

Leadership Styles:

Women Take the Lead

By Chief Karin Montejo, Miami-Dade (FL) Police Department

“Although your position as a manager or supervisor gives you the authority to accomplish certain tasks and objectives, the power does not make you a leader, it simply makes you the boss.” – Author Unknown

It was 1978, and I was dispatched to a neighborhood dispute. As I approached the complainant, he took one look at the woman before him and said he wanted a real cop. I told him I was a real cop and the only one he was going to get. He refused to talk; I left. He called back a short time later; I returned. In fact, I returned three more times before I was finally able to resolve his two issues. Two issues because not only did he have a neighborhood dispute, he had a gender issue, as well.

In the 1970s, it was often a challenge to get people to see women as professional law enforcement officers. We were an anomaly, and many people couldn't believe a "little girl" was ever going to be able to do the job. But we did, and today, the sight of women in uniform barely raises an eyebrow. Women have established themselves as viable, successful officers.

However, while female officers at the entry level are becoming commonplace, women remain underrepresented in higher supervisory positions. This is because women in law enforcement must overcome certain challenges in their quest for leadership positions.

Men and women meet the challenges of leadership in different ways, largely because of historical and sociological roots. Early socialization for women has in the day, focused on democratic/interactive styles of leadership. Women become nurturers and peacemakers, diffusing conflicts before they become an issue. For years, these characteristics were considered soft, ineffective, indecisive and tagged "feminine" types of leadership. Those who embraced this leadership style were seen as weak and ineffective.

The belief was that if you are the boss, you should make all the decisions, which shows that you are in charge and people should look to you for all the answers. Leaders who ask for input must be weak, the thinking goes; they don't know what to do and have to ask others for help. Leaders should not fall for this trap. They should make the best decision with the best information available at the time. Today, these traits have become associated with a variety of successful leadership skills, and the old feminine traits are now effective.

In recent years, there has been a movement towards an inclusive and participatory style of leadership. Affording subordinates an opportunity to provide input in the decision-making process has proven to be a highly successful form of leadership. Allowing people affected by a policy decision to participate in meetings and discussions results in positive outcomes. Few of us know it all, and who knows more about an issue than those who do the job everyday?

PROCESS

The recent change in thinking has opened the door to women moving into leadership roles. But anyone wishing to invoke this new leadership model must employ certain tactics to be successful in their new roles.

To begin, when an issue arises, do not assume the role of primary problem solver, allowing employees to become dependent on you. Instead, become a facilitator. Listen to what your people have to say. Actively listening to your employees and engaging them in discussion not only perpetuates the exchange of ideas, but it provides a learning environment for all.

Recognize the value in the ideas of your subordinates. Everyone views the world from his or her own experiences. Whether you agree with a statement or not, the fact that a person is engaging in the process adds value to the decision-making process. You do not have to support the statement, but you must respect the person who offers it. Step back for a minute, and let the new information sink in. Is there something persuasive in the argument? Does it cast a unique point of view? Allow yourself to embrace diverse opinions.

Truly give recommendations consideration. Continuing to do things the way you've always done them is to disregard alternatives. If you keep doing things the same old way, you will keep getting the same old results. Remember that opinions that differ from yours don't have to be a threat to your ability as a leader. Rather, they provide an opportunity to grow the future leaders of your department.

Whenever possible, incorporate some of your subordinates' suggestions into your final plan. Rarely does one person's decision resolve an entire problem. And problems seldom have just one issue to address. Most problems are composed of a variety of topics, but decisions are made on the most critical components. When possible, use all of your available resources.

RESULTS

So, what do you get from this type of leadership? Most importantly, your subordinates buy into the system. When your people believe they are part of the solution, whether you have embraced their input completely, minimally or not at all, the opportunity to be included and valued results in willingness to embrace change. If some part of their suggestion can be incorporated legally and for a reasonable cost, give it a chance. The implementation of a suggestion will have an immediate and positive effect with staying power.

Policing can be a rewarding job, but it also can be isolating, as we respond to others' crises, resolve their concerns and move on to the next. We are accustomed to making split-second decisions without anyone's input.

This attitude works well on the street, but as one moves into supervisory and leadership positions, decisions should not be made instantaneously and unilaterally. Learn to share in the process and challenges, empower your subordinates and celebrate the successful outcomes with your team.

A variety of leadership styles are utilized everyday in the successful execution of our responsibilities. The positive results of interactive and participatory leadership provide growing opportunities to all involved. There are times when autocratic leadership is absolutely essential, and for those situations, employ it. However, when the opportunity to instruct presents itself, evaluate it, encourage it and most of all, experience it. You just might embrace it.

Karin Montejo is a 28-year veteran and division chief in the largest police department in the southeastern U.S. She also provides leadership training to help female police officers achieve success in leadership positions. Learn more at www.montejoconsulting.com.

Side Bar:

Organizations Supporting Women in Aviation

- ❑ www.awam.org Association for Women in Aviation Maintenance (AWAM) is a nonprofit organization formed for the purpose of championing women's professional growth and enrichment in the aviation maintenance fields by providing opportunities for sharing information and networking, education, fostering a sense of community and increasing public awareness of women in the industry.
- ❑ www.iwitts.com Institute for Women in Trades, Technology & Science (IWITTS) provides the tools to successfully integrate women into male-dominated careers such as technology and law enforcement through training, publications, products, e-strategies and research projects.
- ❑ www.ninety-nines.org The Ninety-Nines, Inc. is an international nonprofit organization of licensed women pilots from 35 countries with over 5,500 female members throughout the world. Although there are other female pilot organizations in various states and nations, virtually all women of achievement in aviation have been or are members of The Ninety-Nines.
- ❑ www.wai.org Women in Aviation International (WAI) is a nonprofit organization dedicated to providing networking, education, mentoring and scholarship opportunities for women (and men) who are striving for challenging and fulfilling careers in the aviation and aerospace industries.
- ❑ www.whirlygirls.org The Whirly-Girls organization is a nonprofit educational and charitable organization dedicated to advancing women in helicopter aviation through the industry's largest pool of annual scholarships, while providing female helicopter pilots a forum for the exchange of information and opportunities. Membership is open to all women around the world who are rated helicopter pilots.
- ❑ www.wifle.org Women in Federal Law Enforcement (WIFLE) promotes gender equity through its leadership education center that provides training, research, scholarships, awards and networking opportunities in partnership with law enforcement agencies.
- ❑ www.women-in-aviation.com Online since March 1996, the Women in Aviation Resource Center is maintained by Henry M. Holden, aviation historian, author and commentator on the History Channel. The website records the history of American women in aviation.