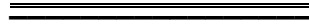# The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

Addressing Police Morale: A High Priority

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

**By
Oscar Cantu**

**Rowlett Police Department
Rowlett, Texas
February 2019**

ABSTRACT

There are many things required for a well-functioning police department. Even in today's tough hiring times, departments are focused on trying to hire the right officers for their department. Policed departments are always looking at new equipment for their officers, as well as constantly looking at new training opportunities for their officers. The leaders in law enforcement generally do what they can to ensure their officers have what it takes to do a good job. Even with all this, the national turnover rate continues to climb in law enforcement. One of the things that is often overlooked or neglected is the morale of the employees. Addressing morale issues within an agency should be placed on a high priority for police agencies. Officers with morale issues could leave their department in search of a "better" department, causing a turnover problem for the agency. This could cause serious issues with hiring, especially with the problems that are already associated with finding good qualified applicants. With all the stresses already associated in police work, high morale is imperative in law enforcement. Some will argue that morale will always exist, that poor morale is caused by decisions out of the control of leaders, or that morale usually only deals with a few certain officers with their agency.

The role of an officer in today's world is harder than it ever was before. It is even harder to fill the police vacancies in departments because of so many variables are out of the department's control. Because of this, addressing police morale should be placed as a high priority in all agencies. This is one concept that is within reach, and agencies should do everything they can to try and eliminate poor morale in police agencies.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Abstract

INTRODUCTION

There are many things that are required for a well-functioning police department. Many departments focus on selecting the right personnel, equipping their officers with state of the art equipment, and training them in different aspects of their job to become a well-rounded officer. Departments constantly look at their command structure and are adjusting it to fit the needs of the department. Law enforcement managers generally do what they can to ensure their officers have what they need to do a great job. All police departments should share a common goal: to have happy, successful employees in their departments. This statement holds true in all types of businesses and industries. Although departments are constantly looking at ways to improve their department, something that is often overlooked or neglected is the morale of the employee. According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, morale is defined as "the mental and emotional condition (as of enthusiasm, confidence, or loyalty) of an individual or group with regard to the function or task at hand" ("Morale," n.d.). According to Gocke (1945), good morale is a "state of mind and the will power to get the most from the equipment available, to perform a job with the greatest effect, to take setbacks with the least depression, and to hold out for the longest time" (p. 215).

Addressing good or bad morale in one's department should be placed on a high priority for police agencies. If bad morale is left unchecked, it can create problems within a department that can spiral out of control if not dealt with. Morale issues are inevitable in agencies and have been around since the inception of law enforcement. A police department should not look towards eliminating all morale issues within their respective agency. That would be a setup for an unattainable goal. Police departments

should instead carefully look at the morale issues within their department and tackle the ones that they think can ignite the poor or bad morale. Poor morale is like a disease and can spread rapidly to become an uncontrollable problem if not addressed properly. These issues could lead to employee turnover, which, in turn, could produce additional unforeseen costs for the department. By tackling some of the negative morale issues, one can then start to see the benefits of better or good morale. The issue can be compared to a weighted scale with poor morale on one side and good morale on the other side. By slowly eliminating poor morale on one side, the weight starts to shift towards the good morale part of the scale. The goal of completely shifting the weight to one side is unattainable. However, one can slowly shift weight from one side to the other. An ideal goal for any department would be an attempt to be heavier on the good side.

When a high emphasis is placed on tackling some of the morale issues, most solutions do not cost any money at all. Many of the solutions lie in the hands of supervisors and holding them accountable for their decisions. Negative morale issues need to be addressed early on in order to prevent it from spreading rapidly. That is why it is imperative that police agencies place high morale on its priority list and be actively dealing with morale within its department.

POSITION

Poor morale can kill a police department rapidly if not controlled. When morale gets bad enough for individuals, it can cause them to leave their department, creating an employee turnover problem. Many times, officers leave, thinking the "grass is possibly greener on the other side." In 2008, the national turnover rate was 11%, and

sometimes higher for smaller agencies or rural agencies (Orrick, 2008). Although this may seem like a low number, for a small or medium sized department, this can cause huge budgetary problems. For example, a police department with 100 officers could lose up to 11 officers a year under these statistics. Being that it could take at least one year to train an officer and have him actually working on the street (including attending the police academy), this can be almost unattainable for some departments. This does not even include the costs involved with equipment for the officer or the cost of overtime for officers having to fill the roles of missing police officers within the department. Police organizations create a huge investment in their officers in regards to training, developing, and retaining them within the ranks and file. Because of this, police departments at all costs must minimize employee turnover (Ongori, 2007).

