Maneuvering Successfully
In the Political Environment

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Maneuvering Successfully
in the Political Environment

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A recent survey of police chiefs identified the “most discouraging, dissatisfying aspect of their job as being frustrated by working in the political environment and dealing with politicians.” Some communities have found well-qualified, high-ranking officers choose to not seek or accept executive positions because of their perceptions of politics. When most persons hear the word ‘politics’ negative images come to mind of questionable behavior, turf battles, back room deals, and hidden agendas. While it is naïve to suggest these events do not occur, it is not the norm. Politics is not bad in and of itself. Politics is the process of determining what governmental services are provided for our communities and how they will be funded. It is not suggested that police executives have to become involved in partisan politics to be appointed or succeed. However, to succeed as the leader of a police organization, the chief must be able to maneuver successfully in the political environment. The political environment is composed of more than just elected officials. This environment is composed of five interconnected components, referred to in this guide as five conceptual arenas:

- The police department (internal)
- The public (external)
- The media
- Other agencies (both police and community or state partners)
- Elected officials.

To survive and succeed in the political environment, the chief must develop strong relationships in each of these five areas. Networking with politicians is not a skill typically taught to leaders as they progress through police organizations. In many police agencies, ‘being political’ is frowned upon as being inappropriate. The perception in most departments is that persons who can perform operationally do not have to rely on political contacts to move ahead in their career. However, the skills required for police chiefs to excel are different than those of lower ranking positions. Those leaders who are able to work within the political system are more successful at gaining support and resources for their agencies. The better the relationships a police chief has in each arena the more influence the chief will enjoy. If a chief fails to maintain effective relationships in two or more of the five arenas, the ability to acquire the resources needed for the department will be severely limited, and the chief will be unable to rally support to achieve lasting positive change. Without a strong base of community and political support, any chief’s tenure will likely be short, ineffective, and painful.

This guide is not intended to be a comprehensive review of politics in government. Rather, it is designed to serve as a primer for improving law enforcement executives’ awareness and ability to maneuver successfully in the political environment. The traits and skills the individual must develop are identified in this guide. Each conceptual arena of the political environment, is dissected to identify behaviors and skills needed to develop successful relationships and enhance a leader’s influence. Finally, strategies to prevent negative interference and to respond effectively when circumstances turn sour will be reviewed.


I. Leader Development

Police executives are immediately recognized as an authority because of the nature of their position. However, to sustain this impression the chief must demonstrate they have the skills, traits, and abilities required to lead their department, serve the community, and maneuver successfully in the political environment. Many of the same skills and traits leaders must possess to excel in the police organization are important for interacting in the political environment.

In order to influence behavior, the first step for a police leader is to recognize politics is a reality of working in governmental agencies. As public officials, everything a police department does falls somewhere on the political spectrum. For example, the enforcement of traffic along a specific road could result from complaints of speeders or dangers to children playing in the area. At the other end of the political spectrum, the decision to substantially increase a department’s funding involves extensive interaction with and inquiry by elected officials.

A. Essential Leadership Skills

Political behavior occurs when “an individual attempts to influence others in order to achieve some end, either personal or organizational”. All organizations, particularly governmental agencies, are social organizations. Persons who are most successful working within organizations possess an inventory of personal characteristics that enhance their influence including emotional intelligence, interpersonal influence, networking abilities, and sincerity.

**Emotional Intelligence:** Emotional intelligence enables leaders to read non-verbal cues or signals from another person’s mood, speech, and body language. Using this knowledge, they adjust their behavior to respond or pitch a proposal in the most acceptable manner. The emotionally intelligent can read the situation and determine if the timing is right to broach an issue. These individuals are more adept at building social capital that is needed when difficult or controversial issues arise.

**Interpersonal Influence:** Great leaders tend to rely on a variety of techniques to convince others to accept their ideas. To accomplish this, one must know the other person’s interests, what they may want to hear, and how to meet this need. Great leaders are able to tell others what they need to know in the manner they want to hear it. This requires the individual to be flexible and open to alternative approaches to addressing the same issue.

