

**THE BILL BLACKWOOD  
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE OF TEXAS**

Stress Management in the Supervisor Role

**A**

**POLICY RESEARCH PROJECT**

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment  
of the Requirements for the Professional Designation  
Graduate, Management Institute

by

Kirk Riggs

Farmers Branch Police Department

Farmers Branch, Texas

April, 1 998

## **Abstract**

There has been extensive research done in the area of Police Stress. This research project addresses some of the additional stressors associated with police supervision.

Most police agencies spend little time and effort on internal training programs for supervisors. If agencies would see the importance of better educating, preparing and directing the newly promoted supervisor, this would eliminate some of the unnecessary stress and allow them to perform at a higher, healthier and more effective manner.

The implementation of a supervisor training program would allow the newly promoted supervisor the opportunity to develop new skills that will assist them in performing their job in a more proficient way. A new supervisors training program should reflect departmental values, what is expected of a supervisor, as well as acceptable styles of management (i.e. participative Vs. autocratic), and what they will be held accountable for. There are a variety of ways this could be accomplished, such as; hands on training, mentoring, and structured classes.

This research indicates police supervisors deal with additional stressors, and by addressing some of these issues, we can assist the new supervisor in feeling more comfortable and confident in performing their new job.

A supervisor training program would help prepare the newly promoted supervisor for their new challenges and by doing so will benefit everyone involved.

## **Introduction**

The purpose of this project is to illustrate some of the different types of stressors a newly promoted supervisor will encounter and by doing so, help better prepare them for their new challenges and responsibilities as a supervisor.

Some of these officers may not be fully aware of the alienation associated with supervising the officer who used to be their peer, who now see them in a different role. The "Us Vs Them" mentality is something the newly promoted officer may have a hard time accepting and understanding when he or she is first promoted. Some of the problems that will be addressed in this research project will include: vicarious liability, division accountability, evaluations, disciplinary issues, and factors that can cause stress in these areas.

This research project will be used to inform officers who are considering going through the promotional process, existing supervisors and agency administrators.

Information used for this research project will be obtained from numerous sources including magazine articles, internet articles, books, journals and personal interviews.

The intended outcome of this research project is to identify and address some of the hurdles the newly promoted officer will face. Some of these concerns and stressors may have an impact on whether or not the officer decides to accept the new responsibilities of supervision. By addressing these concerns and problems associated with moving into the supervisory role, officers can better

manage the numerous causes of stress that will surely arise and affect their performance.

### **Historical, Legal, Theoretical Content**

Before the 1960's, little was known about stress management. Hans Selye was the pioneer researcher in the field of stress and he defined stress as "the non-specific response of the body to any demand made upon it." (Reese, 1994) Other types of research examined occupational stress and its effects on performance. Not until the 1970's did researchers start to look at stress in the law enforcement profession and its effect on officer performance. "The past two decades have seen the phenomenon of police officer stress becoming a major concern to administrators and police psychologists." (Reese, 1994)

Even today, you have officers who refuse to acknowledge that stress management is a necessary and important tool to help them deal with job stressors. "Those who ignore the effects of stress are becoming a minority. The last decade has seen an increased willingness to shed the superficial macho image and recognize the emotional pressures of policing." (Trautman 1987)

We don't want to totally eliminate stress in our life, because some forms of stress can be positive and add anticipation and excitement to our lives, such as competitive sports, confrontations and deadlines. Learning how to use positive stress to our advantage will make us better and healthier administrators. What each of us need to do is find the right amount of stress that motivates, but doesn't overwhelm. (Perloe, 1998)

Researchers and criminal justice officials in the past 25 years have found stressors that are unique to law enforcement. "Today, law enforcement is widely considered to be among the most stressful occupations, associated with high rates of divorce, alcoholism, suicide, and other emotional and health problems."(Finn, 1997)

“Police administrators have an enormous responsibility to ensure that people in their employ are relatively free from psychological problems that may adversely affect their job performance." (Moriarty, 1989) There are unique situations officers are placed in unlike those in any other profession, which subject an officer to psychological pressures. These include officer involved shootings, family disturbances, major accidents, just to list a few.

