



DEFENDING

ENFORCEMENT



THE

OFFICER

Minimizing workplace conflicts through organizational strategy.

By Colleen M. Niese

“**B**ut I was only going to be gone five minutes.” “Your meter doesn’t accept cash.” “I don’t have to pay for parking—I’m on staff.” Parking enforcement officers can be subjected to listening and resolving the proverbial “dog ate my homework” excuses from customers trying to extract themselves from violation notices every day.

The wide spectrum of possible rationales provided to enforcement officers, from a promises and bargaining to insult and offensive language, may be viewed as part of the job. However, in those cases where the exchange escalates into a verbally abusive confrontation or happens between the enforcement officer and a fellow employee, the organization/employer has obligations beyond settling the notice—it is responsible for ensuring a safe work environment for all concerned.

It’s not uncommon for employees and managers to become cognizant of their respective responsibilities to resolve these types of conflicts at the time an actual situation presents itself through an enforcement officer filing a grievance. Managers at any level of an organization can better prepare themselves to bring this type of altercation to an amicable end, or better yet, decrease the likelihood of having an altercation in the first place by instituting best practices.

Hire for Attitude, Train for Skill

It's a well-used adage, but "hire for attitude, train for skill" speaks volumes when it comes to hiring enforcement officers. An organization can train an individual in the procedures associated with patrol and violation notice issuance, but it's been proven time and again that adults are challenged to change behavior.

To source and hire ideal candidates, first review your job description and job posting practices to ensure they align with the attitudinal competencies of a successful enforcement officer. Verify there is language that specifically addresses working with the public, customer service, and conflict resolution. Next, make sure your interview process includes open-ended questions that ask the candidates to discuss their approach toward resolving customer issues, such as:

- What have you found to be success factors when resolving a customer issue?
- When an upset customer approaches, what do you like to say and/or do first to try and diffuse the situation?
- Tell me about a particularly challenging customer issue that you were able to resolve.
- Have you ever had a time when you could not resolve a customer issue? What did you do next? What did you learn from this experience?
- On rare occasions, a guest may use words you find insulting. What have you found helpful to do, say, or think to not react? How do you respond to these types of customer comments?

Be sure your interview process also includes an objective view of a day in the life of the enforcement officer and how the organization supports officers through training, leadership, and coaching. Hiring managers may tend to shy away from this type of narrative during the interview as they are concerned it could scare off potential applicants, but studies have found the more realistic a view an employee has entering a new job, the better the odds are that he or she will stay with that organization.

First Things First

When a new employee joins the organization, he or she routinely receives a small stack of paperwork for human resources and payroll purposes, an employee handbook, and general orientation material. There's a potential missed opportunity during this onboarding. Take a fairly deep dive with two key documents: the

organization's parking policy and its stance on a harassment-free workplace.

Staff members often aren't aware a parking policy exists beyond their issued permits or may believe they are exempt from the parking policy altogether. An organization's complete parking policy, including provisions for special events, holidays, weekends, and other special circumstances, should be clearly spelled out and reviewed with staff during their first day at work. The policy should include language regarding violations in terms of how they are issued, by whom, and what an employee's matter of recourse is should he or she wish to protest. Also, the document could also include what is not acceptable when a staff member receives a violation in terms of challenging the enforcement officer and potential consequences should a staff member choose this particular route, with a reference to the company's harassment-free workplace policy.

This policy communicates the organization's zero-tolerance stance on harassment and retaliation of any nature, the distinction between harassment and workplace hostility, and in very plain-speak, the organization's procedures related to how an employee may voice concerns he or she may have, the organization's response, and discipline in cases of harassment. Once drafted, a final review by legal counsel is always recommended to ensure the language complies with the law and the original intent of the document is met.

It's easy to take this proactive communication a step further by posting the policy on the organization's intranet and issuing an annual letter from a senior leader to all employees that reminds everyone of the organization's stance on harassment and the consequence should an individual be found in breach of the policy. These particular steps support setting the tone from the top, and can be helpful should a legal situation emerge.

Train for Success

Training new enforcement officers meets two key objectives: teaching them the fundamentals of their job responsibilities (the technical skills) and, just as importantly, teaching the soft skill set needed for customer service and conflict resolution. Procedures related to shift work can be pretty straightforward, but learning the specifics related to conflict resolution, either proactive or reactive, is just as necessary for an enforcement officer to succeed.

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There are several online providers that sell conflict resolution training that can be seamlessly integrated into an organization's existing overall program at a very reasonable cost. Purchasing this kind of program gives the organization confidence that the conflict resolution subject matter is provided by experts and is designed at the appropriate comprehension level. When sourcing this type of solution, verify that it includes the following:

- Conflict resolution for both external and internal customers.
- Balancing customer service and adhering to company policy.
- Solutions that include hands-on examples that can be easily applied.
- Practical strategies for the individual to use to ensure they don't take the bait and become involved in an emotionally-charged conversation.

Make sure company-specific information is included with this type of training, including internal policies related to violations issuance exceptions, escalation procedures, and the latitude an enforcement officer has in making autonomous decisions.

Successful training programs are designed to better guarantee that the enforcement officers learn, and as importantly, retain the organization's guidance, policy, and procedure from the start of their careers.

Who's in Charge Here?

Up to this point, the discussion related to enforcement officer support has largely been focused on key tactics and tools organizations can use. Probably the most crucial piece to this puzzle is the role the manager plays in supporting all of the above-described efforts. His or her leadership ability, from recruitment to training and ongoing coaching, will materially influence the enforcement officers' overall success.

As with the enforcement officer position, organizations should take the same approach when recruiting for their managers. Key competencies for a successful patrol manager typically include proven ability in customer service and conflict resolution, institutional parking knowledge, and specific leadership behaviors such as coaching, championing employees, and strong verbal communications skills. Some potential candidate interview questions to explore these particular areas of expertise could be:

- Describe your approach to evaluating talent and expertise when interviewing potential frontline personnel; what questions do you like to ask and why?
- How do you lead your team to ensure each person performs his or her job duties consistently and according to the organization's expectations, policies, and procedures?
- Tell me about a challenging customer interaction that was escalated to your attention. How did you resolve it? Was the customer satisfied? What did you impart to your team afterward in terms of lessons learned?
- How do you influence others who do not report to you to help you meet your work objectives?

Managers should play active roles in both the training program and on-the-job coaching. The enforcement officer training program should include a manager's guide that contains both the learning objectives and guidance regarding the role he or she will play in terms of supporting the organization's performance expectations through his or her leadership.

All of this is put to the test the moment a manager is asked to settle a dispute between an enforcement officer and customer, or when an officer complains that a co-worker demonstrated abusive behavior. Regardless of the specifics of each situation, his or her listening, communications, and decision-making capabilities need to be consistent both in terms of aligning with the organization's policy and from situation to situation. Enforcement officers will quickly question the trust of their leader if they perceive the manager is arbitrarily making procedural exceptions or changes resolution techniques based on certain customer profiles or other dynamics that should have little or no bearing on the outcome.

These scenarios bring about a valuable opportunity in coaching and feedback that, when capitalized on, guarantees employee loyalty and continued high performance. Immediately after the situation is resolved, the manager can check in with the enforcement officer to review what worked and lessons learned, and recognize his or her effort throughout the situation.

As long as people work with people, the potential for an emotionally-charged exchange will always exist. While organizations cannot fully eliminate this probability, they can proactively prepare through their hiring and training practices and leadership principles. 



COLLEEN M. NIESE is principal at The Marlyn Group. She can be reached at cniese@marlyngroupllc.com.