

Avoiding Stressed-Center Syndrome

Candice Solie · *Minnesota Chapter*

The new director of a communications center in Anytown, U.S.A., walks onto the floor and notices very little chatting at the consoles. Instead, people sit in tense silence, avoiding positive interaction with their co-workers. The director can feel the tension in the air and knows something is wrong. Is it him? Is it uncertainty over the change in management? Maybe – but maybe it goes much deeper.

Investigation reveals a pattern of widespread complaining about the “way things are around here,” blaming, bad-mouthing and out-of-control emotional displays (yelling, crying, slamming or throwing things). Performance reviews show a marked decrease in the job performances of tenured employees and a steady increase in tardiness, absenteeism and voluntary turnover.

There is something wrong and it didn't happen overnight. These are the effects of long-term, unmanaged organizational stress – stressed-center syndrome. Working conditions have deteriorated to the point that individual stress manifests as organizational stress.

No one disputes public safety communications is stressful. Some people handle the inherent stressors and shift-work requirements better than others.

A prudent selection process investigates personality characteristics and

coping styles as part of the “job-fit” determination. A prudent management process offers training on individual stress management to help employees deal with demanding job conditions. But, hiring individuals with good coping skills and offering training in stress management will not have the desired effect if the job's inherent stressors are compounded by working conditions that continually undermine the employees' sense of worth and well-being.

Job requirements are created by the nature of the job; working conditions are created by the nature of management. Management sets the tone for working conditions in the center. In the Anytown scenario, the new director inherited a center feeling the effects of negative working conditions that had evolved over time.

At its core was a management style that disregarded – or disengaged from – what was going on in the center. Small, individual problems were allowed to grow until they affected the performance and morale of the center. The absence of strong leadership skills started this center down the slippery slope to stressed-center syndrome. The application of strong leadership skills can cure this center by creating positive working conditions.

I have worked with many excellent communications center directors and supervisors. They all believed in and applied a simple, core principle: Do unto others as you would have others do unto

you. This principle forms the basis for the following leadership skills employed in creating positive working conditions.

Trust and Respect the Abilities of Others

True leaders recognize and respect the contributions of each employee to the overall effectiveness of the organization. They treat others as they would like to be treated. They never belittle or demean.

Good Communications and Listening Skills

True leaders listen to their people. They are willing to consider the opinions of others. They realize employees perform best when they feel they belong, that they can be involved and their participation is recognized and used.

Ask the employees in Anytown what they find most stressful about their jobs, and most would probably say, “Management doesn't listen,” followed closely by “They just don't care about our opinions.” Translation: They make us feel unimportant and helpless.

Effective leaders don't just hear their employees. They *listen* to them and take the appropriate actions in conflict resolution, problem-solving or reassessment of policies and procedures. They recognize the early signs of burnout or the need for critical incident stress debriefing (CISD) and they offer employees access to appropriate professional assistance.

Self-Motivation and the Ability to Motivate Others

True leaders get to know their employees and what motivates them. Through interacting, listening and observing, they discover likes and dislikes, strengths and limitations and how they act and react. They realize “one size fits all” does not apply to motivation.

Some people are motivated by independence and autonomy; some by security and direction. Some are motivated by variety and change; others by consistency and order. Some think achievement means moving up the ladder; others think it means enhancing job skills. Some care more about quantity of life (things); others about quality of life (friends, family and relationships).

Recognizing their employees needs and motivators, they design policies that help employees balance work/life commitments and encourage personal growth and increased job performance.

Professionalism

True leaders demonstrate professionalism and demand it from others. They project a positive attitude, focus on the organization’s mission and set a positive example. They instill pride in their employees for their contributions. When they say, “You are a professional,” they mean it. When they add “and I expect you to act like one,” they also mean it!

Commitment to Quality Employee Selection

True leaders recognize the importance of a structured, comprehensive new-hire selection process. They realize the best hiring decisions are made through stringent hiring practices, including valid pre-employment testing, structured comprehensive interviews and thorough background checks. They affirm through the selection process that the position of public safety telecommunicator is a challenging, technical, professional position that requires high standards in selecting individuals qualified to do the job.

Honesty and Integrity

True leaders keep their word, never misleading subordinates through words or deeds. They roll up their sleeves and

jump in to help whenever needed. They stand up for their people when they are in the right, even if it is be “politically risky.” They work to convince their superiors to provide salaries commensurate with the demands of the job.

Commitment to Quality Training and Employee Development

True leaders recognize the importance of structured, quality new-hire training. They ensure all in-house trainers are trained and certified in training practices and procedures. They continually monitor trainee and trainer performance. They do

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not allow trainers with bad attitudes to remain in the program to the detriment of new employees and the center.

They recognize tenured employees want and need on-going training opportunities that let them enhance their job skills. They know continual learning is a prerequisite for peak performance and continuing education benefits everyone.

Commitment to Quality Performance Evaluations

True leaders realize this profession requires high performance standards, so they establish and enforce performance standards that reflect the professionalism and importance of the position and the profession.

They recognize and commend outstanding performance. A common employee complaint is supervisors are quick to criticize and slow to praise. True leaders know receiving recognition for good work is high on the list of what employees want. They realize employees want to be recognized when they do something well or something beyond their basic responsibilities. This recognition reaffirms the employee’s self-worth and increases their confidence in doing a well.

They recognize poor performance and deal with it quickly and fairly. They do not allow performance problems to fester or grow. They schedule remedial training for technical performance problems. They address interpersonal problems – gossiping, back-biting, rabble-rousing, harassment – through coaching and counseling or, if necessary, disciplinary action.

They allow ample opportunities to correct performance deficiencies, technical or interpersonal. However, under no circumstances do they let employees who have demonstrated their inability to meet the performance standards and/or to correct inappropriate interpersonal behavior remain in the position and undermine the quality of service or the morale of the team.

Commitment to QA

True leaders implement a strong quality-assurance (QA) program, knowing QA is much more than hard-data review. They believe true QA is an organizational philosophy that says “This is a professional organization and we’re going to implement selection, training and management policies, procedures and standards that demonstrate and reinforce the quality of the organization and the professionalism of our employees.”

They couple this philosophy with a structured system of hard-data checks and balances for continuous improvement.

Commitment to the Industry

True leaders are actively involved with organizations such as APCO that work to support and improve public safety communications. They volunteer their time and expertise at the state or national level and work with their peers in finding solutions to issues affecting the future of public safety communications.

If the new director in the Anytown center follows the example of true leaders, he will be well on his way to curing stressed-center syndrome in the center. It won’t be easy, but the results more than justify the effort. ■

About the Author

Candice Solie is vice president of Profile Evaluations, Inc. (PEI).