When an officer's morale is low enough where they need to leave and look elsewhere for another job, there are usually several factors to cause their morale to be so low. Studies have shown that some of the reasons officers feel there is low morale within their department is that the agency failed to provide them with motivational training, failed to provide management training, failed to give more recognition, and failed to provide them with career development (Brown, 1999). According to Tredgold, the main reason people leave their jobs is because of their boss (Tredgold, 2017). Fifty percent of people leave their job because of differences with their manager or supervisor (Tredgold, 2017). It is a hard pill to swallow for police managers to think they could be part of the problem for the poor morale within their department. It is an even harder pill to swallow to think they could be the sole reason for the officer turnover rate within their department. According to Warrell, "All too often supervision and

management are an area frequently overlooked in discussing turnover problems"
(Warrell, 2000, p. 61).

Good morale is extremely vital to have within police agencies. Although
important to have in any business or organization, it is necessary in law enforcement.
In the non-law enforcement world, if an individual is not happy with his environment or
his boss, he could leave his job and find another one possibly doing the same thing as
his last job. He can negotiate his salary depending on credentials attained from
previous employers, and he will not be frowned upon for leaving his job to look for
another one to advance his career. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2016),
workers in management, professional, and related occupations have the highest median
tenure of 5.1 years. For a professional that stays in the same industry for 30 years, that
equates to having approximately six different employers during his tenure. That is
considered acceptable in that field. For law enforcement officers, it is quite the
opposite.

In most police departments, if an officer moves from one department to the next,
he usually starts his seniority over in the patrol division, working late nights and on
weekends. Even if the officer was previously a seasoned detective or attached to a
specialty unit in his past department, he would most likely start off like any brand new
officer would. If he possessed any rank from his previous employer, he usually loses it
at his new department. It is usually frowned upon in the police world for police officers
to switch from one police department to another. When talking about police officers
moving from department to department, it is common for police officials to think the
problems lies within the officer rather than his previous agency. Police administrators

could think that the officer is a problematic officer hiding within different departments. Texas labels these difficult officers as "gypsy cops" and has publicly described them as police officers with troubled pasts forcing them to move from city to city (McPhate, 2015). This can make it difficult for police officers to change departments without being labeled.

In the private sector, businesses can implore certain ideas or perks within their industry to attract employees. They can offer monetary bonuses, different job assignments, leadership training, and paid coaching and mentoring to name a few. In the police world, it is quite different. Budget restraints and rules set forth in government can prevent them from giving monetary incentives. Budgets also have a big impact on the type of training offered to police employees. In law enforcement, seniority plays a big part in operations and often hinders different, new, and unique job assignments for the new officer. They start at the very bottom and "wait their turn" for more favorable assignments. With this para military type environment, high morale is crucial. One can compare it to the military during a war or conflict. The soldiers usually live and work in extreme conditions with huge amounts of stress and uncertainty. In this type of environment, high morale is crucial for the success of the missions ahead. There are no other favorable conditions. Even Napoleon Bonaparte once commented on the necessity on morale during wartime stating, "morale is to the physical as 3 to 1" (Moore, 1999). Law enforcement is more similar to that scenario than the typical business model. Police departments need high morale due to the stresses and working environment they are placed in.

COUNTER POSITION

There are those that would argue that morale issues will always exist in law enforcement. It is something that is inevitable and cannot be eliminated. Police working conditions will never be perfect enough to eliminate poor morale. However, agencies should try to eliminate as many morale issues as possible (Foster, 2012). Some morale issues will never change, regardless of anything police administrators can do. This is no different than treating an illness or medical condition. If someone was to go to the doctor and told he had a serious medical condition, it would not be smart for that person to just accept the news and do absolutely nothing. The smart thing would be to address the issue and do what he could to either eliminate the condition or lessen its side effects. The person would try and change the things he could to make the situation more favorable for himself. If a police supervisor possesses the trait of "it is what it is and there is nothing that be done about it", that should be considered a negative management trait. That is something that should be addressed by management. It is extremely important that energy be directed on the changes that could be made now by police leaders (Wasilewski & Olson, 2011).

Many police agencies believe poor morale is caused by budgetary type conditions that are out of their control. Supervisors believe that the bad morale is caused because of low salaries, infrequent raises, poor equipment, and much needed training for the officers. Police administrators take the stance that these items are out of their control. There is usually not enough money set aside in police budgets to cover the cost of these items. There is a misconception that money is needed to address the morale issues within a department. In reality, past studies suggest that "salaries

generally are not inducements for high morale" (Brown, 1999, p. 113). Police managers are quick to say that low pay is a factor that causes low morale. They are also quick to point out morale issues are caused by lack of money to provide other things like better training, equipment, and career development. Being able to divert the answer to the problem with solutions that are out of the control of police management is common.

