

The Fontana (CA) Police Department's Mentoring Program

An Effective Strategy for Employee Development in a Medium Sized Agency

Background

The City of Fontana is located approximately 50 miles east of Los Angeles and approximately 150,000 residents live in our jurisdiction. One hundred and fifty sworn officers and sixty five non-sworn support personnel provide law enforcement services to the community.

In the year 2000 the Fontana Police Department, under the direction of Chief Frank Scialdone, developed a strategic plan that was to act as a blueprint for the organization through the year 2005. Through the strategic planning process it was determined that our organization would benefit greatly from a formal mentoring program. Chief Scialdone was firmly behind this idea and made it clear that he desired to see this become a reality in our organization.

As is often the case with some of the more ambitious goals in a strategic plan, it became difficult to find the time to develop this program because of other responsibilities and issues that caused the mentoring program to become a lower priority. This actually turned out to be a blessing in disguise because eventually an officer, as part of a leadership training course, decided to take this project on. Officer Bob Morris wrote an excellent proposal to our Chief, gathered support from department staff and his co-workers, and was truly the driving force behind the development and implementation of this program.



What is a Mentor?

According to Webster's Dictionary a mentor is "a trusted counselor or guide." The first written account of mentoring occurs in Greek mythology when Odysseus' son, Telemachus, was mentored by a family friend. Mentoring has continued throughout history, in various forms, and is currently used by many major organizations and companies throughout the world. Included in these organizations is the United States Department of Defense that now uses mentoring programs to insure the development of the next succession in leadership within their organizations. While still not widespread in law enforcement, this concept is beginning to take hold as innovative police departments are now beginning to look ahead for methods of increasing employee retention

as well as developing their future line of succession for leadership positions. The development of mentoring programs can help achieve these goals.

In Fontana we consider mentors to be someone of a similar job description from various levels and ranks within the Department. Newly hired employees are required to be paired with a mentor and are assigned to officers or non-sworn personnel of similar jobs and ranks. This pairing occurs shortly after the acceptance of a job offer. Newly promoted personnel are voluntarily assigned to mentors of the rank they promoted to. We do not require regular meetings or contact, however they are encouraged. The mentor and protégé will get out of the program what they put into it. The feedback received so far from both mentors and protégés has been very positive.

Why Develop a Formal Mentoring Program?

Successful mentoring programs have a large number of benefits, not only to the employee but also to the organization. Every organization has its own identity or organizational culture. New employees coming into the organization are offered a much smoother transition and a greater understanding of the organization's culture and history. This program also has the potential to help new employees enhance their work skills and identify future career goals. In turn, the organization should experience increased employee retention along with increased job satisfaction and loyalty.

While developing his proposal, Officer Morris researched our retention rates for newly hired employees, both sworn and non-sworn. Between March 2001 and March 2003 the Fontana Police Department hired fifty seven new employees. Twenty four of these employees were sworn and thirty three were non-sworn. Of the twenty four sworn employees, six were released from employment prior to completing their probationary period. Of the thirty three non-sworn employees, six were released from employment prior to completing their probationary period. This represents 21% of all new hires being released and 25% of all newly hired officers being released from employment prior to the end of their probation. Considering the amount of time and money any organization spends on hiring new employees, particularly new officers, we found these to be unacceptable numbers and strongly believed that we could improve sworn and non-sworn retention rates by implementing a department-wide mentoring program.

To add to our concerns regarding retention rates and the development of our future leaders, most agencies in California, including Fontana PD, have recently adopted the "3% at 50" retirement system, which encourages retirement at age fifty. As a result of this very favorable retirement system, many agencies are losing senior people at an alarming rate. In Fontana, where we have not been hit nearly as hard as some other agencies in California, we are beginning to experience this rapid turn over at all levels of our organization. During the period of January through August, 2004 we will see a new chief, two of our three captains will be newly promoted, and four of our seven lieutenants will also be promoted during this time period. Nearly half of our sergeants and corporals will also turn over and dozens of new officers will be hired to back fill all of these promotions. This does not include the expansion in the number of our officers that will be needed to keep up with the approximately 5,000 per year population increase our city is projected to experience over the next fifteen years while our community is building out. The combination of all of these factors caused us to believe that a mentoring program had the potential to greatly ease some of the turmoil our agency will be experiencing for the next several years.

