The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas

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Millennials:
Adapting Police Recruiting and Supervision Practices

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

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February 2019

ABSTRACT

The law enforcement profession across the country is suffering from difficulties recruiting and retaining qualified officers. There are likely many factors contributing to the problem. A factor many consider to be having a significant effect is the change of demographics of the job applicant pool with the rise of the millennial generation in the workforce. With millennials being the largest generation since the baby boomers, they will make up more of the workforce as the last of the boomers retire and Generation X begins retiring. It is incumbent upon organizations to modify supervisory practices to account for the different priorities of the millennial generation to keep them engaged. Otherwise, they will switch employers looking for a better fit.

The millennial generational cohort differs from earlier cohorts, such as baby boomers and Generation X, in significant ways. These differences are a based on common circumstances shared by that cohort as they grew up. Many of the differences are at odds with the command and control and strong hierarchy traditionally associated with law enforcement organizations.

Some feel millennials should conform to the traditional law enforcement paradigm just as all others have because of the assertion that law enforcement's objectives cannot be met if supervisory and leadership practices change to support their expectations. However, many of the needs of this generation are more consistent with contemporary leadership practices outside law enforcement. Unquestionably, this generation will soon take over the workforce. Therefore, to recruit and retain quality officers, organizations must adapt and adopt leadership practices more aligned with the needs and expectations of the incoming millennial generation.

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INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies across the country are suffering from difficulties recruiting and retaining officers. There are a number of factors that may be contributing to the problem, including increased poor public perception in the light of several high-profile cases of perceived police misconduct. Many also believe the pay does not compensate for the shift work, missed family time, and other traditional hardships of the profession. Some believe a major contributor to the hiring and retention difficulty is the rise of the millennial generational cohort constituting an increasing share of the applicant pool.

Sociologists and psychologists group society into generational cohorts based on birth year. Cohort labels such as baby boomers, Generation X, millennials, and now Generation Y – or the iGen, often vary slightly in the range of years comprising each group, depending on the research cited. This is primarily a result of the fact that the groupings are less an actual representation of year of birth but more representative of characteristics of upbringing. According to Howe (2010), "Members of a generation share a collective peer personality that is defined by three basic attributes: a common sense of growing up in the same moment in history, a common set of attitudes and behaviors, and a common collective identity" (p. 28). Howe (2010) defines baby boomers as those born between 1943-1960, Generation X as those born between 1961-1981, and millennials as born between 1982-2004. Major Cities Chiefs and FBI National Executive Institute (2007) estimated that by 2012, Generation Xers and millennials would comprise 70% of the workforce (p. 2). Many of the boomers cohort have retired, and growing numbers of Generation X are approaching retirement. As

these groups exit the workforce, they will inevitably be replaced by millennials who will continue to constitute a larger share of the work force. As such, an inability to retain them once hired begets an expensive cycle of recruitment and training for an organization.

Researchers attribute specific sets of traits to each generational cohort. While not every individual member of a generational group will demonstrate all (or even any) of the traits, they are considered to be generally applicable to the group. Howe (2010) associates seven specific traits with the millennials, labeling them special, sheltered, confident, team oriented, conventional, pressured, and achieving. Some of these traits, and others ascribed to millennials in other literature, are not complementary to the traditional command and control environment of paramilitary organizations. For example, York, Whitford, and Williams (2012) stated that millennials "expect greater workplace flexibility" and "need to know their goals and how they fit into the big picture" (p. 26). DeLaCerda (2011) asserts, "This group is also characterized as being hard workers but do not adapt well to being given blind orders" (p. 4). These are a few examples of workplace attitudes that do not integrate well with the traditional command and control paramilitary environment. The environment must change to allow this group to become engaged and committed to an organization, or they will leave in search for that environment. Mosman (2010) suggests loyalty is not what it once was, stating "Loyalty to the department is not automatic with this generation. They will quickly leave if not satisfied or motivated with their position in the department" (p. 3). To ensure a strong, competent, and professional organization, law enforcement agencies should

adapt recruiting and leadership practices to retain this growing component of the workforce.

POSITION

The landscape of the workforce is irreversibly changing. Traditionalists, the parents of the boomers, have all but gone. Boomers are rapidly headed toward retirement, which will leave Gen Xers and the millennials, the largest generation, to fill the employment gap (Howe, 2010). The millennials may be different from their predecessors, but they are coming.

