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Hiring and Recruiting the Best Fit for your Agency

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ABSTRACT

Law enforcement agencies across the country are seeing increases in police officer vacancies due to officers retiring or leaving the law enforcement workforce. At the same time, law enforcement agencies are also seeing a decrease in the number of people applying to be police officers. The problem many agencies are facing is whether to hire to fill staffing needs or be selective for the right fit for their organization. This is a relevant question because the results can be far more impactful than just the person hired.

A review of The Stanford Prison Experiment, Milgram's Obedience Studies, and Abu Ghraib prison revealed that people can be strongly influenced by others and that ethical values can be skewed (Caldero & Crank, 2011; Wargo, 2006; McLeod, 2007; Benjamin Jr. & Simpson, 2009). People can be influenced in relatively minor ways to do cruel, and, sometimes, brutal things. Someone's good intentions can become corrupted and what started out noble may come to be dishonorable. Notable psychological studies and evaluation of contrasting belief systems are the impetus for this research. The results are relevant to hiring and recruiting in law enforcement.

This research in general considers departments across the nation and their policing manpower needs. Many agencies are reporting similar recruiting and hiring challenges. It was concluded that law enforcement agencies that are actively hiring need to find the applicants that are the best fit for their organization. Law enforcement agencies should keep open positions vacant instead of hiring the wrong person.

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INTRODUCTION

Many law enforcement agencies are faced with the challenge of filling vacant entry level police officer positions. Increased scrutiny of law enforcement and retirements are just a couple of the reasons why officers are leaving the law enforcement workforce. Additionally, law enforcement agencies are also seeing a decline in their applicant pool and finding it increasingly difficult to find qualified applicants that can pass the extensive background checks and medical and psychological screenings. It is tempting for agencies to hire the first applicants that can pass their hiring process to maintain staffing, but, without careful consideration of their fit into the organization, doing so can have detrimental consequences to the department and the community. The purpose of this research is to determine if hiring officers that are not the best fit into the organization have negative impacts on the law enforcement agency and the community it serves. Further, the research will examine the influence people have on one another and how that influence can alter another's ethical disposition. Lastly, if ill-fitting officers do have a negative impact on the agency and community, the focus of the research will consider why they are able to negatively influence the agency's culture and community.

Highly publicized and controversial police shootings and police in-custody deaths have put law enforcement under scrutiny. Such deaths have led to civil unrest, division in the country, and calls for defunding of the police. The media and public have questioned officers' ethics, and, in some cases, trust has been diminished between law enforcement and the citizens it polices. Polling has shown that as little as 56% of the public has rated the police with high or very high ethical standards as compared to

nurses, who garner 84% (Martin, 2011). According to a Gallup poll, in 2015 public opinion of law enforcement hit a 22-year low (Tuccille, 2019). With 24-hour media coverage, biased reporting, and scrutiny of officers' decisions, many experienced officers are choosing different careers or retiring. As a result, many agencies are struggling to recruit and hire officers. Over one third of agencies surveyed stated that over the past five years applications have dropped significantly (Lyons, 2020). As agencies have increased vacancies, police administrators are challenged to fill these positions to fulfill their policing services.

Decker and Huckabee (1999) point out that police officials and criminologists have long been interested in the recruitment, selection, and hiring of police officers, as well as answering the question of who and how to hire. Traditional traits such as being honest, being financially responsible, having a stable employment history, and not having a criminal history are important; however, there are other factors that are crucial to the hiring decision (Capps, 2014). Law enforcement agencies must also consider the applicant's fit into their organization. An applicant should fit in with the agency's culture and their goals should be in line with the organization's core values (Hiring the best and the brightest, 2007). Those charged with hiring must find out if the applicant understands the big picture of the organization and has the interests of the team above themselves (Hiring the best and the brightest, 2007). With the significant cost and time associated with recruiting, hiring, educating, and outfitting an officer, as well as the increased public scrutiny and potential for civil liability, agencies are under increasing pressure to hire the right person the first time (Stephens, 2006).

