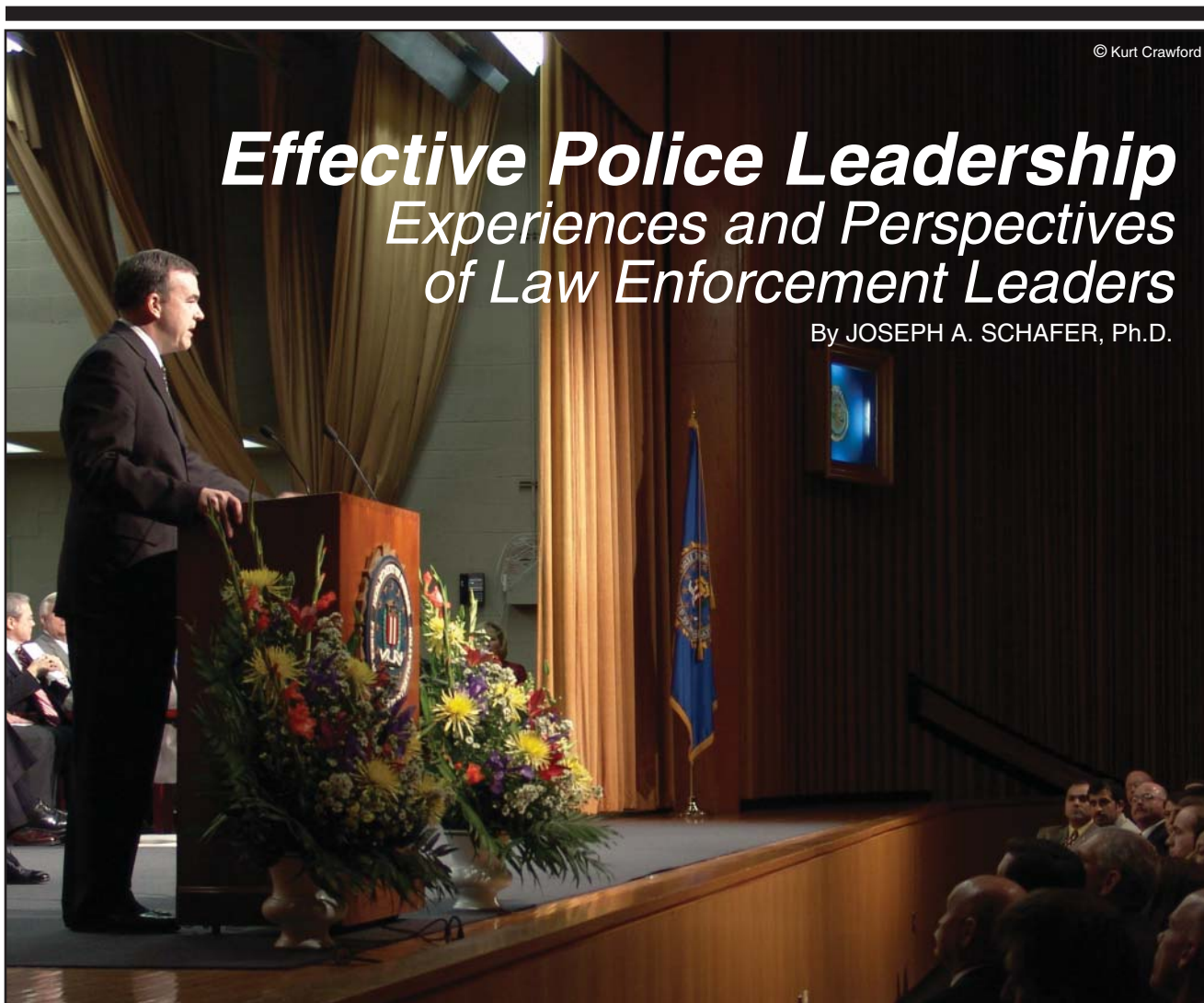


Effective Police Leadership

Experiences and Perspectives of Law Enforcement Leaders

By JOSEPH A. SCHAFER, Ph.D.



Leadership represents a crucial determinant of police organizational efficacy. Supervisors and others in formal positions of power must engage, motivate, and guide subordinates, community members, and other local officials. The evolving vision of patrol officers has led to a rethinking of the role of leadership even among those not possessing conventional supervisory control. Contemporary discussions

about patrol personnel suggest that “every officer is a leader.”¹ Agencies desire frontline employees who can lead citizens during chaotic situations, facilitate and direct problem-solving activities, and make neighborhoods safer.

Despite the centrality of leadership within policing, the vast majority of what is written about the subject uses data developed in other occupational and professional contexts,

especially the military and corporate worlds. While some aspects of organizations and leadership may translate easily into public safety settings, not all transfer universally. Consequently, most information about police leadership is based on anecdotes and case studies; little comes from systematic and broad research efforts.