Socrates once said, "The children now love luxury; they have bad manners, contempt for authority; they show disrespect for elders and love chatter in place of exercise" (Library of Congress, 1989, p. 195). Each generation tends to look upon the next as the looming downfall of society. Although much of that perception is likely related to nostalgia, there are indeed differences in each generation.

To understand the need to alter recruiting and retention practices for the millennials, it makes sense to examine current practices in the context of the baby boomers and Gen Xers who, according to York et al. (2012), currently make up the majority of the law enforcement supervisory hierarchy. Those generations, while maintaining separate identities, embody some workplace mindsets that contrast with those of the incoming millennials.

Boomers are the workaholics. They are driven and take work ethic to an extreme (Howe, 2010). They believe in 'paying your dues' or 'earning your stripes', phrases which, to boomers and even Gen Xers, indicate time in the trenches, gaining skills and showing superiors they are capable of moving up the ladder (Triffin, 2015). They

traditionally find self-worth in their jobs and work-ethic (West Midland Family Center, n.d.). While Gen Xers are less loyal to employers than boomers, they are still dedicated workers. They are willing to put in the time necessary to get the job done (West Midland Family Center, n.d.). Gen Xers are a self-reliant cohort, raised as latch-key kids in an era of growing divorce and working mothers. They have a do-it-yourself attitude but still respect hierarchy and tradition. A 2014 Bentley University study indicated that nearly three quarters of older generation workers believe millennials do not want to pay their dues and attribute it to a poor work ethic (as cited in Triffin, 2015).

The millennial generation does not have a poor work ethic. On the contrary, they have a strong desire to contribute, but they *expect* a different work environment. That is not any fault of their own. Describing millennials, Thompson & Gregory (2012) states, "This generation has been shaped by, among other things, helicopter parents, frequent positive feedback and reassurance, significant leaps in technology, and political and economic turmoil" (p. 238). Due to 'helicopter parents' – those who metaphorically hover over their children, intimately involved with every aspect of their children's lives from pre-school to college (and beyond) - this generation grew up with constant guidance, positive feedback, and esteem-building affirmation. Thompson & Gregory (2012) suggest, "As a result, they expect the same level of feedback, praise, and guidance, as well as a focus on their individual development in the context of work" (p. 239). Thompson and Gregory (2012) further argue that a millennial's immediate supervisor can greatly contribute to whether they find enough fulfillment in their job to stay.

According to Buckingham & Coffman (1999) and Eisenberger, Stinglhamber, Vandenberghe, Sucharski, & Rhoades (2002)," research has shown for years that

people don't leave jobs, they leave managers" (as cited in Thompson & Gregory, 2012, p. 239). Hershatter & Epstein (2010) and Ng et al. (2010) assert that when millennials enter the workforce, managers replace the parents as the primary providers of feedback and affirmation (as cited in Thompson & Gregory, 2012, p. 239). This suggests that the millennials look to supervisors and leaders in their organizations to provide the same type of constant, supportive feedback and esteem building affirmation that their parents have provided in day-to-day life.

In contrast, the prior generation, the "Gen-X" cohort, is a much more self-reliant group, owing to the prevalence of working mothers, higher divorce rates, and a general negative outlook (Major Chiefs, 2007, pp. 1-2). According to Dill (2015), "Globally, an average 26% of millennials expect to receive weekly feedback from their manager, with 31% of North American millennials echoing this sentiment" (p. 3). This is a change from the Gen-X cohort, who are more intrinsically driven and do not require constant affirmation. Howe (2010) suggests this longing for feedback and affirmation makes it even more likely millennials will leave a poor supervisor. Howe (2010) also suggests that millennials are more likely to search for a job or career where they can help others right from the beginning, unlike other generations who tend to develop that altruistic desire later in their working lives. Millennials want intrinsically meaningful work. It is incumbent upon law enforcement to find ways to tap into their motivation. Along with the constant need for feedback, the collective background of millennials has caused them to look for work environments that support their interconnected lifestyles.

Millennials have never known a world without video games, email, and cell phones. They have been raised in an era of instant communication and instant answers.

Facebook is yet another example of instant feedback and support available to this cohort around the clock. To millennials, technology is not simply a tool as boomers and many Gen-Xers see it. Technology is ubiquitous in their lives. York et al. (2012) stated, "They have a preference for up-to-date technology and a multitasking work style" (p. 27). Another difference is that millennials prefer teamwork (York et al., 2012). Sujansky & Ferri-Reed (2009) suggested millennials "thrive on involvement in challenging projects, program development, problem solving, and decision making" (as cited in York et al., 2012, p. 27).

