



## **You Have the Helm!**

### **Filling educational gaps and working through the transition into leadership**

Being promoted is one of the most enjoyable events in one's life. For some it is a quiet celebration among a small group of people and for some it involves much pomp and circumstance. Shortly following is the period we could term as the "honeymoon" period where we are learning our way around our new environs. Then the day arrives (i.e. "the honeymoon is over..."); the newness has been shed and we are established into our position as a supervisor or manager. Reality kicks in and we find ourselves affecting the lives of others by our attitudes, decisions and actions. In all of that there is a nagging sense that even though you are doing your best, that the best is not enough, or at least the best is missing something. I am referring to the awareness or feeling that you are "off your game" or not operating at your peak and you just cannot put your finger on the problem.

Having gaps in our personal experience and training will leave many unanswered questions in our minds. "Am I really prepared to take on this new challenge of leadership?" "Have I received all the training I need to be successful?" "What gaps, if any, are there in my experience or training that will hinder my effectiveness as a leader?" Let's briefly look at this "gap theory" and see if it applies and how can we improve our base of experience and training.

That "something's missing" sense may be the result of not being as prepared for the step into leadership as well as you would like to have been. It would be similar to arriving at your desired destination (the promotion becoming reality) only to find that you are missing important luggage (gaps in training preceding the promotion). This may not only apply for the new supervisor or manager but also for the seasoned leader.

Some of us were thrust into promotion due to normal attrition or newly created positions needing to be filled and others just plain forgot to take the one step back, with the rest of the group, when volunteers were requested.

When a situation comes up that requires knowledge, skills or abilities in an area we are lacking, decision making is difficult, delayed and/or second-guessed, which erodes our effectiveness as a leader. Now the stakes are higher and we are leading more than ourselves. We are leading others and our decisions affect them.

How can we manage this situation? It may seem like the storm and winds are taking your ship from you but you really do have control if you focus on where you are now and what steps you can take to put the ship on the course you need to go.

To correct this, in ourselves, and to ensure we do not perpetuate the gaps in training we need to focus on some simple steps:

### **Have confidence in yourself.**

Realize that someone had confidence in you and selected you to supervise or manage an aspect of your agency. Being selected for promotion is evidence that your boss is recognizing your positive skills, abilities and traits as well as being entrusted to lead others in your organization. If you beat yourself up and speak negatively about yourself you should not expect any success. This includes self-blame or blaming others when you are unable to achieve your goals. Additionally, try not to set the performance bar too high. Smaller progressive successes are best. Right from the start, remember to have confidence in the knowledge, skills and abilities you possess. This is an excellent place to begin building upon.

### **You have control of the helm!**

Although it may not seem like you have control, you really do. Your promotion put you at the helm of some aspect of your agency. If you take your hand off the wheel the results could be disastrous. Don't Panic! Sometimes a shipmaster would allow the wind to take the ship for a bit to assess the situation; you may need to do something similar to regroup your thoughts and obtain focus on objectives and tasks at hand. Shortly afterwards make careful adjustments to slowly regain a careful grip on the helm and guide the ship back onto the course heading you need. This may involve your silence and observation of your assigned team members for a period of time so you can assess strengths and weaknesses of team members and programs you are charged with managing. It will also provide you opportunity to assess your own strengths and weaknesses and identify what training you (and your team) may need.

### **Fill in the gaps with the right stuff.**

Much of your creativity and inventiveness will come forth while you work hard at getting the training you need to fill in any gaps you find in your personal experience. Education exercises the mind which leads to an increase in thinking, thus creativity. This takes commitment, time and ...funding. There are some who might say that you do not have any funds available to you, what are your options? Here are some hints for getting funding for training:

- Research the training you'd like to receive and develop a presentation to sell your request. The more information you can provide in the shortest amount of time (outlining benefits of the training, etc.) will provide your boss with reasonable information on which to base a decision.
  - Do not assume your boss knows and understands what your need is. You will need to assist them with some education on the subject.

