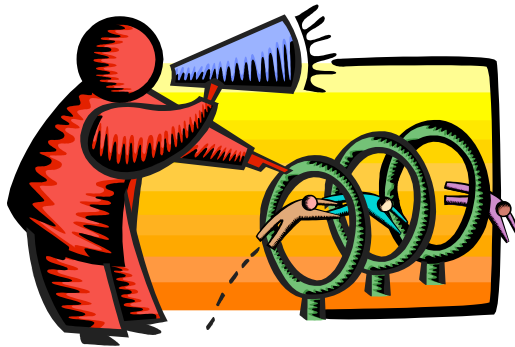


CHAPTER ELEVEN

Stress and the 911 Supervisor



It sure isn't easy being the boss, is it?

No, it isn't. In fact being a supervisor of a 911 Communications Center one of the most demanding and stressful jobs

there is. Whatever level of supervisor you are at, whether it is a shift leader, or being in charge of the entire center, you are charged with the control and motivation of people to get them to work towards organizational goals. It's your job to "get it done".

Getting people to do what you want them to do isn't easy. In reality it is nearly impossible apart from having the necessary motivational skills needed to get people to want to do what you want. No matter what you have heard, people don't do something unless they want to. The human will is just about the most unmovable thing in the whole universe. This is why it is so stressful sometimes as you think, "What do I have to do to get these people motivated?" You see, that is the challenge.

As a supervisor you have to wear many "hats". You have to be a coach, a psychologist, a mentor, a miracle worker, a referee, and still be an employee yourself that also has a supervisor to answer to. At the same time it might always seem like you are the "bad guy", or the one who has to "lay down the law", and get on people sometimes. Sometimes you really feel misunderstood and picked on. You might feel that the minute

you leave your people are talking behind your back, “Who do they think they are?”

In reality supervising can be a really lonely position, and you might even be tempted at times to give it up and jump back in the chair and just become a normal dispatcher again and forget about all that added responsibility. Well, don't do it just yet. Read on.

After all we've covered about dispatcher stress I thought it would be a good idea to address the kind of stress that supervisors face on the job. Maybe you came into your agency as a supervisor, or you were promoted from the ranks. Either way, being a supervisor in an environment as stressful as 911 communications can be really demanding, and hectic – that is, if you don't know how to manage the pressure.

There is a lot of pressure because when you are a supervisor you have not only answer to your own actions, but also of those you manage. That means that you are responsible for not only your mistakes, but also you are ultimately responsible for the mistakes and problems caused by those under your charge.

You have heard the saying, “The Bucks Stops Here!”? Well, it is true that “The Buck” truly stops – as far as your communication center is concerned – with you. After all when things go wrong who is the first one who gets “called on the carpet”? Yep, you do. Then you have to find out what happened and then begin the process of getting things cleaned up.

Yet that is the curse and the blessing of “being in charge”. Just like in everything there are pros and cons. So in helping you to manage your “supervisor stress” in this chapter I will outline the following points. They are:

1. Learn what a supervisor is.

2. Know your limitations.
3. Pick a leadership style and stick with it.
4. Take care of yourself.

WHAT IS A SUPERVISOR?

That sounds like a like a dumb question, but believe me over the last thirty-years of my “working life”, I’ve had a LOT of supervisors, as well as spending about ten of those years being one myself. I’ve seen some really good managers and I’ve seen other who, well, they went on to do other things – *like sell real estate*. The difference between the one’s who did well became good managers and those who didn’t wasn’t because they were necessarily more educated than the others, or better looking, or even better talkers. They were successful because:

They learned what it means be a supervisor!

A supervisor isn’t someone just has the title. A supervisor is a person who is committed to finding out what it means to be a supervisor. This doesn’t come by osmosis – you don’t get this knowledge from a passing space ship, or again, just because you got promoted. I can’t tell you how many people I’ve seen over the years get promoted and preceded to crash and burn, all because they didn’t know HOW to lead.

No, you learn how to be a supervisor educating yourself about LEADERSHIP. I use that word Leadership because it is so much more stronger in my opinion that the word “management”. When you take the take or hopefully are afforded the opportunity through your agency to attend leadership training you should jump at the chance! The more you know and apply the better supervisor you are going to be. The more knowledgeable you are about what it take to lead others the less stress you are going to experience in the position.

You might have experienced this already as you got into the position and then found yourself wondering, “Why did I take this job?” Or maybe you got really honest about it and admitted, “I need help if I going to make it!”

Before I continue let me note a word of caution:

If you became a supervisor, thinking that to do so you would finally be able to “take it easy”, and coast through the day, do yourself a favor now – quit before the carnage begins! It will be a lot easier on you and on others.

