

## Are You Enabling Organizational Insanity by Upholding Tradition?

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

It is impossible to “square a circle,” which makes this phrase an apt metaphor for what many public safety agencies are trying to do now. That is, they continue to conduct business the way they’ve done it in the past in spite of the fact that the environment has changed dramatically in the last few years. Although everything about the “game” has changed – e.g., the playing field, the rules, the boundaries, the competition, the equipment, the funding – many leaders act as though continuing to send in the same players and use the same playbook will result in similar or better outcomes as in years past. It won’t happen. To the contrary: doing the same thing over and over while hoping for different outcomes is a form of organizational insanity.

One reason why this insanity flourishes is that some of the traditions that once served public safety agencies and their communities well are no longer valid in the current environment. And every indication is that the current environment is here to stay: the “good old days” are a thing of the past. Yet leaders continue to take actions and make decisions based on traditions that were developed under different circumstances.

The problem with traditions is that they tend to become set in concrete, never again to be reviewed. They become sacred cows. If the mantra “We’ve always done it this way” continues to be accepted as a justification to continue the status quo despite evidence to the contrary that it isn’t working, public safety will be harmed irreparably. To avoid this fate, leaders need to examine traditions periodically, asking questions such as, “Why are we doing it this way?” and “Does it still serve the community well?” Though many traditions do stand the test of time, the automatic acceptance of past

practices does not serve public safety well, and it needs to stop.

The point is NOT to disregard or dump your agency’s traditions; the goal is to allow them to enable your success. Compare the perspectives revealed by these two statements:

- “115 years of tradition unimpeded by progress”
- “Inspired by 115 years of tradition, not bound by it”

The first statement embodies the position of “My traditions, right or wrong.” Those who cling to this belief find themselves struggling, as they try to square a circle. In contrast, the second statement makes tradition the springboard to success.

Which approach to tradition best describes your agency’s situation? How’s it working for you?

The changes caused by the economic downturn of the last few years make today an ideal time to identify, examine, and assess the traditions underlying your agency. Release those that no longer make sense and that serve as obstacles to success. Retaining only the traditions that fully support public safety will go a long way toward restoring the organization’s – and your own – sanity. ➔

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