Ethical behavior is of particular concern when law enforcement agencies are hiring new police officers. Citizens entrust police officers with their safety, and citizens have to be able to trust the police. If trust does not exist, the police cannot do their jobs (Pardue, 2015). Unethical behavior not only has negative results on the community in which the police work but can also have negative influences on other officers within the department. To root out misconduct, those charged with hiring must strive to not hire unethical individuals. Agencies must carefully screen their applicants to identify the most conscientious ones that have a higher degree of integrity (Martin, 2011).

A significant amount of an agency's resources are directed towards hiring and recruiting to fullfil the policing needs of the community. Law enforcement agencies may find through this research the need to wait to hire the right person instead of filling vacancies to satisfy the immediate need. This, in turn, will mean that law enforcement agencies should keep open positions vacant instead of hiring the wrong person.

POSITION

Fortenbery (2015) points out that law enforcement in general seeks out individuals with high moral character and ethical values. Across the nation, agencies follow stringent hiring standards that are designed to look for people with high moral character. Cadets in law enforcement academies receive ethics training to reinforce the significance of high ethical behavior and its affiliation to the profession (Fortenbery, 2015). However, in a rush to hire officers to fill department needs, standards are sometimes reduced, minor infractions overlooked, or indicators of moral and ethical flaws can be missed. Law enforcement agency administrators must be aware of the influence individuals can have on one another.

Hiring and recruiting officers that have a different set of values from that of the law enforcement agency can result in group polarization. In the Oxford Dictionary of Psychology, Colman (2009) defines group polarization as "the tendency for involvement in a group to cause the attitudes and opinions of the group members to become more extreme, in the direction of the predominant attitudes and opinions in the group" (para. 1). Group polarization can happen in either direction of the group, becoming either more liberal or more conservative. Many law enforcement agencies have established a culture and set of values they want officers to follow. Hiring and recruiting officers into these agencies that have stark differences in their ethics and values can have a negative influence on the predominant attitudes and opinions of the department. This can be especially true the more individuals that are hired with differing views. Hiring morally corrupt officers can pollute the already existent officers within the agency.

The Stanford Prison Experiment, conducted by Dr. Philip G. Zimbardo in August 1971, was a psychological study to examine the psychology of power (Bornus, 2016). Caldero and Crank (2011) describe how a group of twenty-four students were divided in half and randomly assigned roles as guards and prisoners in a mock prison. Prisoners were kept in cells in the basement of the University Psychology Department building and remained in the prison day and night, while prison guards worked eight-hour shifts (Caldero & Crank, 2011). Caldero and Crank (2011) note that even a former prisoner was even brought in as a consultant. Initially the experiment was intended to last two weeks, but it had to be halted after only six days due to prisoners being abused by guards (Caldero & Crank, 2011).

The Stanford Prison Experiment is famous for demonstrating how easily good students can be influenced by each other to carry out cruel and dehumanizing behaviors on other students (Caldero & Crank, 2011). According to Wargo (2006), Dr. Zimbardo contends that people like to think the line between good and evil is impermeable; however, he says that is nonsense. His contention is that the line is permeable and likens it to human cells where materials flow in and out (Wargo, 2006). Wargo (2006) quoted Dr. Zimbardo in saying if the line is permeable, "then it could allow some ordinary people like you to become perpetrators of evil" (para. 7).

Another study that warrants consideration is Dr. Stanley Milgram's Obedience Study conducted in 1961 (McLeod, 2007). McLeod (2007) explains how Dr. Milgram set out to answer the question of whether Adolf Eichmann and millions of others during the Holocaust were merely following orders. He selected participants for his study and paired people together as learners and teachers (McLeod, 2007). The participants that Dr. Milgram selected were always set up to be the teacher, while the learners were always one of his accomplices (McLeod, 2007). McLeod (2007) describes how two separate rooms were used to conduct the study: one where the learner was bound to a chair with electrodes and another where the teacher had access to a generator that could deliver an electric shock. The learner was given a list of word pairs to learn and then was tested on their ability to remember the correct partner words (McLeod, 2007). During the test, each time the learner answered incorrectly the teacher was to deliver a shock increasing in voltage (McLeod, 2007). McLeod (2007) explains that the learner intentionally gave mostly wrong answers during the test, and the teacher delivered a shock to the learner. Though the learner was not actually being shocked, the teacher

believed shocks were being administered based on complaints and cries from the learner (McLeod, 2007). When the teacher refused to administer a shock, an authoritative accomplice prodded the teacher to continue (McLeod, 2007). McLeod (2007) notes that all participants continued to administer shocks up to 300 volts. 65% of participants complied with up to what would be considered a lethal shock of 450 volts (McLeod, 2007).

