

Reality Check: How to Stop Trying to Square the Public Safety Circle

By: Pat Lynch, Ph.D., President

The world has changed in major ways in the last few years, with important implications for public safety agencies and their communities. Despite the resulting upheaval in how and whether local governments provide services, many people continue to cling to the notion that things will return to “normal” if they can just weather the current storm. As a result, they resolutely keep doing what they have been doing for years – i.e., they are trying to square a circle. Here is the truth: change is the new “normal.” This means that some of the actions, decisions, choices, behaviors, norms, and traditions that enabled agencies to keep their communities safe in the past are unlikely to be the key to future success. The playing field has changed, and agencies that fail to adjust to the new reality are engaging in a form of organizational insanity. As a result, public safety is jeopardized.

How can public safety professionals stop trying to square a circle and start facing their situations realistically? Here are six suggestions:

1. Realize that assumptions and some traditions have expiration dates.

Since the environment has changed, it’s safe to say that the bases on which people made decisions in the past have changed. This is a great time to take a close look at what your agency is doing, why it’s doing those things, and how it’s doing them.

2. Take a step back and define “success.”

Painting a clear picture of what success looks like today enables people to realize that things that resulted in success in the past won’t necessarily work now or in the future.

3. Stop putting your head in the sand: ignoring

reality will NOT make it go away.

Sticking tenaciously to the same plan of action in the face of major change is a recipe for disaster. Make sure your strategy can be effective in light of current and future realities.

4. Develop multiple contingency plans.

Situational agility is key to success in this world of permanent “white water” conditions where the only certainty is change. Look beyond the immediate environment for other points at which change may diminish the level of public safety.

5. Embed accountability processes into the agency.

Often people cling stubbornly to the past even when it no longer serves them well because there is little or no accountability for mediocre or poor performance. When situations and environments change, there must be mechanisms in place that demand appropriate adjustments to keep the agency on track for success.

6. Develop and implement a sound strategy.

Although situational agility is important, there must be an overall framework that provides the boundaries within which it operates. Developing a strategy that requires leaders to articulate a clear “big picture,” identifying the measures of progress and success, and adjusting the plan as necessary puts first responder agencies at the helm of the public safety ship rather than leaving its fate to the vagaries of the storms that it encounters. ➔

Pat Lynch, Ph.D., is President of Business Alignment Strategies, Inc., a consulting firm that helps first responders maximize their performance by removing or mitigating obstacles that prevent them from achieving their mission.