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**Employee Retention: Emphasis on the Mid-level Supervisor**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

Early in 2010, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) reached a conclusion regarding the nation's workforce which had not been noted in several years. In February of that year, the number of employees voluntarily walking away from their jobs surpassed the number of employees being fired or laid off. This was the first time this ratio had been documented since October of 2008. Until February of 2010, the BLS had recorded 15 consecutive months where terminations and layoff outnumbered resignations (Below, n.d.). Like other employee driven organizations, law enforcement agencies are also forced to deal with the challenges presented by voluntary employee turnover. Even when a competitive level of salary is afforded to employees, agencies across the nation are experiencing the effects of less than expected, or poor, employee retention levels.

The role of the mid-level supervisor is a very important one in the creation of a healthy and positive work environment for the employee. The existence of a healthy and positive work environment has a tremendous impact on the employee when making the decision to stay with, or leave, an employer. It should be noted that if an employee is not receiving a competitive level of salary and/or benefits package, the rate of voluntary turnover increases, and the ability of a supervisor to substantially persuade an employee to remain loyal to a particular agency may or may not be effective.

A greater amount of focus should be placed on the integral part the mid-level supervisor plays in the creation of a healthy work environment. To realize a greater level of retention and reduce the high cost of recruitment efforts to replace a vacancy created by a disgruntled employee, efforts should be taken to bolster the position of the

mid-level supervisor. In order for law enforcement agencies to achieve a more efficient level of employee retention, specifically in regards to voluntary turnover, more emphasis must be put on the role of the supervisor in creating an atmosphere employees do not want to leave.

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## INTRODUCTION

With the growing number of agencies facing stringent budgetary cutbacks, the ability to maintain a high level of productivity and service has collided with the necessity of reducing overall expenses accrued to protect and serve a specific jurisdiction. An additional challenge in this equation that is often overlooked in the public sector is voluntary employee turnover. Despite the recent economic status of many governing bodies responsible for funding, agencies all over the country are experiencing high levels of turnover often resulting in the inability to fill the vacancy left by the departing employee due to the funding simply not being available. Many departments have been instructed to postpone the hiring of new employees to fill these empty positions.

High voluntary employee turnover is the direct result of poor employee retention practices within a department. Defined loosely, employee retention is the ability to hold on to those employees the agency desires to keep. Traditionally, voluntary turnover is a problem shouldered primarily by the administrative level, but in reality, the responsibility of employee retention steps down a few ranks and lands squarely in the lap of the mid-level supervisor. In an oversimplified statement, the administrator reaps what the mid-level supervisor sows.

Unlike the higher ranks of supervision, the mid-level or immediate supervisor has the ability to directly impact the work environment of the line level officers. With this in mind, it is paramount the individuals occupying these positions are actively involving themselves in the best employee retention practices. If the role of the mid-level supervisor is properly utilized to create a healthy work environment, the agency will realize greater employee retention along with numerous other tangible benefits. The

message should be clear to law enforcement administrators: the role of the mid-level supervisor should be recognized as a vital key in the employee retention process.

## **POSITION**

Of all of the various supervisory levels within a law enforcement agency, the mid-level supervisor has the opportunity to interact with line level employees more than any other. This greater amount of interaction time with the employee puts the majority of the responsibility for actively engaging the employee on their immediate supervisor. An employee's immediate supervisor has the power to improve or completely destroy the overall atmosphere of the organization. The work environment the supervisor creates will impact the rest of the department, which can either lead to negative or positive reinforcement in a powerful manner.

If a supervisor is engaging with an employee, the level of loyalty to the department rises. For example, Corporate Leadership Council (2004) cited, "by increasing employee's engagement levels, organizations can expect an increase in performance of up to 20% and realize an 87% reduction in employee's probability of departure" (p. 5). On the other end of the spectrum, employees who are otherwise engaged demonstrate low levels of commitment, are consistently poor performers, and have a likelihood of leaving the organization at a rate of four times higher than other employees (Corporate Leadership Council, 2004). Supervisors also bear the responsibility of promoting employee professional growth and development, promoting career opportunities, and establishing an environment consisting of work-life balance. The level of support employees receive in the workplace from the mid-level supervisor along with the management of various facets of the workplace environment can effect

job contentment and organizational commitment (Aslam, Shumaila, Azhar, & Sadaqat, 2011). Aslam et al. (2011) continued, stating, “work-life balance is necessary to retain employees” (p. 22). Work-life balance is maintaining a healthy balance between roles the employee holds at work and at home (Aslam, Shumaila, Azhar, & Sadaqat, 2011).

