

**The Bill Blackwood  
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

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**Flexible Supervision**

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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 2014**

## **ABSTRACT**

There are many expectations placed on the first line law enforcement supervisor from different sources. The agency needs the supervisor to support the established goals of the agency and motivate the officers to do the same. Officers want a supervisor who will take the time to develop the officer in order to accomplish their own career goals. The public demands accountability of law enforcement while maintaining excellent customer service. As a result, an effective supervisor must be able to navigate and implement various management styles to meet these expectations successfully. The manner in which personnel matters are addressed in law enforcement can make a significant impression on the public and other agencies.

The ability for a law enforcement supervisor to transition between micromanagement and macromanagement styles is essential in today's work environment. Macromanagement requires a careful balance between empowering an officer and maintaining a level of accountability. Micromanagement can be a necessary tool, though the implementation of this method of supervision must be constantly reevaluated. An effective supervisor remains cognizant of managing people rather than handling situations and is willing and able to transition between micromanagement and macromanagement styles as needed to remain accountable to the many expectations of the management position.

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## INTRODUCTION

Effective supervision is essential to any law enforcement agency. Few professions are under such close scrutiny as that of law enforcement. The public demands that any agency provide a professional and high quality service to its citizens. An agency's reputation and character are paramount to its influence on the community (Sullivan, 2004). As a result, the supervisor must be willing to implement a variety of tactics to develop officers to their full potential and to appropriately address deficiencies.

There are several factors that may influence the management style chosen by a law enforcement supervisor. A single supervisor may have officers of varying experience levels assigned to the same shift. An understanding of generational characteristics can provide insight as to the most appropriate management style. Prior to entering the law enforcement profession, many officers have not experienced a paramilitary organization and as such a period of familiarization may be necessary. The urgency with which a concern should be addressed will further impact the action taken by the supervisory staff. For example, officer safety issues must be addressed swiftly while a paperwork procedure infraction is of less immediate importance. Supervisors must be able to adapt to the needs of a dynamic workforce.

When a supervisor promotes, authority is inherent with the promotion, but true respect is earned from subordinates through actions following promotion. The concept of managing people instead of handling situations is essentially what most officers' desire from a supervisor (Gove, 2004). Effective supervisors will provide a balance between empowerment and accountability, allowing officers performing at or above expectations to gradually take on more responsibilities and obtain more individual

freedom in the workplace (macromanagement). However, there are situations in which a more “hands-on” and directed approach (micromanagement) is both necessary and more effective than macromanagement styles. The law enforcement profession is constantly changing, thus the manner in which supervision is implemented must be able to adapt accordingly. A law enforcement supervisor should be able to transition among a variety of management styles to benefit the subordinate as well as the goals of the agency.

## **POSITION**

The successful delegation of empowerment and accountability is essential to all levels of supervision in law enforcement. The feeling of independence and ability to do one’s own thing on a daily basis (empowerment) are key motivators for officers. On the other hand, a supervisor must hold officers responsible for their actions (accountability) to ensure a professional service is provided to the community as well as minimize the potential for liability. While empowerment starts at the top of the chain of command and flows down, accountability begins at the bottom and moves up (Gove, 2007). Taken together, the successful delegation of empowerment and accountability leads to macromanagement, “a style of management that involves leading decision makers” (“What is the difference”, 2011).

The front line supervisor will have the largest and most direct impact on officer development (Gove, 2007), and therefore it is critical that the front-line supervisor be able to appropriately delegate empowerment and accountability toward the goal of macromanagement. Too much freedom, especially for inexperienced officers, can potentially demotivate the officer and leave them lacking in direction. Conversely, a

supervisor who consistently refuses opportunities to delegate could impede initiative and confidence thus negatively affecting an officer's professional growth.

Empowerment can be apportioned by two methods. First, officers should be encouraged to be involved in the decision making process, which will in turn add to the officers' self-confidence (Gove, 2007). For example, an officer may call the supervisor when they are unsure of the appropriate action to take. Instead of the supervisor readily providing an answer, the supervisor should inquire what action the officer was considering. By walking the officer through the decision making process, the supervisor's opinion regarding the situation seldom has to be voiced. The supervisor can take a "devil's advocate approach" to encourage decision making from another perspective (Gove, 2004). Empowerment can also be introduced through communication and recognition (Gove, 2007). Taking the time to send a positive email or providing an agency's challenge coin for a job well done demonstrates the importance of the officer to the agency. Managing people rather than situations will have long lasting benefits; providing praise for a job well done will encourage more of the same effort (Swope, 2001).

