The Bill Blackwood
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Every Officer is a Leader:
The Benefits of Bottom-Up Leadership Development

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ABSTRACT

Every officer in a law enforcement agency is a leader. Leadership development for every officer in a law enforcement agency is as important as developing any other law-enforcement related skill or knowledge if not more important. Leadership development provides officers with necessary skills allowing them to carry out their duties more effectively, solve complex problems, and make good decisions in critical situations. Developing officers as leaders and empowering those officers in a shared model of leadership has the effect of improving organizational efficiency, increasing employee engagement, and decreasing the turnover rate in organizations. Developing and empowering officers as leaders is critical to the success of proactive policing initiatives such as community-oriented policing. Leadership development for every officer in the organization also allows agencies to plan for the succession of supervisors as they leave those roles and decreases the urgency of filling vacant supervisory positions.

There is no one-size fits all approach to developing and empowering every officer in a law enforcement agency as a leader. The agency must determine what leadership traits they want to develop and what model of shared leadership is the best fit for their agency and takes steps to implement these programs. Agencies that move forward with this plan will realize many benefits.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Abstract

INTRODUCTION

Every officer is a leader. As law enforcement agencies are confronted with changing workforce and community dynamics, agencies must recognize the leadership within the organization can no longer be a top down process. Regardless of rank, position, title, or amount of experience, every law enforcement officer within an organization is a leader for that organization and the community. Law enforcement agencies need to recognize this dynamic and adjust priorities recognizing that leadership within agencies and communities can come from every level of the organization. This change in approach is necessary for law enforcement agencies to continue to meet the needs of communities. Law enforcement agencies should provide training, mentoring, and other opportunities to develop every officer as a leader and empower officers as leaders within the department and community.

In law enforcement agencies, "leadership, or its absence, is recognized as a key force shaping outputs and outcomes in more formal or informal organization" (Schafer, 2009, p. 238). Despite the recognized importance of leadership, most law enforcement agencies only begin developing officers as leaders when they reach a supervisory position for the first time (Fetters, 2018). Law enforcement agencies spend a great amount of time and resources on developing and training certain knowledge and tasks that are critical components of an officers' duties and responsibilities. In the majority of law enforcement agencies, "Traditional training focused on physical activities such as firearms training, physical training, defensive tactics, and driving. Traditional training also included some knowledge areas such as law, arrest procedures, traffic enforcement, and officer safety" (Chappell, 2008, p. 38). Despite the critical importance

for leadership development in law enforcement organizations, most training is devoted to physical skills or areas of basic knowledge. Law enforcement agencies view these as essential skills for all officers to possess. While law enforcement organizations cannot neglect training and development of these areas and skills, there must be a similar priority to develop leadership skills for every police officer.

Training and development in leadership realms is often lacking early in the careers of law enforcement officers. Traditional approaches to law enforcement training, "Neglected were areas such as communications, diversity, problem solving, and police-community relations" (Chappell, 2008, p. 38). These areas are all areas that can be addressed through providing officers with leadership development training and opportunities. Agencies that focus on developing every officer as a leader with as much focus as they place on developing skills and basic knowledge will see benefits for the agency, the community, and most importantly the individual officer.

Explaining the importance of leadership at every level of a law enforcement agency, Kingshott (2006) states, "The role of both management and leadership is not limited to rank but to personnel, both police and civilian support personnel, the most valuable resource of the organization" (Kingshott, 2006, p. 132). As people are the most valuable commodity in an organization, the organization must devote itself to developing those people and this can be accomplished through leadership development. Equally important to the development of every officer as a leader is that the law enforcement agency empower those officers to lead programs and initiatives and support them in doing so.

This research will show that developing every officer as a leader will enhance the productivity and efficiency of law enforcement agencies, is a key component in successful community-oriented and other proactive policing strategies, and will ease succession planning for replacing supervisors in the organization. This research does not attempt to show how a leadership development program should be designed or structured as this unique to each agency. This research intends to show the benefits of developing and empowering every officer as a leader in the agency.

POSITION

Providing leadership development, training, and mentoring opportunities to every officer in the organization will result in increased efficiency and productivity for the organization as well as increase employee engagement and reduce turnover; important to note as these results will also lead to an increase in organizational efficiency. Leadership development for every law enforcement officer is beneficial as, "Early leadership in law enforcement will benefit any individual, organization, and community by providing confidence, connection, and a strong character within the individual officer" (Humphrey, 2009, p. 4).