The reason an officer leaves a department will generally fall into one of two categories, being “external” or “internal” reasons (Orrick, 2008). An example of an “external” reason would be related to the state of the economy at the present time and a held perception of an ability to pursue a better opportunity elsewhere. “Internal” reasons are organizational specific and have to do with such things as relationships with supervisors, a feeling of appreciation and overall engagement within the department (Orrick, 2008). Orrick (2008) states, “The number one internal factor affecting an employee’s decision to stay or leave a job is the relationship he or she has with his or her immediate supervisor” (p. 7).

In a study in 2005 by the Saratoga Institute involving 3,149 employees who voluntarily left their employers, pay, or compensation, was the third most reported reason at a mere 12% behind limited career growth or promotional opportunities at 16% and lack of respect from or support by supervisor at 13% (Branham, 2005). This study went on to state that 70% of the reasons employees choose to leave an employer are related to factors that are controllable by the direct supervisor (Branham, 2005). This information should lead to the conclusion that the mid-level supervisor has a very important part, if not the most important part, in the retention of employees.

In a 2009 survey report conducted by the Society for Human Resource Management involving understanding the factors that make work gratifying, it was

documented that 52% of employees indicated awards and incentives were effective in boosting employee morale and productivity (Society for Human Resource Management, 2009). This survey also showed this number had risen over the previous year, indicating that the perceived value of awards and incentives have risen. The mid-level supervisor undoubtedly has more opportunities to engage in awards and incentives than any other level of supervisor or administrator. An employee will experience a greater level of commitment to an organization if they are made to believe their efforts are valued by that organization.

When a police agency experiences turnover, it also has the potential to offset the productivity of the agency (Wilson, Dalton, Scheer, & Grammich, 2010). The more experience the officer leaving possessed, the more effect their leaving will have. When experienced officers decide to leave, they take their experience, knowledge, and specific skills with them, creating a void. The more experienced the officer, the bigger the potential void created. Depending on the experience of the officer, it could also create a disruptive and visible imbalance between the junior and senior officers that remain. When the number of experienced officers is reduced, due to turnover, the effective decision making of those left is inhibited (Wilson, Dalton, Scheer, & Grammich, 2010). Beyond the obvious loss of experience, a department experiencing turnover will also see a decline in community contacts and knowledge of the inner workings of the department (Copeland, 2009). Citizens get used to the faces in the uniforms and in the patrol vehicles and that familiarity brings about a level of trust. When officers who are trusted and known by the community decide to leave an agency, they take a percentage of that community trust with them as part of their severance package. In the event the



department is in good standings with the community as a whole, the level of trust given to the replacement officer(s) will be visibly lower, which will affect the overall relationship between the agency and the citizens within a given jurisdiction.

For maximum efficiency, there is a preferred ratio of junior to senior officers within a department, with 48% of officers in their first decade service, 36% in their second, and 17% in their third. For those agencies that do not mirror these particular numbers, there is higher risk of going through cycles as they relate to the different age groups as they gain years of experience collectively. These cycles will be exaggerated by either a “boom” or a “bust” impact and exhibit either a positive or a negative effect on the overall output and productivity levels (Wilson & Castaneda, 2011). If a department consists primarily of younger officers within their first decade of service, for example, administration can expect fewer numbers of officers for training and supervisory positions. This may, in turn, cause frustration in these officers, which could lead to continued turnover. In contrast, if a department consists of officers primarily in their second or third decade of service, administration can expect higher expenditures for salaries for providing police services.