Benjamin Jr. and Simpson (2009) conclude the results of the research were unsettling on multiple levels. Perhaps, the most disturbing feature of the study was that it revealed that the capacity for evil exists in everyone and only awaited to appear until the right circumstances occurred (Benjamin Jr. & Simpson, 2009). Wargo (2006) adds that subsequent studies were recreated using students giving non-lethal shocks to a puppy; the students were lead to believe that if they did not shock the puppy, they would receive a failing grade. The results of this study further revealed how easily people's feelings or doubt can fade when something as minimal as a grade is at stake (Wargo, 2006).

The Stanford Prison Experiment and Milgram's Obedience Studies are both examples of how normal individuals can be influenced to perform in ways more extreme than they would otherwise. Caldero and Crank (2011) detail another example of this phenomenon at the Abu Ghraib prison, which began in 2004 when news outlets began reporting accusations of U.S. soldiers torturing prisoners they were ordered to guard. Many of these attrocities were captured in photographs and on videos and developed into a symbol of torture and abuse around the world (Caldero & Crank, 2011). According to Wargo (2006), Dr. Zimbardo interviewed Chip Frederick, one of the U.S.

soldiers responsible for a now famous photo of a prisoner at the Abu Ghraib prison, and found him to be normal with no evidence of psychopathology or sadistic tendencies. Although many factors were in play in the prison, Dr. Zimbardo places the bulk of the blame on military leadership who condoned the torture and looked away from the attrocities (Wargo, 2006). The manner in which U.S. soldiers like Chip Frederick were influenced to do such horrible things shows how people can be swayed morally and ethically from their base by other members of the group.

Law enforcement agencies also tend to have an ethical system that they want officers in that agency to follow. Whether in the law enforcement agency's mission statement or in the organization's core values, values are in place that help define how the agency polices the public it serves. Bayley (2010) asserts that law enforcement administrators must determine whether the means to solve a problem or the result is ideologically more important to their organization. The answer to this question is important to how ethical dilemmas are handled. It speaks volumes about the individual, the agency, and law enforcement as a whole (Bayley, 2010).

There are two basic ethical systems. A deontological point of view is one where a person is means-oriented (Caldero & Crank, 2011). It is a belief that how and why someone does something is more important than the end-result (Bayley, 2010). In contrast, a teleological point of view is one where a person is ends-oriented (Caldero & Crank, 2011). Bayley (2010) explains that under this belief system it is not whether your actions were positive or negative; the primary concern is the consequences of your behavior. Each belief system has its advantages and disadvantages. However, when considering these two ethical systems, there is one external factor that is significant to

shutting down the telological point of view (Bayley, 2010). Bayley (2010) calls it "noble cause corruption" (para. 17).

According to Caldero and Crank (2011), noble cause is a "moral commitment to make the world a safer place to live" (p. 31). Corruption of a noble cause is a teleological approach to an ethical problem that says unethical and sometimes illegal means are used by law enforcement officers as a means to an end result (Bayley, 2010). This approach used in policing can lead to cases being dismissed by prosecutors, violation of civil rights, loss of credibility, and even criminal indictments. Law enforcement agencies may lose the trust of its citizens or make headline news for the actions of one officer that was trying to do the right thing but circumvented or broke rules to catch an offender.

In Bayley (2010), research has suggested that of all incoming cadets, roughly one third have a teleological ethical belief system. If cadets are starting off with this point of view, then they are consequently more predisposed to corruption (Bayley, 2010). This is why ethics training in academies is so important. Rooting out candidates that start out with a strong teleological view point and not hiring them may prevent corruption further down the line. This in turn, may save the law enforcement agency and its officers from disrepute, loss of trust, and struggling to maintain its credibility.

