

## CHAPTER TEN

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### **Getting Along with Others – Dealing with the Stress of Interpersonal Relationships in the Communication Center.**

Of all the sources of stress in the 911 Center that I've talked about so far, the stress that can come from interpersonal relationships, specifically with the peers we work with, can be the greatest. As I said before, the job of a dispatcher is unique because of how closely 911 Dispatchers work together. Can you think of one other job, besides that of police officer, where people work together, in as close confines as do you with your peers as you do in Dispatch? There aren't many.

So all of the things I have spoke about up to now; the segregation and isolation and the pressure to perform your job, the fear of failure, the sustained stress, can really add up. Now put on the "icing" of conflict in interpersonal relationships and we have a big cake to eat!

Depending on your particular circumstances you might have either fostered good friendships or life-long enemies, or somewhere in between with your peers and others you have worked with. In either case the relationships that form these close quarters are unique. Many of you will agree that some of your relationships mirror those you have with your own family because they can be just as close. Of course just like in a family relationships can be strained.

When your relationship with your co-workers is good it can help to make work – even when there are all the other stressors – more enjoyable. However, when they are not it can become intolerable to spend eight to twelve hours with people whom you just can't seem to get along with, nor they with you. It also makes it harder to withstand the stress of the job.

Yet the reality of working in a 911 Center is that you are sometimes partnered with someone you don't particularly like and even may despise, and maybe they don't like you very much either. When this is the case you might have conflicts with them all the time. That can be draining, especially when there doesn't seem to be any solution.

Whether or not people will get along working together is often concern for supervisors when they schedule their personnel to cover shifts. They may try to match partners who get along, but it isn't always possible, after all you have to



staff shifts with the people you have. Although putting people together who work well together is always preferred, with staffing shortages they way they are it is often impossible to please everyone.

I know that when you are a supervisor and you have conflict between your people it can make you feel like you are continually refereeing. Some have told me it is like being a parent and having always to separate the kids, find out who is lying, make people “go to their room”, etc. It can be very draining because you have enough duties with all of the other things that go with running a communication center.

You see, when people don't get along it affects the entire operation. Thinking back, most of my partnerships lasted more than a couple of years each, and were for the most part without any real issues. Still, I can tell you that it wasn't easy getting along at times. But then it is never easy to have a personal or professional relationship with anyone – it takes work and effort from both parties to get along.

If I break total time I spent with some of my partners over that time it equaled to just about 160 hours a month, 1920 hours a year. That is a long time to work with someone. In other occupations you might see someone only an hour or so a day, maybe a little more. Even among other department employees, except for police officers that are partnered, there isn't this much more than an hour or so of strict daily contact with one another.

### **DO WE HAVE TO GET ALONG?**

Some of you might think that this isn't necessary; all this "getting along" stuff. I know that because I hear it all the time during conferences and seminars. In fact, during one of my seminars a dispatcher rose her hand for what I thought was a question. But instead she shocked the class by saying, *"It is not my job to like people!"*

Well, the silence that followed was like a shot of cold air blowing through the room. Everybody had their eyes on her and then the class then turned their attention back to me as if to say, "What now big boy? How do you answer that?"

Well they pay me to have answers, so answer her I did.

I said, *"You don't have to like people", but you do have to "get along" with them.*" The reason I gave this answer is because on every performance evaluation I had ever seen there a section that reads, "Works well with others" as a gage of performance. If "like" equaled "getting along with" then most people would get a low score on that one. The truth is that that is there to score your ability to work well with others, even if they are difficult to work with. It is actually a score for your "professionalism" and "resourcefulness".

This is important to understand. You don't have to like someone just to get along professionally with them!

After all, you are a professional aren't you? We don't always get along with the public we serve do we? But just because they mistreat us, are rude, we cannot let how they treat us determine whether or not we send them help. It's a challenge I know, but you can do it. Besides getting along with your co-workers isn't just a neat idea, in the long run it is absolutely essential to the successful operation of your center.

I don't have to tell some of you how much trouble is caused when nobody seems to be getting along. Or how many mistakes can happen simply because two Dispatchers are so mad at each other that they have separated into different corners, like boxers do in a ring, waiting for the bell to come out swinging. It is extremely difficult to work under these conditions because communication between partners is so essential.

### **WHAT MAKES GETTING ALONG SO HARD?**

Getting along with anyone is such a challenge because all of us have our likes and dislikes and ways of doing things. I talked before about the individual differences we all have, and while we might have a few similarities, between any two people there are going to be vast conflicting differences. Again, we might have always lived our life with the attitude that if we don't like someone then we won't have to have anything to do with them. While that is fine in High School, the Communications Center isn't a school prom; it is the workplace and a critical one at that. We have to try get along; it is absolutely imperative.