Considering a department has, or is relatively close to, the recommended ratio of officers in regard to years of service, proper retention tactics can help ensure a more productive force with which to serve the citizenry. Losing some or a large number of officers from a specific group within a division or the entire department will not only create headaches for operations, but will force recruiting efforts to be more target specific with regards to types and years of experience. This need for focus could result in an increase in expenses and a decrease in viable candidates for employment.

## COUNTER POSITION

A consistent argument from within the ranks and police administration is that the primary reason employees choose to leave an organization is due to a lack of satisfaction with the current level of salary. While this may be the general “reason” provided by an employee during the exit interview, it is not necessarily an accurate one. While salary and compensation packages are important for obvious reasons, the level of pay, along with the satisfaction of that level, typically do not make good predictors of whether or not an employee will leave (Allen, Bryant, & Vardamam, 2010). Job security and relationship with the immediate supervisor shared the top position as the most important aspect of employee job satisfaction beating out benefits in a recent study (SHRM, 2009). It is interesting to note that neither job security nor relationship with the immediate supervisor have any immediate monetary value attached, where a benefit, such as a health insurance package does.

Pay and compensation is considered to be a rational commitment to an organization. It is rational to put emphasis on the level of monetary compensation received for a service provided. If there is a perceived discrepancy in the amount of that pay, the employee then begins to have issue, or question, the rationale of that commitment. A survey conducted by Corporate Leadership Council (2004) as it relates to employee engagement concluded, “Employees stay with their organizations when they believe it is in their self-interest, but they exert discretionary effort when they believe in the value of their job, their team or their organization” (p. 9). The same studies also concluded that, “emotional commitment is four times as valuable as rational commitment in increasing effort levels” (p. 9). This information places the importance of

how an employee feels about their role in the organization over the level of compensation, even if considered less than satisfactory.

The traditional theory in the 1970s of what motivated an employee to stay with an organization placed a heavy emphasis on monetary compensation or pay (Stairs, Galpin, Page, & Linley, 2006). As the decades passed, the emphasis shifted from having the basic psychological, safety, and belonging needs, in Maslow's terms, to striving to realize the need for achievement, status, and recognition, or 'esteem needs' as Maslow defined them (Stairs, Galpin, Page, & Linley, 2006). In other words, pay was replaced with words like meaning, values, and the sentiment and the ability to be a part of, and contribute to, an organization. To further illustrate this opinion, consider the following, "American workers who are emotionally disconnected from their work and workplace rate their lives more poorly than do those who are unemployed" (Harter & Agrawal, 2011, p. 1).

According to Abraham Maslow, an individual would not successfully move on to higher ordered needs, such as love and belongingness or even self-actualization until the lower level needs of security is satisfied (Orrick, 2005). This focus on the psychological needs of the employee should be passed on to the supervisor, as once again, the individual in this role will have greater opportunity to provide and meet those needs. This is true simply because of the amount of time the immediate supervisor interacts with the employee versus that of an administrator or manager or high-level supervisor. The greater amount of time with the employer equals the greater potential to influence that employee. It stands to reason then, the mid-level supervisor, who is in contact with the employee on a daily basis, should be equipped with this information

and provided with the tools in order to be an effective and efficient tool to be used for the purpose of employee retention.

The concept of “employee engagement” has become popular as a motivational force to help create a stronger sense of belonging, and ultimately loyalty to an organization. A business management concept, employee engagement “refers to the commitment employees feel toward the organization (e.g., their willingness to recommend it to friends and family, their pride in working for it and the intentions to remain a part of it” (Werhane & Royal, p. 39). In keeping with the trend, it has been found that employee engagement is not directly dependant on salary level, but rather to the interpersonal relationship the employee has with the immediate supervisor (Kimball & Nink, 2006).

To narrow the view down even further, consider the following: “empirical studies suggest that public employees have a different incentive structure from their private sector counterparts” (Kim, 2010, p. 38) . This should not be interpreted to mean that pay, salary, benefits, etc, are not important items to public servants. Monetary compensation does play a part in the retention game, but rather than placing the entire responsibility on the level of salary when answering the question whether to stay with an employer or not, the public employee tends to put more emphasis on the perception of the overall work environment and the organizational performance (Kim, 2010). This is evident when departments that offer competitive salaries exhibit a rate of turnover similar to those who do not.

