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Ethical Management and Its Relationship to Officer Morale

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, man has been placed in positions of authority over others, and history shows that there have been great leaders as well as poor. The common thread in all great leaders was the moral and ethical standards they demonstrated to those they lead. In law enforcement, far too often have leaders failed to see the importance of abiding by the rules; instead, they see themselves as above those they are attempting to lead. Over time, this lack of ethical behavior will result in a downturn in troop morale. Morale is the driving force within an agency that determines the quality of work done and the public's perceptions of the agency. Moral and ethical behavior sets the tone and momentum of the department and is the most important aspect of being a great leader.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout history, the mark of a true leader was their unyielding adherence to a set of articulable principles that were both moral and ethical in nature. Not only were these standards passed on to the rank and file, they were illustrated by the daily activities and leadership style of that leader. All of the above can be categorized as one being a person of integrity and leading in a manner that brings credibility to the office he or she holds. Living out the principles of moral and ethical leadership builds trust for the leader within the department and grows an environment conducive to an enjoyable workplace. It is only when a leader ventures outside of those principles of ethical and moral behavior that the environment changes from positive to one that is both destructive for the leader in question, and to a greater extent, those that he or she is attempting to lead.

Leadership hinges on gaining the trust and support of those being lead, and this can only be accomplished through the effective implementation of ethical decision making. The importance of taking into consideration the view of those being lead and their needs when it comes to job satisfaction and police work cannot be stressed enough. The success or failure of a leader is directly related to the trust and support given by those below. Once this trust is lost, it is rarely regained, as police officers hold themselves and those above to standards that are not easily achieved. If upper management fails to recognize this and continues to operate outside the perceived ethical standards of the position, the department suffers and fails to meet the vision and mission it has sworn to strive towards.

The level of ethical behavior demonstrated by administration plays a crucial role in the morale of a department. Any deviation from absolute ethical behavior will have a devastating effect, culminating in a devastating morale plummet. This is never more prevalent than when line officers observe a chief of police, or for that matter, any administrator acting in a manner that is outside the parameters of departmental policy. Officers, when observing upper management, want to see total adherence to policy because an officer's actions are being evaluated, and many times judged, on the basis of whether or not they adhered to departmental policy. For the purpose of this paper, chief of police is included in upper management. This adherence, or lack thereof, determines whether or not an officer is disciplined, or to a greater degree, kept as an employee of the department, and when upper management fails to lead by example, then animosity grows and troop welfare declines.

It is the thesis of this paper that the ethical leadership, or lack thereof, plays a crucial role in the morale of a department. Further, leadership is the catalyst that determines the overall ethical behavior of a department. Research as far back as 1945 has shown that "Good morale is vital to police work" (Gocke, 1945, p. 215); therefore, it should be a priority to keep morale as high as can be achieved. Morale has a direct correlation to police production and job initiative, not to mention the potential negative outcomes that can develop leading to officer discipline.

POSITION

Morale within a department, or in other words, the organizational climate, has its foundation in the leadership style of those in command. Being a paramilitary organization, police departments follow a strict chain of authority, from line officer to the

chief of police. Within this chain of command lies the potential to elevate a department to exceptional achievements, but also within it lies the potential to devastate a department with self-driven agendas and abuse of positional power. In a journal article written in 1999, Write made a correlation between leadership style within a department and the level of ethical or unethical behavior. This behavior has its roots in the style of leadership administered to the department. Leadership must take the higher road because there is too much at stake to do otherwise, and in Write's (1999) journal article, he made this clear when he said that the "chief executive officer must walk the walk, as well as, talk the talk" (Write, 1999, p.68).

One of the areas often abused within departments is the administering of discipline. Oftentimes, the level of discipline depends less on what the infraction was, and more about who the officer is. It is cases such as these that the necessity for officer protection was born. Personal agendas or department politics are used as markers to determine the level of discipline handed out, and as Field and Meloni's (1999) article stated, "Civil service systems, merit boards or commissions are essential to protect officers from abuse of politics or misuse of administrative power" (p. 87). But if this protection is not afforded, the officer and the process of handing out discipline is left in the hands of one person, which means the outcome could be based on one's personal bias and prejudice. If this leader holds to a high ethical standard, and "walks the walk", then the process would be fair and unbiased. If not, then the officer stands to lose everything.