Law enforcement agencies are increasingly tasked with dealing with a wider variety of complex problems, often of a type not generally associated with law enforcement (Flynn & Herrington, 2015). As law enforcement officers are being tasked with solving increasingly difficult problems, these problems require officers to have the ability to access a wider ranger of skills. For law enforcement officers and agencies, "Complex problems, however, call for true leadership, which might be defined as using one's ability to influence groups and systems to address complex needs" (Flynn &

Herrington, 2015, p. 3). As law enforcement agencies face the need to address increasingly difficult problems in their communities, developing the leadership skills of every officer in the organization will give officers the tools they need to address these problems more efficiently and effectively thus contributing to the overall efficiency of the agency.

The efficiency and productivity of a law enforcement agency depends entirely on the efficiency and productivity of the officers in that agency. It is critical that the officers are engaged to the vision and goals of that agency for the agency to operate efficiently. Developing every officer as a leader is key to obtaining this engagement. From the earliest days of modern policing models, leadership has been seen as a function of rank or position (Martin, Rogers, Samuel, & Rowling, 2017). Law enforcement agencies must recognize that with changing demands of employees and communities, this approach is not the most effective. Developing and empowering every officer as a leader in the organization will lead to increased employee engagement as well as increased efficiency. Officers will be more engaged when leadership is spread across an organization rather than an organization following a traditional leadership model (Davis & Bailey, 2018). Organizationally, "a 'bottom up' perspective may be needed where the leader is seen as successful and effective when he or she supports their subordinates and allows them to carry out their roles to the best of their ability" (Martin et al., 2017, p. 212). Shifting from a traditional top-down leadership model, law enforcement agencies should develop their officers as leaders and support them to solve difficult issues facing agencies and communities.

Along with increased officer engagement and ability to solve problems more effectively, law enforcement agencies that develop officers as leaders and utilize a shared leadership approach will also see a reduction in turnover, therefore contributing to increased organizational effectiveness and efficiency. All law enforcement agencies know the high cost of turnover in an organization. Developing officers as leaders and increasing engagement is one method that can be used to reduce turnover in organizations. New methods of law enforcement leadership have the ability to, "influence a variety of employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, willingness to go the extra mile and intentions to leave the organization" (Yarlagadda, Bailey, Shantz, Briône, & Zheltoukhova, 2017, p. 205). Developing every officer in an organization as a leader decreases the chances that officer will leave the organization and potentially decreasing the cost of employee turnover.

Developing every officer as a leader provides those officers with more problem solving and critical thinking skills. These skills can be critical when the officer is faced with a decision in a critical incident. An agency that fails to develop every officer as a leader, "invites deficiency in problem solving and decision making and would contribute an unwanted element during an emergency situation. Every administrator should be able to foresee the potential damage to an agency's reputation should this occur" (Pruitt, 2006, p. 18). As law enforcement agencies face increased public and media scrutiny over the decisions made by officers, providing those officers with leadership development is critical. For the individual law enforcement officer and for organizations, "effective police leadership is about character, communication, compassion, and work ethic" (Schafer, 2010, p. 654).

As law enforcement agencies focus on community-oriented and other proactive policing strategies, the development of every officer as a leader is critical to the success of these strategies. A significant amount of research details the importance of front-line officers to the success of community-oriented policing and other proactive policing strategies. In community-policing and other proactive law enforcement initiatives, "the success or failure of community policing efforts hinges on the behaviors of the individual officers who translate community policing philosophy into street-level reality" (Vinzant & Crothers, 1994, p. 189). A traditional top-down leadership style can hinder proactive policing strategies that should be led by front-line officers rather than from the top by creating delays in decisions being made (Smith, 2015).

The ability of front-line individual officers to lead these strategies is critical for their success. Law enforcement agencies cannot continue to focus on leadership only at the top of the organization as, "The focus has shifted from leadership at the top to leadership at the bottom, where the discretionary activities of front line officers can make a real difference in terms of community engagement, prevention and interdiction" (Steinheider & Wuestewald, 2008, p. 145). When leadership at the bottom is critical for the success of community-policing and other proactive policing initiatives, it is critical that law enforcement agencies recognize this and provide leadership development to every officer in the organization, particularly front-line officers who traditionally receive very little, if any leadership training or development. In addition to developing officers as leaders, law enforcement agencies should support and empower their officers in leading proactive law enforcement initiatives.

