

**The Bill Blackwood
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**Honest Communication:
A Law Enforcement Leadership Imperative**

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**By
Shane Sexton**

**Travis County Constable, Precinct Three
Austin, Texas
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ABSTRACT

This paper will discuss the importance of honest communications between leaders and followers in the law enforcement community. Followers have expectations of their leaders, and accurate information dissemination is among those expectations. Statistics indicate that, for most people, lying is a frequent occurrence during social and professional interactions. As inferred by Kornet (1997), people deceive in approximately 30% of their communications. Law enforcement and the leaders associated with the profession are not immune to this behavior. For example, deception is often encouraged during criminal investigations. Skolnick and Leo (1992) relay that “Cops are permitted to, and do, lie routinely during [an] investigation” (p. 4). This deception will also manifest itself during investigations of officer misconduct. However, as relayed by Watkins (2007), “experts in the field of police ethics say that great harm can be the end result of lying” (p. 20). There is no place for deceptive practices by law enforcement leadership; therefore, research related to this topic is relevant to the profession because of the direct correlation between deceit by law enforcement leaders and organizational credibility. Willis (2011) suggested that honesty is an integral part of one’s life. Willis (2011) adds, “those who work for us depend upon our honesty with them” (p. 17). Followers expect honesty in all communications, regardless of whether it is oral or written. If law enforcement leaders expect subordinates to follow, they must realize that honest communication should be an imperative.

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INTRODUCTION

In every relationship, whether personal or professional, involved parties have expectations of each other. Rated among the more important of these expectations is honest communication. However, dishonesty is a reoccurring component of social and workplace communications (Grover, 2005; Kornet, 1997). In fact, people are deceitful in approximately 30% of their communications (Kornet, 1997). Law enforcement organizations are not immune to this dilemma.

As detailed in the Law Enforcement Code of Ethics and as suggested by Delattre (2002), "Officers are required to demonstrate honesty in 'thought and deed' and 'to protect the innocent against deception'" (as cited in Watkins, 2007, p. 1). Ford (2003) adds that aspiring police professionals begin their careers with unsullied morals and a determination to assist the citizenry. However, beginning in the training academy and continuing through the field training program, the aforementioned standards are notably altered. During this period, beliefs associated with the police subculture are ingrained (Ford, 2003). Additionally, during this time frame, agency leaders instill departmental expectations related to honesty and integrity. As stated by Grover (2005), enforcement of these standards "begins and ends with leaders" (p. 154). This in mind, one is left pondering the adverse effects on law enforcement agencies when organizational leaders are deceitful.

Research related to this topic is relevant to law enforcement because of the direct correlation between deceit by law enforcement leadership, organizational morale, and overall departmental credibility. Deception is damaging to agencies both internally and externally. Additionally, as licensed professionals, law enforcement officers are

expected to be above reproach, but deceit inherently equates to unethical behavior. Gomibuchi (2004) adds, organizational leaders lose trust when they act undesirably or without integrity. As relayed by Gomibuchi (2004), “The perception of integrity... is rated in terms of consistency, honesty, fairness, and reliability” (p. 30). Accordingly and as related to this research, the effects of misinformation or lying by law enforcement leadership, even when allowable by law, must be explored. Upon conclusion of this paper, it is suspected research will confirm that honest communication should be a law enforcement leadership imperative.

POSITION

People are brought up believing that telling the truth is better than lying; however, for many people, lying is a daily activity. In fact, a 1996 study revealed that “most people... lie once or twice a day – almost as often as they snack from the refrigerator or brush their teeth” (Kornet, 1997, p. 53). Despite heightened levels of community awareness and scrutiny, these statistics can be applied to law enforcement professionals (Grant, 2002). In fact, law enforcement deception is noted as early as the mid-nineteenth century (Goldschmidt & Anonymous, 2008), and, statistically, only 56% of participants in a recent poll ranked police professionals as possessing “high or very high” ethics (Martin, 2011). As noted by Alpert and Noble (2009), law enforcement professionals frequently lie, as related to various investigative and other employment functions; however, to be a successful law enforcement leader, honesty and trust should prevail.