I know this sounds kind of harsh, but I say this because I know that there are those kinds of supervisors among us. Some of you know who they are too. After all I talk to a lot of Dispatchers all the time, from all around the country, and they tell me about them. But I wouldn’t need their witness, because I’ve also seen them for myself. In fact, way back in 1978 when I made Sergeant in the U.S. Army, I thought the very same thing!

When they pinned those sergeant stripes on I remember thinking, “Man, this is great! No more hassles, no more working hard!” Boy! Did I get a wake up call – quick! No I found out – as some of you have also found, that being a supervisor is hard work – the hardest work there is. Luckily the Army doesn’t leave you without training, so I ended being sent to Leadership schools – three of them in fact – from basic all the way advanced. They were all residential too! The last one was three months long!

However, with each school I got better at being a leader. I learned how to motivate, coach, and counsel people. I hadn’t a clue of how to do that effectively BEFORE I received training from those who knew how it was supposed to be done. It also took time – trial and error – to learn how to apply the principles I had learned. I had to work at it and so do you.

Now I know and large most of the supervisors I've met in the 911 Communications field are true professionals who want to supervise well, and are concerned for both those who work under them and the department they serve. They work long hours; cover shifts for vacations and when people get sick, and they aren't afraid to put the headset back on. They aren't afraid to "get their hands dirty"; they still feel that above the title, they are still at heart a 911 Dispatcher.

But I also know that "heart" isn't all there is to it. To be a supervisor you have also have some knowledge of effective supervision and that takes training. Again, "You have to get some schooling" Unfortunately, many dispatchers are promoted from within, put into the position with little or no idea of how to properly manage, and then never receive an ounce of training on how to be a supervisor. Just like a lot of us learned to be a dispatcher (by the seat of our pants), so too many 911 Supervisors "learn as they go." Not that this is all bad, but it can have serious drawbacks as well.

Mistakes made by untrained supervisors can affect an agency for years to come. In fact most of the deeply seeded interpersonal problems I have seen in agencies can be traced back to bad-supervision. Either it was an untrained or worse inept supervisor who began the down spiral. Even after they have gone the effects are still there. This is why it is immensely important that supervisors be selected carefully – very carefully – because the impact is so great.

Sometimes people are promoted for reasons that should never be considered such as "popularity", or "how long they have been there", other peripheral reasons. The only reason anyone should be promoted because they have demonstrated leadership potential and then taking in other factors it is determined they are the best qualified for the position.

Ok, so now that I've laid the groundwork to what supervisor is and what they should know, let's get on to how to manage your stress as a supervisor. First let's begin with a few principles of sound management. I'm going to quote from my old Army manual of leadership and use eleven principles are "tried and true", and used in management training everywhere. If you apply these eleven principles I guarantee that you will progress greatly as a supervisor.

1. Know you and seek self-improvement. In order to know yourself, you have to understand your *be*, *know*, and *do*, attributes. Seeking self-improvement means continually strengthening your attributes. This can be accomplished through reading, self-study, classes, etc. It would be nice if your agency sent you immediately to a management class to help you learn, but that isn't always the case. So you ought to help yourself out. Go to a bookstore such as a Barnes and Noble Bookseller or visit Amazon.com and get some management books to read for yourself. A self-education is better than none.

2. Be technically proficient. As the supervisor you must know your job as completely as possible, and have a solid familiarity with your employees' jobs. For as much as possible you should be an expert in 911 Dispatching; equipment; policy and procedures. If you want people to really look up to you KNOW your stuff. People respect knowledge and confidence. Confidence is borne of knowledge.

3. Seek responsibility and take responsibility for your actions. This means that when things go wrong - and they will sooner or later - do not merely look to blame others. If you "goofed" then admit it, and NEVER, EVER blame a subordinate for something YOU did. Never find a 'scapegoat', even if it cost your position. INTEGRITY is the key word here. There is no other more important characteristic that a supervisor should possess. When something goes wrong, analyze the situation, take corrective action, and move on to the next challenge.

4. Make sound and timely decisions. Use good problem solving, decision-making, and planning tools. Don't be "flaky". Get your data, weigh options and then MAKE A DECISION. Be DECISIVE!

5. Set the example. Be a good role model for your employees. They must not only hear what they are expected to do, but also see that you ARE what you expect them to be. You can't get on their case for being late if you're always late. People will follow an example. Good behavior always shames bad behavior. If you've got your stuff together you can rightfully expect your people to get theirs.

6. Know your people and look out for their well-being. If you want your people to work FOR you, then work for them! Take care of their concerns and needs on the job. Listen to them; show that you value their opinion. Remember you have to EARN their respect and trust. Also know the 'little things' like, when they are having a birthday, or when they reach a personal goal like completing college. Congratulate them in their successes! Fairly discipline them when they make mistakes – yet do so after knowing the facts – NEVER jump to conclusions! Yet if you do get it wrong, quickly apologize and make it right.