This is not to say that a strong deontological belief system is absent of flaws. In Caldero and Crank (2011), the authors state "The Christian maxim 'do unto others as you would have them do unto you' is deontological – it provides a basis for behavior regardless of consequences" (p. 174). Caldero and Crank (2011) continue to explain that under a deontological belief system actions are more important than the sought-

after end result(s). This can be seen in someone who operates strictly by the book, inflexible towards change, or unconcerned by the morality of the implications of behavior (Caldero & Crank, 2011). With a scrutinizing and litigious society, a deontological belief system has its advantages; however, law enforcement agencies may want to seek individuals that have a balance between deontological beliefs and teleological beliefs.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

On the contrary, some agencies are finding that because of lack of staffing, they are unable to provide policing services as efficiently as when fully staffed. Police provide a myriad of services under the umbrella of law enforcement. Law enforcement agencies and their officers are often expected to be all things to all people. When such pressure is placed on organizations, significant manpower and staffing is required to fulfill their obligations. Civil unrest and riots in cities across the country have also taxed law enforcement agencies' resources sometimes to points beyond their control. Many agencies have had to rely on mutual aid agreements with other agencies or rely on the National Guard's assistance to keep the peace. Keeping open positions vacant during such trying times while seeking the right employee fit can seem counterintuitive.

In one American city, where they were experiencing lower numbers of officers, less officers to cover the same amount of territory has brought concerns of increased response times and fewer officers for community policing (Owens, 2020). This is a concern in many cities nationwide. Not only can this lead to reduced services, but fewer numbers of law enforcement officers can also lead to more working hours to cover shifts and less time off leading to burnout. Law enforcement is already one of the most

stressfull occupations (Flavin, 2018). Stress and burnout can have many detrimental effects including illness, health problems, alcohol and drug abuse, sleep disorders, relationship issues, and diminished overall quality of life (McCarty et al., 2019). This can be exacerbated if the law enforcement agency is short staffed. It can also lead to more turnover.

However, keeping vacant positions open while seeking the right personnel is a short term problem for the law enforcement agency. Applicant numbers have decreased but not totally evaporated. While many will point to a perceived correllation between the number of officers and crime, Kleck and Barnes (2014) point out that elimination of police may result in dramatic increases in crime, but reduction in the numbers of police actually experienced may not have a significant impact on crime. In the interim, law enforcement agencies may need to call on part-time or reserve officers to fill manpower needs, or reduce some services, such as vehicle unlocks, fingerprinting services for community members, escorts, or residence checks to free up personnel for possible increased demands. Law enforcement administrators may need to restructure shift schedules or pull officers from support services to cover patrol division needs until new officers are hired and trained. In addition, to combat burnout, some agencies are providing programs, such as employee wellness programs and childcare assistance to assist with stress reduction (PERF, 2019). Addressing and placing emphasis on the wellbeing of employees as well as assisting with personal day to day work / life challenges can help employee morale and reduce burnout.

Law enforcement agencies can also look to non-sworn personnel to provide a variety of services. Wilson and Weiss (2014) report that as early as 2008,

approximately one-third of those employed by local police were non-sworn. While not trained or expected to handle serious or criminal calls for service, they can be utilized in a support role or to free up officers for other roles, such as community policing and other tasks (Wilson & Weiss, 2014). In addition, the Police Executive Research Forum, also known as PERF (2019), points out that using technology to assist in deploying assets is also a way to maximize law enforcement assets when the numbers of officers are down. Advances in technology and changes in police work allow agencies to rethink their structure and how to conduct enforcement. Agencies should be receptive to new police organization and staffing ideas (PERF, 2019).

Another counter argument to keeping vacant positions open is that the law enforcement agency will become more reactive to crime instead of proactive. The concern may be that officers will have less time to actively engage in activities that deter crime and instead will spend their energy reacting to crimes that have already occurred. If fewer officers are working because of vacant positions and the call volume remains constant, officers may not have as much time to engage in community policing activities or self-initiated calls or arrests.

Some law enforcement agencies in the country are already experiencing a more reactive approach to law enforcement in what has been called the Ferguson Effect (Wetzel, 2016). Because of fear of scrutiny, or making the next headlines, officers are limiting themselves to reactive policing and actively avoiding being proactive during their time at work (Wetzel, 2016). If officers are already taking this approach, then increasing their numbers will not improve the problem. It would only result in more officers being reactive. In Kennedy (1993), the data suggests that up to 90% of dispatched calls are

not even about crime; it is estimated that less than 5% of calls in most cities provide the opportunity for an officer to intervene or make an arrest. This, in turn, means that 95% of the time responding officers can do little more than take a report or comfort the victim (Kennedy, 1993).

