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Managing and Retaining Generation X Employees Within the
Victoria Police Department

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ABSTRACT

The issue of managing and retaining Generation X employees is one that police departments across this country continue to face. It has, in the last five years, affected the Victoria Police Department to an alarming degree. Too often the department has spent thousands of dollars training and preparing officers, only to see them leave, after a short time, for better work environments. The purpose of this research is to identify the reasons officers leave one agency for another. Towards this end, surveys were used to solicit specific information related to work ethic, current rank, years of experience, as well as personal and professional goals. The results of the surveys revealed that while many of the respondents felt that advancement through their respective agencies was important, a majority felt that health and family were far more valuable. Additionally, a majority of the officers surveyed felt that police administrators needed to be more progressive with regards to leadership and not allow the "good old boy" philosophy or internal politics to stifle growth. Police administrators have a duty to ensure that all members of the organization have some sense of ownership into the direction the department will go. This is a duty that is owed not only to the people in the organization, but to the citizens of their respective communities. Independent, forward thinking must be encouraged, along with personal accountability.

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INTRODUCTION

Victoria, Texas is located approximately one hundred miles between the cities of Houston, San Antonio and Corpus Christi Texas. It is for this reason that Victoria is often referred to as the "Cross Roads" of Texas. The city of Victoria has a daytime population of approximately 100,000 and a nighttime population of close to 70,000 people. Those coming into the city do so to support three hospitals, a university, a community college, and other area businesses. In the year 2005, Victoria had a total of 110 sworn law enforcement personnel and 10 vacancies. Over the past five years the local police department has lost an estimated 20 employees, both sworn and support personnel, to both smaller and larger agencies. All of these employees fall within the Generation X parameters. This generation has typically been categorized as those born between the years 1965 and 1981. Over the next five years, this generation will constitute over 70% of the workforce in the Victoria Police Department.

The Victoria Police Department has been used as a training ground for many employees who gained 2 to 3 years of experience then moved on to other agencies for various economic and advancement reasons. Most members of the command staff have been witness to the futile efforts of the department and city council in trying to retain these valuable employees. In short, the department has seen very little in the return of investment in hiring and training these employees, most of whom might have stayed had the right programs been in place with regards to retention and management. One might then make the following statement: If the Victoria Police Department and Victoria City

Council want to retain Generation x employees, then more up-to-date efforts should be made.

Once the problem of retaining and managing the younger employees of the department was identified, all efforts were made to raise the lower end of the pay scale. Believing that pay was the sole issue that was driving people away was clearly the wrong assumption. This only complicated matters, as those Generation X employees, (hereinafter referred to as Xers') who had been with the department over five years felt unappreciated, leaving many to wonder if seeking employment elsewhere was a better option. One can see the varied limitations in only taking one approach to a multifaceted problem.

A second and probably the most profound assumption was made by an older generation of police administrators and seasoned veterans, the Baby Boomer Generation (hereinafter referred to as Boomers), and categorized as those born between the years 1946 and 1964. The assumption was, that due to their age, a perceived lack of work ethic and disregard for authority, Xers' had little to offer in the way of long-term commitment to any organization. Following this unfounded way of thinking not only limited the pool of potential replacements, but caused a great deal of talent to go unrecognized among those the department was trying so desperately to retain. This philosophy is also problematic from the standpoint of managing Xers'. As will be discussed in the proceeding sections, each member of an organization brings with them talents, which if recognized, can raise an entire organization to a level of success never before seen. However, one cannot fully appreciate the dynamics surrounding this generation until one examines causal factors, more specifically, those things that make this generation "tick", and the basis for their beliefs. Environmental influences during the child and teenage years such as; divorce,

single family incomes, technology, domestic and international unrest, are things that will be examined.

The goal is not to solve the problems of the past, but to seek a better understanding. This has been accomplished through blind surveys conducted locally, as well as from other areas of the United States. The data collected will yield critical information, which if interpreted properly, can and should lead to some very sound applications.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Information regarding recruiting, but more importantly retaining and managing Xers' has been reviewed. This research reveals that there is a distinct difference between the "Baby Boomer" generation and "Generation X", both of whom makeup a vast majority of the American workforce. Xers' total 44 million in the United States alone and they "comprise 20% of the U.S. workforce and 32% of the public and nonprofit sector workforce" (Jurkiewicz, 2000, p. 63). Most of these born in the 1970's and coming of age in the 1980's. As such, they were raised in a society that saw a drastic increase in the divorce rate or the need for a dual income family, leaving many to fend for themselves and subsequently being labeled "latchkey" children. This force into independence laid the groundwork for what many in the Boomer generation consider to be a self-centered, individualistic approach to work and life in general. Conversely, Mineard (2003), states that "for employees who were born in the baby boom, the work ethic instilled in them was one that most police administrators now are familiar with: a sense of duty, commitment, obedience, and the idea that any position accepted would be for the long term" (p. 95). Understanding this and knowing that the Generation Xers' view their entire employment through different eyes provides quite a dilemma. Mineard (2003), goes on to state that

"employees today question work issues, work conditions, and management techniques" (p. 95).