Employee accountability is essential for the apportioned empowerment to be of maximum benefit (Gove, 2007). A lack of accountability can cause major consequences for the officer as well as the agency, including civil implications. Officers must know they are held to a standard and policies will be followed. For example, when a supervisor regularly reviews mobile videos of traffic stops and learns of an officer not following established procedures for contact with the public on traffic stops, the involved officer should be counseled over the performance deficiency. This practice will

demonstrate to the involved officer and teammates that policy should be followed. The notion of delegating empowered decision making and proportional accountability is only ideal for officers who are meeting or exceeding performance expectations. Officers who fall short of meeting acceptable standards may need a closer form of supervision (micromanagement).

While micromanagement is often seen as a negative form of supervision to be avoided at all times, micromanagement is a valuable tool when used appropriately by supervisors and on a temporary basis. Micromanagement is defined as “a management style where a manager closely observes or controls the work of his or her subordinates or employees” (“What is the difference”, 2011). Benefits of micromanagement are that task completion can be expedited and risks minimized (Glass, 2011) while the risks include the aforementioned impediment of professional growth and development. As such, micromanagement techniques should be applied judiciously.

At times, officers mistake a supervisor's actions as micromanagement when actually they are just doing their job. The manner in which different supervisors operate can vary, opening the door for claims of inappropriate micromanagement when it is not the case. Additionally, problem officers will use micromanagement as a self-preservation defense when supervisors are not micromanaging but merely attempting to correct a problem with the officer (Gove, 2008). Inconsistent decision making among supervisors can also spurn false accusations of micromanagement (Gove, 2008). Some supervisors may fail to hold officers accountable, so when other supervisors appropriately insist on accountability, problems can arise. Supervisors must be

conscious of the possible misinterpretation of their efforts by subordinates (Gove, 2008) and minimize this risk through effective communication skills.

There are specific instances in law enforcement where micromanagement is necessary, and a supervisor must be honest as to the reason and duration of such intense scrutiny (Riordan, 2010). For example, micromanagement may be necessary to address performance deficiencies (Glass, 2011). In some cases, the performance deficiencies may have developed during a period of macromanagement or empowerment supervision, and the supervisor should ensure that the problem officer understands the performance expectations necessary for the reinstitution of empowerment. Micromanagement in this situation also serves as a form of accountability and can be one of the most efficient ways to increase performance. For performance deficiencies resulting from inexperience, such as with new officers or reassigned veterans, closer supervision through micromanagement may also be appropriate (Riordan, 2010) until an acceptable level of performance is achieved.

Another example of appropriately applied micromanagement is during high-risk situations (Glass, 2011). A supervisor must be the source calmness and order during times of chaos, such as in the case of an active shooter or bomb threat (Glass, 2011). In these situations, decisions must be made quickly and without debate. When SWAT teams are deployed for high risk arrest and/or search warrants, there usually is a command post in operation (Glass, 2011). The command post consists of experienced upper level management charged with making difficult decisions, minimizing uncalculated risk.



Perhaps the most difficult and yet necessary situation in which micromanagement is a fitting approach involves the discipline of consistently underperforming officers (“problem officers”). Despite the low ratio of problem officers in proportion to the rest of the organization (Harris & Gilmartin, 2000), most of a supervisor’s time and effort is spent on dealing with problem officers. Although extensive background investigations are completed on law enforcement applicants, no particular characteristic stands out to determine who will be a problem officer (Bradshaw, 2010). The entire chain of command must support each other in order to address a problem officer. An officer will quickly know if supervisor is not supported by his agency which can further aggravate the situation. Furthermore, upper management is essentially unable to take action against a problem employee when the first-line supervisor fails to deal with the officer (Harris & Gilmartin, 2000).

