

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

Adapting to Generations in a Law Enforcement Agency

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

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June 2018**

ABSTRACT

The law enforcement profession is continuing to experience a transitional era due to the number of generations entering policing. With these different generations comes difficulty understanding and adapting to generational differences within police departments. This leadership white paper aim is to raise awareness that not properly understanding and addressing generational differences can be detrimental to the success of police organizations. Arguments in favor and oppose to this issue has been evaluated and scholarly sources have been critically analyzed. This paper proves that generations have a lot to learn from one another and working to establish common ground is fundamental to an agency. Adapting to and establishing certain principals will aid to knocking down barriers that are often placed in law enforcement. Law Enforcement has a true sub-culture that influences all that enter it. The sense of pride and brotherhood are often overshadowed by the egocentrism of its members, which can hinder relationships from within and effect the communities they serve.

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INTRODUCTION

Abraham Lincoln said, "A house divided against itself cannot stand...Our cause must be entrusted to, and conducted by its own undoubted friends – whose hands are free, whose hearts are in the work, - who *do care* for the result" (as cited in Phillips & Runger, 2011). As true as they were 150 years ago, the words spoken by Abraham Lincoln remain true today. An organization's inability to stand together with all its members who believe in the same goals and vision(s) must be able to stand together for the greater good. Leaders of an organization have a responsibility to make sure that all members of that organization adhere to the organizations core values. They must ensure that those values are met without interference from negativity and do so with the willingness to do what they must to reach common ground that facilitates communication.

Spoiled, hard to deal with, hardheaded, entitled - These are just a few of the phrases or labels placed on generations within the workplace. Labels in society cause divide and separation. Law enforcement agencies are not exempt from the damage labels can cause. Unfair labels hinder the common ground for its members from any particular generation, it provides a platform of distrust, and creates the barrier for effective communication, thus hindering the agency's growth and effectiveness. A workplace will always see a change in its workforce, due to attrition or other factors. This will always have an effect on the personnel and ultimately cause a commingling of generations. Issues between generations is not a new topic as the first study of generational issues was made in 1953 (Kriegel, 2016). Work place demographics will always be in constant change. Every 16 to 20 years the work place takes on different

characteristics that cannot be ignored. Those characteristics go beyond typical work place demographics, such as gender, race or sexual orientation. The workplace evolves at much greater depth than people are most willing to delve into or even realize, and that is the generational differences. Generation after generation that enters the workplace differs in one way or another but share certain characteristics. However, it is the misunderstanding of ideals that they seem to not have in common that creates barriers for effective communication. Communication is essential to an organization and impacts the welfare of their respective communities who have the most at stake.

A generation is a cohort of people that exists together during a 20-year period of history, where a magnitude of events or influences affect their thought process or their view of society which transposes how they interact within the workplace (Saucer & Sims, 2012). This can get present challenges to such a degree as many generations begin to co-mingle with one another in society but struggle to blend with one another in the work setting. As the work life expectancy increases amongst the population the direct result of that is now employers will face an instance of five or more overlapping of generations can occupy the same workplace at one-time. This poses a challenge to the leaders of an organization such as a police agency, because then the challenge becomes how to make them all communicate on an effective level (Shaw, 2015). An article submitted by Dr. Jill Novak (n.d.) of Texas A&M University identified that there are at least six generations moving in and about society today and all of which have their own unique characteristics and influences. In modern police agencies, there is no room for “senior employees (in age) asking, ‘What is wrong with the younger generation?’ And the younger employees should not endlessly criticize about the

seemingly rigid and archaic management and leadership styles of their older colleagues” (Angeline, 2010, p. 249). These generations must coexist in the same setting and doing so presents challenges on levels that has effects on how an agency will be able to effectively serve their community.

This leadership white paper (LWP) will focus on today’s typical law enforcement agencies and the generational make-up and disclose two positions as to reasons that law enforcement agencies should train, understand and adapt to generational differences within their respective departments. Generations in the workplace are made up of at least three distinct generational groups: the baby boomers, Generation X and Generation Z. In departments, the average patrol officer is found to be made up of the millennial generation; while the first to midline supervision as well as the upper chain of command encompass Generation X (baby boomers) and there is a small amount of Generation Z intertwined. All three of these particular generations have distinct influences on their way of processing information and ideals, which are mostly, influenced by their upbringing and environments as well as significant events in history or significant life events (SLEs), including previous generations (Shah, 2011). However, all generations have attributes in common, that lend a hand in establishing a better understanding of one another. These attributes can allow a basis for common ground for all generations and aid one another on how the other interacts in the work place.

This LWP will also address two position points that support why law enforcement agencies should adapt to generational changes within the work place and how Generation X and millennials who make up the new majority in the agency must coexist. It will also provide two counter positions that pose a substantial argument as to why

generational training has not been a priority in the past and may not seem realistic given the current policing model. In conclusion, it will share strategies that can be applied across generations in a manner that can lend a hand in establishing understanding that can accommodate generations of all kind.