**Networking Abilities:** The third essential skill required for a leader to maneuver successfully in the political environment is to be able to interact or network with as many diverse groups, friends, and alliances as possible. They achieve this by treating everyone with dignity and respect regardless of their position or what the individual can do for the leader. Having these contacts impacts the leader’s ability to gather critical information, create and take advantage of opportunities, and levy pressure to achieve goals.

**Sincerity:** Finally, persons who are most politically adept are perceived as sincere in seeking what is best for the agency, community, and personnel. If others perceive a chief to have an ulterior motive or to be manipulative and self-serving, the leader will develop a poor reputation and be unable to gather support.
B. Traits for Credibility

To develop the trust and confidence of employees, the public and elected officials, police leaders must be viewed as being credible. Noted leadership researchers Kouzer and Pozner have conducted over 75,000 surveys in a variety of organizations around the world. When responses are controlled for semantics, the same leadership traits consistently emerge as being desired: trustworthy, forward thinking, competent, and inspiring.4

**Trustworthy:** “If people don’t believe in the *messenger*, they won’t believe the *message.*”5 The trustworthy leader is straightforward, honest, and does what he says. If he doesn’t know something, he tells the person he doesn’t know. Accountability is essential. When he promises something, he delivers it. If the leader can’t do what is promised, he gets back with the individual or group and tells them why he can’t do what he promised and why. Without follow-up, a person’s accountability and trust is compromised.

**Forward Looking:** While organizational history is important, employees, citizens, and elected officials don’t care where the agency was five or ten years ago, they want to know what the future holds for them. Leaders are expected to have a vision for the department and to keep others informed of what will be happening in the next one to three years. This is particularly true for Generation X and Y employees who prefer being informed and a part of decision-making.

**Competent:** While police chiefs may not be expected to be able to reconstruct an automobile accident or conduct a blood spatter pattern analysis, the community and police employees expect them to know how to perform the tasks required of a chief executive. The chief needs to be able to communicate the budgetary needs of the department, conduct public speaking, and establish relationships to achieve the department’s goals.

**Inspiring:** Leaders are expected to be able to describe to their employees what the department is doing and why it is important, how the officers’ and department’s performance improves the lives of others and makes a difference in their community.

II. The Five Interacting Components of the Political Environment

Component One: Internal Environment of the Police Department

The police chief’s ability to maneuver successfully in the political environment many times is directly related to the quality of relationships within their department. In short, the relationships that exist within the department, whether they are good or bad, will reflect how officers interact with the public, media, other agencies, and elected officials. If officers treat the public, media, partner agency representatives in a positive way, it will reflect positively on the entire department. If they are unable to maintain positive relationships, it eventually invokes legislative inquiry and oversight by the elected officials. While it may seem elementary, good leadership and management practices within the department are critical for achieving the department’s mission of serving the community.

First, to build a strong foundation for the department, the fundamental core values and mission statement must be articulated. These documents are more than ideal statements in a policy manual or on a poster. The core values are the cornerstone of the department’s operations. Too often law
enforcement agencies espouse a belief only to have their officers routinely act in an entirely different manner. This conflict exists because the promulgated values are not representative of the organization’s true values. The core values and mission should permeate every aspect of the department’s operations including operational procedures, recruitment/selection, training, supervision, and discipline.

Second, the organization cannot be what the people are not. The quality of service provided to the community is directly related to the quality of employees with the department. Because of this, the effectiveness of the police department is directly related to the recruitment, selection, development, and retention of personnel who ‘fit’ with the organizational values. Leaders must establish high standards based upon character and ability. If the personnel employed do not possess the values, character, and ability required for the job, they cannot be expected to perform at the proscribed level. The agency must not only have the right people on board, they must have them in the right places. This allows the department to achieve the maximum benefit of its personnel's potential.