Supervisors must be willing to confront problem officers and address the underlying issues of poor performance. A lack of attention to problem employees can lead to frustration among teammates and eventually infect the integrity of the entire organization. Thus, it is imperative that a supervisor address problem officers in a timely manner (Gove, 2004). Confrontation can be difficult for supervisors for a plethora of reasons. In many instances, the supervisor may be friends with the officer. Supervisors want to be accepted by the officers. The unfamiliarity of dealing with personnel issues by new supervisors, especially in dealing with veteran problem officers, can add to an already awkward situation. Fortunately, these difficulties can be minimized with preparation prior to meeting with the employee (Harris & Gilmartin, 2000). The supervisor must be able to clearly communicate to the officer the problem

that is being addressed in a factual, objective manner. As the facts are known, the severity of the problem behavior can be fully understood (Harris & Gilmartin, 2000).

The supervisor's meeting with a problem officer is trifold in purpose. First, the officer must have a clear understanding of the problem. Second, the actions to right the problem should be defined. Third, the officer should understand the ramifications of further unacceptable behavior. The meeting illustrates to the officer that the supervisor is not intimidated by the situation and will do what it takes to ensure the behavior is corrected (Gove, 2004).

The responsibility now falls on the officer to make the necessary modifications to their performance to return to an acceptable standard (Harris & Gilmartin, 2000). When it appears the officer has demonstrated acceptable corrective actions, the supervisor may consider a more "hands off" style of management; that is, the supervisor may move toward macromanagement. Alternatively, in the case of continuous underperformance by an officer, a period of micromanagement may be necessary to further observe the behavior and provide correction. It is the quality of supervision that has a much greater impact on an officer than the quantity of supervision (Engel, 2003). Therefore, micromanagement should be used on a temporary basis and its usage constantly reevaluated (Riordan, 2010) with an eventual goal of moving capable officers towards greater levels of empowerment and accountability.

It is vital that a supervisor be willing and capable of objectively documenting the efforts of the supervisor and performance of the officer to correct deficiencies. The documentation should be detailed and written in close proximity to the actions taken. A lack of documentation results in the supervisor starting at "ground zero" if and when the

unacceptable behavior repeats itself. Documentation of corrective action defends against accusations of inadequate supervision. In formal administrative hearings, an absence of documentation is a common justification used to dismiss disciplinary actions (Harris & Gilmartin, 2000). In addition, officers within the agency are watching to see how the administrative staff handles problems, which can have a profound effect on the extent the footprint of unacceptable behavior has on the agency.

### **COUNTER POSITION**

In 2010, William Goodwin from the Texas City Police Department published a paper suggesting a uniform type of supervision is the only management style appropriate for a paramilitary organization, an organizational style which has been synonymous with the law enforcement profession for years (Goodwin, 2010). According to Goodwin, a supervisor who adheres to any other style of supervision is opening himself to claims of inconsistency. Additionally, differences in levels of experience and generational gaps among officers were not considered valid considerations for applying alternative management practices (Goodwin, 2010).

In contrast, Glass (2011) suggested that the situation at hand should determine which style of management is implemented and there is no such thing as “a one size fits all” approach in management theory. Others have noted that inexperienced officers need more guidance from their supervisors than veteran officers (Gove, 2004). As the officer develops, increased decision making ability is placed on the officer to foster an environment of trust between the officer and supervisor (Gove, 2004). An effective supervisor adjusts the management style to meet the requirements of the individual officer (Davenport, 2010).

Additionally, generational differences have become important in leadership development programs (Morreale & Ortmeier, 2004) as the effects of generational gaps have become evident. For example, understanding the characteristics of the Millennials (born roughly between the early 1980s through the early 2000s) can improve employee retention and job fulfillment (Mosman, 2010). Supervisors must understand the characteristics of this unique generation to supervise them effectively. Millennials like to be a part of a team, often seek guidance from supervisors, and appreciate supervisors who lead by example (Mosman, 2010). Supervisors should be mindful of this when considering a “hands off” approach with Millennials. It is often said that no two days are alike in law enforcement which intrigues Millennials. When considering assignments, supervisors should be cognizant of Millennials’ desire for stimulating versus non-stimulating assignments (e.g., patrol versus surveillance). Millennials appreciate being given an explanation for assigned tasks. In general, Millennials have no loyalty to a particular department and when disgruntled they may seek employment elsewhere sooner than others (Mosman, 2010). As a result, supervisors may choose to observe Millennials closer than others to maximize retention and morale (Mosman, 2010). The Millennial generation is clearly different from the older Baby Boomers and Generation X’ers and so the one-size-fits-all approach to management across generations will result in sub-optimal results.

