

LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

POLICE CHIEF SELECTION CRITERIA

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BY  
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## TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS . . . . .	ii
REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE . . . . .	2
Education	
Experience	
Intangible Qualities and Characteristics	
PERSONAL INTERVIEWS . . . . .	7
Education	
Experience	
Intangibles	
Suggestions	
CONCLUSIONS . . . . .	10
NOTES . . . . .	12
BIBLIOGRAPHY . . . . .	14

## POLICE CHIEF SELECTION CRITERIA

From the time they enter the law enforcement profession, many police officers aspire to one day hold the title "Chief of Police." There is a certain aura about being the top law enforcement officer in the community and to some degree being responsible for the safety and well being of one's fellow citizens. Most of those who don't care about being chief do care about promotion and moving up to higher levels in the organization.

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the various attributes and qualities sought in police chief candidates and to offer suggestions for individuals seeking to improve their chances of furthering their careers. The first part of the paper is a review of the literature on the topic, and the second part is a compilation of information gained through personal interviews with city managers in the North Central Texas area. Both parts will contain information on minimum qualifications as well as the more intangible qualities sought in a police chief.

As Jerald R. Vaughn has written:

Today's police chief is more than simply a crime fighter. He must manage a sizable budget, develop short- and long-term plans, establish effective organizational communications, and deal with complex issues.<sup>1</sup>

It is the goal of this paper to illustrate for police officers what they need to do to move from being crime fighters to being effective law enforcement managers and administrators.

### Review of the Literature

The literature generally focuses on the intangible qualities sought in the police chief candidate and offers few hard and fast guidelines regarding the minimum qualifications a police chief candidate should possess. According to Michael J. Kelly:

The most sensible way to establish formal, public qualifications, other than those that are legally required, is to advertize them as general indications of the selection authority's expectations, but not as absolute or rigid standards that can never be waived.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, some writers have prescribed certain basic credentials.

### Education

In 1976, the Police Chief Executive Committee of the International Association of Chiefs of Police suggested that any applicant for a chief's job in an agency of 75 or more employees should possess a four-year degree from an accredited college or university.<sup>3</sup> In 1989, criminal justice educators Robert Sheenan and Gary Cordner wrote that "it is certainly feasible to establish the bachelor's degree as the minimum education requirement, and perhaps even the master's degree should be considered for larger departments."<sup>4</sup> According to

city manager and author William E. Kirchhoff, "only in the rarest of circumstances can anyone successfully compete for a police chief position without holding a baccalaureate degree."<sup>5</sup>

The danger, as Sheehan and Cordner point out, in setting a minimum educational requirement is that many otherwise capable candidates will be excluded.<sup>6</sup> There is very little hard evidence to demonstrate that graduation from college is a good predictor of success in the position of police chief. However, as Sheehan and Cordner state:

Many police officers hold degrees, not to mention other government officials and members of the community. Consequently, it would be very desirable for the police chief to hold at least a bachelor's degree.<sup>7</sup>

According to Kirchhoff, advanced training beyond the college degree program is also important:

Programs such as those sponsored by Northwestern University's Traffic Institute, the FBI, Harvard's Program for Government Executives, and other prestigious institutions are essential.<sup>8</sup>

### Experience

The writers are especially evasive when it comes to specifying a certain number of years of experience required of a police chief. According to Sheehan and Cordner:

A minimum experience qualification is legitimate only if it can be demonstrated that candidates with less than the minimum requirement are, therefore, not capable of satisfactorily performing the job. In most cases this cannot be proven.<sup>9</sup>

Many writers have, however, commented on the quality of the experience required. Criminal justice educators

William Bopp and Paul Whisenand have written:

A prime requisite for this position [chief of police] is demonstrated administrative ability in progressively responsible positions. Ideally, a candidate will either have been a chief executive elsewhere, or at the very least, held command rank.<sup>10</sup>

In addition, V. A. Leonard and Harry W. More, Jr. have stated:

Basic, then, among the indispensable qualifications of the executive is an extended and successful police experience characterized preferably by service at every rank in the department. . . . If experience includes periods of service in each of the major functional divisions and bureaus of the department, including patrol, detective, vice, traffic, crime prevention, records, communications and personnel, the chief will be even better prepared to assume the responsibilities of the new position.<sup>11</sup>

Kirchhoff has emphasized the importance of patrol command experience in writing that "the most competitive police chief candidates will be those who have a well rounded background with the bulk of their experience in patrol command slots."<sup>12</sup>

Jack E. Enter's research has revealed an interesting phenomena regarding experience from inside or outside the appointing agency:

Although the traditional bureaucratic method of career advancement was often maligned by the literature, the "insider" career pattern has continued to be the most prevalent form of police executive development.<sup>13</sup>

For those chiefs who did come from outside the agency, however, Enter went on to say that "the outsider typically was more highly educated, more likely to have come through administrative positions, and has less line experience."<sup>14</sup>

### Intangible Qualities and Characteristics

Appointing agencies look for many attributes beyond the minimum qualifications. According to Robert Wasserman, "It is impossible to delineate exact, universal standards, since each community will look for candidate skills and abilities most suitable to local priorities."<sup>15</sup> Nevertheless, several qualities do appear repeatedly in the literature.