On the contrary, the solution to many of the morale issues is directly in the hands of police supervisors and does not cost a dime. In 1945, there was an article written by B.W. Gocke regarding police morale. Even though this article was written over 70 years ago, the principles and advice are the same today as it was back then. How someone is treated never changes throughout history. In the article, there were several ideas that were listed that is needed to build good morale. One of the ideas was about gaining the respect of subordinates. In order for good morale to be maintained in a police department, the supervisory officers must be respected by their men (Gocke, 1945). Gocke (1945) also went on to say, "This is particularly true of the sergeants, for they are the supervisors on the firing line of departmental operations; they are the ones in closest contact with the patrolman" (p. 217). Another idea that was written was giving commendations when deserved. According to Gocke (1945), "One of his basic responsibilities is to be thoroughly familiar with the performance of his men and to the expectations for the particular job" (p. 218).

By paying attention and knowing what the officers are doing, a supervisor can pick out good work by the officer and praise him accordingly. Everyone likes to hear they are doing a good job or when exceptionally good work is performed. When officers

know their supervisor is watching them, they will naturally want to do a good job. No one wants to turn in a bad product if they think they might be getting "graded" on it.

Another point brought up in the article is eliminating unfavorable work conditions. A department should do everything it can to remove these kinds of conditions in the workplace. These conditions are not necessarily tangible. Examples could be constant shifting of personnel, lack of published guidelines or policy, preferences shown to certain officers, and spreading rumors. Police leaders should do everything in their power to eliminate these conditions in their workplace. Blame can be shifted towards the police administration if not addressed properly. The responsibility ultimately lies with them.

Many people believe that most poor morale issues lie within an individual rather than a group, so tackling that issue would be very hard to do. A department can provide state of the art technology to its officers. It can have very competitive pay and great benefits. That department could also have great communication throughout its ranks and have outstanding supervisors. A department can have all this and more, and there will still be officers within the department who will complain about something. No one can please this type of person. The style of this difficult person, called the chronic complainer, exists in all work places (Tucker-Ladd, 2016). Although one may feel like there is nothing that can be done to change this individual's mind, supervisors have a duty to address these issues with them. This cannot go ignored. It is the supervisor's responsibility to address it with the problem employee as soon as practical. Sometimes there is no other choice but to make it simple for the problem employee. The employee will have to make an important choice, either change his outlook or if he is not happy at

the work place he might want to find employment elsewhere. This seems like an easy solution, but law enforcement managers tend to ignore these types of problems. Many managers try and avoid confrontation and difficult situations with fellow employees. According to the article Leadership and Cynicism by Michael A. Keller (2000), "A true leader must decide what is the right thing to do and what is in the best interest of the department" (p. 77).

RECOMMENDATION

The job of a police officer is harder today, more so than it ever was. Officers' actions are getting scrutinized more than ever, partly because of social media. The generational differences of newer employees also changes the workplace. It is getting harder to fill officer roles due to those differences. These types of circumstances make it imperative that police agencies address police morale within their department. Police agencies should place this priority on the top of the list within their department. If not considered a high priority, departments will see that bad morale is like a disease and can kill a department rapidly if not controlled. Bad morale can increase the turnover rate, which has already been shown can be detrimental to a department. Smaller and mid-sized agencies will not be able to sustain the costs associated with turnover issues, not to mention the time needed to train new officers. Good working morale is a vital necessity for any police agency. Law enforcement is a very different and difficult field to work in. Going into the job, officers know that the will be exposed to shift work and will start at the newest position. They know they will not earn a lot of money in this chosen field. They know they will work under difficult and stressful situations. Officers know that at any time, they could lose their life defending the people they serve. Similar to

the military, officers feed and thrive off high morale. If one were to combine all the negative aspects of an officer's career, morale is all he has. This is a unique line of work, where a high emphasis is placed on the camaraderie and high morale within the troops.

It is true that morale issues will always exist within a department and cannot be completely eliminated. This is also similar to community crime. An agency can never eliminate crime completely within their respective community. A department still does everything it can to reduce the crime rate, constantly monitoring where to put resources to combat it. Crime suppression is on the forefront of every agencies' goals and is constantly being looked at by police management and supervision. Treating morale is no different. Everything must be done to reduce the bad morale, and departments must be willing to change tactics on dealing with the problems as the needs exist.

Some will argue that due to budgetary restraints, it is difficult for police agencies to be able to effectively control morale issues. There is usually little money in the budget for the things officers want and need in order to do their job more effectively. There is little money in the budget for raises, which police leaders also feel reduces the morale. Police leaders need to remove this thought from their ideology and focus on the things they can change. Police leaders think officers are leaving their jobs due to the departments working conditions. Leaders should instead put the idea in their head that officers are leaving their bosses, not their jobs. The focus needs to shift on things that can be changed with internal influence, rather than the external influences that usually cannot be changed.