Within this same context of morale or department climate, the potential for unethical behavior by the line officer is also present. Failure of upper management to

present a positive path for the department and have a willing cooperation from the rank and file stems from a lack of morale and trust. Morale is the driving force that acts as the life blood fueling many aspects within the organization. Couple low morale with poor leadership, and the department becomes a powder keg waiting to explode upon itself, as well as the public. A leader must have followers, and those followers must demonstrate a willing cooperation to fulfill the vision presented. If there is not willing participation with the leadership, then there arises a potential for less than ethical means to be used to facilitate that following (Eddy, Lorenzet, & Mastrangelo, 2008). By less than ethical, one can imagine the use of coercion, intimidation, and the threat of discipline as means to force the following. Again, all are elements of unethical behavior that will affect the ability of the department to function at the necessary level to provide for the common good of the public for which it serves.

It could be argued that one of the most important, if not the most important, aspects of law enforcement leadership is the unquestionable need for moral decision making. This should not be confused with morality as it pertains to lifestyle, but morals as they pertain to the decision making process. Moral decision making is ethical decision making, and the two cannot be separated. To make an unethical leadership decision is synonymous with an immoral decision. One is the basis of the other, and outside of the two working simultaneously, poor leadership is the result. Persons can be taught policy and procedures and conditioned to act accordingly, but moral leadership is something that comes from within the person (Maguan & Krone, 2009). Law enforcement is based on the moral and ethical enforcement of the law, so it should come as no surprise that those same standards that are placed on the officer when

dealing with the public must be placed on upper management when dealing with those they supervise. If this standard is not followed, then a disconnect develops between the officer and the public, with he or she mirrors the treatment observed within the department. The correlation between the two aspects of law enforcement, enforcing the law and interdepartmental treatment by upper management, are so closely related that questions of liability should arise. Sendjaya (2005) stated that "Real leadership takes place only when leaders' and followers' ethical aspirations are enhanced as a result of their interactions" (p. 76).

The relationship between the ethical behavior of upper management and those they supervise has a direct correlation. One feeds the other, and as a direct result, this limits the growth and functionality of the department as a whole. An example would be upper management directing those below that it is unacceptable for any officer to initiate contact with the public, specifically in regards to traffic contacts, without the use of in-car mobile video. Within days of this directive, upper management is observed by officers violating the same. As a result, they are confronted with this obvious violation of their own directive. Instead of acknowledging this lack of accountability, they make the argument that they write policy but do not necessarily have to abide by it. Young officers hearing about this observable double standard and begin to question accountability. These questions lead to frustration, which, in turn, develops into dissatisfaction within the workplace, and dissatisfaction with those in positions of authority. This dissatisfaction manifests itself in outward anger, and it is a short step between anger and blatant insubordination, which results in unnecessary discipline on

the officer. So it becomes observable that leadership, and its moral and ethical implementation, are vital to the health of a department.

One aspect of law enforcement leadership that cannot be overlooked is that of the political climate the leader was brought up in. The harder one has had to fight within the agency to climb the ranks, and those he or she has had to overcome, bear a huge influence in the leadership style ultimately displayed. Personal pride for the position is very often difficult to overcome and put aside for the best interests of those being lead. But again, this relates directly to the need for a sound moral and ethical standing within the leader. This is reinforced with Azuka (2009) when he stated, "Making ethical choices requires a clear idea of one's moral mandate and the ability to critically analyze choices to determine how they stand up to principle" (p. 14).

COUNTER POSITION

It has been argued thus far that leadership and its ethical implementation has a direct correlation to the morale of a department. While there is a strong argument for this being a valid thesis, one must take an objective view of the side of upper management and their reasoning for this type of leadership style. One must also look at the question of leadership style and its relationship to department morale. With this in mind, it can be argued that while upper management does have a part in the morale of a department, it is not the responsibility of upper management to stimulate troop morale. Morale is based on the individual's ability to overcome the perceived unethical leadership style, and Brandon (2008) argued, "It is easier to blame others than to deal with our own issues. Yet, when we fail to deal with our own issues, they are exacerbated over time and can lead to serious, chaotic, or disastrous events" (p. 21).