So just how do we do that?



### **HOW DO INTERPERSONAL CONFLICTS HAPPEN?**

The first thing we have to have is at least a basic understanding of how human conflict happens. Therefore it is almost impossible to get

along with most people without having a little knowledge of human behavior, and like we talked about in Chapter Six, “Why we do the things we do”, we need to understand a little bit about “who we are”.

Most interpersonal conflict happens whenever the needs, wants, and desires of one person clash with another. We all motivate according to our varied needs. For instance if we are hungry we are going to be motivated to find something to eat. If we are cold, we are going to be motivated to find something to keep us warm. However, if two of you are working on a shift and one likes the air conditioner setting “cold”, at a temperature just above freezing, and the other likes it a little warmer than that, then you are going to have a conflict of needs. Therefore in this conflict there is going to be tension, anger, resentment, as you resent them for being so cold-blooded, and they you for being so “warm”. This is just one example of a conflict of needs but I’ll bet you can come up with a few others.



The graphic on the left may be familiar to you. It is called “Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs”. Abraham Maslow (1908-1970) developed this hierarchy to show the varied needs that we all have. The levels are:

1. **Physiological** – These are the basic needs such as hunger, thirst, or any other basic physical need.
2. **Safety and Security** – Refers to our need to feel safe, secure and out of danger.
3. **Belongingness** – The need to affiliate ourselves with others, feel accepted and ‘belong’. This is why we join clubs, “network”, etc.
4. **Self Esteem** – the need to be recognized, rewarded, to achieve and be something.

5. **Self-Actualization** – The final need that describes our desire to reach our full potential – such as climbing the ladder of our success.

We all have these needs, yet we don't all have them at the same time. Maslow's theory was that we don't progress to the next level until the prior level is satisfied. So if we are still concerned with our physiological needs then we aren't going to be concerned with questions like, "Where am I going in life?" We just want a hamburger right now – thank you very much!

So when two people are working together, one may be trying to fulfill their Self-Esteem needs, while the other is concerned with their Safety and Security. Therefore there can be a conflict when these different needs collide. The point is that on an interpersonal level we are going to relate to people, and they to us, according to our individual needs and subsequent motivations to fulfill those needs. Therefore with any two people who are placed together in any scenario there are going to be conflicts between them because of each one's differing needs.

So that when we are either at work, with our family, or shopping at the mall, we are going to be interacting with people who may not necessarily have the same needs, wants and desires as we do at any given time. For instance, you're at the mall, circling for a parking space when suddenly you find one – Eureka! At last!" You exclaim. Unfortunately, another person saw it a split second before you and pulls right in! "Rude?" Yeah, but in reality they were just fulfilling their need for that parking space. Unfortunately you wanted it too, but they got there first. So their need got fulfilled and yours got frustrated.

Now I won't get into all the scenarios that can happen at this point. You may rant, rave, yell at the rude person, honk your horn, etc. But the point is that it really can make you angry when you desire something – you want it really bad but someone else's needs conflict with yours and yours is frustrated. Now translate this example to your Communications Center. During any given shift you and your partner are going to have needs, wants and desires and many

times they are going to conflict with each other's. When they do one of several things might happen. Either you are going to get mad and verbalize your frustration. Or you might sulk and say nothing. However, you deal with the situation, there is still going to be tension until there is a solution to the conflict.

### **RELATIONSHIPS TAKE WORK!**

For years now I have operated the only real Husband specific website on the Internet called "Hubbynet.com". On that site there is a teaching series I did a while back called, "Husbands, Love Your Wife". The key to the teaching I was getting across to people who took the course was that men and women are very different from each other. They are different in the way that they think. Different in the needs they have. I've been married over twenty-two years, and I know this from first hand knowledge. If some of you have been married a long time you know that, "It takes two for a relationship to I had to learn "her speak" and what her needs, wants and desires were so that I could try – the big word is try – to meet them in some measure.

Likewise, in any relationship, how well you get along with others is going to be determined by the amount of effort you put forth. If you put in little effort, you are going to get little results. However, if you put more effort, then the more "fruit" you are going to enjoy from any relationship. Again, it takes EFFORT to get along!

### **CONFRONTING OUR IRRATIONAL BELIEFS**

As I spoke of before, negative stress can originate from many of the same external sources and catalysts of change as positive stress. The difference has to do with your individual wants, perceptions, desires, beliefs and values, some of which are rational and others which are irrational because they based on an irrational belief system. Remembering that your beliefs – which comprise your thoughts – will rule your emotions, which will guide your actions.