With solid core values and well-trained personnel in place, the police chief establishes the standard of performance as a role model. The staff continuously watch department leaders to see how they act. The relationship the administration has with line officers is oftentimes representative of the relationship between the agency and the public, press, partner agencies, and elected officials. If the chief treats staff in an honest, fair, respectful manner, officers are likely to respond in a similar manner with the others outside the department.

The chief must constantly work to establish and maintain a strong, positive, organizational culture. This culture should focus on serving the community and resolving community problems. Several key factors are critical for developing this culture. First, when attention is focused on the internal operations, it should be to enhance how the agency is serving the community. Training should be provided to improve the officer’s ability to serve. Second, when seeking to make change in the department the chief must recognize they can only affect the amount of change that the community is willing to accept. Because of this, it is critical to follow a deliberate practice that involves staff and key partners throughout the community. Third, every officer in the department is a leader who is charged with working in the community, effecting change and improving the quality of community life. Most of the time, officers work without direct supervision. To empower staff to be more effective in facilitating positive change every officer in the department should be provided leadership training. Fourth, it is also important the department focuses its attention and measurement on key performance indicators. The leader demonstrates to officers what is important by the behavior on which they focus their attention. What gets measured is what gets done. For example, if the department closely evaluates the officer’s use of force, interaction with the public, and vehicle pursuits, these activities will more often be done in accordance with established standards. If these duties are ignored, they will likely be performed below standard and in an inconsistent manner. Inevitably there are individuals within the organization that will not rise to the established standards, struggle to maintain the continuity of mediocrity, or disrupt daily operations with their toxic personalities. The chief and other formal leaders within the organization must address undesirable behaviors. If the individuals are not willing to modify their behavior, steps must be taken to remove them from the department. Otherwise, they will be an impediment to the entire organization.

**Component Two: Building Public Support with the Community**

In many ways, political support for a department’s operations is swayed by public opinion. An agency perceived to have a good image is likely to be successful in garnering political support. At the same time, an agency with a bad reputation will experience difficulty finding the support they need to accomplish their goals. The public’s perception of law enforcement is their reality. It is influenced in a number of ways including: past experiences, rumors within the community, social media, television,
movies, news programs, and websites. Unfortunately, the perception that is portrayed is often not accurate. In an effort to build public support for the department, leaders must develop community partnerships, market the agency’s achievements, and maintain a positive relationship with the press.

- Developing Community Partnerships

Officers tend to spend most of their time interacting with the eight percent of the public who cause 80 – 90 percent of the problems. Unfortunately, officers quickly begin to feel this group is representative of most people. This frequent, negative interaction leads officers to feeling cynical and pessimistic about people. Because of this perception, bridging the gap between officers and the community may be difficult. In reality the majority of citizens seldom have contact with officers, but respect, appreciate, and support their department and desire to have a closer relationship with officers.

Within any jurisdiction, there are a variety of ‘communities’ including business, youth, the elderly, schools, historical districts, and housing complexes. Some of these ‘communities’ may have subgroups, with each having specific needs. For instance, the business community may be composed of a downtown business district, malls, financial institutions, convenience stores, and hotel/motels.

Developing partnerships with the community enables the department to accurately identify and resolve issues using comprehensive solutions. The benefits of police-community partnerships have been well documented including reduced crime, improved quality of life, and strong community support. This community-focused approach has its roots in community policing philosophy, one that emphasizes the police connection to community at all levels of the organization.

It is important to note that community policing is not soft on crime. In fact, more persons may be arrested when a department implements this philosophy in part due to tips from the public. There are abundant resources for assisting agencies with developing their community policing efforts including guides, training, and websites. However, implementing community policing programs should not be designed as a stand-alone program for a special unit. To truly be effective, community policing should be part of a comprehensive organizational approach to serve the needs of the community.

- Marketing the Department

Everyday police departments around the country initiate innovative programs to make their communities safe that go unrecognized. This does not occur because of a lack of interest, but a failure to recognize the importance of publicizing the initiatives and their accomplishments. There are a number of inexpensive avenues to market the department in a positive manner.