Developing every officer as a leader and employing a collaborative leadership approach also places law enforcement agencies in a better position to replace officers in supervisory positions as they leave the agency. Supervisors in law enforcement agencies are retiring earlier than before and this is creating a serious problem for many agencies as they do not have leadership development programs in place (Endy, 2009). Leadership development for every officer in a law enforcement agency would solve this issue by preparing and empowering every officer to take on leadership roles and responsibilities. This would make succession planning and replacing supervisors who leave the organization a much easier process. Developing and empowering every officer as a leader in the organization could also reduce the sense of urgency to replace formal supervisors who leave their positions. It is important that organizations plan "for the succession of leadership. Preparation that begins on the eve of a retirement or the day after an unexpected departure will not serve the agency or the individual well. Leadership development should begin as soon as officers are hired" (Luke, 2019, p. 23).

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

An argument could be made that leadership training and development for every officer within a law enforcement organization is too costly, would require too many resources, or take too much time. Law enforcement agencies may choose to focus training and development resources on areas such as defensive tactics, firearms, driving, and other technical skills rather than leadership development. Agencies faced with decreasing budgets may also remove leadership development training for employees (Getha-Taylor, Fowles, Silvia, & Merritt, 2015). As law enforcement

agencies everywhere must deal with limited resources in regard to training, leadership development can easily be put aside to accommodate other training needs including mandated continuing education requirements.

This is not a valid argument against leadership development for law enforcement officers. In a study of leadership development in law enforcement agencies and barriers to that development, officers surveyed indicated that cost of training programs was not a significant barrier to leadership development in their agencies (Schafer, 2010). In the same study, the majority of officers surveyed identified leadership development tools such as feedback, experience, and mentoring as very helpful to leadership development (Schafer, 2010). These leadership development tools and techniques do not require a significant budgetary commitment, they only require the commitment of another leader in the organization to work on developing other officers as leaders. Schafer (2010) further states on the topic, "though an agency might not offer a formal leadership development program, a good leader will encourage the front-line personnel to read and attend elective leadership training" (Schafer, 2010, p. 656). This is another method law enforcement agencies can use to develop leaders while expending few agency resources.

Agencies may also wish to focus training on critical job skills. Leadership development training can be incorporated into other types of training as well, "for example, tactical maneuvers are generally an integral component of leadership development programs for police officers" (Getha-Taylor et al., 2015, p. 297). Critical skills such as defensive tactics, firearm training, and others can all be creatively incorporated into leadership development programs or vice versa.

Another reason law enforcement agencies may chose to not focus on developing every officer as a leader deals with the traditional structure of most law enforcement agencies. Most law enforcement agencies employ a traditional, top-down type structure, and "have long been characterized by a para-military style" (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010, p. 188). These types of agencies, "have clear formal authority structures. There is an explicit chain of command, and incumbents of positions in that hierarchy enjoy authority over those holding lower positions" (Chappell & Lanza-Kaduce, 2010, p. 195). This model of leadership and structure has been long standing in law enforcement and there may be resistance to change.

A study partially pertaining to barriers to leadership development in law enforcement agencies identifies "the dominant constraint related with the culture (resistance to change, politics, and failure to provide true leadership) and structures (ineffective leadership development systems and inferior standards and selections) as the major barriers to law enforcement leadership development" (Schafer, 2010, p. 654). Another study of law enforcement leaders showed, "an adherence to the quasi-military model's rigid methods of command and control and a directive, if not authoritarian, system" (Kunselman, Vito, & Walsh, 2013, p. 317). Many law enforcement agencies may be resistant to developing and empowering every officer as a leader because they have belief in a traditional model of leadership in law enforcement agencies and a belief in the effectiveness of this model.

This argument is not valid as research in police leadership has shown that a shared leadership model, where every officer is developed and empowered as a leader in the organization, is more effective in a number of areas. Research data illustrates,

"that officers' perceptions of the higher echelons of the department improved dramatically, vertical communications improved, critical employee relations were stronger, and employees displayed more motivation and greater pride in the agency" (Steinheider & Wuestewald, 2008, p. 153) when a shared leadership model was implemented in law enforcement agencies. Further in the same study, "lower officer turnover rates also indicate improved morale and continuance commitment within the agency" (Steinheider & Wuestewald, 2008, p. 153). Research clearly indicates that agencies where officers are developed and empowered as leaders are more effective than those that utilize a traditional top-down approach.