All of us have irrational beliefs to some degree. These beliefs are irrational not because they don't make sense or are not "noble", but because in reality they are not reasonable or attainable. Unfortunately, irrational beliefs can cause more stress and pressure as you strive to defend them, or demand that others respect them. Here are a few of the irrational beliefs we can have:

- *You must have love and approval nearly all the time from people who are important to you.*
- *You must be completely competent in all your endeavors, or have real expertise or talent in something important.*
- *Life must go the way you want it to. Things are awful when you don't get your first choices.*
- *Other people should treat everyone fairly. When people are unfair or unethical, they are horrible and rotten and need to be punished or avoided.*
- *People and circumstances should turn out better than they do. It's awful and terrible when quick solutions to life's hassles are not forthcoming.*
- *Your past is a strong influence on your behavior and must continue to affect you and determine your behavior.*
- *You can find happiness by inertia, inactivity, or passivity.*

Why are these beliefs about the world, ourselves, and others so irrational? After all, the second example sounds like a good one, something to strive for. We all strive for perfection and believe we should be good at something right? Yet just because a goal or idea sounds rational to us doesn't exactly make it so. When we bind ourselves to an irrational belief in an "all or none" stance we are apt to be "kicked off our pedestal" when the conditions change – and they will. Striving for "perfection" is a good way to burn yourself out, because perfection isn't attainable by anyone, at least not in this life. True, you want to be the best you can be, and be as close to your idea of perfect as you can. But there are going to be limitations we will find that will thwart our goal. The more we try to 'keep the idea alive and thriving', the more frustrated we are going to become.

For instance, when we believe that everybody must like us all the time, we will find it hard to accept or tolerate those who seem not to like us. Depending on how much we desire to have them like us we may even put pressure on ourselves to “perform” for them, and try to please them. We know this as “people pleasing behavior”. Consequently, we get stressed when even after all of our efforts to please them and gain their acceptance, we perceive that they still don’t like us, or we sense their disapproval.

The great fact of human relationships is that approximately 80% of the people you are going to meet in your lifetime are either not going to like you, or could care less about you, or at the least are completely disinterested in you. That only leaves a group of about 20% that you can possibly gain friends, confidants, or mentors from. If we insist that we want 100% approval from everyone we meet in life, we create an expectation that is unrealistic. We are simply “setting ourselves up” and it is a sure formula for feeling bad, rejected, and useless when they do not respond. Now if there is no chance with eighty-percent of the people we meet, yet we expect 100% approval, then 80% of the time we are going to be disappointed. This doesn’t mean that we can never work with those 80% because we know that they don’t have to like us or we them just to “get along”. It is subsequently true that 80% of the people you meet you are going to have either one of the three aforementioned responses as well.

So it’s like this: If we are going to get along with people we have to know that from the get-go it takes work - hard work, to have a workable relationship with someone. No, we don’t have to like the person we work with; in fact, we don’t have to like anybody. But unless we want to be a sociopath, or a hermit, we are going to have to be able to get along with people because people are everywhere! Like it or not you are going to have to LEARN how to get along with people you work with at the console because unless you leave the profession, working “close-quarters” with people is going to be a fact of life.

### **SO HOW DO WE “GET ALONG”?**

To get along with others and have good working relationships we are going to have to first see that the dispatcher basically has four groups of people with whom they interact during the work day / night. These are their peers (fellow dispatchers), the officers (road patrol, detectives) and administration (clerical staff), and the public they serve. Primarily, here we are concerned with our peers and the officers we work with, as these are our closest working relationships. Tough order sometimes as officers can be demanding, unreasonable, well, down right rude at times can't they? The same is true for our peers who can be moody, irresponsible, and nasty as well. Again, this is because differing motivations. But we have to have to understand that people are not necessarily 'jerks' or 'idiots' just because they don't see things "our way." We all have our 'cross to bear' as it is said. So a little understanding goes a long way.

For instance, understanding the officer on the road who just wants to get through the day in one piece. Maybe an officer just wants to go to their call, write their paper, file their report, and go 10-07, all while they are getting flack from the public, their peers, their supervisors just like you do.

On some days people want to get along and on others they may not feel like it. Maybe they are just not feeling so good that day and take it out on you – remember defensive coping tools like displacement?