- Do not assume that the training expense will not be approved. Make your request. If you get denied you are still getting direction; go to your next option or step.
- Look for alternative ways for funding, such as government grants, association scholarships or corporate sponsorships.
- Cut back and save money in other areas, if possible, so it can be put toward training.
- Invest in yourself for training, from time to time. The payoff is worth it.

Take training courses through the various public safety communications training vendors, local community colleges, as well as the APCO Virtual College. You can also subscribe to several newsletters or magazines relating to supervision or management to keep your reading and knowledgebase current.

Not every learning opportunity requires funding. If you do not have any educational funding try some of the obvious methods to obtain the training you need to fill in the gaps:

- Public Library – In the Dewey Decimal system the 658 Dewey range has a lot of books on management. Start with books relating to new supervisors and managers and work your way up to the more complex topics. If you read one book per month you will be amazed at the information you will obtain that could be put to excellent use.
  - When reading, take notes and list a minimum of three things you can apply to your performance from each of the books.
- Internet – Doing a cursory search on the words “supervision”, “management” or “leadership” will glean a lot of additional information you can use.
- Find a mentor – Seek out someone you admire and trust; see if they would be willing to mentor you and to be available to answer your questions.
  - Remember: It will be up to YOU to make decisions, though, not your mentor.

The more gaps you are able to fill, the better prepared you will be to face the challenges ahead. Make sure to fill those gaps with information and training that applies to and focuses on your educational need. Any of these ideas can help you manage the situation. The action steps you take will be an example for your team to follow. Once you achieve some of your personal training goals you will have an idea of how to assist your team in reaching theirs.

Lastly, the goal here is not only to just “plug a hole” or fill in the gaps. The real benefits are derived from the process (the journey) of learning new things and increasing your knowledge in specific areas of need. The process is what strengthens your level of confidence as you build upon your experience. You will be doing all of this in full view of your team. They will observe your commitment to learning and by your role modeling will pick up the vision and help you run with it to the finish line. This is the essence of training and leadership and it empowers your team for victory and success.

Maybe you were not as prepared as you would have liked when you became a leader. The solution to the problem is not unreachable. Give yourself a chance. You can be the manager you want to be by making some simple choices. It may only involve taking simple steps. It will be your choice – remember you have the helm!

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## Quiz

### **CDE Article – You Have the Helm!**

Name: \_\_\_\_\_ Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Agency: \_\_\_\_\_

Address: \_\_\_\_\_

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Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

Fax: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

1. Difficulty in making decisions, delaying decisions or second guessing decisions can be traced back to:
  - a. Not considering all of your options carefully.
  - b. Lack of listening to feedback from your team.
  - c. Educational gaps before and during the transition into supervision or management.
  - d. Lack of critical thinking skills.
  
2. Educational or training gaps
  - a. Occur only with newer supervisors or managers.
  - b. Do not apply to seasoned leaders due to their years of experience.
  - c. Affect both new and seasoned leaders and those they supervise or manage.
  - d. Have no effect upon leadership abilities.
  
3. Having confidence in your abilities
  - a. Is an important foundational element in becoming a supervisor or manager.
  - b. Is a negative trait that is counterproductive in leadership development.
  - c. Does nothing to enhance your leadership abilities.
  - d. Is not an issue because everyone has confidence in their abilities.

4. Educational and training gaps
  - a. Must be filled properly with information that meets the educational or training need in the supervisor or manager.
  - b. Will affect what actions a supervisor or manager will take when solving problems.
  - c. Are easily filled once they are identified.
  - d. All of the above.
  
5. The real benefits derived from the learning process are:
  - a. Role modeling your commitment to learning new things for the benefit of the team.
  - b. Increasing your personal knowledge on a specific topic you need to focus on.
  - c. Both "a." and "b"
  - d. None of the above.