

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD
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Stress Management for the New Supervisor

**A Research Project
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Abstract

Police officers and supervisors have been subjected to various stress related problems throughout their careers, which can interfere with their professional and personal lives. Studies have indicated that these effects can be detrimental to both the physical and emotional well being.

When an officer decides to participate in career advancement, he or she is subjected to various stressors relating to the promotional process. These problems can be compounded when the supervisor is initially advanced into the supervisory ranks. New stress related problems begin to unfold as the new supervisor begins to explore the new position.

Being accountable for daily discipline, dealing with morale issues, evaluation performance ratings and learning how to effectively communicate with former peers can be overwhelming for the newly promoted officer. These stressors can impede the learning process for the new supervisor and affect overall work performance

The purpose of this research project was to identify common stressors that frequently affect the newly promoted supervisor, and to develop a training program. The program will be designed to teach the officers how to recognize and deal with various stressors, and how to perform basic supervisory skills which will aid in the decision making process, during the transition from officer to supervisor.

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Introduction

Law enforcement agencies often forget just stressful the promotional process can be for the officer involved. Making the transition from the rank of officer to supervisor can be a major challenge. By the time the new supervisor is promoted, he or she has been exposed to a great deal of personal and work related stressors, over an extended period of time. The candidate must make many sacrifices and spends a great deal of time preparing for the written examination, which is commonly the first step in the process. Upon being promoted, the new supervisor will become exposed to new, unfamiliar stressors. According to Michael Buren (1986), "there are two completely different sources of stress that need to be addressed: Personal problems that are affecting the officer, and the management or environment of the particular police department."

After successfully passing the written test, the candidate must prepare for the oral assessment center or interview, and then await his or her fate, adding even more stress to the situation. Following promotion, the new supervisor is confronted with new stressors, which can impede in the transitional learning process, and affect his or her well-being. The new supervisor not only has the fear of failure to contend with in his position, but also quickly realizes with time, that he is no longer "one of the guys". A newfound feeling of isolation may take place, and having to discipline his close mends is difficult at best. The reality of being accountable for the actions of many, versus one, can be a difficult lesson to learn.

Additional conflicts arise when subjected to the stress of dealing with the day-to-day aspects of community relations. More often than not, negative feedback from community contacts will take its toll in the form of frustration. This stressor refers to the problem arising from public apathy, negative reaction to, and lack of support for the police (Kroes, 1976).

From test preparation time to the oral boards and appointment, the recently promoted

indicates that stress can lead to physical diseases, such as cancer and heart disease, which in turn hurt the organization by preventing employees from contributing their full measure to the agency. Heart attacks and stress kill more people, including managers, than all diseases combined. Once city leaders realize this, they often are more willing to support agency initiatives to reduce the stress of supervisors in the workplace (Standfest, 1996).

The purpose of this study is to identify stressors that affect newly promoted officers, and to develop a training program to assist them during the transition from officer to supervisor. Following training, employees will be better informed on how to perform day-to-day supervisory tasks, and recognize stress related problems that will affect them. If successful at educating employees on how to eliminate many of these stressors, a more productive and healthy work environment will result.

Review of Literature

Stress is a term that virtually everyone is familiar with and it has been a popular topic for quite some time. Television and news programs, written articles, training seminars and college classes have been discussing the topic.

Stress can be defined as any type of a demand or force exerted on our mind or body that changes its balance. Dr. Hans Selye (1974), described stress as "the non specific response of the body to any demand made upon it." There are many different opinions on definitions of stress. Very seldom do people describe stress the same way, or offer an easily understandable definition (Selye, 1983).

Different types of stress have been described as good or bad (positive or negative). According to R. Church (personal communication), positive stress has been proven to assist individuals obtain peak performance, by providing them with additional strength or energy. A feeling of success soon follows and with rest, the body eventually returns to its pre-stress state. With negative stress, the body remains in a prolonged uncontrollable state and cannot be shut down, which tends to cause distress. When negative stress occurs, the effects can lead to an array of different health related problems.

Short-term exposure to different types of stress can affect the cognitive, emotional, physiological and behavioral aspects of a person. If untreated, the end result of long-term exposure to stress can be alcoholism, drug addiction, heart disease, hypertension, eating disorders, depression and even suicide. According to Stratton (1984), doctors have indicated that 70 to 90 percent of all illnesses involve stress at the core of the problem.

The effects of stress can be detrimental to both the physical and emotional well-being. Immediate examples of physical effects include increased heartbeat, a rise in the breathing rate,

and increased sweating. Emotional reactions to stress may include feelings of anxiety, intense fear, confusion and anger. In addition to the health implications caused by these types of stress, they also have the tendency to interfere with interpersonal relationships. When an officer suffers from work related problems, it is common for them to be brought home. The spouse and or children of the effected officer often find themselves victim to the post stress trauma.