- Department Web Site
- Social Media including Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube
- City/Department Newsletters
- Citizen Police Academy
- Annual Reports
- Newsletters (Schools, Companies, Chamber of Commerce)
- Town Hall Meetings
- Service Club Meetings (Kiwanis, Rotary, Lions)
- Community Access Television
Marketing the department in this manner provides a number of benefits. First, it increases the likelihood the department’s positive accomplishments will be recognized. Using different methods to market the department increases the potential number of persons who will learn of the agency’s achievements. As the same message is repeatedly heard, persons start to identify the program and accomplishments with the department. Sharing this information with the public builds public trust, educates future city leaders and other potential police department supporters.

Examples of programs to highlight the department may include:

- Any grants the department receives and how the funds or equipment will be used. Improving the department operations at reduced or no cost to the community sends the message department leaders are being good stewards of their tax dollars.

- Produce a public interest story about the department’s school resource officer program. Having resource officers describe their purpose for being in the schools and achievements of the program demonstrate the department’s concern for providing a safe environment for the children to learn.

- Offering educational programs including Law Enforcement Explorer Posts, DARE, GREAT, summer day camps, defensive driving, and hunter safety helps young people to develop the skills needed to avoid negative behavior. This can also promote future officer recruitment efforts.

- Officers regularly attend advanced training courses that administrators tend to take for granted. A press release describing officers’ graduation from courses, skills developed, and how the department will be able to better serve the community, enhances the citizens’ confidence in their department.

- New initiatives or programs designed to inform citizens how to protect themselves and avoid becoming a victim.

These simple ways of telling the department’s story effectively informs citizens about the positive and community-oriented aspects of the police department. It builds good will with the community and city decision-makers to benefit the agency in the future.

**Component Three: Maintaining a Positive Image in the Media**

Never before has information been more accessible to the public. The internet and social media have radically changed how we research, evaluate, and judge issues. The advent of 24-hour news programs have caused even greater competition between reporters to obtain a unique angle on every story. This evolution is requiring law enforcement leaders and organizations to change how they react to high profile incidents and build their brand images. To accomplish this, leaders will be required to continue developing a greater footprint in social media outlets.

In the past, many department agencies maintained a reactive stance when dealing with the press and allowed them to tell the department’s story. Too often the story being told was not accurate nor in the department’s best interest. The first step for agencies is to recognize the need to be highly responsive in communicating information regarding any high profile incident. Second, assume there are no secrets. Any and everything done by the agency is susceptible to inquiry. Third, understand that the media has a responsibility in our nation of informing citizens and holding officials accountable. Because of this, the department must seek to develop a transparent relationship with the media. The only way this type of relationship can develop is to have open communications on
both sides. When each party is aware of the others’ frustrations, business needs, and position on issues, everyone can work together to build a professionally mature and positive relationship that supports both the media and the police.

Internally, the department must have an effective policy for dealing with the press. When developing a policy, allowing media representatives to have input ensures their needs are met in a manner that is acceptable to the department. This policy should ensure one person in the department is responsible for being the ‘primary’ liaison with the press.

As is common with 24-hour operations, high profile events frequently occur when the public information officer (PIO) is not available. When this occurs, selected employees should be authorized and trained to release limited information to reporters. For example, officers at incident locations should be authorized to make a statement describing the situation and its current status. Dispatchers or clerks can be provided a template to assist them with making preliminary press statements when called upon. This approach helps reporters to make tight deadlines, builds a sense of cooperation, and ensures open and accurate communication.

Once the policy has been developed, all civilian and sworn staff should be trained on how to interact with the press. This training should emphasize the importance of having a good relationship with the press, how to interact with the media and one another at a scene, who is authorized to give statements, and what to include and not include in statements. In today’s multi-media environment, it is important to discuss social media as well as traditional media, including guidance on what content staff may and may not post to the department’s social media accounts as well as their own personal accounts. In some cases, the press may be invited to participate and present in the training and assist with practice newspaper and television interviews. Any person releasing information should be held accountable for releasing statements in the manner proscribed in policy and training.

