

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**Leadership Reform in Policing:  
Decentralizing the Modern Police Leadership Model**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper explores the need for leadership reform in law enforcement organizations towards a more decentralized model. Existing top-down leadership models, such as command-and-control, are no longer congruent with today's community-oriented policing initiatives. Additionally, leadership and management models must change to address the challenges associated with a new generation entering the workforce. This paper reviews existing scholarly literature in the form of peer-reviewed journals, books, and prominent law enforcement journals to evaluate current and proposed leadership models. The research findings support a shift to a decentralized leadership model, which will allow for swift problem resolution, increased employee morale, and increased productivity. Furthermore, increased officer autonomy will foster a more collaborative workforce which will create increased job satisfaction and organizational unity while meeting the societal demands of community oriented policing models.

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## INTRODUCTION

In the not so distant past, police agencies and military institutions demonstrated a great deal of success with the centralized, top-down leadership style of command and control. Police officers and soldiers have followed direct orders under some of the greatest leaders in history. To this day, many law enforcement agencies continue to operate under a centralized, top-down militaristic style of leadership. Police officers, just like soldiers, look to their organization's leader for direction and instruction. This style of leadership was sufficient in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century when it was needed "in response to widespread corruption and political interference that threatened the credibility of U.S. police" (Wuestewald & Steinheider, 2006, para. 7).

Police departments have changed policing models to meet the needs of societal changes by shifting to community oriented styles of policing, but at the same time, they have been reluctant to make any changes to their outdated centralized leadership models, such as command and control. Attributes of a command and control style of leadership include the "hyper-bureaucratic military organizational attributes of formal rank, formal hierarchy, and a chain of unquestioned and unquestioning command" (Toch, 2008, p. 62). As a result, police leaders are reluctant to share power with front-line employees. Furthermore, "traditional hierarchical police management is often cited as a major hindrance to line officer empowerment. In addition, the top down nature of most community-oriented crime control initiatives have tended to generate resistance from both line officers and first line supervisors" (Steinheider & Wuestewald, 2008, p. 145).

Traditional hierarchical organization does not allow for input from the bottom-up. Officers who have the most working knowledge of what problems need to be addressed and how to address them are not allowed any input in the decision making process. Toch (2008) further stated that “top-down reform invites resistance from rank-and-file officers who feel that their views have been disregarded” (p. 60).

In order for officers to become a more integral and participative group, they will need to be provided with an environment that will allow them to grow intellectually and professionally. In order for this change to occur, the organizational standard must shift from a culture of telling, commanding, and giving orders to a format of learning, teaching, and listening. It is for this reason law enforcement agencies should abandon command and control, top-down leadership models in favor of a more decentralized model allowing for a more unilateral style of leadership.

## **POSITION**

A decentralized leadership model is needed to effectively fit with today's changing workforce, to make community oriented policing models more effective, and is conducive to increased productivity, employee morale, and overall job satisfaction. The benefits of a more participative leadership model in policing outweigh the benefits of an autocratic top-down structure. As society changes, so must policing methods and leadership management models.

Law enforcement agencies are just now beginning to see the influx of generation Y, or Millennials, into the workforce. This is creating a more educated workforce than past generations with unique communication methods, work ethic, and learning styles. More than just generational differences, Millennials will challenge outdated centralized

leadership models. York, Whitford, and Williams (2012) addressed this very concern by stating “these workers respond to intrinsic motivation through work involvement rather than “because it’s my job” (p. 27). They have a preference for up-to-date technology and a multitasking work style” (York, Whitford, & Williams, 2012, p. 27). Furthermore, York, Whitford, and Williams (2012) stated “Millennials want to rewrite rules when they find problems” and “prefer to work on a team” (p. 27). This type of required flexibility in decision making for front-line employees is not possible with rigid top-down leadership models. This point is also made by Wuestewald and Steinheider (2006) when they wrote “workers of the new millennium are better educated, technologically savvy, and adept problem solvers; they are both team players and more likely to question authority” (para. 12). Employees of this new generation require the ability to think outside of the box and work with others in an effort to solve problems as they arise. York, Whitford, and Williams (2012) addressed this when they wrote that “for effective performance and loyalty to the organization, leadership must embrace these factors rather than relying solely on rank-based authority to motivate members” (p. 27). The constraints of a centralized leadership model will have a direct conflict with the freedom Millennials require, thus creating the “potential for difficulty responding to traditional command-and-control management approaches” (York, Whitford, & Williams, 2012, p. 27).