As far back as 1950, a study was conducted using census data to examine the police profession and other occupations. The result of the study indicated that police had the highest occurrence of heart disease and diabetes in addition to suicide (Buren, 1986). Police officers are frequently exposed to various levels of stress on a daily basis. Even small levels of stress can initiate chemical changes in the body that can eventually cause the officer serious problems (Mulroy, 2000). Statistical information that has been collected clearly shows that police officers live for a shorter duration of time than many other individuals (Trautman, 1987).

When promoted, the new probationary supervisor may feel as though he or she needs to be aware of just about everything that is taking place, because the ultimate responsibility for work accomplishments and proper discipline falls on his/her shoulders. The new "Velcro" stripes can feel very heavy during this time. The supervisor may also inadvertently tend to micro manage the decisions of the officers on the street, which can lead increased tension with the troops. Officers on the street have a great deal of discretionary powers and must continually be allowed to, in order to successfully perform their job. Because of this, if they feel as though they are being micro managed at each and every turn, they will become very untrusting of the supervisor (Anderson, 1995).

According to Schaefer (1983), "stressors for officers participating in the career development program are both numerous and varied. They begin with the very organizational structure of police departments and are further complicated by written and oral examination,

court decisions, and even the officer's self-induced stress".

Keeping in mind that there usually remains some tension among those that have been passed over for promotion, the "honeymoon stage" can be a time when some officers try to push the envelop and see what the new supervisor is made of. Several supervisors interviewed said that as soon as they sewed on the stripes, all of a sudden it appeared like some officers in their command wanted the new supervisor to make decisions for them, which is commonly known as "passing the buck." They were treated as if they should have all the answers to all of the questions. Apparently this only lasted for a short period of time, but it initially felt frustrating.

The probationary first line supervisor is careful not to make many mistakes for fear of being labeled the poor promotional choice. These first line supervisors are responsible for meeting out discipline to the troops, which can be a very awkward and difficult situation. This is especially true when the supervisor must take action involving an officer who has been a friend. When officers do not feel as though they agree with the supervisor's style, they may decide to give him the cold shoulder. If the supervisor is not able to establish an expectable relationship with the officers, they will not share important information with him, thus removing the sergeant from the lines of communication (Anderson, 1995)

A researcher conducted a study of supervisory law enforcement officers stress levels. The results stated that the day to day job of disciplining officers, motivating them to perform better, dealing with morale issues, evaluating officer performance, identifying personal problems within those they supervise, and choosing the best way to approach the problem, and effectively communicating with those they supervise, caused the most stress among the supervisors that were involved in the study (Norvell, 1988).

A majority of police administrators and first line supervisors have suffered from different types of stress than the officers on the street, although just as dangerous (More, 1976). They are

held to a high performance standard by management and are constantly accountable for the work of their officers, while responsible for meeting out discipline to the troops. At the same time they are responsible for the day to day boosting of morale to acquire officer activity.

Staff support should be so crucial to the organizational success, that it is recommended that supervision training be conducted initially (Trautman, 1987). Research clearly shows that the effects of stress on the new supervisor can hinder performance and health.

Methodology

The purpose of this research project was to identify various common stressors that frequently affect the newly promoted supervisors, and to develop and implement a training program during the transition from officer to supervisor. The training should involve common every day tasks necessary to perform the basic, supervisory entry-level job. The causes and effects of stress were studied, with a particular focus involving the path to promotion, and the introduction to the new supervisory position.

Information was obtained for this project by researching various stress related articles, textbooks, journals and Internet sources. In addition, personal interviews involving other police department officials in the Dallas, Fort Worth metroplex were conducted. Several Farmers Branch supervisors were questioned in relation to their experiences in the promotional journey. Further, three medium sized Texas police departments were studied in reference to their training for new supervisors. Three medium sized police departments were surveyed, with three surveys collected and completed. This information was used to determine recommendations necessary for developing and introducing the training program.

It was hypothesized that a new supervisor should receive stress related training as soon as possible following his or her promotion. The effects of stress on the new supervisor can hinder performance as well as the individuals' health.

The police agency has a great deal of time and effort invested in each individual officer, especially with the supervisor. The effects of stress related problems can be costly to the department, as well as fatal to the individual if not recognized and remedied. Long-term disabilities and early retirements due to stress related issues could greatly affect a police department down the road.

Findings

The short-term effects of stress on the human body can lead to emotional, physiological, and behavioral problems. Long-term effects can lead to alcoholism, drug addiction, eating disorders, heart disease and even suicide.

Various studies conducted on stress indicate that police officers live for shorter durations of time than other occupations because of the types of stressors that they are confronted with. It's for this reason that eliminating stress in the workplace should be a major concern for police departments. A person's inability to learn how to cope with stress can lead to a lack of self motivation, in addition to physical and mental disease. This tends to deplete the quality of life and peak performance of the individual (Nakajima, 1994).