This knowledge gap results in the presumption that what works in the military

and corporate worlds also will apply to the law enforcement profession. Such supposition, however, leaves many key questions about police leadership unanswered.

- What is effective leadership in policing? Is it the same in agencies of different sizes and cultures and in other professions? How can it be measured and evaluated?
- Are leaders born or made? How can departments recognize officers who display leadership ability? How can they develop this quality?
- What are the barriers to the expansion of effective leadership? What factors prevent officers from being more effective leaders? What traits and habits do effective police leaders exhibit?

To help answer these questions, the author offers the findings from his recent study on police leadership. By asking law enforcement leaders what they thought effective leadership involved, he hoped to gain further insight into an area of great concern to the profession.

STUDY PARTICIPANTS

While serving as a visiting researcher in the Behavioral Science Unit at the FBI Academy, the author surveyed National Academy (NA) attendees to assess their views of and experiences with leadership.² Over a 12-month period, he gave these command-level law enforcement officers the opportunity to complete a brief questionnaire during their first week in residence.³ Out of about 1,000 NA attendees, approximately three-quarters completed

the survey, which asked them to describe effective leadership, discuss how it could be measured, consider their experiences with leadership, suggest how to develop it, and identify the traits and habits of effective and ineffective police leaders. Additionally, the author interviewed some of these officers individually and in groups to further assess experiences and perceptions.

These NA attendees comprised an interesting research population. Although they did not meet strict scientific standards as a random sample, they represented a range of law enforcement organizations from across the country and around the world. They served in agencies of all shapes and sizes that had diverse missions, budgets, selection and training procedures, and operational styles. They brought a variety of experiences, educational backgrounds, and career histories to the study. While all had some level of supervisory authority, most did not head their employing agency. This proved particularly interesting when considering leadership: not only did they hold positions where they were expected to exhibit sound leadership but they also confronted the leadership styles and skills (or lack thereof) of both supervisors and subordinates. Viewed in this way, NA attendees provided a rich cross section



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of perspectives into aspects of police leadership. The remainder of this article summarizes the key sentiments that NA attendees expressed regarding a range of leadership topics.

NATURE OF EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

A large portion of the study focused on developing a deeper understanding of effective leadership in policing. Discussions concerning leadership efficacy, however, first require a definition of that concept. In general, NA attendees felt that effective leadership is the achievement of organizational and unit goals, objectives, and missions. It involves moving a group of employees in the proper direction to achieve these desired outcomes. At times, this means influencing others to do what they otherwise would not do. The attendees kept this definition in mind when answering specific questions concerning effective leadership in policing.

What Is Effective Leadership in Policing?

To NA attendees, effective leadership is the process of setting a proper example for other officers by showing them how to police in a manner that is fair, service oriented, professional, and within the standards and expectations of the community. Effective leadership involves a set of actions and initiatives

to better the agency and the community it serves while also protecting the welfare, well-being, and interests of employees and the citizens they protect.

Is the Definition Universal?

Defining and discussing effective leadership in policing can raise a number of important secondary questions that consider how policing relates with other professions and how law enforcement organizations

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vary based on size, type (local, county, state), and culture. Is the definition of effective leadership generally universal across different agencies? NA attendees felt that little about the definition of effective leadership changed based on a department's size, type, and culture. Instead, they believed that the specific tactics and styles used by leaders, the agency's mission and goals, its resources, and the constraints and demands under which it operated could

vary. Overall, the study showed that while the core definition of effective leadership generally did not change across departments, differences did occur in agency context, such as the nature of the community and local culture.

A second consideration related to the extent to which effective leadership in policing was the same as effective leadership in other occupational contexts. NA attendees felt that effective leadership, in general, was achieved through the use of common leader traits and habits. They believed that in policing, versus other contexts, organizations tend to have a more rigid structure and are significantly different because of the capacity to use force and deny freedoms. They also thought that the nature of police work and the legal and symbolic importance of trust and ethics embedded in the profession require leaders to demonstrate more honesty and integrity than those in many other occupations.

How Can It Be Measured and Evaluated?

NA attendees felt that a number of indicators could determine whether a leader is effective. First, as implied by the definition, effective leaders demonstrate the achievement of organizational and unit goals and objectives. Next, they recruit and retain employees who

become successful and productive, generating quality work while demonstrating a positive attitude toward the job and the agency. Finally, effective leaders and their departments have a favorable image within their communities and among their peers and employees and do not generate a high volume of formal complaints or informal dissatisfaction.

Are Leaders Born or Made?

This age-old question found within leadership literature frequently is answered through biographical examples of recognized leaders. The leadership sections of libraries and book stores often contain a number of texts that offer accounts of great military, political, and corporate leaders.⁴ Other examinations of this issue consider whether cultural and social events forge great leaders within the crucible of adversity, such as seen in World War II.

