

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

**A Three-Pronged Approach to Improving
Leadership Within Law Enforcement**

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ABSTRACT

Poor leadership in law enforcement is all too common. The results of this poor leadership can be seen in negative media coverage, high turnover rates, absenteeism, poor job satisfaction, and civil litigation. These issues can be attributed in many ways to ineffective leadership in the organizations.

The breakdown in leadership development can be attributed to several factors. Many agencies do not provide leadership training until an officer is promoted which does not work because leadership is a skill that needs to be learned and developed throughout an officer's career. Most agencies also promote officers based on a series of tests that provide little insight as to whether the officer will be a good leader as opposed to a good test taker. Another issue with leadership in law enforcement is there is little accountability for poor or ineffective leaders after they have been promoted.

The author's research has shown that each of these weaknesses in leadership development can be addressed with a three-pronged approach to developing leadership within law enforcement agencies. The first step in the process is to implement leadership training from top to bottom in the agency so everyone knows what right looks like. The next step is to create progressive promotion processes that target officers with proven leadership skills, not the most liked. Finally, anonymous surveys conducted by subordinates, peers, and supervisors should be used to inform and identify ineffective leaders. These simple, but aggressive changes can create a culture and climate of effective leadership that will permeate throughout law enforcement organizations.

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INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement is inherently a high-stress career. Officers have the authority to deprive citizens of their liberty and use force to do so. They must make split-second life and death decisions as a regular part of the job. Officers must also face scrutiny for their decisions and actions by a society, that in most part, has no idea what it is like to make decisions in dangerous, dynamic, and rapidly evolving situations. When their decisions are found to be wrong, their careers can end and they may also face lawsuits or incarceration. Examples of this can be found in recent events such as the Michael Brown shooting on August 9, 2014, in Ferguson, MO, and the death of Freddie Gray on April 19, 2015, in Baltimore, MD. The aftermath of these events has strained relationships with law enforcement and communities nationwide.

It is common knowledge that good leadership is the catalyst for true success in any organization, but with the above factors in mind, it is imperative that law enforcement officers have the best-qualified leaders to train, correct, mentor, and guide them through their careers. However, leadership is hard to define and means different things to different people. The U.S. Army defines leadership as “influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation, while operating to accomplish the mission and improve the organization” (Department of the Army, 2007, p. 1). Enter (2006) stated leaders gain commitment in subordinates by leading by example at work and at home, using disciplined behavior when working with others, and “are well known and respected among the rank and file in the agency” (p. 30). It is also important to point out that “leadership is not management, although managers can exhibit leadership skills” (Morreale & Ortmeier, 2004, para. 14). Trained, properly selected, and

accountable leaders from top to bottom are what law enforcement agencies need to improve going into the uncertain future.

Poor and ineffective leadership is perceived to be extremely common in law enforcement. This is evident in discussions with law enforcement officers from most agencies, the many books and articles that have been published on the subject, and the emphasis on classes offered on leadership to law enforcement. According to Neal (2015), "A large percentage of officers feel far more stress from their own supervision, than they do from simply doing their job" (para. 1). When law enforcement officers are asked to indicate a percentage of past and present supervisors and managers that displayed true leadership skills, "most respond 5-10 percent" (Enter, 2006, p. 27). In addition, Enter (2006) said, "most respondents stated that 10 percent of managers or less are evil" (p. 30). Finally, Enter (2006) states, "By mathematical necessity, close to 80 percent of managers are viewed as unskilled or ineffective" (p. 31). Sadly, with this reasoning, 90% of supervisors and managers in law enforcement are bad or ineffective leaders.

Bad leadership causes low morale, high turnover rates, and inefficiency in the profession (Cruickshank, 2012). Poor leadership or the lack of leadership in law enforcement is a major issue that needs to be addressed with a comprehensive and aggressive approach to be corrected. To fill this void of leadership, law enforcement organizations should employ mandatory training, progressive promotion processes, and accountability measures to improve leadership within organizations.