While preparing for the written promotional test, officers put a great deal of pressure on themselves to succeed in this very competitive arena. They find themselves spending more and more time studying, and less time with their families and friends. Some indicated that specialized training was attended, and promotional training aids purchased. They also used personal vacation days in order to spend more time preparing for the test. This means that less vacation time will be available for the family.

Upon successful completion of the promotional process, those involved have been emotionally exhausted. In many cases he or she is then immediately transferred to the new position and informal learning takes place throughout the day. Without proper training, the new supervisor can easily become frustrated with their performance.

In the State of Texas, a new supervisor must receive at least 40 hours of supervisory training and must take place within a two-year period. Although this mandate has good intentions, many things can take place within that two-year period. During this time, some new

supervisors may find themselves the ranking person in charge of the entire police department. For this reason alone, it makes sense to train the new supervisor as soon as possible.

No formal classroom training presently exists at the Farmers Branch police department to assist the new supervisor during the transition from officer to the new rank. The newly promoted supervisor is assigned to a patrol shift, and informal training takes place as seen fit by the shift Sergeant and the Lieutenant. When it appears as though the new supervisor can properly perform the job without any assistance, they are released from training.

The Grand Prairie Police Department conducts a one-week block of training for new supervisors. During this week, training involves familiarizing them with normal day-to-day paperwork, policy, and procedures associated with supervision. They are also provided with a manual that contains information covered in the training sessions for future reference.

The Grapevine Police Department pairs the new supervisor with a veteran supervisor, similar to the field-training concept for recruits. The new supervisor is assigned to all three patrol shifts, with three different veteran supervisors for a total of three weeks. He or she then spends a one-week "ghost" phase with the Sergeant in charge of field training.

The Coppell Police Department has a field-training program that is based upon the San Jose model. This program is divided into four phases, and pairs the new supervisor with various training supervisors. A modified daily observation form is used, and a training guide is provided to the new supervisors to assist them throughout the program. Similar to recruit training, the new supervisor must successfully complete this program.

Departments vary in the amount and types of training that they offer, and all have tailored programs to fit their agencies specific needs and goals. A training program can be formal, informal, or a combination of both. Research information suggests that training take place as soon as possible for maximum benefit. All supervisors interviewed for this research project

agreed that formal classroom training would help to reduce stress, and better prepare the newly promoted officer for the challenges of supervision.

Discussion/Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify stressors that affect newly promoted officers, and to develop specialized training to assist them during the transition from officer to supervisor. Following this training, employees will be better informed on how to perform day-to-day supervisory tasks, and to recognize stress related challenges that will confront them.

Stress affects each and every officer within the department. When an officer is promoted, he or she becomes subjected to new and unfamiliar stressors. Because of a lack of transitional training, the new supervisor will not be prepared to understand or resolve these new stressors. The findings of this study provide evidence that police officers and supervisors experience a great deal of work related negative stress. This is also especially true when discussing the promotional sequence of events that starts with test preparation and hopefully ends with successful appointment to a new rank.

The development and implementation of a training program for new supervisors can occur in different ways. A formal class setting can be initiated, as well as a field training or mentor type system. There can also be a combination of the programs, tailored to the needs of the agency and the individual.

It is recommended that formal training in Farmers Branch should take place as soon as possible following a promotion. The classroom sessions should be the first step in the training process and would be conducted by the Training Division Sergeant. A training binder will be issued to each supervisor candidate during the first session of training. It will contain examples of various required day-to-day reports and forms, in addition to handouts covering the various class topics.

Topics to be discussed in the formal classroom training will include the following:

- Supervision and Leadership
- Liability issues
- How to prepare and conduct briefings
- Understanding stress and how to manage it
- Documenting officer performance
- The evaluation system
- Review critical policy
- Officer complaints
- Scheduling manpower
- Problem solving
- Timesheet entries
- Media Relations
- Necessary forms and reports

Cost of the formal classroom training will be minimal for the department. The training will take place "in house" and would be scheduled and performed by the training Sergeant, so that no overtime issue is presented. The only cost involved will be for the training binder and printing material.

Following the classroom training, the new supervisor will report to a designated patrol shift and be assigned to a mentor supervisor. Supervisor training will be responsibility of the shift Sergeant, although a Corporal or Lieutenant may assist in the process. During the mentor type field training, a reasonable amount of time will be given to the new supervisor to insure that he or she is eventually be capable of supervising a patrol shift as the sole person in charge.

The police agency has a great deal invested in an officer by the time he or she reaches the rank of supervisor. The effects of stress related problems can be costly to the department, as well as fatal to the individual if not recognized and remedied. Research indicates that long-term disabilities and early retirements due to stress related issues would have a negative impact on a police department down the road.

Implementing a formal training will teach a new supervisor how to recognize and deal with various stressors that come with the new position, while providing practical information necessary to perform the job of a first line supervisor.

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