7. Keep your people informed. If something is happening that is going to affect your people then let them hear it from YOU – not the grapevine. Don't let your people think that you are 'hiding' something from them or that you can't trust them. No, you don't have to tell them everything, as some things may be confidential. But to every extent possible keep your people up to date on what is going on in the organization.

8. Develop a sense of responsibility in your people. Develop good character traits within your people that will help them carry out their professional responsibilities. This goes back to "knowing your people". Learn how each person is motivated – what makes them tick – then tap into that motivation. Try to learn what their strong points and weak points are. Help them further develop their strong points and help them work on their weaker ones. Most of all develop a way of making them feel that they have

a hand – a purpose – in the overall success of the mission. Get them involved!

9. Ensure that tasks are understood, supervised, and accomplished.

Don't assume they understand what you want – MAKE SURE they do. Do you want it done exactly how you told them? Or can they improvise? Your instructions should be clear and leave no room for misunderstanding.

10. Train your people as a team. Capitalize on the “team concept” of training. That is each person has a duty that is enhanced and augmented by another person. Give worth to every team member's contribution to the whole. Emphasize that everyone is critical to getting the job done. Don't have “favorites – or the same people you go to for everything because you think the other less capable or that they don't care. Believe me, they do.

11. Use the full capabilities of your organization. By developing a team spirit, you will be able to employ your organization, department, section, etc. to its fullest capabilities.

Again, these are a few principles that managers from all occupations have used for years with great success. When you have these principles and practice them you are a more decisive and proficient leader. The more proficient you are, the more professional you are, and so the more confidence you'll have. This will translate into less pressure on the job.

Now on to a few tips for getting stress under control in your center. Like I said you have a lot of things to monitor and evaluate. You have to watch all the operations, and specifically what your dispatchers are doing from one moment to the next. You have to constantly make adjustments to policy and procedure. Arrange schedules – or better yet balance them. There is a lot you have to do.

However one thing you should always be looking at is how to streamline and reduce operations so to alleviate unnecessary pressure and demand – not only on you but on your dispatchers as well.

One of the ways to make adjustments is simply in examining your management style. To be more exact, decide which management style best fits your Comm. Center's mission.

Primarily in a law enforcement agency you are going to find most managers employ the "authoritarian" model of management. The authoritarian style is just what its name entails – you are in charge, make all the decisions, and approve every move. In fact nothing moves unless you "will" it. This is fine except it is not the most efficient style of management. For one you can't be everywhere at all times and it takes a very important stress-reducing component away from those who work for you. Namely: "Decision latitude".

Decision latitude refers to the level of ability that employees have to make decisions during their everyday duties. When employees feel that they have a sense of control over their workflow and design of tasks, they feel more confident and less stressed.

This style of management is called "participative". That means that you allow your people a "say" in what gets done, how things are done, shift schedules plans, etc. Electing to manage this way does degrade your authority in the least. You give them the authority – your authority to do things, and if it is abused you can take it back. But more than anything it takes some of the pressure off of you. It frees you to be more involved in other things related to your job.

You no doubt have some very good and capable people working for you. Then USE them! Give them responsibilities and tasks that they will do so that you don't have to. This will leave your energies more open

for other “bigger and better things”. It creates a “win-win” situation for everyone involved!

Know Your Limitations

Even the greatest athletes know their limitations. We all have limitations. When you exceed your limitations you stretch yourself too thin and get burned out rather quickly.

Sometimes it is hard to admit, especially you “Type A” people that you can’t do something, or worse, you don’t know something. We all want to appear competent and knowledgeable most of the time. Yet the truth of the matter is that we don’t know how to do EVERYTHING, and sometimes we don’t know the answer.

What good is it when you say, “Yes, I can do that!” And then afterwards berate yourself saying, “Why in the heck did I say I could do this?” By “being the big shot” you cause yourself unneeded stress and worry, all because you simply didn’t say, “I can’t” or “I don’t know”. There is no shame in being honest and human. Learn what your limitations are; and then stay within them.

Pick Your Style of Leadership

Whether you decide to lead authoritatively, or with delegation, decide which one and then stick with it. Subordinates quickly pick it up when you are “wishy-washy”, or you seem not sure of yourself. If one minute you are calling all the shots and the next asking for advice you can confuse your subordinates. Consistency is the key – be consistent.

Finally, take care of YOURSELF

You can be of no good to anyone – the agency or your people – if you don’t first take care of yourself. That means you can’t become the “be-all” for everything and everybody. Learn how to slow down, and

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recharge yourself. Know when you are “over-revving” and it’s time to gear down.

Being a supervisor is one of the hardest jobs you ever have in any profession, even harder in the high stress job of 911 Dispatching. But if you educate yourself to what it takes to supervisor, get educated, take it easy and be both confident yet humble in your limitations you remove a great amount of the stress you face as a 911 Supervisor.