Willis (2011) suggests that honesty is an integral part of one’s life. Despite the assertion of Verschuere and Shalvi (2014) that one’s efforts are wasted attempting to

determine the truth of communications, Willis (2011) insists that “those who work for us depend upon our honesty with them” (p. 17). Followers expect honesty in all communications, regardless of whether it is oral or written. Additionally, Willis (2011) suggests communication from management must be “honest and forthright” (p. 17). Kouzes and Posner (2012) add that “credibility is the foundation of leadership” (p. 37). The ability to believe a leader is fundamental to an employee (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Kouzes and Posner (2012) emphasize, “for them to be willing to follow... they must believe that the leader’s word can be trusted” (p. 37).

As a law enforcement leader, one must consistently support the mission of the agency while simultaneously placing the department’s needs before personal aspiration or gain (Willis, 2011). In addition, Willis (2011) asserts, “When others see that our motives are geared toward their own growth and development and in serving the purpose of the organization before any thought for ourselves, then they readily will trust and follow us” (p. 17). Acting with integrity contributes to overall trust by subordinates. Kouzes and Posner (2002) suggest “without trust you cannot lead” (as cited by Hernandez, Long, & Sitkin, 2014, p. 2). Aforementioned considered, law enforcement leaders are role models.

Because leaders are role models, followers will judge them based upon their actions. A direct correlation will be drawn between what a leader says and how they act, and consistency is important to the distinction between words and acts (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). Kouzes and Posner add “A judgment of ‘credible’ is handed down when words and deeds are consonant” (p. 39). Additionally, a link exists between a subordinate’s organizational buy in and perceived leadership credibility (Kouzes &

Posner, 2012). Conversely, when a follower believes a leader lacks credibility, a lowered sense of morale and of being appreciated manifests itself (Kouzes & Posner, 2012). As stated by Kouzes and Posner (2012), “Clearly, credibility makes a difference, and leaders must take this personally” (p. 38). All aforementioned information considered, a follower’s positive or negative perception of their organizational leaders becomes their reality. Additionally, as suggested by Bennett (1992), “If leadership is effective; norms beliefs and principles will emerge in an organization to which members give allegiance” (p. 257). This allegiance directly impacts organizational success (Bennett, 1992). In essence, the behaviors exhibited by leaders will be mimicked.

COUNTER POSITION

A reduction in force (RIF) is just as the name implies – a “separation” of or other reallocation of employees (Holzer, 1986). Although they appear to happen with less frequently in law enforcement agencies, RIFs remain a possibility when budget or other crises occur. Despite beliefs that government employee’s productivity is consistently substandard, RIFs will have a notable impact on government agencies, their provided services, and on employee performance. As noted by Holzer (1986), pursuant to RIFs, “morale declines and remains at low levels which jeopardize a government’s expensive investment in human capital” (p. 88). Harvey (2008) adds that morale is a “casualty” of RIFs. Additionally, Holzer (1986) infers that, among other factors contributing to this dilemma, many employees believe RIFs replace standard progressive discipline measures for those with inadequate productivity levels.

As it relates to law enforcement, if morale and productivity is negatively affected by RIFs and one’s tendency to deceive is affected by environmental factors or when

given proper motivation, a leader might manipulate the truth regarding an imminent RIF and the surrounding circumstances to subordinates. As noted by Grover (2005), “sometimes we are expected to lie or to fudge the truth” because “some lies are meant to be helpful” (p. 148-149).

Amongst other reasons, individuals will lie because it affords opportunity for personal gain (Grover, 2005; Verschuere & Shalvi, 2014). Verschuere and Shalvi (2014) add that, in some cases, “people’s production of honest versus dis-honest communication depends on the outcome of an analysis weighing costs versus the benefits of lying” (p. 421). RIFs create these opportunities because, during a “downsize transition,” organizations are volatile (Harvey, 2008).