Technology has also played a significant role in this generational gap. Technology in the workplace today is not the same as that seen by the Boomer generation when they entered the American workforce. Xers' seem to find comfort in the fact that they feel they can make tremendous contributions in this area. It's no wonder, considering this generation came of age with things such as video games, computers, internet, and cell phones. The Victoria Police Department currently employs a variety of sophisticated electronic equipment both in its offices and patrol vehicles. The younger employees of the department are taking an active role in training a majority of the department personnel in the use of most of these devices. Other events that helped define this generation were the emergence of nontraditional families and various other socioeconomic changes.

To understand why there is such disparity in the two philosophies one must examine the proposed origin of the Generation X mindset. During the 1980's the U.S. workforce was dealt a heavy blow. This was the downsizing of Corporate America. It was during this time that many Xers' saw their parents laid off to accommodate this trend. Many of these workers had given years of faithful service to only one employer, only to see their loyalty betrayed. Xers', realizing that they can no longer rely on institutional security, do not feel the need to pay their dues or stay with one employer for the duration of their careers. They now seek "career security" and not "job security". They are no longer willing to make great personal sacrifices, as were their parents, only to see these efforts go unappreciated by the establishment. Instead, many Xers' have decided that finding the best job that suits their needs is what they desire most, even if this means

hopping from one job to another. As a result, Boomers feel that this pattern of "job hopping" only solidifies their belief that Xers' are uncommitted, lacking focus and maturity. There has existed, within the Victoria Police Department, a pervasive attitude among Boomer officers that Xer officers lack the commitment that the boomers displayed when they entered the workforce.

Foley & LeFevre (2000), recognized that "the majority of Generation Xers' parents worked outside the home, leaving them to fend for themselves. This independence, learned at an early age, is sometimes perceived as being selfish and coldhearted" (p. 59).

The research further indicates that many progressive agencies are taking steps to retain this valued segment of the American workforce. Opening better lines of communication that flow both up and down throughout the chain of command and giving the employees more of an active voice in what goes on, is one approach. Researchers have also suggested more flexible work schedules. This would allow for more time spent with families and other leisure activities outside the workplace. This generation, which is no longer defined by the type of work they do or the positions they hold, might see these alternatives as an added benefit.

METHODOLGY

The issue of retaining and managing X'ers in law enforcement is one that has plagued departments across the country. For this reason, surveys have been collected from several agencies across the. The research questions in this survey are designed to solicit specific answers, dealing with desires, ambitions, beliefs and self reflection. These specific questions are necessary in order to gain better insight into how police administrators manage and retain this valuable segment of the law enforcement community. More

specifically, the manner in which one might retain those members of the Victoria Police Department who have so much to contribute. If one can answer these questions, then law enforcement executives might better be able to accomplish two things. These two things are, getting a greater return on the investment, with regards to training and equipping these employees but most importantly, providing a level of service that the members of the community so greatly deserve.

FINDINGS

This research has allowed the author to draw several conclusions which helped form the basis for the following recommendations. The American workforce, but more specifically, American law enforcement and the Victoria Police Department, can no longer allow itself to fester in a pool of stagnation. Progressive departments must make every effort to retain this valuable generation, recognizing that they are the present and future of law enforcement. They must also seek every opportunity to bridge the gap that exits between Xers' and Boomers. Quick fixes such as sporadic pay increases and other transparent attempts are not going to stem this mass exodus from the Victoria Police Department. Allowing employees to define their own roles, within reason, and establish new ways of accomplishing the overall mission in an organization will help in developing a sense of ownership.