Others have suggested that micromanagement is never a viable option. For example, Henry (2010) submitted that micromanagement is indicative of a lack of leadership and weak supervisory skills. Accordingly, efforts to inspire a person should

be implemented instead of attempts to control as are generally characteristic of micromanagement (Henry, 2010)

In contrast, Riordan (2010) proposed that micromanagement is necessary to determine if the right person is in the right assignment. For example, a veteran detective returning to the patrol division after years in the investigative division may not be familiar with the new technology (mobile computer, digital video, policy changes) in the patrol car since on the street last and period of intense supervision and training may be necessary. As the officer demonstrates the desired level of competency in the new assignment, a less intense supervisory style can be implemented. If the officer cannot perform to the targeted level, however, reassignment or remedial training may be warranted.

A great example of micromanagement success comes from University of Alabama's football program, namely Coach Nick Saban's coaching style he refers to as "the process" (Loosvelt, 2013). The implementation of his micromanagement style has yielded impressive results that no program has experienced in recent years and is continuously studied by not only his peers, but successful business leaders. He has brought notoriety to the university in addition to facilitating impressive academic success from the student athletes.

Saban has been interviewed on multiple occasions as how his coaching style came to be and he has provided a few characteristics for others to ponder (Loosvelt, 2013). First, he devotes time to evaluate the physical training and study efforts year round. Goals are defined for each player and if the goals have not been reached, the efforts to come closer to accomplishing the goal are examined. Next, a detailed plan

must be put in place, practiced with a reasonable measure of success, and executed with confidence. Equally important, the smallest detail is focused upon for completion rather than spending time on the outcome of the big picture. Finally, success is constantly studied for avenues of improvement without allowing for complacency (Loosvelt, 2013). The micromanagement model that Nick Saban has put in place encourages accomplishments through constant support of the smallest detail and the organization has buy-in because all are allowed to experience individual success!

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Effective supervision can have far-reaching influence on officers and the community the agency serves. The professional reputation and character of an agency can speak volumes in the courtroom where often times it is the officer's word against that of the accused. Officers must understand that the actions taken and words spoken on each contact with the public has significant implications for the entire organization. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to ensure officers have the freedom they desire while maintaining a level of accountability that is absolutely necessary.

The public entrusts law enforcement with more responsibility and freedom than any other profession. As a result, the actions or the lack thereof by the police can lead to public outrage. Under such strong scrutiny by the public, deficiencies in performance by the police can be devastating to an agency for years to follow if not addressed in a timely manner. The media is quick to report on stories of police misconduct, which contributes to a negative law enforcement image. In most instances, the misconduct is manifested by the absence of appropriate supervision rather than too much guidance.

Disgruntled and malcontented officers may exist among the ranks for a variety of reasons. The supervisor must understand the causes of inadequate performance and be willing to implement a variety of methods to correct deficiencies. Administering discipline is not an enjoyable part of supervision, but it is essential. In today's litigious society, supervisors must consider documentation a staple of their job function. In addition, a supervisor's efforts must be supported by upper administration for the correction to be effective.

Due to the personality characteristics of most police officers, there will be a "tug of war" of sorts between the supervisor doing his job and the officer wanting independence (Sullivan, 2004). This strain between the officer and supervisor often leads to misguided complaints of micromanagement when actually the supervisor is doing his job (Gove, 2008). However, there are situations where the implementation of micromanagement is a viable option.

Despite claims of refutation, micromanagement is a viable option for law enforcement supervision in the short term. Situations requiring the repetitive use or extended use of micromanagement should be reassessed as to whether the officer is in the correct assignment or career choice. Regardless of the difficulty, discipline must be judiciously administered regardless of the preferred management style of the individual supervisor. The mindset of a single supervisory style for all officers is a failed theory. Supervision must be adjusted to the individual needs of the officer. Law enforcement is made up of people from different generations and life experiences. As a result, the supervisor must have several "tools" in his leadership "tool box" from which to choose in the consistently demanding and continuously evolving field of law enforcement.

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