A study conducted in 1974 by the Cincinnati, Ohio, Police department, involved 30 supervisors and asked them to identify some of their major stressors. Eighteen of 30 supervisors pointed to departmental politics as a major stressor. (Standfest, 1996) A lot of this can depend on what type of administration you work under. If you have an innovative, understanding and caring administrator, obviously you would have less stress in this area. But, some of us work for what you have heard called the, "Dinosaur." This is the administrator that is afraid of letting go of their power, control and almost always has a knee jerk reaction to all crises. Working under this type of administration puts unnecessary stress on all employees and also has a negative effect on departmental morale. (Standfest, 1996)

The study's most interesting findings were the identification of two stressors unique to the supervisory role. "The survey found that taking disciplinary action against a

subordinate and making amends with the public because of a subordinate's mistake cause supervisors the most stress." (Standfest, 1996)

As a supervisor you also have a legal obligation to your agency and yourself "Public criticism and lack of respect are at an all-time high following the highly publicized case of Rodney King in 1991." (Reese, 1994) The newly promoted supervisor needs to be well educated, so they can avoid vicarious liability lawsuits. Vicarious liability means, "3rd party liability" when you authorized, permitted, or participated in the actions of your subordinate you are held accountable.

" The supervisor's tendency to cover up or look the other way when his subordinates are involved in brutality or corruption will diminish as the full implication of his vicarious liability under federal law becomes more apparent." (McCafferty, 1989)

" Regardless of the very small number of officers guilty of such misconduct, the heat has been turned up for all those who serve the public. The demands for greater accountability are being made loudly and clearly." (Reese, 1994)

### **Review of Literature and Practice**

" Bullets are not the only thing that can kill an officer. Statistics indicate career police officers die younger than most occupational groups." (Trautman 1987)

Career development issues can also contribute to the many job stressors found in policing. Police officers like to be in control and when you take this away from them it can be frustrating. Most police officers start and end their careers as patrol officers. The majority of your agencies have some formal testing process, but even with this system you have those officers that don't trust it. Another problem in police departments is the appointment to special divisions, such as narcotics, traffic, SWAT, and bike patrol. The

majority of these assignments are done through the, "good ole boy" system. (Hurrell, 1982)

" Opportunities for promotion to higher ranks are limited, as are specialized assignments within the patrol officer rank." Officers also find it very frustrating, when they don't receive the proper recognition for a job well done. (Hurrell, 1982)

Police officers today are under constant pressure to perform, to make decisions, execute the decisions of others, and constantly be aware of the ever-changing social environment. In order to survive, officers need to look inside themselves to find the formula to help them cope with the different types of stress they're confronted with in the law enforcement profession. Finding the proper balance in life is the key to recapturing control. (Reese, 1998)

Researchers have found that individuals who felt the least amount of stress in their lives were those whose lives included more than just work, they accepted change and adjusted quickly. They also set aside time for other outside interests, and they believed that their lives were less stressful. (Reese, 1998)

International Conference of Police Associations (ICPA) conducted a survey that pointed out some of the stress problems among law enforcement personnel. "The survey chose a sample of 20,000 officers from cities of various sizes, asking each if he noticed any serious problems among five of his *closest* associates. The responses indicated (with some overlap in problem areas) the following." (Buren, 1986)

<b>Problem Area</b>	<b>% Officers</b>
Serious Marital Problems	37.0
Serious Health Problems	36.0
Alcoholism	23.0
Problems with Neighbors	21.0
Problems with Children	21.0
Drugs	10.0

The survey showed that even by selecting the best of the best, officers are not immune to the everyday stressors and problems of everyday life. (Buren, 1986)

As research and surveys continue to find different reasons for unique stressors in law enforcement, other studies were developed to help the law enforcement community cope and understand the effects of stress on their lives. In the past 10 years there have been many programs implemented to help police officers deal with stress; such as stress management courses, professional counseling, peer group counseling, and wellness programs. (Reese, 1994)

There are areas of policing that contribute to a high degree of stress to the police officer and have an indirect effect on their families. "Some researchers, such as Borum and Philpot (1993), categorize stresses into several different variables within law enforcement. Others, such as Kroes (1985), have eloquently described law enforcement personnel as a "blue race" and indicate that they are collectively the recipients of many of the pressures and stressors of a disdained, unliked, and unwanted minority group." (Reese 1994)