This is in total contradiction to Write (1999), when he stated that leaders who stress ethical behavior, yet do not follow their own examples, will quickly lose trust, and a lack of trust will result in a downward spiral of morale. The link between practice and its resultant effect on morale is clearly documented, and while it may be the responsibility of the individual to overcome low morale, at some point, it becomes insurmountable due to accumulative actions on the part of upper management, thus invalidating this argument.

Another point of contention often argued by upper management is the fact that they formulate policies and procedures, and, at any time, they can also violate them (Hooker, 2010). While this is a valid statement and well within the parameters of policy, it is conceivable that there will be times that policy will not fully cover the situation at hand and immediate decisions have to be made. But these are exceptions, not norms. It can be argued that upper management must take moral and ethical responsibility for their actions if they expect this to occur within the rank and file. The stronger the ethical behavior demonstrated by upper management, the more ethical those below will be (Carlson & Perrewe, 1995). So to argue that policy can be violated at the whim of upper management holds no validity and will cause the overall health of a department to suffer. As mentioned, there are exceptions to this rule, but those exceptions often come at the price of a critical incident and the necessity to re-evaluate policy in order to deal with the situation at hand. These situations are easily understood by the rank and file, and often work to the benefit of leadership as they show a willingness to adapt, but this is the exception, not the rule.

It has also been argued that upper management does not have to demonstrate the standard, just enforce its adherence. This enforcement is accomplished through the use of departmental policy, which justifies the position of upper management (Hooker, 2010). This is a direct fallback to the “do as I say, not as I do” style of management and holds no validity in today’s work environment. Write (1999) made it clear in his statement that “Leaders must develop a sense of professionalism that pervades the organization” (p. 68). Through this, the ethical standards of the department are witnessed and through mirroring, it is carried out by the officers on the street.

CONCLUSION

It has been the message throughout this paper that leadership and morale hold a direct correlation to one another. The moral and ethical behavior of those in positions of authority not only determines the level of support and trust they are entrusted with, it sets the standard for the rest of the department to follow. It has also been documented that morale has a direct influence on the level of performance of the line officer and his or her ability to function within the department. As stated previously, “morale is vital to good police work” (Gocke, 1945, p. 215), and a department with good morale will have higher producers and fewer instances of officer indiscretion. Write (1999) stated, “criminal justice agency heads that stress ethical practice and turn away from it with impunity in their own activities will quickly lose the respect and compliance of their staff” (p. 68). It is understandable that once upper management loses compliance of their staff, they, in effect, become more of a liability to a department than an asset.

To be a leader requires sacrifice, and an adherence to a strict moral and ethical code. Sendjaya (2005) said, “it is insufficient for leaders to be effective but

unethical...The more corrupt they are, the greater our yearning for morally sound or ethical leaders” (p. 76). Law enforcement officials are held to a standard much greater than that of the general public. This is also applicable to the standards held between public and private sector leadership. Law enforcement upper management holds the success or failure of the department and his or her troops within their hands. This success or failure is directly related to the style and implementation of their leadership model. Decisions made by upper management, whether truly unethical or perceived as unethical, all result in the same outcome. In law enforcement, perception is reality, and as a leader, that has to be taken into consideration.

Though there is unethical behavior within police departments’ upper management, the solution is simple. The willingness to correct past behavior has to be a priority if upper management has any hope of regaining the lost trust and respect owed to the position. Upper management has to “walk the walk and talk the talk” (Write, 1999, p. 68), and this has to take place in every aspect of his or her leadership model. The policies that line officers are held to have to have the same meaning, and receive the same repercussion upon violation with upper management as with line officers. If it is important enough to place in a General Order of Standard Operating Procedure, then its enforcement has to be standard across the board because any deviation from that standard has the perception of being an unethical decision. Compile years of such practice and the result is a total lack of confidence in a department’s upper management.

Leadership is about doing the right thing all the time and in every situation, whether a person is a first line supervisor, or the chief of police within an agency. The

higher up the chain of command a person travels, the more important this becomes because with rank comes a tremendous amount of influence and a large amount of responsibility. That responsibility requires that every decision be weighed against the highest moral and ethical standards that can be obtained. Standards need not be based upon the situation, but can be based upon what is morally and ethically right for that situation and any deviation from this fails to meet the standards put upon the office by the public it serves. There is an obligation to treat those below with the same standards as those without, and when leadership fails to live up to this, morale suffers and everyone loses.

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