Mark Twain once said, “I can live for 2 months on a good compliment.” Wise managers in today’s law enforcement agencies will adopt this adage as a means for leading employees. When used effectively, praise holds many benefits. Empirical research, social psychology, manager and employee surveys, and motivational experts repeatedly have proven this fact. A law enforcement agency that values and implements this ideology will create an environment that helps to alleviate employee stress, improve morale, increase productivity, and retain personnel.

**STRESS IN POLICE WORK**

**Sources**

People commonly consider violence and danger or the potential of such the leading antecedents to stress in police work. Other perceived main stressors include external, uncontrollable factors, such as protracted periods of low activity interspersed with brief periods of excitement. However, analyses of the officers themselves presented a different picture. One study revealed that they perceived most stress as originating within the workplace. Specifically cited were relationships with supervisors. One officer observed, “The most
stressful call is the one that summons you to headquarters.”¹

When officers in both the United States and the United Kingdom listed significant causes of stress, they cited poor and insensitive supervision among the most primary sources.² Additional studies evidencing that management and organizational issues accounted for most workplace stress in the police service have supported these findings. This contradicts the long-held belief that factors external to the law enforcement organization primarily lead to stress.

**Consequences**

Stress represents a person’s internal response to external stimuli. Typically, stress associated with the rigors of police work is defined as “distress,” which occurs when a person faces challenges beyond regular coping abilities, resulting in taxed biological systems and, in turn, negative mental and physical effects. Some of the key consequences of police stress include—

- cynicism and suspiciousness;
- emotional detachment from various aspects of daily life;
- reduced efficiency;
- absenteeism and early retirement;
- excessive aggressiveness and a related increase in citizen complaints; and
- heart attacks, ulcers, weight gain, and other health problems.³

The police agency also will suffer because of the instances of lower morale, inefficiency, increased absenteeism, and friction with citizens due to rudeness or poor service that ultimately can hurt the department’s public image.

Stress also exacts far-reaching burdens as it not only affects officers and agencies but also harms families of law enforcement personnel. This holds particularly true for their spouses, who often experience unusually high levels of stress due to the police occupation.⁴

**PRAISE REAPPRAISED**

Fortunately, unlike many of the external stressors of police work, managers can improve their supervisory skills, and organizations can provide a more supportive environment for their employees. In this regard, praise—although not a panacea for the mental and physical ailments common to police officers—has proven to have many benefits that should bear the attention of today’s progressive police managers.

Societal changes have resulted in police agencies moving away from the paramilitary structure of years past. Today’s more-educated officers hold degrees in a variety of areas. Gone are the days when a majority of police applicants held prior military experience, accustomed to taking orders without question. Agency leaders now utilize coaching and mentoring programs better served to influence desired

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> "Praise not only promotes physical and mental well-being but also improves motivation."

Sergeant Gove serves with the West Hartford, Connecticut, Police Department.
behavior. This manner of leading requires praise to build self-esteem within the developing officer.

**Mental and Physical Health**

Ample proof exists that stress has debilitating effects on health and well-being. However, empirical studies also have shown that simply using forms of social support, such as praise, within the workplace can mitigate the effects of job stress on physical and mental health.\(^5\) To this end, evidence uncovered a substantial buffering effect whereby social support acts to cushion the blow and make the perception of stress less severe.

Additionally, studies have found that workers with lower levels of social support within the workplace suffered a higher prevalence of cardiovascular disease in strenuous jobs, such as police work, where high demands mix with low control.\(^6\) The implications and benefits of social support are obvious as experts cite cardiovascular disease as the leading killer of Americans.\(^7\)

**Morale, Motivation, and Employee Retention**

Praise not only promotes physical and mental well-being but also improves motivation. A recent survey found that “nearly 100 percent of respondents agree or strongly agree that giving recognition can make an impact on employee morale.”\(^8\) Additionally, empirical studies have shown that both American and English workers respond favorably to praise and that it does, in fact, influence job performance.\(^9\)

Unfortunately, some managers fail to focus on employee motivation until morale sinks, motivation becomes lost, and, ultimately, employees quit.\(^10\)

A reactive response to morale issues, versus a more proactive approach, will make the task of improving employee attitudes more difficult than if supervisors nurture behavior and performance from the start.

The importance of employee retention represents another issue facing police managers. Limited job praise and recognition rank as primary reasons why employees leave.\(^11\)

Money is an extrinsic motivator—once it is given, it will become expected. Eventually, if money is withheld, employees will see this as a punishment and the reinforced behavior will stop. However, praise increases
personal esteem that then becomes an *intrinsic* motivator—even if praise temporarily stops, the stock of personal pride developed will motivate and ensure productivity.

In this regard, Abraham Maslow, a humanistic psychologist, explained motivation as a series of needs. In his scheme, lower-order needs, such as physiological, safety, and love, first must be met. Once these become satisfied, they cease to motivate. Fair compensation accords some of these lower-order needs. Higher-order needs, such as self-esteem and self-actualization, then motivate. Praise and recognition build esteem needs. Once satisfied, people seek a state of self-actualization where a desire exists to test their potential. Compensation alone will not build this motivation.

Frederick Herzberg, an organizational theorist, further supports the benefits of praise over money. He saw two variables functioning within the work setting. Salary represents a “hygiene,” or “maintenance,” factor, something that acts as an incentive only to do what is required. If agencies meet all hygiene factors, officers are not motivated—they simply are not dissatisfied. Praise and recognition, however, are motivators that impel people to do their best work.

**PRAISE IN THE WORKPLACE**

**Breaking Down Barriers**

In an ideal work setting, praise will come from the top and work down. However, if managers do not receive praise themselves, they may not know how to give it. Further, they may feel that because it does not represent part of their department’s culture, it is not part of their job. Also, supervisors are even more prone to stress due to additional pressures required by their position. They confront the same work environment as officers, but with additional responsibilities, including facing the consequences for decisions they have made and being caught between the wants and needs of administrators and subordinates.

Additionally, administering praise properly requires supervisors to publicly talk about feelings. In doing so, they make themselves vulnerable to others, a condition some may find difficult and intimidating, particularly in an occupation where, for years, they have hidden emotion to be effective police officers. Many will consider it necessary to learn and then practice giving praise.

All levels of leadership should educate, model, demonstrate, and reinforce recognition and feedback skills. Additionally, not only should everyone from the chief down provide recognition but command-level staff should hold supervisors responsible for providing officer recognition. Praise opens lines of communication, which builds trust—leading to motivation. Employees are the product of their environment. Supervisors, especially first-line ones, have the opportunity to make an impact and to create a supportive workplace. Progressive leaders will initiate this environment even if it is not pervasive throughout the agency.

**Administering Praise**

To have maximum effect, supervisors must give praise correctly. To this end, they can gauge their efforts by six important characteristics.

1) Timely: Praise should immediately follow the laudable behavior and be
Ample proof exists that stress has debilitating effects on health and well-being.
CONCLUSION

Common sense should deem a quick pat on the back for a job well done not only deserved but necessary. Studies and surveys have proven the results of such reinforcing behavior stronger than once believed. Social support in the form of recognition and praise serves to increase morale, motivation, and productivity. Consequently, the physical and mental health of employees improve and organizations are better served and run more efficiently.

Police work represents a stressful, difficult, and, at most times, unforgiving occupation. Managers need to recognize officers for their commitment to service and show them their value to the agency. Praise delivers this message and costs nothing but compassion. Effective police leaders will value and demonstrate this ideology.

Endnotes
12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Supra note 11.
18 Supra note 9.