Many officers feel like they are "on-duty" at all times, this can make it hard to go home and relax. I feel that this type of mind set can and has contributed to alcoholism in law enforcement. You see it almost everytime you watch a cop show, after work they all go down to the "Cop" bar and have a few drinks. Some of this is Hollywood hype, but most cops don't like to hang around non-police. "Rapid shifts in activity level can also produce both emotionally and physically devastating effects. Law enforcement personnel may report feeling of isolation and may have few friends outside of their profession. This is unfortunate in light of the evidence that social support systems help protect persons from the potentially dangerous influence of stress." (Norvell and Belles 1988)

All information sources agree that there is stress in law enforcement, some even agreeing on the problems that are unique to police officers when compared to the corporate world. Kroes, Norvell and Belles agree on unique feelings experienced by police officers: alienation and isolation. (1985)

Many officers feel uncomfortable and distrust around anyone other than police officers or their families. After being promoted your social circle narrows even more, your subordinates and even some of your close friends see you as, "One of Them." " This "psuedo-paranoia" leads to the adolescent-like importance of peer pressure in the law enforcement culture." (Gilmartin, 1982)

### **Discussion of Relevant Issues**

"Congratulations. You made sergeant. At last, the end of police stress. If it suits you, it is potentially the best job in law enforcement. You probably are still in the union; you have status and responsibility over and above what you used to have. You can finally exercise your leadership with the credibility of those stripes, which you worked long and hard to get. You've just "lost" your first name with your buddies and you in may never hear it again, but that's okay with you. Now you're "Hey Sarge!" It will never be the same again. That's the good news. It also may be

the bad news. Police stress, you thought your problems were over? But sometimes the "monster" rears its ugly head.

You are in the middle virtually all the time. And if your bosses are poor leaders, and you end up caught in the middle between him and your subordinates, those stripes can feel mighty oppressive at times. As a sergeant, especially a new one, you may have to cope with the jealousy of colleagues; though this isn't as common as having friendships gradually fall by the wayside the more you exercise authority on the job with former peers." (Brown 1998)

This article, while being humorous does have a lot of truth to it that a newly promoted officer may not have anticipated. Many police administrators suffer from physiological and emotional health problems and most don't understand why.

"As patrol officers, they might have believed that a promotion would alleviate the stress they faced everyday. Soon after taking command, however, many find that they must contend with a variety of new stresses, in addition to the ones experienced by the patrol officers they lead." (Standfest, 1996)

Police supervisors must not only deal with the stress of grievances, counseling subordinates, evaluations, citizen complaints and departmental politics; but they also have to deal with the everyday stressors of fights in progress calls, family disturbances, death scenes, and major accidents. "The combination of leadership stressors and the unique stresses faced by the police can be a recipe for a health catastrophe." (Standfest, 1996)

" While some supervisors boast that "we don't get ulcers, we give ulcers," their job is one with a number of pressures that in fact lead to many of the same stress symptoms experienced by patrol officers." (Anderson, 1995) Patrol officers and supervisors agree on some primary stressors originating not from the nature of the job, but from the organization, its procedures, and policies. Let's examine some of the stressors you will inherit when you are promoted. (Anderson, 1995)

The patrol sergeant is usually the first supervisor to arrive at the scene after the patrol officer, and he has to take charge of most situations. "The sergeant is also the officer who picks up rule infractions by officers and takes disciplinary action. Many sergeants see themselves as mediators between upper administration and the patrol officers. Often they feel protective toward the officers under their direction and want to show them support, as well as how to function more effectively on the street. They can pass on suggestions, demonstrate ways of doing the job, and try to deflect unreasonable pressures from above." (Anderson, 1995)

The sergeant must also make sure his patrol officers are producing results that demonstrate he is doing his job to upper administrators. Taking care of his shift and still being able to carry out the directives of the department can sometimes be very difficult. (Anderson, 1995)

There are many issues and problems that newly promoted officers need to prepare themselves for in order to handle them in a professional manner. The two most common stressors a newly promoted officer will encounter are dealing with disciplinary issues and citizen complaints. I feel that we have an obligation to the newly promoted officers to prepare them as best we can to deal with some of these new stressors. When we hire a new recruit, we invest thousands of dollars as well as numerous training hours to insure we get the best police officer for placement in our department. But, most agencies assume since the officer scored the highest on the written exam and aced the oral review board, they will have no problem dealing with their new responsibilities. Soon the new supervisor discovers that there is no teacher like experience.