NA attendees tended to believe that both explanations held some truth in understanding the emergence of leaders. While most people have some innate leadership traits and skills, the attendees felt that leaders step up to challenges and seek ways to better themselves and others. Leaders pursue education, training, experiences, opportunities, and mentoring that allow them to build upon and further develop their natural skills and

abilities. Although not necessarily born as strong leaders, these individuals possess a work ethic, drive, and desire that push them toward self-improvement. Perhaps not forged in the crucible of war, effective leaders tend to rise to the challenges of their local environment.

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What Prevents the Expansion of Effective Leadership?

Regardless of the wealth of material about the importance of strong leaders, a deficiency of such individuals exists in most organizations. NA attendees reflected on the aspects of police organizations that seemed to prevent the growth of effective leadership within the profession. They felt that those in positions of formal authority tend to engage in more management than leadership; the relationship between these two concepts proves fundamental.⁵ Even more problematic, some

in positions of authority micro-manage, not allowing subordinates to exercise discretion and freedom in the performance of their duties. This stifles the emergence of leadership skills. Having the chance to practice being a leader and, perhaps, encountering some failure represents a significant element in developing future leaders. This opportunity, however, requires current leaders to grant freedom to subordinates, something micromanagers rarely do.

In addition, NA attendees thought that leaders may encounter resistance from those they seek to influence. While the process of leading includes finding ways to convince others to do things they would prefer not to do, it also assumes a certain degree of compliance and cooperation on the part of the “others.” Capable leaders can encounter difficulties in the face of poor followership, egotism, and resistance to change from those they seek to influence.

Finally, the attendees felt that those external to the police organization can affect its leaders. District attorneys, city and county officials, legislative bodies, judges, and citizens all make decisions that relate to a department’s budget, policies, and procedures in a way that limits the range of choices available to leaders. The attendees cited interpersonal dynamics and politics (broadly defined) as

influencing the choices leaders, especially those elected or appointed, can make. Determining the correct action to take in a given situation can be a complicated process because of limited resources. It may prove easier to identify a proper course of action than to secure the necessary money, personnel, materials, training, and approvals. To this end, the attendees thought that inadequate opportunities for training and education and insufficient mentoring can prevent officers from practicing and improving their leadership skills.

TRAITS AND HABITS OF LEADERS

Many of the questions posed to NA attendees dealt with issues of academic and philosophical relevance that appeared somewhat removed from the everyday environments of police supervisors and leaders. Although important in understanding leadership and its development, such topics offer limited assistance to those currently seeking to provide quality leadership within a modern law enforcement organization. Of greater relevance is consideration of effective leaders, in particular the traits and habits contributing to leadership success.⁶ Some attendees were asked to describe the traits, habits, and routines of police leaders they considered particularly

effective. Conversely, other attendees were asked to comment on ineffective leaders and detail what they did or failed to do that caused inefficacy.

Effective Leader Responses

Although law enforcement agencies vary in their missions, goals, and strategies, effective leaders set an example of how to carry out policing and embody the tone, tactics, and philosophy within a given organization. NA attendees repeatedly identified leadership by example as a key personality trait of

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effective leaders who possess a high level of honesty and integrity. Unlike other career fields, the trust and legal responsibilities associated with law enforcement make these two traits key factors in the efficacy of all employees. Leaders who exude honesty and integrity not only set a proper example for others in their organization but also demonstrate their trustworthiness. Attendees indicated that

trust was central to leadership efficacy. The physical, legal, and other risks associated with policing make trust a central concern; trust ensures that officers will follow the vision and direction of their leaders.

Other traits that NA attendees considered important included valuing input from coworkers, subordinates, and others. Though decisive in action, effective leaders recognize that improvements always can be made. They know that strong communication and listening skills are crucial and that sometimes they must explain their decisions and actions to ensure compliance and support. Effective leaders also understand the human aspect of being a leader. They show concern for the emotional well-being of their coworkers and subordinates by demonstrating compassion and respect.

Fairness and courage also were of key importance to NA attendees. Officers are expected to treat citizens with fairness, respect, and dignity while showing courage in the performance of their sworn duties. Likewise, effective leaders must exhibit these same traits. They display courage by sometimes making unpopular yet correct decisions. They perform their duties ethically and appropriately and never ask others to do more than they will do themselves. While they do not shy away

Traits of Effective Leaders

- Set a proper example and demonstrate trustworthiness
- Consider input from others
- Accept responsibility and admit mistakes
- Make informed decisions based on appropriate research and study
- Treat all employees fairly and with dignity
- Allow subordinates to handle duties commensurate with their skills and level of authority

from becoming involved in situations requiring their leadership skills, they also recognize when to allow subordinates to handle incidents commensurate with their skills and level of authority.