This new workforce is no longer motivated by salaries, promotions, or prestige. Rather, they “do not view money as the greatest motivator, but instead appear more concerned with their time off and other available lifestyle benefits; they are diligent workers with tremendous skill sets, but see things differently” (Pangora, 2010, p. 2).

Wuestewald and Steinheider (2006) explained that “participative management techniques have reaped great benefits for industry in terms of productivity, quality, and worker satisfaction, but such power-sharing arrangements seem to have found little acceptance in law enforcement circles” (para. 2) . Police agencies must decentralize their command structure to be effective in this changing workforce. As police departments have changed their policing models to that of a more community oriented style, so must they adopt a more participative leadership model.

In the 1970's, the policing model began to change to the currently practiced community-oriented model. This model of policing requires more autonomy for officers as they try to address problems in the community as they arise. The problem with top-down, command and control leadership is that officer independence is not possible due to strict up-down communication requirements. Wuestewald and Steinheider (2006) supported this when they wrote that “community-oriented policing calls for more inclusive decision making processes in order to foster frontline problem solving and commitment” (para. 12). The ability for officers to make decisions on their own is paramount to the success of proactive policing. Steinheider and Wuestewald (2008) addressed this by stating that “inclusive decision-making practices can foster greater rank-and-file commitment to organizational initiatives, particularly with regard to community-oriented policing” (p. 145). Community-oriented policing programs, such as citizens on patrol and neighborhood watch, rely heavily on police officer presence in the community and subsequently their hands-on problem solving capabilities. Proactive policing is hindered by the constraints of delayed decision making present in autocratic leadership.

Officer autonomy is not only important for community relations, but for officer buy-in to community-oriented policing programs. Steinheider and Wuestewald (2008) revealed in their research that “participatory styles of supervision can affect line officer acceptance of, confidence in, and satisfaction with community policing” (p. 147). Officer participation is clearly conducive to effective community policing programs; however, “this research has had little impact on police hierarchical structure because police administrations are still reluctant to grant line officer autonomy” (Steinheider & Wuestewald, 2008, p. 147). Wuestewald and Steinheider (2006) indicated that officers who have the most working knowledge of what problems need to be addressed and how to address them are not allowed any input in the decision making process. According to Toch (2008), another issue is that “top-down reform invites resistance from rank-and-file officers who feel that their views have been disregarded” (p. 60). Community-oriented policing programs are not the only things harmed by centralized leadership, but employee morale, productivity, and commitment suffer as well.

The discouragement of employee participation in the day-to-day activities has left many officers with a sense of helplessness. Although once bright-eyed, bushy-tailed, and excited to come to work, these officers now drag themselves to work and do the minimum that is expected of them. While this may sound acceptable to some people, a motivated and enthusiastic police officer is more likely to catch the guy who just burglarized homes and has fled on foot. This is also the same officer who might be needed to save a life in the event of a 9-1-1 call for medical assistance. Low employee morale breeds egocentrism. A “me, myself, and I” attitude will completely undermine any team building effort. Wuestewald and Steinheider (2006) wrote that research



suggests “participative police administration can help make employees feel more valued and supported by their organization, more committed to its objectives, can cultivate better labor-management relations, and may even promote greater productivity” (para. 48).

As indicated above, in addition to low morale officers feel little reward for doing their jobs well. The command and control system currently in place communicates directives, policies, and areas in need of improvement, but rarely praises or acknowledges a job well done. This type of behavior then creates a sense of thanklessness, causing employees to become unhappy with their employment situation. Officers eventually become fed-up with the current system and resort to doing just enough to get by, thus decreasing productivity.

In a study performed at the Broken Arrow Police Department, data was reviewed prior to the implementation of shared leadership and compared with data after the introduction of a shared leadership model. In this study, Wuestewald and Steinheider (2006) reported the first full year of shared leadership resulted in “arrests of all types increased 24 percent, traffic citations rose 6 percent, field interview reports were up 51 percent and detectives cleared 34 percent more cases than in preceding years” (para. 34). During this same time frame, “Broken Arrow’s citizen complaints dropped 56 percent versus the mean of the preceding four years” (Wuestewald & Steinheider, 2006). These research findings “suggest that shared leadership can make officers feel more empowered and committed to their organization” (Steinheider & Wuestewald, 2008, p. 155).