The problem associated with staffing is again a short-term concern. Law enforcement agencies hiring the wrong person might just intensify the problem of reactive policing. Instead, the motivation and culture of the department must be set by leadership that will back their officers and encourage proactive policing. Officers must be reminded that they are still the good guys and their mission is to serve the public (Wetzel, 2016). Hiring the right personnel with a mindset that is in-sync with the department's will achieve the long-term goals and mission.

Either argument focuses only on short-term needs and fails to recognize the long lasting effects of the actions of even one officer from either a toxic influence on other officers or public actions which could make headline news in a negative way. Dr. Zimbardo's and Dr. Milgram's works show the influence people can have on one another (Caldero & Crank, 2011; Wargo, 2006; McLeod, 2007; Benjamin Jr. & Simpson, 2009). Abu Ghraib is a stark reminder of how significant this influence can be (Caldero & Crank, 2011; Wargo, 2006). The negative publicity and loss of trust that one officer with corrupt intentions can inflict on their department, community, and even the country, far outweigh the short-term needs to fill manpower or staffing needs. If trust and credibility are lost, it can take years or decades to regain.

RECOMMENDATION

Police administrators of law enforcement agencies experiencing declining numbers of applications and increasing numbers of turnover should not be discouraged. Administrators should remain mindful of their organizational mission and core values and continue to seek out and hire individuals that fit their culture. Officers with ethics and moral values that are in alignment with the law enforcement agency will serve to further the agency's cause and have a stronger relationship with their peers and the community they serve.

A great deal of human nature can be gleaned from both Dr. Zimbardo's famous Stanford Prison Experiment and Dr. Milgram's Obedience Studies (Caldero & Crank, 2011; Wargo, 2006; McLeod, 2007; Benjamin Jr. & Simpson, 2009). The studies give insight into human psychology and social behavior. The studies' ethical implications are still being studied and remain relevant to law enforcement. The environment in which police officers work exposes them to some of the worst that society has to offer. As both of these studies shows, people can be affected and influenced to do things that under normal conditions would be inconceivable (Caldero & Crank, 2011; Wargo, 2006; McLeod, 2007; Benjamin Jr. & Simpson, 2009). They show just how extreme people can shift away from their views, even to the point of harming another person, when under normal circumstances they would not act in such a way. U.S. soldiers that guarded prisoners at Abu Ghraib did not start out performing atrocities; they were influenced to perform the acts carried out at the prison by internal and external factors (Caldero & Crank, 2011). Like these studies and the events at Abu Ghraib demonstrate, hiring the wrong personnel in an organization can influence the ethics and

values upheld by the organization. Too many of the wrong people providing the wrong influence can have dramatic results.

In addition, hiring individuals with an ends-oriented mindset may be the precursor for corruption (Bayley, 2010). In an age when almost everyone has a camera readily available and officers' actions are being questioned and scrutinized, following well defined recruiting and hiring processes is increasingly important. Individuals need to be evaluated for how they handle ethical dilemmas. Those who take a strong teleological approach may be susceptible to "noble cause corruption" (Bayley, 2010, para. 17). Law enforcement agency administrators may want to seek individuals that have a balance between deontological beliefs and teleological beliefs.

Those who say that personnel resources are needed sooner rather than later may argue that they may not be able to provide services as efficiently or may burn out their officers with less officers to share the workload. Likewise, there may be concerns that the agency will become more reactive in its approach to policing rather than being proactive. Both of these arguments solve a short-term problem but may neglect the ethical stance of the department and its culture. Alternative staffing measures and department assistance programs can help assist with burnout. Additionally, instilling a proactive approach through effective leadership as well as policy and procedures can help navigate through the shortage of officers until ones with the right fit with the organization can be hired. Hiring officers to fill staffing needs while foregoing their ethical belief system can have damaging results.   Law enforcement agencies should be patient and keep vacant positions open before hiring the wrong person.

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