POSITION

One reason why generation training in law enforcement is important is that educating on the characteristics of generations is crucial to law enforcement agencies so that an individual's opportunity to grow is nurtured. Education is the key to any police department's development. City governments across the United States are spending more than they did 25 years ago to train police officers (Gascon & Fogelson, 2010). Training is not only a way to limit agency liability, it is the way to bring law enforcement up to speed with current best practices. In Texas, police officers are mandated to undergo approximately 40 hours of continuing education per training cycle (every two years). Newly appointed officers must complete mandated courses to advance which consist of intermediate courses in use of force, Spanish for law enforcement and cultural diversity.

Upon the promotion to a newly appointed supervisor, there is no requirement other than attending a 32 hours new supervisor course for self – development in many agencies. However, supervisors will deal with an array of subordinates ranging from older generations such as the baby boomers to new generations like the millennials. Ultimately, it is the departmental leaders who must deal with the new generation of officers and gain influence over those who may be of an older generation. As of 2016, there are no and has not been any courses developed and mandated in understanding

generational differences. This has the potential to continue any discord. Many generations adhere or have subscribed to how things have been done in the past. Like many generations before, the baby boomers entered the workforce starting in the late 1980s while their predecessors had long been on the job before them. Bringing with them certain characteristics that their predecessors did not understand caused issues, however; many baby boomers merely chose to adapt. Now Generation X poses a difficulty for that generation (Gen x / baby boomers) to adapt to (Lewis, 2015). In today's modern police agency training in the area of generational influences and differences is vital to both generations who are destined and have to communicate with one another. Collier (n.d) pointed out how different Gen Y (millennials) prefers communication to Gen X. Training is fundamentally built on strong communication practices. If trainers cannot adapt to how students learn then the training is futile. Just as in law enforcement agencies this model is no different. Trainers in law enforcement must understand the learning concepts of others and adapt to those they teach to make sure training stays understood.

Generations must strive to learn from one another and must be able to put away certain feelings to accomplish this. Some generations, such as the millennials, having to be recognized and encouraged on a routine basis makes for an issue in the workplace when it comes to older generations. Some of the older generations, such as Generation X, who are used to doing what they are told find this hard to accomplish when the newer generation wants to know why. Generations must be taught about one another and how to communicate what they feel and why so that proper understanding is formed. Not truly understanding why causes an issue with their relationship with their predecessors.

Some generations, like millennials, begin to strive for meaningful positions within their respective agencies, even though they may have little tenure in the law enforcement field. The millennial generation will want to gain better positions not long after they join an agency. In this case, millennials desire a sense of belonging to an organization that has a purpose. Millennials seek positions where they can make a difference and are not defined by the money they earn. Furthermore, it is something they desire to do in life. Millennials think nothing of taking off for a year and working an eco-project in Africa. A project or position like that gives them a sense of purpose and provides meaning to them and not redundancy. Millennials are not the generation that lives to work, but instead only works to live. They desire constant feedback as well as recognition and have to have a sense of balance between personal life and work. Seeking position advancement is just one other way millennials desire recognition for a job they have been tasked so they could improve or be recognized for the job well done (Sharp, 2012).

COUNTER POSITION

One reason why agencies resist generational adaptation training is that law enforcement is para-military in nature. The paramilitary model for policing has served the mission of law enforcement well over the years by allowing militaristic command-and-control during emergencies (Cruickshank, 2013). With this, law enforcement has established a rank structure and with it brings on a certain culture which some generations have subscribed to and mostly have appealed to due to their generational influences.

The paramilitary organizational model for law enforcement establishes a hierarchy or “chain of command”. This organizational flow dictates the flow of information both upwards and downwards and is taught to all officers entering their respective agencies during their field training program (FTO Program). During these types of encounters, it has been seen that millennials seek reasoning and logic behind certain aspects of their job to fulfill their need and desire to have a meaningful work place, which often leads to conflict (Collier, n.d.).

Generation X feels that there is a time and place for positional advancement that comes with tenure by “paying one’s dues”. In the police department, millennials do not want to be unfulfilled and desire to be recognized for a job well done. The average millennial does not want to wait until 20 years have gone by to “pay their dues” (Sharp, 2012); instead they choose to showcase their talents and expect to be recognized for them and what they have or can accomplish. This makes a challenging work environment to say the least. Generation X must understand the importance of what that means for the agency. Generation X has to be able to keep up with a generation who grew up immersed in such innovated times, and raised in an era where everyone got a trophy (Sigman, 2012). Millennials will strive for these positions to challenge themselves. A millennial not trusted to share in and be a part of information and progress will usually lose interest and seek employment elsewhere.