The department may allow reporters to ride along with officers to see the challenges and risks the police face every day. As reporters ride with officers, they build a rapport that is based on professionalism and respect.

Producing a daily press release that is sent to all area media outlets keeps them informed of police activities and helps reporters to reduce their workload. Again this demonstrates that the department wants to maintain a cooperative, transparent relationship with the media. This release may also be used to highlight department programs and accomplishments such as officer training and certifications.

Police misconduct and the ensuing internal affairs (IA), and/or criminal investigations of officers are typically a flashpoint in police/media relations. Police leaders trying to do damage control run squarely into media representatives seeking more detailed information on the event, possible charges, and the officer(s) involved. Albeit a very difficult situation for police officials, it can also be an opportunity to exercise leadership.

When responding to media inquiries regarding police misconduct, IA investigations, or even criminal investigations, it is critical that the department and its leadership become immediately transparent in their management of information. There will be obvious legal, legislative, policy, union contract and other limitations on what kind of information, or how much of it, can be shared with the public. But even within these parameters, police leaders can and must step up to the microphone to make the following examples clear to the public:

- The department is very concerned about the allegations and intends on conducting a very thorough independent investigation.
The department welcomes the input of any citizen in the community having information or perspective on the issue.

The department is committed to quickly determining the need for any corrective action.

The department will immediately address any criminal allegations against officers and will protect the public by reassigning the accused officers or putting them on administrative leave.

Clear-cut statements to the media at the beginning of any investigation vowing to identify and address any misconduct, is essential. The leaders must then live up to the ‘transparent’ commitment by providing additional information as is appropriate to city leaders, the media and the public.

**Component Four: Other Agencies**

Developing and maintaining strong relationships with other governmental agencies is critical for enhancing a law enforcement department’s image, influence, and effectiveness. Police departments across the country are challenged with limited budgets, personnel, and authority. Developing partnerships with other organizations is critical for multiplying the departments’ influence in the community and effectively addressing citizens’ needs.

- **Local Government**

Developing collaborative relationships with other municipal departments allows the community to better coordinate services. For example, code officials can assist with addressing dilapidated properties in blighted neighborhoods. Fire departments can offer unique expertise during arson investigations and serious automobile accidents. Maintaining good relationships with garage mechanics can ensure patrol cars are repaired in a prompt manner. Mechanics can also be valuable allies in developing a vehicle maintenance and replacement schedule.

Similarly developing relationships with the finance department is probably one of the most important tasks for a police chief. Explaining the department’s unique challenges and involving staff from the finance department to develop proposed solutions increases the police department’s support for funding requests to meet these needs.

If the community has a public relations or media affairs office, police department officials can partner with them to better highlight the agency’s accomplishments.

Human resources have traditionally been perceived as an administrative processing unit. Today HR plays an integral role in the selection, development, and retention of personnel. Most departments spend approximately 85% of their budget on personnel services. Coordination of with HR officials can help to ensure that the latest techniques to recruit, retain and develop staff are available.

If the community has a public relations office, department officials can partner with them to better highlight the agencies’ accomplishments.

- **Law Enforcement Agencies**

Local law enforcement agencies are the primary provider of law enforcement services nationwide. Inevitably, police are faced with challenges for which they do not possess the resources to address. In a small community this could include a homicide investigation, fatality automobile accident, or officer involved shooting.
On a local level, agencies must work together to effectively maintain an open exchange of information and pool resources for common needs. Interagency rivalries only serve to diminish the capacity of each agency and enhance the criminals’ ability to evade capture.

State and federal agencies are uniquely equipped to assist local agencies with complex investigations that cross community and state lines. The resources and expertise required to conduct these investigations exceed the scope for smaller agencies to develop and maintain. Similarly, contributions from child protective services, juvenile services, mental health, and prosecutors can help to guarantee comprehensive resolution to problems.

