The Need for a Symmetrical Leadership Philosophy in Law Enforcement
By John B. Edwards

Webster defines symmetry as “the beauty of form arising from balanced proportions.”

Symmetrical leadership is a culture where balance, fairness, proportionality, and stability all come together to make subordinates feel secure in their jobs, positions, and responsibilities within the organization.

Academics will identify a symmetrical philosophy more with the theory of transformational leadership. I am a huge proponent for transformational leadership, but my philosophy in symmetrical leadership is more specific toward the workplace environment the leader transforms, and how that transformation influences police officers in their role in today’s agency operations.

This philosophy is critically important in our current role as police managers. We are responsible for the development and perpetuation of a professional and responsible work culture and performance. We are also responsible for the caretaking, maintenance, growth, and development of our most valued resources, those officers and staff under our command.

The growth and development of the agencies we lead are reliant on five processes that we must develop and sustain. First, establishing and communicating a clear sense of direction and purpose. Second, empowering our employees at all levels. Third, accumulating and sharing internal knowledge. Fourth, gathering and integrating external information, and fifth, challenging the status quo and enabling creativity. A symmetrical leadership mindset incorporates these five processes as an organizational priority that is installed into the DNA of every work unit within the agency. Moreover, the symmetrical leader challenges themselves and everyone else to rise to the occasion every day, promoting exemplary performance tempered by ethical behavior in a context of professional values. In addition, the leader must promote meaning and purpose in their work and model the passion and extra work required to enhance their competence and confidence in their craft by embracing a lifestyle of learning and improving. Then translate that mindset as a priority of the professional growth and development of their subordinates.

For a symmetrical leadership culture to be developed and sustained, the leader must dedicate themselves to be disciplined in their processing of information, interacting with others, and making decisions. The leader’s perspective or point of view must be loyal to objective facts and criterion versus subjective interpretations or feelings.

Symmetrical leadership requires the discipline to remain self-aware while not self-absorbed, to be a servant rather than a dictator, to be opened minded and adaptable to change rather than set in prideful ways and driven by ego. Symmetrical leadership requires these attributes because when the subordinate’s environment is balanced, a state of equilibrium is

1 https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/symmetry
achieved that promotes purposeful work under a climate of security for the subordinate. From this culture created by the leader comes a momentum influencing subordinates to critically think, be candid with the leader and buy into the leader’s vision and goals. This devotion hinges on the leader’s ability to be true to their responsibility and staff, absent following personal paths to self-centered ambitious ends.

One of the greatest attributes of a leader is to be self-secure in their responsibilities and obligations guided by optimism, values, and vision consistent with their profession. One of the most difficult attributes to maintain is a mental state of metacognition. Dr. Richard Paul describes metacognition as “thinking about your thinking, while you’re thinking, to make your thinking better.”

There are five domains necessary for a symmetrical leader to inherit and use interchangeably with each domain to navigate modern management and supervision in today’s complex and dynamic work environment. I call these domains “Burdens” because of the difficulty to the leader to carry them out confidently and consistently. These five “burdens” require objectivity, dedication, and devotion, as well as hard work. The leader that strives to be self-aware, competent, servant driven, a skillful communicator and a proactive and impartial manager will create an optimum environment for performance and success for all involved in the organization. Proper implementation of and sustaining of this philosophy will ensure that the culture of symmetry so vital to the health and function of the modern police work unit.

A symmetrically oriented leader develops a procedurally just climate. They focus on the importance of fairness in creating a supportive organizational climate within their agency. They are perceived by their subordinates to be caring and benevolent, their people expect them to make fair neutral decisions based on facts, rather than decisions based on personal biases. This includes giving subordinates an opportunity to have input in which they can express their concerns during the decision-making process, providing an explanation afterward of why the specific decision was made. Procedural just management communicates to subordinates that they are important and are a valued part of the organization. As a result, workers identify with the organization and subsequently internalize its values.

Symmetrical leadership demonstrates models and promotes a purposeful environment. Purpose and meaning motivate a workforce driven by autonomy, mastery and purpose. The environment created by the symmetrical leader fosters motivation and job satisfaction throughout the work unit.

Most of the problems in the police work unit come from misunderstandings, miscommunications, or misapplications. Symmetrical leaders prevent and mitigate those

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4 Dr. Richard Paul, Director of Research and Professional Development at the Center for Critical Thinking. [https://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/dr-richard-paul/818](https://www.criticalthinking.org/pages/dr-richard-pau) 818
8 Dr. Ronal W. Serpas professor at Loyola University New Orleans
problems. They develop standards and promote conduct, they place people on notice regarding a zero-tolerance for unprofessional conduct, they prevent problems from ever occurring, they have their people focus and understand the important issues afoot and promotes “consequence” thinking over reactionary thinking.

They provide specific expectations that are communicated well to their officers, they ensure officers have had the training and possess the competence and confidence to do the job, and they praise what was done right first, then offer specific and objective feedback regarding improvements.

The balance created and sustained by this description of leadership creates a culture of professional responsibility and accountability. If the lower-level personnel understand the vision and the values (How we do things) then it becomes accountability at the lowest level.9

They do not have to wonder or ask supervisors, they know the expectations and understand the consequences involved. This develops and sustains the professional culture of the work unit.

Leadership will become increasing more simulative and collaborative rather than directive. The concern will be with the relationship of the leader in their respective organizational environment. Bureaucracies will be profoundly affected by contemporary turbulence and must adapt to become effective.10 The sensitivity to everyone’s roles and responsibilities within the context of the leadership, staff and both internal and external stakeholders is tremendously important in today’s workplace. The symmetrical leader takes great care to establish clear roles, communicate specific expectations and navigate the operational arena in an open and respectful manner placing emphasis on the individual’s perspective in combination with the objective organizational requirements.

Symmetrical leadership means being balanced and proportional to everyone, but sensitive and empathetic to each’s individual situation at the time. It results in equanimity and ameliorating the issues that will promote premier work ethic and prevent and mitigate risk in 21st-century police operations. Symmetrical leadership is a primary ingredient to organizational competence and preparedness.

We must heed Dr. David H. Bayley warning in his commentary from 2016 where he states: “Senior police managers must be better prepared for the complexities they face. The decentralized system, complicated by federal-state jealousies, scatters authority to respond to the emerging complexities of police and ensures that most police departments, apart from larger cities, will be underfunded with respect to the selection and training of senior managers.” Bayley also noted: “It is important to note that the scope of external oversight has expanded from the behavior of individual officers to the effectiveness of the police organization.”11

We must start changing the workplace paradigm and proactively train to ensure law enforcement managers know-how and can perform as a symmetrical leader to meet the

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challenges of our time and provide the necessary leadership, mentorship and oversight required to ensure their agencies perform at the highest level of competence and confidence for the benefit of our profession and the citizens we serve.