RECOMMENDATION

Law enforcement agencies should provide training, mentoring, and other opportunities to develop every officer as a leader and empower officers as leaders within the department and community. Research clearly shows that leadership skills are essential for law enforcement officers in the context of evolving workforces and demands of the community. Leadership skills encompass a variety of critical thinking, problem solving, communication, and other skills that are important for law enforcement officers. These skills allow officers to navigate difficult situations and solve complex problems that they face while carrying out their duties. Despite this, the majority of law enforcement training is still focused around skills and general knowledge without significant attention or resources being devoted to leadership development. Further, the majority of law enforcement officers first receive leadership or management training when they are promoted to a supervisory position instead of leadership development throughout their careers.

Research shows clear correlations between developing and empowering officers as leaders in an organization and the efficiency and effectiveness of that organization. Research also shows that when officers are provided with leadership development opportunities, they will be more engaged with and committed to the agency. Data suggests that when engagement is increased through the development of leaders in the agency, turnover in the agency decreases thus contributing to increased efficiency in the agency.

Developing officers as leaders is a key component of successfully implementing community-oriented policing and other proactive policing strategies. Officers must be equipped and empowered to make decisions and afforded with a degree of discretion to implement these programs and proactively address community issues. For these types of proactive policing initiatives to be successful, there must be leadership from the front-line officers of the organization with the upper levels of the organization supporting those officers, a reverse from a traditional top-down style of leadership. Leadership skills of front-line officers are the key to these programs' success making leadership development of every officer critically important.

Developing officers as leaders from the time they are first employed with an agency positions the agency well when there are supervisory positions to fill in the agency. Law enforcement agencies must have succession plans to fill supervisory positions as they become vacant, regardless of if the vacancy is expected or unexpected. Beginning leadership development of officers when a supervisory position is vacant or when an officer is promoted is too late.

Arguments against developing and empowering every officer as a leader largely revolve around cost and the traditional structure of law enforcement. Law enforcement agencies faced with tight budgets may neglect leadership development in favor of training in other areas. This argument is not valid however as leadership development can be accomplished through a variety of methods that involve very little cost or use of resources. Additionally, leadership development can be incorporated into training for other law enforcement related competencies such as tactical training.

Traditional structures of law enforcement agencies are largely para-military structures utilizing a top-down leadership approach. Research has also shown that many law enforcement agencies are resistant to change in this area. Research however shows that this type of organization is not as effective as one that encourages leadership development for every officer and a shared leadership approach. Officers in agencies that promote leadership development for every officer are generally more effective, more committed to the organization, have higher job satisfaction, and these agencies experience a lower degree of turnover than traditional top-down agencies.

There is no one-size fits all solution to implementing leadership development programs in law enforcement agencies. These programs must be tailored to meet the needs of the individual agency. Law enforcement administrators should begin by working collaboratively with others in the organization to identify the traits, characteristics, and skills they wish to develop in each officer through a leadership development program. Focusing on developing skills such as problem-solving, communication, and critical thinking would be a strong place to focus on with the creation of a leadership development program. The next step is determining what type

of leadership development program the agency will implement. Agencies may opt for a formal leadership development program through training and other development opportunities. Agencies may also decide to implement a less formal leadership development program based around mentoring, feedback, suggested readings, and other options. A combination of the two, formal and informal leadership development, could be the most beneficial based on results of previously stated research. Regardless of the type of training or development program used, agencies should immediately implement leadership development for every officer in the agency.

Finally, law enforcement agencies must empower every officer in their organization as a leader through some form of shared leadership model. This can take the form of officer-led community policing or other proactive policing initiatives with officers leading the way while the agency administration provides support and takes care of the needs of the officers. Law enforcement administrators should also consider involving leadership at all levels of the organization in the decision making progress by soliciting feedback on ideas, encouraging others to bring forth new ideas, and engaging others in discussions and debates. Through these approaches, law enforcement agencies will see the benefits of recognizing that every officer is a leader.

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