According to Johnson (2015), millennials are not interested in doing things the way they have always been done, but prefer to challenge tradition. King, Lambsdorff, & Zhu, (n.d.) stated, "These self-confident young adults are highly ambitious and care little about hierarchy. To them, the ideal workplace is a meritocracy where employees advance at their own speed based on their accomplishments, not their seniority" (p. 71). York et al. (2012) suggested, "millennials often question supervisors not out of disrespect for authority, but from a desire to understand and participate in the decision making and direction of the organization" (p. 27). These tendencies are antithetical to the traditional hierarchical, autocratic law enforcement organization. Unless organizations adapt to the changing mindset, employees in this cohort will quickly become discouraged and disengaged, leading them to seek more satisfying employment. Vargas (2014) asserts, "This newer generation does not share the same dedication to employers or professions as did previous generations" (p. 3). Rosseau (2001) stated, "Feelings of loyalty to an organization come at least in part from the psychological contract between employers and employees" (as cited in Thompson,

2012, p. 240). This readiness to change jobs is not due to an inherent lack of loyalty, but derives from a youth spent observing layoffs, downsizing, and furloughs brought on by the economic downturn of the time. According to Thompson and Gregory (2012), "These factors likely served to cement what many millennials already believed: the psychological contract is dead" (p. 240). In a good job market, millennials are likely to switch jobs frequently for money, career growth, and more engaging work (King, Lambsdorff, & Zhu, n.d.).

Another shift for this generation is toward a better work-life balance. Dill (2015) states, "Work-life balance is a highly-valuable form of compensation-it may even be overtaking cash" (p. 1). Millennials seem more willing to allow work to creep into their personal lives, such as answering work emails on personal time, but they also expect the inverse as well (Dill, 2015). According to research by Universum, 73% of millennials value work-life balance over increased salary, and 82% value it ahead of promotion (as cited in Dill, 2015). Howe (2010) states, "Unlike Boomers, few millennials see the individual pursuit of career success as their primary path to life satisfaction" (p. 188). Thompson & Gregory (2012) state, "For a generation of technology-enabled knowledge workers, work is no longer a place you go, but a thing you do" (p. 242). Contemporary concepts of work-life balance center around separating work time from personal time and ensuring an adequate amount of time is spent within each "sphere" to maintain personal fulfillment. However, Illingsworth (2004) references a new view of professional vs personal time called "work-life blending", which utilizes the combination of technology and knowledge work (as cited in Thompson & Gregory, 2012). Work-life blending involves each area being integrated into the other. This paradigm seems well suited to

millennials. As Howe (2010) stated, "For today's rising generation, the personal is becoming professional" (p. 189). This underscores that, for them, the black and white, work vs. home of the Gen Xers is becoming a blended grey.

A third major incentive for making adjustments is the price of resistance. Putting a new officer on the street is an expensive endeavor, from recruiting and testing, through background investigations and training. Many departments hire uncertified officers and send them through a basic academy. Some larger agencies will send certified officers through an additional academy designed for that organization. Not only are departments paying the costs of these basic academies, the cadets are also paid to attend. After successful completion of the academy, probationary officers typically enter an on-the-job field training program which can extend training for weeks or months. There is also the potential of accrued overtime for officers who remain and must shoulder the workload of the vacant position. All of these pieces comprise significant, measurable expenses for each new hire. Over ten years ago, New Orleans Police Department (2004) estimated an average cost of $44,665 to recruit and train a new officer (as cited in Nolan & Harper, 2007, p. 19). Even based on that dated estimate, turnover is very expensive for an organization.

Another less quantifiable, but potentially significant cost to consider results from vicarious liability and the effects of an inexperienced workforce. Few would argue with the assertion that an experienced employee, in nearly any field, can provide better service than an inexperienced employee. When the tremendous authority and responsibility shouldered by police officers are considered in the equation, the need for experience and training becomes even more apparent. Wilson (2010) also lists other

intangible costs of turnover such as peer disruption, department operation disruptions,

and lower morale.