Ability to Lead. Probably the one attribute most often sought in a police chief candidate is the ability to lead. According to Leonard and More:

The executive must be an acknowledged "leader of men," capable of inspiring them to carry on until the set task is accomplished.<sup>16</sup>

Vaughn has written that the police chief must have "the ability to persuade, move people without shoving them, and inspire people both inside and outside the organization in a way that facilitates the achievement of legitimate public safety objectives in the most humane, respectful, and moral way possible."<sup>17</sup>

Kirchhoff writes that "many can manage but few can lead."<sup>18</sup> It is the ability to motivate people to do what needs to be done, without having to resort to one's power and authority, that distinguishes the truly successful chief.

Ability to Make Decisions in a Timely Fashion. The police chief is faced with making a number of decisions every



day. Many of these decisions, while not taken lightly, must be made relatively quickly. Therefore, it is imperative that the chief be able to weigh facts, applying what Leonard and More refer to as "a scientific turn of mind,"<sup>19</sup> develop alternatives, and select an appropriate solution in a short period of time.

Once a decision has been made, the chief must have the courage and self-confidence to follow through and see that the plan is implemented. Leonard and More mention the need for "mental courage,"<sup>20</sup> and Kirchhoff advocates a strong ego to deal with the constant scrutiny from internal as well as external sources.<sup>21</sup>

Personal Integrity and Honesty. According to Vaughn, the public must be able to trust the police, and the chief must be the role model for his subordinates to follow. He cannot afford to tolerate any dishonesty, including his own, within the department.<sup>22</sup>

When necessary, the police chief must be able to fire or otherwise discipline employees, a task avoided by many unsuccessful chiefs.<sup>23</sup>

Intuition, Creativity, and Innovation. Some problems cannot be solved using structured, analytical methods. In these cases, the chief must have what Kirchhoff calls "the feel of 'Eureka,'" <sup>24</sup> and he must be willing to take calculated risks if necessary to provide more efficient and

effective services to the community.<sup>25</sup>

Additional Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities. In addition to those attributes listed above, the Police Chief Executive Committee recommended that the following qualities be sought in a police chief candidate: flexibility and open-mindedness, alertness and intelligence, patience and self-control, and energy and initiative.<sup>26</sup>

Sheehan and Cordner wrote that the police must possess "communication skills, human relations skills, and specific administration skills pertaining to budgeting, personnel, and similar matters."<sup>27</sup>

#### Professional Reputation

Finally, in addition to possessing the minimum credentials and the various intangible qualities, Kirchhoff indicated that the candidate must have a reputation and be known in professional circles as a knowledgeable and competent practitioner of police administration.<sup>28</sup>

#### Personal Interviews<sup>29</sup>

City Manager Leonard G. Wood has written that "the city manager and the police chief are generally recognized as the two most powerful appointed officials in the city."<sup>30</sup> It follows, then, that the relationship between the city manager and the police chief is extremely important, not only to the incumbents, but also to the individuals they supervise

and serve.

In this part of the paper, the "textbook" answers to the question of what a police chief should bring to the job are compared with what a number of city managers stated in personal interviews that they are looking for in a police chief. In addition, suggestions elicited from the city managers are given for those who hope to pursue careers as police chiefs in the future.

#### Education

Most of the city managers interviewed stated they would require a bachelor's degree as a minimum, with advanced work preferred. As one interviewee put it, education helps to develop a broad perspective and teaches one to think like a manager.

In addition to college training, most interviewees felt that specialized training through one of the recognized schools of police or public administration was very important.

#### Experience

In general, the city managers interviewed felt that a police chief candidate should have a minimum of ten years experience as a police officer with considerable time as a supervisor. While all seemed in favor of well-rounded experience in all areas of law enforcement, one interviewee felt that significant experience in the patrol and administra-

tive services was especially important. In addition, it is important that the applicant's experience be with cities and departments viewed as progressive.