Another reason why some believe law enforcement should not adapt to generational differences is the belief that millennials do not want to learn or adapt themselves. Furthermore, there is the belief that millennials do not accept constructive criticism well (Saucer & Sims, 2012). Millennials are often shouldered off as being too

entitled and want to be recognized for just showing up (Saucer & Sims, 2012). Also noted is that they challenge those who deem to teach them when they do not receive a passing grade. Millennials will seek reasoning for certain actions and do not expect the phrase because I told you to do it, or because I said so lightly (Saucer & Sims, 2012). This in some ways is very true. Millennials do show a strong sense of entitlement as they seek and have a desire for frequent work – performance feedback from their supervisor which in some cases causes the trainers to evolve in their approaches and training methods (Saucer & Sims, 2012). In an article addressed to *Forbes*, Shah (2011) stated that “in just four short years’ half of the world’s workforce will be made up of millennials” (p. 1). Some of those supervisors or trainers have subscribed to their predecessor’s way of managing and that was to do what they are told without asking why. It was not because they have a reason not to; it is what was just expected.

As stated, millennials have a sense of wanting recognition for a job well done and two-way conversation. Per an article published in June 2015 a Boston consulting group revamped recruiting and training to address needs of millennials. The same firm started to give millennials opportunities to work high profile cases, and projects. Most times millennials ask questions as means for “buy in” (Lewis, 2015). They are more willing to become part of a system that has meaning and purpose rather than be part of an organization without one.

RECOMMENDATION

In the law enforcement workplace, it is easy to want to keep the status quo. Change is always turbulent and often at times seems too ambitious. While workplace demographics remain in constant change, how agencies approach certain issues are

always having to adapt to that change. A key component to change in law enforcement is always assessing the impact the change will make on the communities served. A failure to enact certain trainings can grossly hinder any organization who identifies a potential need.

Police agencies spend money on an annual basis that is allocated for police training. Police training needs to go beyond emphasizing the severity of the risks that officer's face. It needs to encompass other issues, like generational differences employees will face in and outside their respective agency (Stoughton, 2014). Take into account the 2016 presidential race for instance; millennials had a major impact on that presidential race, whether they chose to vote or not. They achieved this through their ability to influence social trends and express their views on platforms such as social media (Coleman, 2016). So understanding these trends and how to communicate across generations are important. A failure to connect the generations within an agency leads to a failure to connect with the community that will have a smorgasbord of generations they must connect with. A failure to connect within the agency can disconnect the agency from within and create internal divide, which could affect recruiting and retention. On June 16, 1856 President Abraham Lincoln addressed the republican State Convention in Springfield, Illinois and gave his famous "A house divided" speech (Phillips & Runger, 2011). Even then, over 150 years ago the threat of division was a threat to the survival of a country and much is true even on a smaller scale which can be much more devastating to agencies such as police agencies who are struggle with this concept.

A key component to cross-generational communication is to build strong alliances. By learning to how to communicate with one another, generations will build strong alliances on both personal and professional levels. This allows generations such as millennials and Generations X to seek common ground which is always the foundation that can be capitalized on.

Being a good listener always helps, however, millennials require constant feedback, and they truly want to be heard and taken seriously. By listening, you will inadvertently establish trust amongst them. In instituting a strong bond between subordinates and supervisors of mixed generations it can offer a good path to begin on and make both generations receptive form learning from one another; “simply spending time together or simply getting to know one’s subordinates can overcome mountains of personal differences” (Phillips & Runger, 2011, p. 443).

Adapting to and establishing certain principals will aid to knocking down barriers that are often placed in law enforcement. Law enforcement has a true sub-culture that influences all that enter it. The sense of pride and brotherhood are often overshadowed by the egocentrism of its members.

Marik (2015) addressed the issue of police egos in the workplace in the following manner. There are “20-year veterans that have been running and gunning the same mean streets their whole career,” there are the “I’ve seen it all” types, and there are those that the rookies look at and say, “That dude has seen some serious [bleeping bleep]” (para. 2). Marik (2015) then points out the tactical operator who “refuses to give it up and hand it off to the next generation,” and there is “the rookie who has already been in combat overseas and thinks they know it all” (para. 2). Lastly Marik (2015)

identifies the instructor who “thinks his daily 10-200 doesn’t stink,” and “the “gym rat” or the martial arts expert that swaggers into roll call everyday thinking there’s nobody on the planet that can touch him” (para. 2).

These labels or perceived stereotypes cause the barriers to effective communication amongst its members. Which leads to most issues seen in the modern police agency. However, the most detrimental of all is the unwillingness to change or adapt one’s own self to accommodate the change from within the organization for which they cannot control. In today’s society “police aren’t faring so well when it comes to inspiring trust from the community” (Chumley, 2014, p. 1). When an agency finds itself lacking effective communication from within it can and will inevitably effect how the agency can serve the community and maintain the partnerships it needs with that community. Law enforcement officials have to recognize that one of those barriers is that the lack of understanding between generations will cause discord through their ranks. Moving forward law enforcement leaders must make a priority to address certain issues and monitor the sub cultures of their respective agencies and should train, understand and adapt to generational differences. Doing this will allow them the opportunity to make sure they are achieving the agency’s goals and accomplish the missions of their department.

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