



Leadership with a Capital 'L'

APCO Delivers the Tools to Succeed ~ BY GIGI SMITH

Recently I was meeting with a panel when they asked me what I thought was the greatest challenge of running a communications center. In my mind, I kept thinking that the real challenge was narrowing it down to just one answer!

Those of you who manage or work in comm centers know that no two calls are ever alike. Similarly, there is not just one problem at any given comm center, and no two problems are ever the same. Situations can mimic each other and there may be a core solution, but in my experience, one size does not fit all.

I've worked for a few different dispatch centers in my career and I've noticed that, regardless of the facility or how differently they do things, there always tends to be some similar personalities. Those of you who have also worked at multiple comm centers know what I'm talking about.

There's always the matriarch, or "mom" of the group. You know that if you pop a button off your shirt at 0200 hours, they'll have the thread and needle to fix it in that giant bag they bring to work every day. Speaking of popping the button off your shirt, it seems each center has "the baker" who is always bringing in treats—the same treats you swore you would never eat again because you refuse to go out and buy new uniforms. Wait, I'm digressing. Let's get back to the question at hand: What is the biggest challenge of running a communications center?

Are personnel issues our greatest challenge? Although we may have similar personality types, there is not a one size fits all human resources solution. This is a good thing. Think about going to the symphony. You could spend the entire evening listening to just the flutist. You'd hear some beautiful music and the evening would be nice, but think about how much more of an impact is made when all

the different instruments play together.

This is how a comm center works. Yes, you could get along with just one type of employee (how many times have you said, I wish I had 10 more just like so-and-so?), but it's our differences that make us successful and it's that uniqueness that gives a shift its various strengths. These different strengths are the yin and yang of the profession. Personnel issues can be difficult, but are they the most difficult? How do you please everyone? How do you keep morale up? How do you cover all the shifts, channels, phones and still allow your staff to take time off, or call in sick?

There are so many training courses, books, speakers, motivational posters, scheduling programs and statistics available to help comm centers manage their unique staff. APCO's Professional Communications Human Resources Committee (ProCHRT) offers a toolbox—available on www.apcointl.org—to assist with training, certification, human resources management, legislative issues, media relations and public education. Another APCO initiative called Project RETAINS provides members with the resources needed to improve staff retention. These are just a few of the benefits APCO provides to its membership.

Even with all these resources, managing personnel, disciplinary protocols and staffing problems continue to be a big headache for comm centers. So are personnel issues the hardest thing about running a comm center? Some days, yes.

So let's say that your center's morale is high, everyone is happy and everyone comes to work. Staff is on time, productive and everyone gets along. You're lucky. What about your technology? Is it where it should be? Do you have all the bells and whistles? (Oh wait, we don't want bells and whistles in the comm center, we like it quiet. No bells and whistles,

no pen tapping, no humming, no ma'am, just the clicking of the keyboard please).

The problem with technology is it's like a new car. As soon as you drive it off the lot, there's a newer, spiffier model waiting to be bought. So how do you keep up? How do you know that you are buying the best model for your center? How do you know it's going to last and that you're going to get your money's worth? How do you train on what's new and fix what's broken? Again, there are many resources out there, including APCO and our ever-present drive to keep our thumb on the pulse of technology. It's definitely a challenge to look into the future and know what to expect, and then be able to maintain and update as needed. So is technology the hardest thing about running a communications center? Some days, yes.

The list of challenges could go on, but I ended up presenting these two topics to the panel, and then asked them what they thought was the greatest challenge. They agreed, and added that the best way to overcome these challenges is through strong leadership. The panel reiterated this—saying that it's Leadership with a capital L. I couldn't help but to immediately reflect that APCO is such a leader. APCO—with a capital A-P-C-O. APCO is continually looking to assist with personnel issues, staffing issues and technology exploration. Am I proud to be the president of the leading public safety association? Every day, yes! **[PSC]**



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