POSITION

The way to begin the process of developing leaders and future leaders in law enforcement organizations is to implement mandatory leadership training the day officers are hired and maintain the training through their entire career. Moriarty (2009) said, "Successful organizations typically provide leadership development programs to enhance the skills of their employees, supervisors, and managers" (para. 6). Notice that the preceding statement included leadership development for employees, not just supervisors and managers. In a study on leadership conducted at the Federal Bureau of Investigations National Academy, Schafer (2008) found that "such processes should begin very early in an officer's career, perhaps even as a component of pre-service (academy) training" (p. 21). By starting leadership training at the beginning of officers' careers, it allows more time for them to build their leadership traits and potential.

An example of this philosophy outside of law enforcement can be seen in the United States Army. The U.S. Army begins teaching leadership values and a Warrior Ethos as soon as recruits arrive at basic training and are expected to live by them the rest of their career, whether on or off duty ("The Army Values", n.d.; "Military Leadership", n.d.). Soldiers are rotated through leadership positions as part of their training as soon as they arrive at their basic training unit. This technique is continued throughout a Soldier's career as they advance through the ranks.

Another reason to implement leadership training at all levels of law enforcement is that all officers are leaders regardless of rank. Meese III and Ortmeier (2008) stressed the importance of ethical leadership development for all police officers, regardless of rank, position, or title, because leadership skills are required of the

individual officer on the street (Morreale & Ortmeier, 2008). Officers are expected to “take charge” on the street to settle disputes and save lives. This is obviously a form of leadership. Therefore, leadership traits and skills should be taught at the lowest levels of law enforcement organizations.

Mandatory leadership training throughout the organization will also teach everyone to recognize good leadership traits and skills. Mandatory leadership training at the mid and upper levels of organizations will help to prevent supervisors from becoming stagnant, refresh their skills, and may serve as a reminder as to why they became supervisors. This will allow for better feedback and evaluation of the leadership of the entire organization. When used in this manner, subordinates can hold supervisors accountable and they can be made aware of their deficiencies so they know where they can improve as leaders. This first step of implementing mandatory leadership training for the entire organization will instill the desired traits at the lowest levels and can then be improved and refined as the training continues throughout officers' careers.

The next step in improving leadership in law enforcement organizations is to implement progressive promotion processes. Progressive promotion processes are better focused on selecting the best candidate for supervisory positions instead of the most liked. Progressive promotion processes also help prevent a lackluster employee from “putting on a good show” during the promotion process and fooling the assessors into believing their actions will match their words.

Traditional promotion processes tend to select the person who is most liked by the administration or the person who scores the best on the tests, but not necessarily

the best person to be a leader in the organization. According to Beard (2014), “The primary method for law enforcement agencies across Texas is still a test/assessment model or a derivative” (p. 1). Written tests and assessments are typically geared towards retention of information, intelligence, and scenario management skills. Although these are important traits for supervisors to have, they do not indicate leadership traits and skills. This is why organizations need to transition to a more progressive promotion process that will include assessing leadership skills and traits.

As stated by Hughes (2010), “By further investing time into creating a better testing process to observe leadership behavior, law enforcement agencies would improve their organizational design” (para. 13). An example of a progressive promotion process is a promotional system presented in *Performance-Based Promotion in Law Enforcement: The Abilene Police Model* (Beard, 2014). In this paper, Beard (2014) stated that law enforcement organizations should use this model because it “incorporates leadership training prior to promotion, tests the candidates over instructed material, utilizes a performance review or background investigation, and culminates with an assessment center (p. 2).

This model incorporates leadership training prior to promotion and it also adds in reviewing past evaluations of performance to show indicators of proven leadership potential (Beard, 2014). Prior training before promotion provides a foundation of leadership traits and skills. Then by utilizing past performance evaluations and a background check similar to those conducted when people apply to be hired by law enforcement agencies, it can be determined if the person has applied the leadership training in his daily duties. The background check also gives insight as to whether the

person testing for promotion is living an honorable life outside of work. Additionally, the Abilene Model uses assessment centers in the promotional process. Assessment centers are designed to assess a person's knowledge and skills through several different methods.

The purpose of this paper is not to prescribe a specific promotion process for law enforcement because each organization has their own specific mission and desired traits. However, law enforcement organizations must put time, effort, and thought into selecting their leaders to ensure the right people are being selected. Promotion processes should incorporate methods that evaluate and point to the skills, knowledge, and traits of leaders, not managers and good test takers.