I suggest a field training program that would better prepare the newly promoted supervisors for their new role. This could be a modified version of the new recruit field training program geared towards supervisory training. Another idea would be to have a veteran supervisor mentor to a rookie supervisor for a certain time period, allowing the veteran to evaluate the performance of the newly promoted supervisor. There is no sure fire way or program that will guarantee a perfect supervisor, but by having a field training program in place, this will give the new supervisor the additional tools necessary to help them better understand and cope with their new duties.

The city would incur minimal cost to implement this field training program. The city's main expense would be the loss of manpower during development of materials for the program as well as during the actual on-the-job training. The Farmers Branch Police Department, the citizens of Farmers Branch and the newly promoted officer will all benefit from a program that would better educate and prepare them for their new position. The city would produce a well-educated, better prepared and more professional supervisor. The new supervisor would have less stress knowing that he was better prepared and wasn't thrown into the ball game without first warming up. Most agencies do send supervisors to different types of supervisory schools such as: LEMIT, Southwestern Legal Institute, and the FBI Academy, but not immediately, and this is the problem. Any type of program an administration can implement to reduce stress will benefit everyone over the long term. The job involves enough stress without the added stress of not knowing the "how to's" up front.

"Reducing stress translates into reduced medical and insurance costs, which would more than offset the cost of implementing a program of ongoing training, instruction and

support. Relaxed officers make better decisions under fire that would be reflected in a reduction in costly negligence and brutality lawsuits." (Moroney 1997)

### **Conclusion/Recommendations**

The purpose of this project was to point out some of the stressors the law enforcement professionals have to deal with and the additional stressors associated with police supervision.

Preparing the newly promoted supervisor to handle administrative issues in a healthy way will allow him to perform at a higher level. All police officers can benefit from training, but I feel it is even more important to educate and prepare your supervisors with whatever resources you have available. With the added emphasis on police scrutiny, and with the additional supervisor liabilities, it is extremely important that everything be done to eliminate unnecessary free-floating anxiety associated with the unknowns of the job.

Police supervisors have to deal with the same stressors the officer on the street deal with on a daily bases, plus deal with the added alienation from the police officers themselves, disciplinary issues, subordinate's mistakes, division accountability, and vicarious liabilities.

If supervisors know and feel more comfortable about their new role, everyone involved will benefit. The supervisor will have more freedom to deal with daily situations as they arise. A supervisor training program is recommended to provide this experience.

The process would involve developing a program, training the trainers, and allowing new supervisors to experience an internship before moving into the position permanently.

## Bibliography

- Anderson, Wayne., et al., eds. "Stress Management For Law Enforcement Officers." Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey, 1995.
- Brown, Hal, "Hey Sarge!" Online. <http://www.geocities.com/~halbrown/bogshink6.html>. June 30,1998. 1-3.
- Buren, Michael R. "Stress and the Police Manager." Northwestern University Traffic Institute, 1986.
- Finn, Peter. "Reducing Stress: An Organization-Centered Approach." FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin. August 1997, 20-26.
- Gilmartin, Kevin M. "Hypervigilance: A Learned Perceptual Set and its Consequences on Police Stress." U.S. Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation-Psychological Services for Law Enforcement. 1982,446-447.
- Hurrell, Joseph J. "Some Organizational Stressors in Police Work and Means for Their Amelioration." U.S. Department of Justice Federal Bureau of Investigation-for Psychological Services Law Enforcement. 1982, 449-451.
- McCafferty, Francis, et al., eds. "Lessening Stress in The Police Department." The Police Chief. February 1989, 28-31.
- Moriarty, Anthony R. "Police Psychological Screening: The Third Generation." The Police Chief. February 1989, 36-40.
- Moroney, Robert W. "Study Yields Results for Stress Management" Law and Order. November 1997, 81-82.
- Norvell, Nancy and Dale Belles. "A Stress Management Curriculum for Enforcement Personnel Supervisors." The Police Journal. January 1988 11-14.
- Perloe, Mark, "Stress Management" Online. <http://www.ivf.com//stress.html>. June 30, 1998. 1-2
- Reese, James T. and Scrivner, Ellen. Law Enforcement Families: Issues and Answers. Washington, D.C. 1994.

Reese, James T. James T. Reese and Associates  
Personal Interview, June 18, 1998.

Standfest, Steven R. "The Police Supervisor and Stress." FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin. May 1996, 7-10.

Trautman, Neal E. "Practical and Realistic Solutions to Law Enforcement's In-Service Training Dilemma" Law Enforcement In-Service Training Programs. 1987.