### Intangibles

One interviewee stated that he looks for (1) an innovator, someone who has demonstrated the ability to find new ways of solving problems and doing things with limited funds; (2) someone with a broad perspective, able to understand city government as a whole and to work effectively with other city department heads; and (3) a strong leader, able to set the proper example and motivate people.

Other intangible qualities mentioned during the interviews include open-mindedness, an ability to overcome stress, a family orientation, a dynamic personality, a high energy level, an ability to appear before diverse groups, an ability to balance external needs and internal needs, and a willingness to take calculated risks.

### Suggestions

The following list of actions was given by the interviewees for those who desire to compete for police chief jobs.

1. Get a college degree and any other advanced training available.
2. Gain exposure to all facets of police work, especially patrol and administration.

3. Learn the basics of municipal finance, including municipal budgeting and matters regarding taxation.
4. Learn to speak before diverse groups both from inside and outside the department.
5. Learn to make good decisions in a timely manner.
6. Become aware of issues facing the community and develop strategies for dealing with those issues.
7. Develop a reputation for handling problems as they occur and for keeping the boss informed of potential problems.

### Conclusions

Each year, police chief applicants send numerous resumes to city managers across the country. Due to the volume involved, some resumes get no more than a passing glance before they are filed away and forgotten. Those which do get a second look indicate that the applicant is well-educated, experienced, and, to a certain degree, well-known.

If the applicant can show he meets the minimum qualifications, he must then show that he is a leader, that he can make decisions, that he can solve problems, and that he can set a good example.

While the intangible qualities are probably more important to successful performance than the basic qualifications, it is the basic qualifications that determine whether the applicant moves forward through the selection process or is turned away early on.

Police officers who aspire to someday be police chiefs should begin now to ensure they possess the qualifica-

tions needed to get beyond the initial screenings. At the same time, they should begin to develop those intangible qualities that are so much in demand by city managers.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Jerald R. Vaughn, How to Rate Your Police Chief (Washington, D. C.: Police Executive Research Forum, 1989), 1.

<sup>2</sup>Michael J. Kelly, Police Chief Selection: A Handbook for Local Government (Washington, D. C.: Police Foundation, 1975), 36.

<sup>3</sup>Police Chief Executive Committee, Police Chief Executive Report (Washington, D. C.: International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1976), 27.

<sup>4</sup>Robert Sheehan and Gary W. Cordner, Introduction to Police Administration (Cincinnati, Ohio: Anderson Publishing Co., 1989), 98.

<sup>5</sup>William E. Kirchhoff, How Bright is Your Badge?: Ways to Successfully Compete for the Best Police Chief Jobs (Arlington, Texas: Arlington Century Printing, Inc., 1989), 9.

<sup>6</sup>Sheehan, 98.

<sup>7</sup>Ibid., 99.

<sup>8</sup>Kirchhoff, 9.

<sup>9</sup>Sheehan, 98.

<sup>10</sup>William Bopp and Paul Whisenand, Police Personnel Administration (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1980), 160.

<sup>11</sup>V. A. Leonard and Harry W. More, Jr., Police Organization and Management (Mineola, New York: The Foundation Press, Inc., 1982), 181.

<sup>12</sup>Kirchhoff, 9.

<sup>13</sup>Jack E. Enter, "The Rise to the Top: An Analysis of Police Chief Career Patterns," Journal of Police Science and Administration 14 (December 1986): 344.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., 345.

<sup>15</sup>Robert Wasserman, "The Government Setting," Local Government Police Management, ed. Bernard L. Garmire (Washington, D. C.: International City Management Association, 1982), 47.

<sup>16</sup>Leonard, 188.

<sup>17</sup>Vaughn, 15.

<sup>18</sup>Kirchhoff, 7.

<sup>19</sup>Leonard, 189.

<sup>20</sup>ibid., 190.

<sup>21</sup>Kirchhoff, 8.

<sup>22</sup>Vaughn, 21.

<sup>23</sup>Kirchhoff, 8.

<sup>24</sup>ibid.

<sup>25</sup>Vaughn, 20.

<sup>26</sup>Police Chief Executive Committee, 19.

<sup>27</sup>Sheehan, 99.

<sup>28</sup>Kirchhoff, 10.

<sup>29</sup>The material in this section of the paper is derived from personal interviews with the following persons: Lloyd V. Harrell, City Manager, Denton, Texas; William E. Kirchhoff, City Manager, Arlington, Texas; Lanny S. Lambert, City Manager, Terrell, Texas; and James McCarley, Assistant City Manager, Plano, Texas.

<sup>30</sup>Leonard G. Wood, "What Do City Managers Expect?" The Police Chief (April 1988): 38.



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