The final step in this three-pronged approach to improving leadership in law enforcement organizations is implementing accountability measures such as anonymous evaluations/surveys to hold all leaders accountable throughout their career. The selected accountability measures should be applied to all supervisors and managers, to include the head of the organization. Including all supervisors in this step shows commitment to the leadership development in the organization and provides an example of one of the most important tenants of leadership, which is to lead by example. By keeping all supervisors accountable to their subordinates, peers and superiors (sometimes referred to as 360-degree evaluation), there will be a higher probability of the desired leadership traits and skills to permeate throughout the organization.

In *Police Leadership Matters – Now More Than Ever*, Weis (2016) says, "Perhaps the most important component of any leadership development program is

reporting and having the right analytics tools to measure results” (para. 9). It does no good to implement leader development training and promote people, then have no way to determine if that person is truly performing their duties as a leader in the organization. Most agencies conduct annual evaluations on employees and supervisors, but often the people conducting the evaluations do not truly know if the person being evaluated is exhibiting good leadership skills and traits while performing their duties.

The people that would know this best would be that person’s subordinates and peers because they work with them on a daily basis. In addition, they are subject to the leadership being provided and the environment it creates in the organization. Enter (2006) said, “I have always thought it impractical that sergeants are only evaluated by lieutenants and captains (who rarely see them) and not by their subordinates” (p. 70). Leaders that know they are going to be held accountable by their subordinates are more likely to be more attentive to their needs. Accountability to subordinates and peers, as opposed to only the person’s supervisor, would provide a much more realistic picture as to whether the person is an effective leader in the organization. An anonymous evaluation or survey that is completed by subordinates, peers, and supervisors is the best way to get this information.

Anonymous evaluations/surveys (or 360-evaluations) are the best way to get honest feedback and enforce accountability to improve organizations. Surveys provide direct, unfiltered employee feedback on the organization, especially when survey responses are confidential (Roberts & Levine, 2013, p.39). Senior leaders are more likely to get honest feedback through these evaluations. Honest feedback is invaluable in making positive change in organizations (Roberts & Levine, 2013). Enter (2006) said,

“Generally, evaluations must be written anonymously to be effective. Most people are afraid of retaliation and will not fill out these forms honestly if they think they will be punished for doing so” (p. 71). People are more likely to be honest about their assessments if they can do it anonymously because they do not have to do the difficult thing of confronting someone face to face, or have the fear of retribution from the person being evaluated.

360-degree evaluations/surveys should also be used in mandated (usually annual) employee performance evaluations. In *Making Employee Evaluations a Motivational Tool*, Colwell (2015) says about 360-degree evaluations, “This method is intended to give the employee being rated a better idea of how they are perceived by those around them compared to their own self-evaluation” (p. 2). Many times, when people self-evaluate themselves they do not see their shortcomings. For these evaluations/surveys to be most effective, there must be a negative result for failing to recognize areas of needed improvement and attempt at correction. By applying the results of these evaluations/surveys to a person’s annual performance evaluation, failure to correct ineffective performance can affect pay raises and future promotions. It should also be noted that good or outstanding performance determined through these evaluations/surveys should be documented in annual performance evaluations as well. Some may say that using these surveys as part of the annual evaluation is not what they were intended for, but it could be considered if an agency has extremely poor leadership and it is reported on the surveys over a substantial period.

A final reason for implementing these accountability measures of anonymous evaluations/surveys is that they can be used as documentation to identify toxic or inept

supervisors. In extreme situations, these evaluations/surveys can be used to demote or fire these people who seem to exist in many organizations and seem to “skate” through the system only to be promoted higher into the ranks where their brand of toxic leadership effects more people. *9 Toxic Law Enforcement Bosses* by Neal (2015) said, “The toxic boss plague, denied by many in leadership positions, is the elephant in the room for public safety” (para. 2). This accountability measure also makes it more difficult for those supervisors or managers in upper-level administration to ignore toxic leaders in their organizations because those toxic leaders will surely become evident throughout this process.