Using appropriate information to form sound decisions ranked high with NA attendees. Effective leaders research situations (or delegate that task) so they can base their decisions on reasonable assessments of relevant data. This requires them to be knowledgeable, aware of current innovations, and willing to try new ideas and tactics. To achieve efficacy, leaders must continue to educate themselves through reading, research, and attending conferences and training.

Finally, to be effective, leaders must understand the crucial importance between leadership and management. Though management skills are

helpful in some aspects of the profession, NA attendees indicated that policing needed more leadership from supervisors and others throughout the organization. In particular, effective leaders avoid micro-managing the actions of subordinates and coworkers. They set a proper tone, show how the job is to be done, and give others the freedom to find ways to complete assigned duties within those parameters.

Ineffective Leader Responses

NA attendees felt that ineffective leaders tend to be motivated by their personal self-interests. They seek positions of authority because they enjoy the power, prestige, status, or money and not because they have a desire to serve the needs of the organization. Ineffective leaders generally have poor communication skills. They may hear the

views and perspectives of others but do not truly listen. They often lack strong interpersonal skills and show little concern or compassion for others. This failure to connect limits their ability to convince subordinates to follow their lead.

Another trait that NA attendees described involved a rigid leadership or policing style. These leaders unwillingly adopt new methods, procedures, or ways of thinking. Although leadership involves moving individuals and organizations toward new and better ways of operating, ineffective leaders remain tied to current and past objectives. Often not grounded by known beliefs, ineffective leaders can be unpredictable. Consequently, their actions appear capricious and arbitrary. Subordinates suffer because they are unsure how to act in a manner consistent with the leader's vision, typically because the leader has no vision. The past actions of ineffective leaders may have resulted in the loss of respect from subordinates who now view them as incompetent, shortsighted, arbitrary, vindictive, or incapable of making critical and difficult decisions.

NA attendees also thought that ineffective leaders spend their time and energy managing and micromanaging, instead of leading. They dictate to others

and make unilateral decisions, rather than involving others and seeking their input. Such actions often frustrate subordinates and limit the development of future leaders, including likely successors.

Finally, NA attendees deemed leaders ineffective for failing to act. Because they have not embraced the notion of leadership, they do not seek to inspire and motivate subordinates. Ineffective leaders may exhibit a double standard in their work ethic, expecting more than 100 percent from their employees while appearing to do little actual work themselves. Failing to set a proper tone of professionalism, dedication, and vigilance makes it unlikely that subordinates will exhibit these desired work habits. Most critical to NA attendees, some ineffective leaders fail to act altogether. When they must make difficult, complex, and important decisions, these leaders delay, defer, or ignore the matter.

CONCLUSION

Increasingly, law enforcement organizations are recognizing the importance of leadership development and evaluation. Moving into these new domains requires that agencies develop definitions of what effective leadership means in their own communities and organizational context. Equipped with this definition, they can

begin to consider how to evaluate leadership potential among newer officers. This process also enables departments to work toward the improvement of leadership skills among current and future leaders.

A variety of new and innovative development programs have emerged in recent years, though clear evidence of their efficacy remains elusive. The key is to continue to strive for leadership development, both

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individually and organizationally. At the end of the day, effective leaders may be those individuals who continually strive toward self-improvement. This ongoing pursuit undoubtedly will ensure that others emulate this quality, strengthening not just the skills of the leaders themselves but also elevating the leadership performance of those around them. ♦

Endnotes

¹ Terry D. Anderson, Kenneth Gisborne, and Patrick Holliday, *Every Officer*

Is a Leader: Coaching Leadership, Learning, and Performance in Justice, Public Safety, and Security Organizations, 2nd ed. (Victoria, BC: Trafford, 2006).

² Operational since 2004, the Futurists in Residence (FIR) program is part of the Futures Working Group, a partnership between the FBI and the Society of Police Futurists International (<http://www.policefuturists.org>). It affords researchers and practitioners an opportunity to conduct original research. See the April 2008 edition of the *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin* for the recent FIR effort on recognizing laser threats.

³ The FBI hosts four 10-week sessions each year during which law enforcement executives from around the world come together to attend classes in various criminal justice subjects. Between 200 and 250 officers from a mixture of small, medium, and large organizations attend each session.

⁴ Two recent books have taken this approach in studying police leadership: M.R. Habersfeld, *Police Leadership* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2006); and Renford Reese, *Leadership in the LAPD: Walking the Tightrope* (Durham, NC: Carolina Academic Press, 2005).

⁵ For a discussion of how these two concepts relate to one another, see Gary Yukl, *Leadership in Organizations*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice Hall, 2002), 5-6.

⁶ For two of the seminal discussions of these matters in nonpolicing contexts, see Warren Bennis, *On Becoming a Leader* (New York, NY: Basic Books, 2003); and John W. Gardner, *On Leadership* (New York, NY: The Free Press, 1990).

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