

Community and law enforcement join forces to curb false alarms

Team members problem-solve to improve quality

By LISA A. BEACH

When the City of Coral Springs, Fla. and its police department noticed an increase in false alarms in the community, they joined forces to solve the problem. They assembled a team that reflected a spectrum of city government departments (i.e., police, legal, building, etc.). They also sought community involvement by conducting focus groups with local businesses,

residents and alarm companies. To begin problem solving, the cross-functional team used valuable tools to address the issue:

First, the team armed themselves with facts. By conducting a computer analysis, they discovered a pattern of where, why and how often false alarms occurred. By using focus groups, they gathered invaluable community feedback. By reviewing model programs already running in other states, they found out what works and what doesn't. "Data played a heavy role in our success," explains **Chris Heflin**, the

(See **ALARM** on page 2)

Sensory perceptions impact work comfort

Sensory factors play a role in your work performance and in maintaining your health. These ergonomic issues, such as air quality, aromas and noise levels, can impact stress, productivity and physiological states. Here are some suggestions that will help you stay productive and healthy:

- **Dust your work area to improve air quality.** This includes your computer screen, stacks of files or books and furniture. If you're allowed, bring in an air cleaner to reduce the number of airborne particles that can cause allergies and illness, such as mold, dust and pollen.

- **Refrain from bringing in items with strong odors.** This may include eating aromatic seafood or greasy

foods at your desk, popping popcorn generating an odor that permeates throughout the floor, wearing heavy perfume or cologne or bringing in a large bowl of potpourri for your office. Although the fragrance may not be offensive to you, your teammates' senses react to scents differently. Be considerate of others around you.

- **Follow cubicle etiquette.** If members of your team or co-workers in the company work with you in a cubicle or open environment, don't contribute to a high noise level with loud or disruptive interactions, musical computer wallpapers, conversations on speaker phone or a phone ring set at high volume. If background noises are distracting, bring in a small fan that provides subtle white noise. ■

- **Evaluate your training.** Any programs that teach you new skills or increase your knowledge are valuable. Offer feedback on how you would rate the training. Begin by asking: Did the trainer use real-life examples? Has your performance improved since your training?
- **Volunteer as time-keeper.** If your team offers a rotating role to keep time and help keep the group on track during meetings, step up to the plate to perform a simple but important function. Your help in ensuring discussions are structured will make the meetings more effective.
- **Service with a smile.** If you're away from your phone for an extended period, change your voice mail greeting to state you will be away and leave the phone extension for a teammate who has agreed to speak with clients while you're gone.

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

To reduce personal stress, I try to shy away from taking on anything new on the team. I feel more in control when I know what to expect.

(See page 2)

Break old patterns, welcome new opportunities

"Habit is a cable; we weave a thread of it each day, and at last we cannot break it."

—Horace Mann, American educator and advocate of public education

WHAT WOULD YOU DO?

Tackle future challenges with fervor

To avoid possible stress and adding to your workload, you may find you don't volunteer for new assignments or additional tasks on the team. You may believe that maintaining the same routine and familiar work projects will be easier than assuming new duties.

One disadvantage of avoiding opportunities is you won't feel you are growing in your position. By seeking new challenges, your skill levels and knowledge will increase, you will have more impact on the team's outcome and appear more valuable to the company.

Consider these approaches:

- **Look at your schedule.** Determine where you can "fit in" an additional responsibility. If you already feel overloaded, ask your team leader if this new project has a higher priority than a task you are currently working on.
- **Express your enthusiasm.** When an opportunity is discussed, be the first to volunteer for the role if you feel the project is aligned with your skills and talents.
- **Plunge into your new work.** Learning something new can be stimulating, rewarding and can improve your self-esteem. ■

ALARM (continued from page 1)

team facilitator. "Facts can really diffuse debate."

Next, the team set a measurable goal, met weekly and began brainstorming ideas. For objectivity, expertise and credibility, they hired an alarm consultant to present their program to the city commission for approval. "You don't have to reinvent the wheel," says Sgt. Robert Kostick, the team leader. "Find someone who has solved a similar problem and tailor that solution to your own needs."

Within the team, they sent e-mails and forwarded appropriate documentation to keep each other, their own staff and management informed and involved.

Within the community, the team published informative articles in Coral Springs' *Citizen* magazine. The team also invited the community to attend monthly town hall meetings and created a False Alarm School as a community service.

Both Heflin and Kostick agree that *how* you do things is as important as *what* you do. Kostick says heavy community involvement was a key factor in their success. "Initially, there was no public outcry when our consultant presented the program to the commission," Heflin adds. "We kept the public informed and involved from the beginning."

Although Coral Springs won't be able to measure one-year results until November 2000, the city has already seen a reduction in false alarms based on initial results. And the indirect results are already paying off. "The program was a very positive process for everyone involved," Kostick says. "The elected officials and management liked the outcome. The businesses loved our approach. The public loved the personal contact. We generated good internal press. And we achieved consensus on how to solve the problem." ■

Source: Sgt. Robert Kostick, Coral Springs Police Department, Coral Springs, Fla., and Chris Heflin, Team Facilitator.

Steps to improve quality

1. Define the problem.
2. Conduct research.
3. Set measurable goals.
4. Communicate progress.
5. Evaluate results.

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