This doesn't excuse their behavior, or yours for that matter as we all have good days and bad days. But it does show that while you are trying to maybe have a nice day, and get along with everyone, not everyone will be sharing your views. It is just a fact of human experience. Remember, some days you don't feel so good either, you're having a "bad headset" day so to speak, and you don't mean to be so rude, or snippy, but you're tired. Tomorrow is another day. The point is that on any given day any of us can be happy, sad, angry, or giddy. All Sure, we can say, "Well that's their problem! They don't have to get mad at me!" Well, that is true, but just remember, you have your days as well. So a little understanding can go a long way.

Yet while you can't control other people and their moods, or likes and dislikes, but you don't have to let it rain on your day – that choice is yours. For me, I've found that when I try to understand people and give them a little slack, it just makes my dealing with them a little easier, and that translates to "less stressful."

## WORKING IN A NEGATIVE ENVIRONMENT

We talked a little about a negative working environment and how to deal with it. I said that negativity can be a part of the job it seems; yet again the solution is that we don't have to play into it. We can be a positive influence even when others are trying to be negative. Just like it is hard to argue with someone who won't argue back, it also hard to "push the button" of someone when they won't "play" to the push.

You know what "buttons" are don't you. It's like the Pillsbury Doe Boy – you know, you push him in the belly button and he giggles. Well, we all have buttons that when either people or situations push them we react in a certain way. One example of this is how we might react when we are criticized. For instance, how do you respond to criticism from a peer or from an Officer on the Road? Do you feel defensive; do feel like your integrity is being attacked? Do you feel hurt, and angry? Do you feel like retaliating? Or, when one of your peers mentions a fault of yours do you acknowledge it, thank them for the observation? Or do you say something like, "Hey, it isn't as bad as that stuff you do?"

How we respond to another's criticism is going to have a lot to do with how we perceive their input. If we feel the other person is attacking us, we are going to retaliate. Yet if we trust the other person's judgment then we may just acknowledge their point and move on. Again, like I've been saying all along, "We are going to act the way we feel, which is going to be based on what we are thinking." If we are thinking thoughts like, *"That so and so, how dare they criticize*

*me! They have got enough problems of their own! They should just mind their own business!”* How is that kind of thinking going to make us feel? Yes! Angry!

For any working environment to be a positive experience there is going to have to be “trust” and “respect”. Neither is inherited as you come on the job. No, trust and respect are always earned. Now sometimes we give respect to people – like a supervisor – solely because of their position, after all, they are the boss. But even then we may not trust them or respect them except when required to do so externally. Internally we may not respect or trust them at all. Many supervisors make the mistake of mixing up the two – something I’ll address later. But between peers trust and respect go hand in hand. Yet just as both have to be earned, and this may take some time – so they can be lost in a split second when we allow certain “organizational viruses” in.

You know what a virus is? It is an organism that infects another organism causing sickness and disease. Your body is an organism, but so is your organization. Just as a virus can invade your body and even spread to others, so these seven things can invade your Center and cause “organizational sickness”, and they spread like wildfire. Let’s call them “The Seven Deadly Sins of a Negative Workplace.” They are:

1. Gossip
2. Slander
3. Dishonesty
4. Back-Biting
5. Negative Attitudes
6. Favoritism
7. People Pleasing

## **GOSSIP**

I think most people are natural gossips. After all our society thrives on gossip from the news to entertainment shows. Yet gossip in a work environment can be the death of both trust and respect. Gossip should never – ever be

tolerated or allowed to take place. The best way to deal with gossip, especially if you are the victim is to confront the gossiper head on. Gossip is like a fire, and fire doesn't spread well when someone throws water on it. Gossiper's need a willing audience; don't be a willing participant.

## **SLANDER**

Slander is a form of gossip but where gossip is just 'idle curiosity', slander seeks to destroy. Slander is meant to harm someone, to "damage them" and their reputation, their life. Gossip can be retracted and reversed. Slander is harder to reverse once the damage is done. In addition, if you are not careful you can be actually sued for slander and in fact there is a long case history of this happening in workplaces all over the country. Again, confrontation is key. When you are slandered you should confront the source and get the situation resolved. But more important it should also be treated as a disciplinary situation as well. Again, supervisors shouldn't condone, participate, or allow slander to occur in any form.

## **DISHONESTY**

"Fool me once, shame on me, fool me twice, shame on you" so the saying goes. So goes dishonesty. Nothing erodes a relationship more than being dishonest with someone. "Once a liar, always a liar"? Perhaps. We all "stretch" the truth every so often. Yet being blatantly dishonest at the expense of our peers, such as when we do something, but blame it on our partner (usually outside of their presence). This will cover "backbiting" as well. This kind of dishonesty is usually born of fear – the fear of getting into trouble. Kids do this, such as when one kid breaks a vase and tells Mom, their sister or brother did it. Yet the old truth about a lie is that to support it over time you have to tell more lies. Unless we are pathological liars, even a little one usually bothers us in some way. Honesty is truly the best and only policy, and it's better on the conscious.