Despite the likelihood of a RIF, law enforcement leaders should avoid deceiving employees. As inferred by Lee, Gillespie, Mann, and Wearing (2010), “knowledge sharing in teams has been found to lead to superior team performance” (p. 473). Lee et al. (2010) add “Trust, because it underpins a willingness to communicate, is also critical for knowledge sharing in teams” (p. 473). As stated by Grover (2005), the negative impact of intentionally deceiving outweighs the potential gain because “we don’t trust people who lie to us” (p. 152). In addition, Grover (2005) infers that one typically will not rely on someone who deceives them again in the future. Becoming an effective law enforcement leader is an ongoing endeavor; therefore, as stated by Willis (2011), “Managers do not merely hold a position but possess a distinct responsibility requiring persistent efforts to proactively develop themselves and motivate... others” (p. 16).

Deceptive practices utilized by police during interrogations or investigations has been a topic of conversation and controversy for years (Wakefield & Underwager,

1998). As stated by Skolnick and Leo (1992), “the acceptability of deception seems to vary inversely with the level of criminal process. Cops are permitted to, and do, lie routinely during [an] investigation” (p. 4). Goldschmidt and Anonymous (2008) suggest that deception has a deep-rooted history within law enforcement. Accordingly, officers who are proponents of deceitful investigative practices will adamantly defend the process (Goldschmidt & Anonymous, 2008). As with others suspected of malfeasance, deceptive practices are utilized when officer misconduct is investigated.

The concept of deception utilized to solicit responses related to allegations of officer misconduct seemingly contradicts the leadership values previously discussed. In that regard, Watkins (2007) relays “experts in the field of police ethics say that great harm can be the end result of lying” (p. 20). As discussed by Kouzes and Posner (2012), credible leaders “do what they say they will do” (p. 39). Additionally, as suggested by Hernandez, Long, and Sitkin (2014), leaders enhance follower trust when they “clarify how and why the organization functions” (p. 6). In that regard, deception has no place in investigations involving officer misconduct. Individuals who trust their leaders are more likely to cooperate, even if the circumstances are unfavorable or difficult.

As inferred by Gomibuchi (2004), there is an affirmative link between a leader’s character and performance. Character in this context is associated with trustworthiness and integrity (Gomibuchi, 2004), and integrity is “rated in terms of consistency, honesty, fairness, and perhaps reliability” (Gomibuchi, 2004, p. 30). Gomibuchi (2004) adds that leaders acting adversely to these concepts will inadvertently diminish or dissolve subordinate trust.

RECOMMENDATION

As stated by Goldschmidt and Anonymous (2008), “we know that dishonesty in policing is common” (p. 113). However, it is imperative for law enforcement leadership to communicate honestly with their subordinates. It should be noted that there are circumstances wherein deceit appears to be a plausible path. For example, reductions in force negatively impact organizations. Conversely, as noted by Lee et al. (2010), knowledge sharing within organizations is a “significant predictor of team performance” (p. 487).

In an effort to make better choices and to ensure that departmental productivity is not negatively impacted, leaders will need to ask themselves difficult questions associated with sharing information related to staffing reductions or RIFs to ensure that agency productivity is not negatively impacted. Additionally, as occurs in some criminal investigations, deceiving an officer who is subject to internal investigations may seem a plausible option. In either circumstance, ethical considerations manifest themselves.

Although legal precedence has been established related to deceit and criminal prosecutions, withstanding potential policy violations, no existing regulations prohibit deceptive practices when investigating allegations of officer malfeasance. Therefore, leaders should make simplistic and logical determinations to guide questioning. For example, to better evaluate one’s choice(s), Johnson (2009) suggests one ask themselves a single question: “‘Would I want everyone else to make the same decision I did?’ If the answer is yes, the choice is justified. If the answer is no, the decision is wrong” (p. 141). Johnson (2009) inferred that, in accordance with this logic, “certain

behaviors such as truth telling... are always right. Other acts, such as lying... are always wrong" (p. 141). This resolution is simplistic and void of complication.