COUNTER POSITION

Opponents to this three-pronged approach to improving leadership in law enforcement organizations may say that these steps would be too financially costly with the current budget constraints in the public service world. The United States Department of Justice (USDOJ) said, “Over one-third of the agencies that applied for 2011 COPS officer hiring funding reported an operating budget drop of greater than 5 percent between 2009 and 2011” (“The Impact of economic downturn”, n.d.). The USDOJ also said, “Nearly a quarter of American cities surveyed have made cuts to public safety budgets” (“The impact of economic downturn”, n.d.). Because of these shrinking budgets, some may believe that the cost of additional training that is required to all employees, more complicated promotion processes, and accountability measures applied to everyone in the agency would just be too much of an additional burden on budgets that are already too tight.

Federal, state, and local economies do dramatically affect budgets for law enforcement organizations in a negative way. It can be difficult to prioritize the funding that is available to the organization in lean budget years. However, improving leadership within law enforcement agencies should be a top priority. Poor and ineffective leadership and the negative effects it causes within law enforcement organizations create far greater costs than it would take to implement the three-pronged approach that has been presented. Poor leadership, or the lack of leadership, causes low morale, which brings with it many second-hand effects. Low morale causes high turnover rates, absenteeism, low productivity, and civil liability, (Cruickshank, 2012).

High turnover rates cause increased spending in recruiting and training of new officers. High turnover rates also cause the experience level of the overall organization to drop as well. Absenteeism costs agencies because when employees abuse sick time they are paying people who are not producing any work. When people have low morale and disdain for their organization due to poor leadership, they are not motivated to do any more than is required to keep their job. Poor leadership and low morale cause increased civil liability, which in turn causes higher costs in court fees and settlements. If the cost of each of these negative results of poor leadership were quantified and compared to the costs of implementing the suggested three-pronged approach to improving leadership in law enforcement, the benefits, and savings of the implementation would far outweigh the costs. As Cruickshank (2012) said, "recent perspectives on the true cost of low morale along with the benefits of improvement are too much to ignore" (para. 7).

Another reason an agency may be against implementing the presented steps to improving leadership in their organization is that it may be perceived as being too time-consuming. Due to negative national media coverage of recent events in law enforcement, especially in the area of use-of-force, as well as budget constraints of today's economy, many law enforcement agencies are deficient in manpower. For these reasons, many agencies across the nation say they are understaffed and overworked (Ybarra, 2016; Hanson, 2016; Bat, 2016). When agencies feel overwhelmed from patrol call-load, investigative caseload, and the existing demands on training and administrative tasks, they may feel that adding more tasks to their plate would not be worth the time and resources needed to implement the changes.

However, with these same factors in mind, they provide proof that improving leadership in law enforcement agencies is a crucial task. Increased workloads, low morale, high turnover rates, and the inherent stress of law enforcement make good leadership more important than ever. Implementing leadership training throughout the organization will bring a big return for the organization in the future by raising morale and reducing turnover. Wedlick (2012) said, "training should be considered not as a cost, but rather as an investment in an agency's long-term viability and success in serving the needs of its constituents" (p. 21).

Implementing progressive promotion processes does not have to take up more time. Most agencies already use some form of a traditional promotion process. Traditional processes only need to be modified to test for the best candidate who shows leadership traits and skills instead of the best test taker. Incorporating accountability measures may take some time to develop, fill out, and analyze, but organizations must

have some type of accountability measure to identify, correct, or remove poor leaders. Improving leadership in law enforcement agencies will improve all aspects of the organization. There could be no better use of time.

RECOMMENDATION

Modern law enforcement agencies are facing challenges such as negative media attention, low public confidence, low morale, high turnover, and shrinking budgets. It is imperative that agencies establish a system to ensure they have the best leaders available to build their organizations and to lead them through these difficult times. In order to accomplish this, law enforcement agencies should employ mandatory leadership training from top to bottom, establish progressive promotion processes that target true leaders instead of managers, and implement accountability measures such as 360-degree surveys and evaluations.

Good leadership creates an atmosphere of trust, productivity, fairness, teamwork, accountability, and esprit de corps. It stands to reason that bad leadership creates the opposite effects. Unfortunately, as many as 90% of supervisors in law enforcement are poor or ineffective leaders (Enter, 2006). Even if this estimation is only half-correct, this should be unacceptable to any organization.

