

Using Seniority as a Factor in Decision Making

Seniority is the foundation of many decisions that are made in the law enforcement profession. It is often used as a factor when soliciting an officer's preference for a day or evening shift assignment, for distributing new equipment and even in selecting personnel for promotions. Seniority can be a fair tool in making some decisions, but the true essence of seniority captures much more than simply the number of years an officer has been an employee of an agency.

The old adage is, "A police officer can have 20 years on the job but only have one year of experience twenty times over." This exemplifies the circumstances in which seniority can be misused as a tool in the decision making process. When managers reward an officer with some preferential treatment based solely on longevity and absent any other conditions, the leader's actions do not promote a sense of duty or responsibility; they promote a sense of individual entitlement. This use of simple seniority as a management decision making tool will often stifle morale and motivation since it fails to compensate for effort and achievement.

To be a useful decision-making tool, sen-

iority must encapsulate more than simply the number of years an officer has served on the job or in a certain position; it must factor in the value added to the organization of an individual officer's years of service. Personal growth within the law enforcement profession will add value to the years of service. Personal growth includes learning from mistakes, seizing opportunities and advancing one's education.

In the infancy of an officer's career, he is bound to respond to situations differently than he would if the same situation occurred after a few more years of experience. For example, a rookie officer may generate a high percentage of arrest statistics; however, most of the arrests he makes are for lower level, on-view misdemeanor crimes. As the officer advances in his career, he should be expected to initiate arrests for crimes that are more complex and egregious. If the officer fails to progress past ever making just the lower level arrests, his seniority will lack the added value that comes from personal growth and advancement in the profession.

When an officer does not add value to the organization based on his years of service, he will likely be the first person to use seniority as the sole basis for preferential treatment in either receiving a choice bene-

fit or avoiding a difficult assignment. Leaders should recognize this ungrounded ploy to exploit simple seniority. They must assess the reasons that the officers do not present more plausible and valuable excuses. Leaders should consider why productivity, participation in major operations or other measures were not presented in lieu of simple seniority.

Certain objective figures, such as number of arrests, caseload or other measures of productivity, are measurable statistics on which decision makers can assess seniority, but other less tangible qualities of seniority also provide value added to an organization. These qualities include demonstrated leadership abilities, comprehensive institutional knowledge, well established community relationships and sound decision-making skills.

There is no standard formula for assessing the value added by seniority to an organization. The criteria for assessing seniority will vary depending on the circumstances of each decision encountered. It is imperative however, that law enforcement leaders consider more than simple seniority based on years of service when making decisions. If they do not, it can establish a sense of entitlement in those who may not be worthy of it and a sense of inequity in those who deserve it. The true essence of seniority compels veteran officers to capitalize on their years of service to bring an added value back to their agency.

Brian Boetig is a supervisory special agent with the FBI who previously served as a university, municipal and state police officer. He can be reached at brianboetig@gmail.com.

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