

Managing People

by James B. Thomas, Jr., and Gretchen C. Schwarz

James B. Thomas, Jr. was the Inspector General, U.S. Department of Education, from 1980 until 1995. He is currently the Director of Auditing, Office of Chief Inspector General, Executive Office of the Governor of Florida.

Gretchen C. Schwarz was the Associate Inspector General, U.S. Department of Education, from 1980 until 1995.

Resource management in an Inspector General office is synonymous with personnel management. People are by far the most expensive and essential of IG resources and this is THE tremendous challenge for the IG manager. The challenge to get and keep the best and brightest individuals with the right mix of skills, the challenge to identify and provide quality training to enhance their skills; the challenge to provide an atmosphere of continuous learning and continuous improvement; and the challenge to provide sufficient compensation to keep good staff from being distracted by outside offers are among the challenges for an IG manager. These provide many opportunities for managers to excel.

Recruiting and Retaining

Historically, IGs often used the tried and true way of obtaining the best and brightest - they raided other IG offices. This has the advantages of providing experienced staff quickly and provides some cross-fertilization among the IG offices. However, it has a significant down side. It does not add to the wealth and the strength of the community as a whole. It does not feed the pipeline. In an ideal world, an IG manager would recruit at those colleges and universities which could provide the type of talent required to round out the skill set needed to carry out the responsibilities of the particular IG office.

Determining the type of talent needed is an issue that IGs now face that was not much of a problem years ago. This reflects the changing nature and focus of IG work - particularly audit work - over the last 2 decades. The IGs increasingly are taking a value-added approach to their

work, an approach which will provide significant tangible program improvements and will be of greater service to agency program managers and to the public. This focus is set out specifically in the Vision Statement of the President's Council on Integrity and Efficiency in 1994. Because IGs have broadened their efforts from dealing primarily with accounting and internal control issues to looking increasingly at program outputs, outcomes, and results/performance measures, skill needs have changed. While IGs used to rely almost exclusively on accountants, now we also need information systems specialists, engineers, medical doctors, statisticians, economists, educators, and social scientists, to name a few. These needs vary significantly among the IGs because each IG's work focuses on the mission of the agency with which it deals. Previously, we may have hired investigators from the traditional law enforcement agencies like the FBI and the Secret Service. Now, with our primary interest in financial crimes, it's more important than ever to have investigators trained in financial transactions. This results in the need to have full integration of auditors with investigators. I believe some of our best investigators were originally hired and trained as auditors.

To identify good candidates, each IG needs to develop continuing relationships with the colleges and universities which can serve the IG's requirements. Through contacts with the schools and its professors, the IGs will be aware of excellent prospects and may have an opportunity to influence the schools to include subjects in the curriculum which might interest the students in seeking work with the Government specifically the IG, and which will help prepare the students for such work.

When IGs participate in the recruitment processes at the universities and colleges, we are of course looking for hard technical skills, but I believe there are two areas we have not paid enough attention to in this process. One area is writing skills. No matter what important facts our work reveals, unless we can effectively communicate, we fail. This is not an issue of putting in the comma to make a

(continued on page 24)

sentence look nice, but is an issue of putting in the comma to make the meaning clear. In the last 20 years, there has been a decline in the ability of those coming out of school to put together clear sentences into meaningful paragraphs which convey a clear, crisp and concise message. This needs to be an important recruitment criteria.

Another area of concern I feel we have not paid enough attention to in recruitment is the willingness and ability of the prospective employee to work in a team. Little we do in an IG office is done by one individual alone. Almost all is done in a team of some kind. While not an easy issue to focus on, I think it is important in selecting future staff. It can have tremendous impact on the success of the office.

In that perfect world I mentioned, once recruitment has taken place, the issue of retaining staff becomes key. This involves the training, learning and continuous improvement, which I will discuss below, but the best way I have found to retain staff is to provide an environment where individuals feel they are a significant part of the team, where they are consulted, where they feel they are part of the process and where they feel their opinions matter. This requires the “supervisor” to become a “mentor” and an “advisor” and not a “director.” The process becomes one of collaboration, cooperation, and mediation so that all members know that they have an opportunity for significant input and impact not only in their work but also in their own personal training and development. Ultimately, staff work together in truly self-directed work teams where they plan, organize, conduct and report on their efforts, and where they assure training and development for one another, with the “supervisor” outside the team being the “advisor and mentor.” This team process best taps into staff creativity and encourages innovation in a way that is often discouraged by traditional hierarchical systems.