Watkins (2007) inferred, "Trust is a valued commodity that the [police] profession must maintain at all times" (p. 22). That trust is both external and internal. Externally, deception to solicit suspect admission of criminal acts is acceptable, within the guidelines of court determined parameters. However, internally, the deception has different implications. For example, leaders cannot espouse honesty and trustworthiness as traits to subordinates while simultaneously and intentionally being deceptive when conducting internal investigations. Similar to employees affected by RIFs, a leader's "clear, consistent, and compassionate communication" will be key to investigative successes (Harvey, 2008, p. 24). Conversely, if an officer is exonerated of an allegation and remains employed subsequent to the conclusion of the internal investigation process, his recognizing leadership deception during the investigation will have negative consequences. Specifically, awareness of leadership deception will negatively affect his or her ability to trust management. In that regard, "policing requires perfection and unyielding ethics and ultimately depends on each employee's own level of... moral excellence" (Martin, 2011, p. 16). Although, under the right circumstances, many people will alter the truth (Grover, 2005), this circumstance requires better judgment.

The research findings support the original hypothesis. Although some exceptions are noted, as related to police officers deceiving suspects in criminal investigations, research indicates that honesty and open communication with subordinates is the best and most viable option. As stated by Grover (2005), "we

expect our leaders to be honest and admire them when they are” (p. 154). If leaders model honest behavior, subordinates will mimic their behavior.

In an effort to eliminate law enforcement related deception, this researcher recommends, among other things, ethics training. Although ethics training is mandated for police professionals, this recommendation is intended to increase training requirements already in place. As stated by Carlton (2004), “Training in ethics should be an on-going proposition” (p. 3). Additionally, as suggested by Carlton (2004) and as related to this paper, training should include components associated with appropriate officer conduct during investigations. Specifically, Carlton (2004) relays “such training might cover... acting ethically in undercover operations” (p. 3). A direct correlation can be made between actions during undercover operations and during other investigative duties previously discussed.

Aforementioned considered, this researcher suggests expanded ethics training at three points in a law enforcement professional’s career: as a police cadet attending the training academy, as a testing requirement for veteran officers during any promotional or advancement processes, and as legislative or departmentally required reoccurring training for all officers employed by the organization. As suggested by Carlton (2004), ethics training will assist police officers in delineating between right and wrong decisions.

As previously indicated, police candidates begin exposure to law enforcement culture once immersed in the training academy. At this crucial learning point, exposure to ethics training and associated policy would potentially have a profound impact on the blossoming police officer. Knowledge is power. During promotional processes, officers

exposed to ethics training will become better equipped to mitigate circumstances that may arise in new or future assignments. Training that accompanies policy review enhances policy familiarity. Additionally, it would likely assist during assessment center evaluations. Enhancing one's knowledge is empowering.

Grover (2005) relays "While untrustworthy behavior can be forgiven, untrustworthy behavior accompanied by lying is hard to forgive" (p. 152). Bennett (1992) adds "A lack of honesty and integrity can destroy an organization" (p. 260). Law enforcement professionals should hold themselves to a higher standard. As stated by Grant (2002), "all law enforcement personnel must set the ethical example" (p. 13). Additionally, Sykes (2002) states "When all is said and done, for those who work in law enforcement there is a professionally-based moral requirement that demands the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, in all official acts and utterances" (as cited in Watkins, 2007, p. 3). There should be no presumption of doubt or assumption of falsification associated with statements made by law enforcement professionals (Watkins, 2007). This is especially true of law enforcement leaders. Additionally, as relayed by Watkins (2007), "If trust is at issue, there may be a breakdown in cohesiveness, a critical element for members of any team, but especially required... by law enforcement officers" (p. 5). Within law enforcement agencies, followers have certain expectations of their leaders, and among the most important of these expectations is honest communication.

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