Leaders must be developed from the beginning of their careers through training. Waiting for someone to be promoted to a supervisory position before training them to be leaders is “putting the cart before the horse” (Hughes, 2010, para. 14). Creating progressive promotion processes that are fair and focus on selecting people with leadership traits and skills will limit the “good old boy system” or good test takers from being promoted into leadership positions. Leaders at all levels must be held

accountable for their performance. All too often the wrong people are promoted, create toxic environments, and then hold those positions because subordinates have no way to voice their issues or they fear retribution. When a system is in place that allows these people to maintain their positions or promote to positions of more influence, that system is broken. By implementing a 360-degree evaluation that includes feedback from subordinates, peers, and supervisors, and that is tied into the annual performance evaluations, it will be very difficult for these toxic leaders to hide. It will also be difficult for those in upper-level administration to turn a blind eye to bad leaders once their existence is documented.

There are those that may say implementing these processes into their organization would cost too much financially on an already tight budget, and it would be too time-consuming for an overworked and undermanned agency that is barely getting by as it is. However, research has shown that poor leadership and its negative effects on organizations will dramatically cost more than department wide leadership training, leader targeting promotion processes, and 360-degree evaluations. Leaders who innovate, inspire, and care create organizations that people want to be a part of and are respected by the citizens they serve.

The three-pronged approach to improving leadership in law enforcement organizations that is presented in this paper is not costly, time-consuming, or even difficult. This process is merely a way to make leadership skills and traits permeate throughout the organization creating an environment where good leaders are the norm and poor leaders are not tolerated. By initiating leadership training to officers as soon as they are hired, and then continuing that training throughout their career and through

all levels of rank, everyone in the organization will know what leadership looks like and what is expected of leaders. By implementing promotion processes that select leaders instead of good test takers and managers, organizations will be far less likely to promote the wrong people. Finally, by incorporating anonymous 360-degree evaluations and surveys it will make it difficult for poor, ineffective, or toxic leaders to survive in organizations.

To incorporate this leadership enhancing process, an agency should begin by determining what leadership skills and traits are desirable. Once this is determined, training can be developed and conducted. This training should probably include realistic scenarios and events. The leadership training developed by the agency should be evaluated periodically to ensure the training is meeting the needs of the department. Officers should also be given small leadership opportunities, like planning and supervising a special operation, to develop their skills prior to promoting. This can be done with assistance from a supervisor. They can then be evaluated on their performance to be used during the promotion process. Once leaders are promoted, they can also attend outside training courses like the Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute Leadership Command College or the Federal Bureau of Investigations National Academy to expand their knowledge further. Lessons learned at these outside training courses can be brought back to the agency to assist in developing the leadership development program further as well.

Next, agencies should evaluate their promotion processes to ensure they target potential leaders that have the traits and skills they are looking for. The testing process must be conducted in a manner that highlights leadership skills and traits that are

desired by the agency. Evaluations from previous small leadership roles, such as planning and supervising a special operation, should be used as a reference during promotion processes. Promotion processes can be conducted in-house or with leaders from other agencies if the desired traits and skills are clearly defined in the testing process and scoring methods.

Finally, agencies can implement 360-degree surveys to create accountability measures in several ways. There are free online surveys like SurveyMonkey.com that are web based and have a questionnaire tool to customize the evaluation to the agency's needs. For those that are less trusting of the internet, evaluations/surveys can also be written and developed by computer, then printed and disseminated to be completed. There are several books and on-line resources to assist in developing the questions for the evaluation/survey. There are also several keys to ensuring this process captures relevant and actionable information. The evaluation/survey must be anonymous, it must ask specific questions directed towards leadership traits and skills, both good and bad, and the results must be followed up on (Enter, 2006). Once the selected evaluation/survey is complete, collected, and analyzed, the results may be used as a supporting document in each person's annual performance evaluation. When trends in poor leadership are identified and not improved over time, the agency could take the needed steps to retrain, demote, or terminate the person, depending on the severity of the issue. By incorporating these steps, organizations will create a leadership climate throughout the department that will pay huge dividends over time.

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