## COUNTER POSITION

Although the concept of shared leadership is not new, its application and acceptance in law enforcement organizations is just beginning to see light. Leadership models will continue to evolve over the years with arguments made supporting the newest models as well as voices of those who will continue to support older, and possibly outdated, leadership styles. Top-down centralized leadership is no exception. Just as leaders begin to sing the praises of participative leadership models, such as transformational or servant leadership, so are those who continue to see the benefits of centralized leadership models.

Support for a command-and-control style of leadership has come from those who maintain the need for authoritarian leadership as a means for quick and efficient leadership with clearly defined participant roles and decision making. For instance, Boin and Hart (2003) wrote “the decision-making process guiding crisis-response efforts must and will be centralized. This so-called centralization thesis underpins the public want of a figure-head who is “in charge” during times of crisis” (p. 547).

This argument has no real merit because as Wuestewald and Steinheider (2006) stated “control-oriented approaches fails to recognize that police work is, and always has been, highly discretionary” (para. 8). Officers cannot wait idly by in emergency situations for decisions to be made while higher-ups deliberate on the plan of action to be taken. Waugh and Streib (2006) mimic this sentiment when they wrote about emergency efforts during hurricane Katrina: “centralized decision processes caused delays in approving and dispatching disaster assistance and greatly complicated communication between federal officials on the ground” (p. 136).

There are those who believe shared leadership cannot be effective in maintaining a level of professionalism in policing. Top-down leadership structures worked hard to establish professionalism by eliminating the public's perception of crooked cops and unfaithful crime fighters. Wuestewald and Steinheider (2006) addressed this very topic when they wrote "a paramilitary police model evolved in response to widespread corruption and political interference that threatened the credibility of U.S. police" (para. 7). Police held a negative image with the public in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century due to their lack of effective leadership and increasing political pressures. Wuestewald and Steinheider (2006) go on to state that "to instill discipline, leaders seized upon authoritarian hierarchy as a bulwark against both political cooptation and low-level corruption" (para. 7). Cowper (2000) takes a similar stance by writing "top-down command-and-control style as essential to both the police crime suppression mandate and the requirement to control armed police officers" (p. 229).

Critics are quick to point out that "authoritarian approaches to police management have failed to allay concerns about police abuse of authority, thereby periodically generating interest in alternative approaches" (Steinheider & Wuestewald, 2008, p. 147). This makes a great point that even over the past few decades top-down models have failed to eliminate public perceptions of police misconduct and corruption. This proves that top-down leadership is not the Holy Grail for professional police leadership models as was once thought.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Participative, decentralized leadership models are needed in policing today more than ever. The world has changed a lot since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and the need for

authoritarian leadership has come to an end. As the environment continues to evolve, the policing world must change with it; this includes internal leadership structures. Command-and-control management is counter-productive with today's community oriented policing models and shared leadership models are a better fit with today's young workforce. Lastly, employee empowerment leads to higher employee morale, more job satisfaction, and increased productivity.

The arguments that centralized leadership is needed to fight police corruption and for efficiency of decision making has proven to no longer hold merit. Decentralized policing places problem-solving at the lowest level where problems can be address as they are discovered. This level of efficiency is only possible when decision making authority is shared. This is important in law enforcement due to the number of officers working at any given time. When problems arise, sometimes many at one time, officers will be empowered to take swift action to resolve the issue.

Police agencies can benefit from incremental changes to their existing command structure without the need to completely rebuild. A team-oriented approach can be established by creating a leadership team. A team of officers and civilian employees can successfully lead a change initiative using Kotter's (1996) four key characteristics of "position power, expertise, credibility, and leadership" (p. 57). Employees who are seen as credible and hold position power are seen as leaders by their coworkers, even if they do not hold management or leadership titles. Kotter (1996) further stated that "the combination of trust and a common goal shared by people with the right characteristics can make for a powerful team" (p. 65). This type of leadership is present at all levels in a police organization, many times at the bottom levels.

Leadership teams can be an effective tool in building employee morale and encouraging officer participation. Wuestewald and Steinheider (2006) further wrote, “the team’s composition has become more representative of the lower echelons of the department” (para. 20). Representation at the lower levels of the organization has many positive effects, such as trust, loyalty, and “ownership in the organization and its goals” (Wuestewald & Steinheider, 2006, para. 30). Team leadership can prove to be effective for several reasons. As Northouse (2010) stated, “It can diagnose and correct team problems, it takes into account the changing role of leaders and followers in organizations, and it can help in the selection of team leaders” (p. 258). Law enforcement agencies must remain indefatigable in their efforts to adapt leadership styles to meet the ever-changing needs in the communities in which they serve.

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