Development and Implementation

In our case, we had the good fortune of having a motivated and ambitious line level officer take ownership of this project from the beginning. There really is no better way to sell a program such as this to the troops than for them to know that one of their own was deeply involved in the development and implementation phases of the program. Officer Bob Morris wrote an outstanding proposal and brought in Corporal Mike Senior to assist him with selling the proposal to both staff and line personnel. Corporal Senior also assisted with putting the program together after it was approved. After reviewing the proposal, Chief Scialdone gave it his blessing. We quickly put together a Mentoring Committee to move the process along. The committee consists of a captain, lieutenant (program coordinator), sergeant, corporal, officer, and two non-sworn members of the Department.

The Mentoring Committee met several times to discuss how best to develop and implement the program. We put out information to members of the Department explaining the program and accepted memos of interest from those employees who desired to be mentors. The committee developed brochures, overtime guidelines, pairing questionnaires, and program evaluation materials. Once this process was completed we moved into the most critical aspect of development and implementation – selection of mentors.

The Fontana Police Department currently has 40 mentors including both sworn and non-sworn personnel or slightly less than 20% of our Department has mentor status. Selection was merit based and not all applicants were accepted into the program. Once mentors were selected we had them fill out a pairing questionnaire that asked for information such as hobbies and interests, marital status, career goals, prior work and law enforcement experience, educational levels, etc. We have protégés fill out the same questionnaires and use these to match protégés with the mentor who seems to have the most in common with them. After the pairing takes place, the mentor is notified and directed to make an initial contact with his new protégé and explain the program and what the mentor's function is to the protégé.

This seems to have had the most impact on our new hires who are attending the academy. During this intensive six month period, the recruits rarely interact with Fontana PD employees because they are training off-site at the San Bernardino County Sheriff's Academy. Our mentors have been visiting the recruits at the academy and the feedback from both the recruits and mentors has been very favorable regarding these contacts. It gives the recruits a sense of belonging to the organization that they did not previously have and connects them directly to an officer who can assist them in many ways during the academy training period and beyond. These contacts also make a very good impression on pre-service recruits who may not yet be hired by a police department and are looking for a good organization to go to.

While protégés are in the field training program, we ensure that their mentor is not assigned as their FTO for obvious reasons. The mentor is designed to be a friend, helper, advisor and confidant – not an evaluator or critic. We also make a point of instructing our mentors not to become involved in the training of his or her protégé unless there is a specific request by a field training officer or field training supervisor. Training conflicts would certainly dampen the enthusiasm of personnel for the program.

Conclusion

There really is no “down-side” to this type of a program. The workload is minimal for committee members and it costs next to nothing to organize and run the program. The workload is even less for the mentors who are merely required to make the initial contact and are encouraged to check in regularly with their protégé from that point on. We are assigning a new employee or offering a newly promoted employee a friend, in essence, to help him or her through that early, awkward phase of being the “newbie” and hopefully making that employee loyal, happy, and more productive in the future. If for some reason our program evaluation shows that we did not improve our retention rates we will still continue to keep the program in place for a very simple reason – it just makes good sense to offer assistance to newly hired personnel and make them feel welcome and part of the team from day one.

About the Author



Lieutenant Alan Hostetter is currently assigned as the Mentor Program Coordinator for the Fontana Police Department. He has been in law enforcement for 17 years and is currently assigned as the Investigations Unit Commander. Lt. Hostetter holds a bachelor's degree in Workforce Education and Development from Southern Illinois University and a Masters degree in Public Administration from California State University at San Bernardino. He is a graduate of the 212th session of the FBI National Academy. He can be reached by e-mail at ahostetter@fontana.org.

Officer Bob Morris was recently promoted to corporal and will be promoted to sergeant this summer.