Many leaders think having bad morale is an issue from within and is individualistic. The problem lies with individual people, and that mindset cannot be changed. They can be considered negativists and can be difficult to work with. Those individuals will always see the negative in everything at life as well as work, regardless of the positive things they are faced with. Those individuals can wreak havoc on an agency if not dealt with. Departments tend to ignore individuals with bad morale and not realize the potential damage they are creating within a department.

Agencies must change their way of thinking and dealing with these naysayers in the department. Departments must have a stance where that type of behavior cannot be tolerated. Supervisors must be individualistic in their way of handling the issue, and deal with those officers one at time. Departments need to have a slight softer approach to the "either on or off the bus" mentality. If individuals with bad morale are not truly happy in the department, then every attempt should be made to find them a new place of employment. The way those employees are treated speaks volumes to other employees. Many times in life, people get older and decide they may want to be on a different path than what was originally set. Life and work goals may change. An organization needs to be willing to accept that fact. Too often if an officer is found to have applied to a different agency, his current agency treats him as an outcast and washes their hands with him. If supervisors help him find out why he is not happy at his current agency and attempt to help him in any way needed, they may find out that the issues that officer has can be addressed from within the department. This would speak volumes to that officer, as well as other officers in the department that will be watching this situation unfold.

Addressing morale in the department starts at the chief's level, but the responsibility does not stop there. It spans all the way to the first line supervising sergeant. Eliminating unfavorable working conditions, paying attention to officers, and getting the respect of subordinates are just a few things that are the responsibility of all supervisors. These do not cost anything monetary. The cost is the individual supervisors getting out of their comfort zone and putting their own goals on hold. They must give back and truly think of everyone else first. This is extremely hard to do with all the different leadership styles and personalities, but the payoff is having a department that everyone can be proud to work at. Supervisors need to do everything they can to change the morale within their police agencies.

REFERENCES

Brown, E. S. (1999, April). Police success development. *Law and Order*, *47*, 112-114.

      Retrieved from http://www.hendonpub.com/law_and_order

Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2016). *Employee tenure in 2016* (USDL publication 16-

      1867). Retrieved from https://www.bls.gov/news.release/pdf/tenure.pdf

Foster, R. (2012). *Police leadership-morale: Whose job is it anyway*? Retrieved from

      http://www.hitechcj.com/chiefslist/id12.html

Gocke, B. W. (1945). Morale in a police department. *Journal of Criminal Law and*

      Criminology, 36(3), 215-219. Retrieved from

      https://scholarlycommons.law.northwestern.edu/jclc/vol36/iss3/8/

Keller, M. A. (2000, November). Leadership and cynicism. *Law and Order, 48*, 76-77.

      Retrieved from http://www.hendonpub.com/law_and_order

McPhate, C. (2015, July 8). Official: 'Gypsy cops' a problem. *Denton Record-Chronicle*.

      Retrieved from http://dentonrc.com/local-news/local-news-headlines/20150708-

      official-gypsy-cops-a-problem.ece

Moore, R. (1999) *Napoleonic Guide* (Napoleon on War) Retrieved from

      http://www.napoleonguide.com

Morale. (n.d.). In *Merriam-Webster.* Retrieved from https://www.merriam-

      webster.com/dictionary/morale

Ongori, H. (2007). A review of the literature on employee turnover. *African Journal*

      of Business Management, 1(3), 49-54. Retrieved from

      https://www.researchgate.net/publication/209835787_A_review_of_the_literature

      _on_employee_turnover

Orrick, D. (2008). Best practices guide: Recruitment, retention, and turnover.

International Association of Chiefs of Police. Retrieved from

http://www.theiacp.org/portals/0/documents/pdfs/BP-

RecruitmentRetentionandTurnover.pdf

Tredgold, G. (2017, January 26). People leave bosses, not companies. But maybe that

boss is you! *The Huffington Post*. Retrieved from

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/gordon-tredgold/people-leave-bosses-not-

c_b_9077466.html

Tucker-Ladd, C. (2016). 6 difficult types of people and how to deal with them. *Psych

Central*. Retrieved from https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2008/04/15/6-

difficult-types-of-people-and-how-to-deal-with-them/

Warrell, G. (2000, September). Turnover: A small agency nightmare. *Law & Order*, *48*,

58-61. Retrieved from http://www.hendonpub.com/law_and_order

Wasilewski, M. & Olson, A. (2011). Taking on low morale. *Officer.com*. Retrieved from

https://www.officer.com/training-careers/article/10227600/taking-on-low-morale