## **NEGATIVE ATTITUDES**

I have always found “negative attitudes” to be a real bummer. We all get in our “moods” from time to time and sometimes because of everything seemingly happening to us at once, we get down on ourselves, others and life. No, I’m not saying we have to be holding hands and singing, “We are the World” all the time, but we don’t have to be negative either. The thing I have noticed about negativity is that once one or two people are showing the attitude, it doesn’t take for it to spread to others. It is almost as infectious as sneezing.

## **FAVORITISM**

Favoritism applies more to supervisors. I know about this, as I was as guilty of this as anybody in my first days as a supervisor in the Military. After all you may feel as though everybody hates you because of who you are, so when you find a few of your people who seem to like you, you tend to gravitate towards them and “treat” them better. Again, this is more normal especially when you are a new supervisor and haven’t gathered effective skills of leadership. Still we are human and we are going to have favorites, the key is to not “play” favorites where we give preferential treatment to one employee over another. Other employees will pick this up immediately and call you on it – bet on it! At the least it will foster an atmosphere of distrust in your integrity and skills as a supervisor.

## **PEOPLE PLEASING**

People pleasing again ties into an irrational belief that we somehow have to be liked by everyone, especially those whom we really desire to have their approval – such as a supervisor. This too can breed suspicion from co-workers and distrust of supervisors.

Now this list isn't inclusive of all the "viruses" that can infect your organization but they give you an ideal of the how the workplace can have a myriad of variables that contribute to people not getting along. To take the analogy of sickness a step further, when you are physically sick and go to the doctor you relate your symptoms and he, after taking some tests and fact finding, suggests a course of treatment. Depending on how "deep rooted" the problems in your Communication Center are, the "treatment" will depend on how much damage has been done over time. At this point your organization may need a special consultation such as we provide here at Headsets911 via our Agency Evaluation and Enhancement Program to begin the process of healing.

However, sometimes just acknowledging the problem sometimes is the first step.

To close out this chapter on getting along, here is a little trick I teach in our seminar that I suggest each Dispatcher do when they start working with a new partner. It is something I did with every new partner I had as a dispatcher, and always attributed it to the successful (and peaceful) partnerships I had while dispatching.

### **1. HAVE AN UNDERSTANDING FROM DAY ONE**

On your first shift together with your new partner take a minute with them and discuss how you both like to do business. Take turns describing likes and dislikes. For instance, you might like to handle certain situations in a different way than your new partner has experienced with others they have worked with. This can cause friction between the two of you, but the effect is lessened when you have talked it out before hand. The fact of life in dispatch is that newly partnered dispatchers are always a little suspicious of each other - at least in the beginning. Talking it out at in the beginning goes a long way to dispelling the suspicions. Its just like buddies in a foxhole; you have to learn to get along. Not only for your own piece of mind and well being, but for the

success of the shift and the safety of the public and others. You don't have to love one another, but you have to get along.

## **2. REMEMBER – PEOPLE ARE DIFFERENT**

Snowflakes are different and so are people. Each of you has different likes and dislikes. They are bound to come up during an 8-hour shift together, so learn to give and take. Learn to cooperate instead of compete. Dispel the notion that in order for you to like someone they have to be like you. You have your own warts, so do they. Instead of concentrating on the warts, look beyond to the overall person you are relating to. You might be surprised what you find in people that is good when you look.

## **3. ADDRESS CONCERNS WITH THE PERSON CONCERNED.**

If you disagree with your partner take it up with them - NOT other dispatchers. Remember that nothing rots a relationship like gossip. Of course if their behavior is grossly inappropriate or illegal. Still you should confront them and if necessary then to the supervisor, especially if they do not respond appropriately to you. But never try to “go behind” your partner, especially for trivial things. Be an adult; take it up with them as an adult.

In other words, be as real and direct as you can be in all your relationships at work. Be a model of “how it is done”, and believe it or not it can actually work to change negativity in your center to the positive. This tool can work with your relationship with officers as well. You can't help what other people think about you, you can only help how you relate to others.

When we strike the balance between our needs and the needs of others we will find that there can be a peaceful co-existence with them even when we don't particularly like them, and that even in the midst of trying circumstance we can all get along.