Leaders should not view the involvement of other agencies as an indictment of the department’s abilities. Being able to capitalize on the availability of these services ensures every resource available is utilized to serve the community and minimizes inquiries or criticism that not enough is being done. Leaders should not wait until an incident occurs to find what services are available. State and federal authorities face competing challenges for their resources. Oftentimes, these agencies assume local communities are aware of the services they can provide. Meet with agency representatives to identify what services are available and how to access them. If they cannot assist with the problem, they can likely direct the chief to a department that can.

Component Five: Elected Officials

The three rules for working with elected officials are: Communicate, Communicate, Communicate!!! Frequent communication is the key to all good relationships. It is especially true when dealing with elected officials.

When elected, most officials have a limited background working in the public arena. Despite this, all elected officials generally have the same expectations for enforcement executives. First, police leaders are expected to represent strength, particularly in regards to moral integrity. Since the beginning of time, persons in leadership positions have been faced with ethical dilemmas. Community leaders need to know their police chief will always make the right ethical choice. To accomplish this, the chief must know what personal values and beliefs are not negotiable.

Second, the chief and the entire department are expected to treat everyone fairly and with dignity. As long as it can be said the chief was trying to be fair, critics will be unable to gain a foothold. One of the most important traits for ensuring any officer’s success is the ability to treat everyone with respect.

Third, elected officials expect the police chief to be able to handle every situation, regardless of its gravity, in a calm, controlled, and confident manner. The police chief’s demeanor is critical to reassuring the public that the department and community will be able handle a situation. In addition, the department’s employees look to the chief for how they should react during times of trouble.

Finally, elected officials view the chief as their “servant” and want him to protect them. The police chief must exercise good decision-making and provide them the information they need to make good decisions.

When making proposals or presentations to elected officials it is easy to become defensive. This is particularly true when a program the department has worked hard to accomplish is being questioned. The chief should never argue, display anger or indignation toward an official. To avoid any confrontation, talk with potential opponents or critic prior to a public meeting. This informal conversation allows the chief to listen to the official then identify his questions and concerns. Using this information, sufficient answers to their inquiries or acceptable alternatives may be developed.
The chief’s duty is to focus on addressing the needs of the department and the community it serves, not the personal ambitions of its decision-makers. During these meetings, leaders must never let pride or ego get in the way of accomplishing their goals. Oftentimes, the input or questions by elected officials identify areas police did not consider and can help to develop a stronger plan.

The community’s charter establishes the formal lines of authority for police executives and the elected officials’ to whom they may report. In some communities, the police chief may report to the Mayor, City Manager, or the entire Council. Knowing who hires and fires the chief is important, particularly when turbulent times arise. It is best if the chief understands these lines of authority before agreeing to assume command.

In addition to supervision and lines of authority, every city has its idiosyncrasies, unique culture, and informal communications networks. Each community has processes for addressing issues that evolved over time. The chief must be aware of these differences and be flexible enough to ensure the channels of communication always remain open with superiors. For example, in some communities, the chief may be expected to keep every council member abreast of activity. In another community, the chief may be prohibited from speaking with elected officials.

The police chief should keep a global perspective. It is easy to develop tunnel vision and simply focus on the needs of the police department. However, the police department is only one part of the total operations of the community.

People don’t trust people whom they don’t know. Take time to talk with elected officials. Informal conversation helps identify the problems officials and their constituents have experienced or concerns they may have. When meeting with officials, the chief does not have to have an issue of concern to discuss, but it is important to build a relationship. When the chief needs to discuss concerns the foundation of trust will have been established.

Go to every council meeting even if not required. Attendance at the meeting keeps one aware of what is going on in the community and demonstrates an interest in the city’s operations. Being present at council meetings ensures the chief is available to answer questions or address issues relating to the department. It is also important to recognize that it is harder to criticize a person if they are present.

Keep everyone informed. Inevitably controversial issues arise. Police executives do not like to be caught off-guard when these issues occur. The same is true for elected officials. Before incidents occur or become public, keeping elected officials informed of problems and the actions you are taking to correct them prevents the city official from being blindsided. When this occurs, the police leader is viewed as being a solution, not as a problem.