COUNTER POSITION

There are those who contend that law enforcement should not be forced to adapt

its traditional methodologies. There are at least two significant arguments, and the first

suggests that law enforcement, with a necessarily paramilitary structure, cannot

successfully complete its mission the way millennials desire to work. Most law

enforcement organizations are structured based on an autocratic, hierarchical model

with strictly enforced lines of authority. Operations are typically rigid and dictated by

detailed policies and operating procedures. This resembles the military model

(paramilitary) for efficient communication and clear lines of responsibility during times of

emergency or crisis. As in the military, police training typically involves some of the

same types of training and socialization, including weapons usage, hand-to-hand

fighting (self-defense), chain of command, discipline, and performance under stress

(Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010). Many of these concepts do not integrate well with

the millennials, who are brought up to feel special and individual. They want to know the

"why" for instructions and orders before they can commit, and need praise for actually

doing so (Major Cities Chiefs And Federal Bureau of Investigation National Executive

Institute, 2007). An argument can be made that every other generation has assimilated

into the paramilitary culture of police organizations, and that is because a police

organization can only fulfill its mission with indivdiuals who are suited to the paramilitary

environment (Vargas, 2014).

There are, however, several issues affecting police organizations today that suggest this is not true. Within the past 20 years, police have seen an increase in job functions attributed to a shift toward a community oriented policing concept (Wilson, 2010). On a daily basis, officers need to cooperate *with* the public, instead of seeing themselves as apart from it. Unfortunately, one of the effects of traditional basic police training, not to mention police culture, is the engendering of an "us vs. them" mindset, as pointed out by Kraska and Cubellis (1997) (as cited in Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010, p. 189). As many in society call for the police to "demilitarize" and media stories of police use of force abuse abound, law enforcement could benefit from shifting away from the military model. Adopting a more corporate, customer service model will not only improve public perception of the profession, but it will allow organizations more flexibility to incorporate millennial-friendly retention programs.

Another argument against modifying recruiting and retention strategies for millennials is the perception of older generations believing the millennials are needy and cannot complete tasks without specific instructions and constant praise (McCarron, 2016). This is a pervasive belief about the millennial generation. One of the most common traits attributed to that generation is the need for regular affirmation. According to Zeigler (2011), "You have to give feedback to millennials at least once a month" (para. 19).

Much current thought on leadership would suggest that the problem of clear direction and feedback does not lie with the millennial's need for it, as much as it does with the traditionally autocratic culture's unwillingness (or inability) to provide it. It may be the millennial generation is the stimulus to finally push conventional law enforcement

supervision and leadership into a more contemporary (corporate) position. Addressing feedback, Kouzes and Posner (2012) state, "people will not continue working for long if they feel unappreciated or taken for granted" (p. 275). While this is not specific to just one generation, it is especially true of millennials.

RECOMMENDATION

According to McCarron (2016), "many managers are complaining about having a hard time finding employees with the same motivations as they have – 'They're looking for 30-year-old boomers'" (para. 9). As demonstrated, millennials have different motivations and expectations than boomers or Gen Xers. Their drives are not necessarily worse, just different. Millennials want to understand *why* they are doing what they are doing. They want feedback to understand *how* they are doing. They want to enjoy work as *part* of their lives, not as the meaning in their lives. It is difficult to argue these are bad things. Organizations can make adaptations with minimal effort that may help recruit and retain a highly trained, competent workforce.

Training organizational leadership and management to move away from the autocratic style and toward more of a coaching/mentoring approach will help to retain employees of *all* generations, but will become a requirement for millennials. According to Major Cities Chiefs And Federal Bureau of Investigation National Executive Institute (2007), leaders with "Do it because I said so" or "My way or the highway" style will not succeed with millennials (p. 53). On the contrary, as McCarron (2016) suggests, managers will need to become coaches, providing the affirmation and guidance they crave. In fact, using reverse mentoring programs where, in exchange for a department veteran mentoring a younger recruit in departmental operations and culture, the

younger officer can "mentor" the veteran officer in another area such as technology. This can help to bridge generational differences in the organization.

Also, including all employees in organizational goal-setting and policy-making will help to foster buy-in. This is especially important for millennials and helps provide the involvement and understanding that so many of them require to be committed. Working toward flexible schedules in those situations where it is practical will also help to draw millennials. While basic police patrol is more regimented and not necessarily compatible with a flexible schedule or work from home model, it becomes more feasible with detectives and investigators.

Making such changes will not only help organizations recruit and retain quality employees, moving toward a more corporate, customer service model may also benefit organizations from a public perception standpoint. It is inevitable that the millennial generational cohort will become the dominant generation of the workforce in the coming years. Organizations can be on the leading edge by adopting changes to support their needs. Those that do will benefit from recruiting and retaining quality employees. Organizations that resist will continue to suffer from turnover and the associated costs due to an unsatisfied workforce.

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