The research does not suggest that every employer should allow Xers' to run roughshod over the organization, resulting in loss of productivity. However, it has been suggested that giving Xers' an active voice in the future of the organization does assist in giving employee's a sense of ownership. There are several approaches laid out in the research that appear, at least from a readers perspective, to be valid with regards to

managing Xers' and bridging the gap with Boomers. Reese, (1999), states that "in exchange for Xers' valuable time employers must offer the training, mentoring, coaching and growth opportunities young employees crave" (p. 20). Of these desires, Reese cites a survey conducted by the Gallup Organization of 1,000 employees nationwide in reference to training opportunities. According to Reese (1999), the results indicate that "younger workers were most likely to consider training 'extremely useful' in preparing them for higher level jobs" (p. 20).

Along with up-to-date training, Xers' also desire timely feedback from their supervisors. They use this as a gauge to see how far they have progressed but more importantly, as a way of pinpointing any deficiencies that might keep them from pursuing higher level jobs. Other things valued by Xers' are flexible work schedules and time-sharing. This would allow them the time with their families that their parents were too often willing to sacrifice. Smith (2000) states that this sacrifice along with "the trend of corporate takeovers and the downsizing that followed them left bitter tastes in their mouths. It seems that neither their parents nor Corporate America could be trusted" (p. 32).

The research concludes that the most beneficial approach to managing Xers' is the mentoring approach. Sprafka & Krandra (2003), define mentoring as "a mutually beneficial relationship in which a knowledgeable and skilled veteran officer (mentor) provides insight, guidance and developmental opportunities to a lesser skilled and experienced colleague (protégé)" (p. 1). The two types of mentoring are the formal and informal. Both must be demonstrated and absolutely supported by the chief executive of the organization. This plan calls for developing sound, achievable career goals, and

grooming individuals to assume the role of leaders in the organization. Without such, there can be no forward progress towards achieving the overall mission of the organization.

Through this mentoring process the employee is granted a sensible amount of autonomy, allowing them to expand on their own approaches to accomplishing the task. Just because something is different does not necessarily mean it's wrong. One way to avoid this is for supervisors to focus on the end results and not the avenues taken to achieve these results. This is the time when the timely feedback discussed earlier becomes extremely critical. The Victoria Police Department currently relies solely on an annual evaluation. This method does not allow for the timely feedback necessary for the mentoring process to succeed. It is only when an employees deficiencies surface that a detailed "work plan" with routine feedback is implemented.

Tapping into this valuable resource called Generation X and encouraging their independent way of thinking will, in the long term, reap substantial benefits. Additionally, supporting their desires for high level training and growth opportunities will only cause to gain their loyalty, an area in which Boomers feel Xers' are lacking.

Cole (1999), sites Michael P. Sullivan, President of 50-Plus Communication Consulting, who provides the following 10 suggestions for managing Xers': challenge Xers' with tasks that that will allow them to utilize their entrepreneurial instincts, make work fun by creating a team concept approach, allow them to use their own problem solving skills, explain project results in terms of pros and cons, validate their contributions to the organization, encourage Xers' to take an active role in the planning process related to a specific task, give Xers' clear directions to follow and be forthright, partner them up with

members of the Boomer generation, explain potential career paths, and provide immediate feedback. (p.7)

In addition to the research, surveys were provided to officers from various agencies throughout the State of Texas. The purpose of the surveys was to gather information related to their work ethic, ambitions and insight into their life history. A total 21 surveys were administered with a return rate of 100%. Of those surveyed the average law enforcement career spanned 12.4 years, while the average age of the respondents was 38. 17 were still married, 3 divorced and one was single. While many of the respondents felt that advancement through their respective agencies was important, a majority felt that health and family were far more valuable. This response confirms the research, which concluded that what Gen Xer's value more than job security is time with family and a stable home life. Additionally, 80% of the 21 people surveyed felt that police administrators needed to be more progressive with regards to leadership and not allow the "good old boy" philosophy or internal politics to stifle growth.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

As the pool for qualified applicants continues to dwindle, it is clear that retaining valuable employees is critical to the level and quality of protection an agency can provide. There comes a time when the chief administrator and those directly under that administrator need to look within themselves to see if they are the reason why people are leaving.

Failing at the venture of managing Generation X and bridging the gap between these Xers' and Boomers can have long lasting, damaging affects on an organization. Smith (2000), states that "the sobering message is that failing to value the ways that

Generation X is different from the Establishment stymies organizational growth" (p. 33). Additionally, leaders in organizations should see that this mission of growing ones people is carried out. Mentoring and providing for the growth of subordinates should be the primary *internal* concern. As the Victoria Police Department continues to struggle with retention it is clear that this, along with *managing Generation X* will be a challenge faced by every law enforcement executive across the country.

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