Be nice to everybody versus selected individuals. While some elected officials may be perceived as the ‘movers and shakers,’ aligning with specific elected officials at the expense of others can be devastating. Politics change and the people in position of authority change. The chief should always be viewed as an unbiased professional servant of the community, the elected leaders, and the department he leads. Always provide each official with the same respect and dignity. Politics makes for strange bedfellows. The individual opposing the department on an issue today, may be the department’s strongest advocate tomorrow.

Never gossip, complain, or criticize to one official about another. This behavior will lead officials to believe that if the chief comes to them talking about another person, he is just as likely to criticize
them to others. This kind of behavior is professionally immature and destroys support and confidence.

Little things police officers do provide for good feedback to council members. The public appreciates service related activities such as helping stranded motorists, resolving neighborhood complaints, and conducting security checks. The public communicates this appreciation to elected officials which, builds goodwill in the community and support for the department as a whole.

**What to Do When Things Go Bad**

In smaller communities it is important to recognize that officers oftentimes have relationships with elected officials. In some cases, the officer may be a relative. In other instances, the individual may have intentionally developed the relationship to support his or her own agenda. This personal agenda may not compliment the chief’s agenda. Unstable lines of authority and communication can severely impair the department’s operations and its effectiveness. In other instances, new issues may occur regarding the department’s response to a previous issue. If these issues are not resolved, they will likely result in the chief’s resignation or termination. These situations are always difficult to traverse.

It is always best to maintain good communications and avoid negative incidents that may drive a wedge between the chief and an elected official, city manager, or another department head. Even in the best of circumstances, this may sometimes be unavoidable. When the police chief finds himself at odds with another city employee, the problem must be addressed as soon as possible. Allowing the situation to go unresolved allows the conditions to simmer and the problem to fester. Allowing feelings of anger, disappointment of being misled, or betrayed to continue, will only make the situation more difficult.

The following steps are recommended for addressing and improving damaged relationships.

- Develop the right mindset. Recognize that a resolution to the problem is possible and be committed to achieving it. When resolving a conflict, there is no place for ego. An open-minded, objective, professional approach is essential for developing an acceptable solution.

- Having established a positive attitude, call ahead to set up an appointment to discuss the issue.

- When meeting with the other party, be objective. As Covey explains in The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, “To be understood, first seek to understand.” Look at the situation from their perspective. It is very likely a misunderstanding or miscommunication led to an inappropriate response. Taking time to see the issue from another perspective may reveal that the other person is right, has a better idea, or there may be a better way to respond.

- Throughout the conversation be sure to take good notes, particularly of issues of concern or questions that are posed. This demonstrates concern for addressing the problem. The notes will also trigger points needing clarification and serve as a reminder of issues to be addressed after the meeting.

- In more challenging instances, the other party may be resistant to working out the problem or be unable to articulate their position. In these circumstances consider talking with an individual who may serve as a mediator. In the most severe cases the mediator may sit with both parties and facilitate a resolution. However, in most cases, the mediator will be known
to both parties, and will suggest methods to each on how they can resolve the issue amenable. For example, the mayor may know the chief is having a problem with a council member. The mayor may agree to talk with the council member to identify the problem and offer solutions.

Finally, the chief must be willing to stand by his or her personal and professional ethical standards and determine the most appropriate course of action for the situation.

In closing, the police chief does not have to become involved in electoral or partisan politics to be appointed to a position or to succeed in that position. He does, however, have to interact in a political environment. Building strong relationships within the police department, with the media, the community, with other agencies, and elected officials, allows the chief to influence the political environment in which he works. This influence will pay dividends in the future when the police chief seeks to acquire the resources needed to support the department and effectively serve the community. While this decision may be difficult to make, violating ethical beliefs and standards can destroy any future career in law enforcement.


5 Kouzes and Posner, p. xv.


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