Training

When we recruit someone from outside the IG community, we believe that they have all the basic skills that they need to do the job that they were hired to do. Nevertheless, the first thing a new staff member will need is to be initiated into the unique IG world, for an auditor that means an orientation such as provided by the Inspector General Auditor Training Institute (IGATI), and for an investigator a program at the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC).

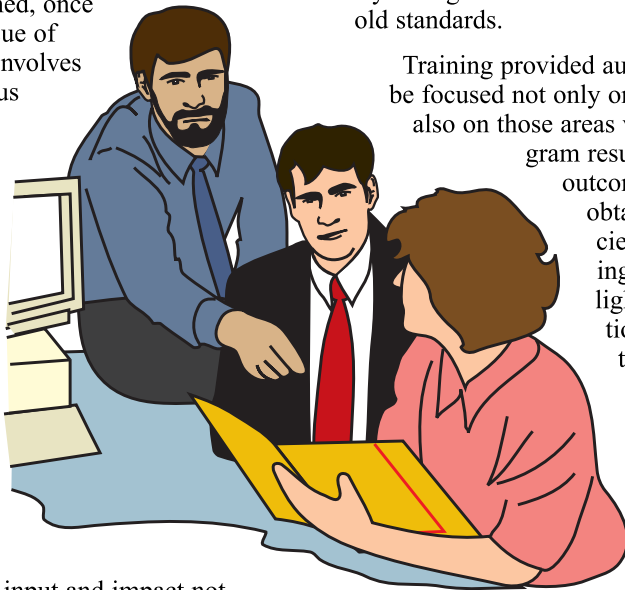
Regardless of the skills brought to the IG, those skills will need to be honed over time and new skills will need to be added. Skills required of auditors and investigators

today, in some cases, were not even in existence as little as 3 years ago and they will continue to change. In addition, the conditions under which those skills are applied are also constantly changing. In Government, many organizations are moving from being regulators to being resources. Many typical government operations (if there are typical operations anymore) are now being contracted out to private business. This “privatization” process, like a “reinvented” internal process, may well not have the kinds of internal controls for accountability that we have come to know in government service. Consequently, the auditor and investigator must know and understand new processes and new ways of assuring accountability so that auditors and investigators won’t be accused of interfering with operations and stymieing innovation and creativity by measuring against old standards.

Training provided auditors and investigators thus must be focused not only on important traditional skills, but also on those areas which help them work with program results and assess whether the outcomes called for in legislation are

obtained in the most effective and efficient manner. This requires identifying the needs of each individual in light of the demands of the organization, and considering the desires of the staff member. Significant time and resources are required to develop or procure timely and high quality internal training programs or to send individuals to good external programs. It would be hard to overemphasize in our ideal world the importance of providing adequate

training, not only to meet the needs of the job, but to retain that valuable resource - the individual staff member.



Environment for Continuous Learning and Improvement

An environment in which individuals feel appreciated, where they have an opportunity to contribute, and where they believe their ideas are thoughtfully considered will produce an office in which continuous learning and improvement can take place. When IG management provides the best available equipment, technology, and training and where sufficient resources are made available for staff to participate in professional activities, individual members will usually respond by being more committed and involved in work and in the activities for self improvement.

Providing sufficient compensation opportunities for good IG staff members abound - in other IG offices, in program accounting and investigative offices, and in outside accounting and investigative offices. How do we keep the good people? In addition to opportunities to influence their work, have adequate equipment and other resources, and

develop their skills, even in the ideal world the bottom line is probably cash. However, if IG managers assure development of their staff and provide them with more responsibility, they will be able to justify compensation at a level to hold them.

One Last Challenge

Over the years, IGs have tried to get auditors and investigators to work more closely together because their joint efforts can produce more than the sum of their separate efforts. We have not succeeded in this to the degree that we should have. Auditors and investigators must be trained together and learn to appreciate each others' skills. Only then can we overcome the "we/them" atmosphere. The office environment always suffers when this atmosphere is present. Teamwork - including having both auditors and investigators on the same teams where all share equally depending upon their skill and experience is imperative. In this supportive environment, knowledge and skills are

shared and we learn to appreciate one another and accomplish more.

Conclusion

The IG community has come a long way in the last 20 years in updating its approach in ways which contribute more significantly toward improving Government operations. But we have a long way to go. It will take our best leadership skills to assure a staff that is sufficient, trained and ready for the changes here and still to come. We can best do this by bringing in good new talent, by involving the staff in decision making, by providing them training and other resources needed, and by inculcating an environment of continuous learning - an environment that values the individual and stimulates teamwork and synergy between auditors and investigators. Hopefully our 30-year report on resource management will say that we have made great progress toward this goal.□