If you care about the future of your agency and your staff, prepare them for the day when you will leave.

Are You Planning for Succession?

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Editor’s Note: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily the American Correctional Association.

On Thursday, July 17, 2014, my life changed. Michael B. Hancock, mayor of the city and county of Denver called me at home at 9 p.m. to tell me that my friend, Sheriff Gary Wilson, was stepping down under a mutual agreement the two made. Hancock then stated he was going to conduct a national search for a new sheriff and asked if I would serve as the interim sheriff until he found a permanent replacement. The mayor told me that Wilson and a few others suggested my name be placed into consideration. I was surprised, humbled, shocked and a bit hesitant. I told the mayor I would take on the challenge, as I believed in his leadership, and I knew our department would need to have someone at the helm.

I really didn’t know how big of a hill I was about to climb. What I did know was that at an entry level, I was at least knowledgeable enough to step in and to have an operational, administrative and political sense of what the position of sheriff in our agency meant. Wilson and former directors of corrections William “Bill” Lovingier, Fred Oliva and John Simonet — men I have known for more than 20 years — were all visionary leaders. They truly believed in succession planning, and I am grateful for it. Without being able to see how the “business of jail” is run from all angles, I would not have been prepared to stand in the gap.

There are several classes on succession planning available through various national organizations. For example, the American Correctional Association offers customized trainings on succession planning. Such classes focus on the many topics that need to be addressed when thinking about preparing future leaders. This article will center on three important topics: operations, administration and political preparation.

In order to develop the leaders of tomorrow, delegate authority to your staff and allow them to learn what it means to make decisions in the organization.

Operations

I have worked in many areas of our department, and have been blessed to have worked in all of our divisions. From the jails, to our Court Services Unit, to the Internal Affairs Bureau, to the Training Academy, to Emergency Response Unit/SWAT Team, I was given an opportunity throughout my career to see the global view of our organization. This has helped me to understand operationally how the decisions in one area directly affect another. For example, I knew that limiting the number of bookings at the county jail would begin to back up the number of inmates housed in pre-arraignment detention. Moving staff around to other areas in your agency is key to molding future leaders and will help staff understand how not focusing on your operation in a global perspective is counterproductive to a well-run jail system.

I was also given great responsibility without micromanaged oversight. My leaders trusted that I would do a good job, and when I stumbled, they were there for advice, counsel and course correction, when needed. In order to develop the leaders of tomorrow, delegate authority to your staff and allow them to learn what it means to make decisions in the organization.
Administration

One of the first presentations I had to make when I stepped into the position of sheriff was to the chief financial officer (CFO) of Denver. The material was already created by Wilson and our internal finance director, and the date of the talk with the CFO could not be reset since the timeline for the budget to go to the mayor and City Council for final approval was tight. I had the privilege of knowing the details of almost all the items because when Wilson was sheriff, we would take his division chiefs to sit in the room and observe. I also knew our staffing matrix, position allocation, overtime projections, etc., because this information was shared with the command staff.

Political Preparation

When our agency was placed in the public spotlight and the change was made, I was automatically made the “face” of the Denver Sheriff Department. For every story that ran, whether it was tied to me or not, it was likely that my image or my name would be associated with it. In classes I have taken at ACA and American Jail Association conferences, or courses such as Executive Excellence through the National Institute of Corrections, I was given a foreshadowing of what this meant to an administrator. I was also allowed through my work as division chief to have been in the room to witness press conferences and political strategy meetings on how to address topics. Through these gatherings, I found it is best to learn from the expertise of others before jumping out and making statements or decisions, and this helped when the time came to deal with the media and others. I could go on and on about how my work experiences have led me to a place to be prepared for being the interim sheriff of Denver, but I will end with this: If you care about the future of your agency and your staff, prepare them for the day when you will leave.