With the understanding of the importance of the level of pay as it pertains to employee retention, moving on to the reason why turnover should be addressed would

be a logical step. As with other business actions, it can be deduced to the base element of cost. The bottom line is that employee turnover is an expense, and as has already been determined, can be avoided if the right practices are in place within an organization. The determining factor as to whether or not the cost associated with this is acceptable or not will be found when the facts are properly studied.

There are many percentages that estimate the replacement cost of an employee that leaves an organization. Some say the cost is 100% of the annual salary of the position being filled (Booz, Allen, Hamilton, 2010). Others list the loss and replacement of an employee at a price tag ranging from 50 to 200 percent of the salary “depending on the individual role, seniority, specialization, performance level and on-the-job training received” (Booz, Allen, Hamilton, 2011). Either figure presents a substantial expense to a budget. When the probability of the expense could have been avoided, it only adds insult to injury. In addition to monetary loss, a department may also experience a reduced level of productivity, a decrease in the quality of service, an increase in citizen complaints and an increase in liability risks (Copeland, 2009). All of these factors bring with them their own implied expense with some being more substantial than others.

The third and final offered counterpoint of this paper will be that even with a competitive salary in place, voluntary turnover is inevitable. Employees come, and employees go. The cycle will never be able to be broken regardless of how effective a supervisor is at creating the perfect work environment for the employee. Even with a satisfactory compensation package in place, not every employee will decide to remain loyal to a given department.

With this particular thought in mind, it should be noted that not all turnover should be viewed as bad. Some employees leave as a result of a poor recruiting effort, a realization of an inability to satisfactorily perform the function of an officer or adequately deal with the stresses of the job. Again, the loss of these particular employees should not be viewed as negative. The removal of these employees will more often than not save the department money and lower the level of vicarious liability in the long run. The employees that leave under these circumstances are the employees that we want to leave.

It should be recognized and accepted that some, if not most, officers will not spend an entire career with one agency. Some officers will opt to make lateral changes, while other officers will find promotional or developmental opportunities to further a career path or goal. If an officer performs satisfactorily in a new position with another agency, it should be viewed as a positive for the agency that provided the training and fostered the development of that officer. The fact that this outstanding officer came from Department A will serve as an advertisement, or a reputation enhancer, for that department (Orrick, 2005).

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Employee turnover is a problem that negatively impacts budgets, morale, service ability, efficiency and effectiveness. The bottom line is this is a problem that is directly linked to cost. Losing a productive employee requires the agency to engage in a costly recruiting and selection process to fill the vacancy created by an employee who voluntarily chooses to terminate their employment. When an employee leaves, department budgets can be depleted at an exasperating rate, causing other areas of functionality

within the department to suffer. Citizens also suffer as the decrease in personnel, and attached skill and ability, hinder the ability to serve at the expected level.

While a competitive salary is an important aspect of recruiting new officers and retaining those currently employed, other factors such as job satisfaction, relationships with supervisors, employee engagement, meeting and providing training and developmental needs are vital to the retention process. An engaged and empowered employee will be more apt to overlook, or excuse, a slightly less than competitive salary, where a disgruntled or disengaged employee will not. The focus needs to be then, on the individuals in the organizational structure with the most opportunity to create a healthy environment in which officers can flourish and thrive. This position is the mid-level supervisor.

It is incumbent for administrators and leaders within the law enforcement community to identify the factors that contribute to voluntary employee turnover and to engage in the necessary tactics to curtail this issue as effectively as practical. Utilizing the role of the mid-level supervisor to engage employees while fostering a team environment, providing and supporting specific challenging goals, and recognizing employee contributions will greatly impact the desire of those employees to remain with the agency. Police agencies that take on the challenge curtailing voluntary employee turnover will see a decrease in the spending of unnecessary and unbudgeted funds, will realize an increase in the overall morale of the department, and ultimately reap the benefits of owning a more efficient and effective group of public servants with which to protect and serve a given community.

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