

Preparing Future Leaders for Tomorrow: Succession Planning for Police Leadership

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Leadership in public safety agencies is at a critical crossroads. In many communities, early retirement incentives have enticed experienced personnel to leave their departments in large numbers and many police leaders are approaching retirement age. The result is an upcoming shortage of police leaders. By the year 2020, most police officers in the United States will be those of the so-called millennial generation.¹ According to an article in *Police Chief* magazine by Chief Dwayne Orrick, police departments across the country are reporting increased rates of staff turnover with resulting difficulties in maintaining staffing levels.²

Law enforcement agencies should do more to develop their future leaders. Studies show that many public administration academics are, at best, ignoring the coming leadership crisis and, at worst, rejecting the idea that a crisis is imminent. Practitioners, on the other hand, are trying to gain sufficient training or grounding in leadership to deal with the relationship-based problems they face daily.

Impediments to Succession Planning

Departments may tend to focus on replacing those who leave, but the real dilemma is what can they do for the department before they leave? Police departments have a plan in place for hiring and training new officers, but most do not have an exit strategy for supervisors and managers who are leaving. Supervisors and managers are not easily replaced. Too often, the veteran employee simply puts in the appropriate papers and waits to leave, with little, if any, formal transition into retirement or other career choices.

The military and the private sector have adopted successor programs to ensure the health of the organization and to assist the leaving employee. But public administrators have not learned the lesson, according to Eric Henry: "Succession planning and leadership development are more than just lining up recruits for vacancies and most public sector managers haven't caught onto this yet."³ Can individual departments or the law enforcement community build programs for personnel who are either retiring, being promoted to other agencies, or transitioning to another career? As part of the succession program, a more critical path could be the development of their replacements as investigators, specialists, supervisors, or managers.

Unfortunately, few law enforcement administrators have developed succession plans. Some leave the responsibility for developing future police supervisors and managers to the jurisdiction's human resource department, whose role should include not only updating job descriptions, but also initiating career development programs, and maintaining career path offices designed to help employees in career development decisions. Experience has shown that it is in the best interests of the police department to be proactive and work with the human resources office to develop future leaders.

If the number of leaders leaving supervisory and management positions is as great an issue as it appears, then it is necessary to consider just how to assess whether the next generation is ready to lead. In 2003 a Human Resource Institute survey found that nearly three-quarters of the human resource professionals who responded saw leadership as an "extremely important management issue."⁴ Consequently, a method to validate the department's assessments of supervisory or management skills is necessary. According to the late Jack Hunter,⁵ the ratings of education and experience most favored by public-sector assessments have the least validity. This is a critical issue, as many agencies rely solely on an oral history, career evaluation, accomplishment survey, and the interview panel in promotion selection. Also, the cost of a bad hiring (or bad promotion) can be as high as 200 percent of a year's salary.⁶

Perhaps the focus should be more on developing critical skills and less on one's perceived potential. Researcher Mary Young looked at what "public agencies are doing to attract the right kind of leadership for the new generation."⁷ She found that there is a need for a process that would allow for a full assessment of potential supervisors and managers' knowledge, skills, and abilities for development purposes. Public safety agencies should regularly conduct supervisory or managerial needs assessments and then develop the necessary skills- or competencies-based experiential set of scenarios, assignments, rotations, mentoring and coaching opportunities, and evaluations not only to provide the candidates with this experience but also to enable the agency to gain the benefit from this experience and information.

Succession planning does not require extensive budget, equipment, staffing, or resources. It does require a change of thinking.

Managing Change

In managing change, this is always the conundrum: to effect change, one must see the need for the change, plan for the change, implement the change, and then

evaluate the success or failure of the change. Because succession planning is not necessarily part of an assigned role or task in a police department's human resource function, it tends to get overlooked. It is not assigned, budgeted, organized, planned, scheduled, or evaluated.

Succession planning for the most part is essentially ignored, although it could go a long way toward both identifying key leadership potential in the organization and helping the department now. As Jim Collins writes in *Good to Great*, the goal is to put the right people on the bus, get the wrong people off the bus, and the right people in the right seats. How is this related to change? Because if a department doesn't have solid leadership, with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to plan, organize, and direct others, the department is less likely to recognize the need for change and carry it out.

The Impact of Early Retirement

In the early 1990s state, county, and city budgets were typically at a surplus. Through various processes and frequently with police union cooperation, early retirement incentives were offered to long-term employees. Some agencies adopted what is known as the 3-percent-at-50 program. This retirement incentive program allows any employee over the age of 50 to collect an annual retirement salary that represents 3 percent of their salary for each year they have been employed by the department. An employee with 25 years of service, for instance, would receive a retirement salary of 75 percent (3 percent times 25) of their existing salary. For many, this is an offer too good to pass up, given the option to begin a second career.

To counterbalance the senior leadership exodus created by 3-percent-at-50 programs, some departments, such as the San Diego Police Department, created deferred retirement option plan, or Drop, programs. Drop programs allow city executives to collect both their regular pay and retirement pay during the last five years of their employment (essentially allowing employees to double-dip) for continuing to work in the city after retirement eligibility. Unfortunately, financial analysts miscalculated the impact of this expense. For example, the city of San Diego's pension liability is projected to consume 21 percent of the city's general fund by fiscal year 2011.⁸

In a few short years the financial posture of state and local governments changed. State and local government watched as the surplus revenues of early 1990s decreased quickly in the 2000s. Today, many state and local governments have been and are still facing lean fiscal years. Many state and local agencies are already in a budget crisis partly because of the decreasing support from federal grant programs and the diversion of this funding to homeland security activities. For example, the proposed federal budget for the 2007 fiscal year cuts more than \$1.1 billion from core local law enforcement assistance program. The federal government slashes funding for state and local law enforcement programs even as it demands that the state and local agencies assume a larger, unfunded role in homeland security. As it stands now, the proposed 2007 federal budget bring the funding to local departments to a 10-year low. Thus, local agencies are not receiving the financial support they have come to expect. Unrelated to retirement funding issues, just finding the resources to recruit, train, and retain qualified leadership candidates is a greater challenge than ever. Even in face of these challenges, succession planning is a necessary to maintain a high level of police service in the communities.

As a result of early retirement program incentives, many agencies are replacing veteran leaders with younger candidates who have not had the length of service in the field and have little experience in leadership positions. Consequently, the need arises for more concentrated efforts to identify leadership traits, to create a career development path, and to prepare those replacements as supervisors.

For agencies, the cycle of bringing people into the organization, preparing them for the job, and then keeping them in the organization, is divided into three areas: recruitment, training, and retention. Each of these areas could have a significant impact on the other, particularly with leadership training and how it relates to promotions or employee development.

Developing Leaders

Many agencies continue to rely on a traditional written test followed by an interview with an oral review panel to determine leaders for the department. This process often includes little, if any, evaluation of the candidate's preparation or orientation toward leadership.

Promotional tests revolve around policies and procedures, laws, and protocols and not supervisory or managerial skills they'll need in the actual job they will be doing. For example, considering that a supervisor or manager will meet with their units at least once a week if not once a day, many agencies provide no training or testing in meeting management. Most supervisors or managers will obviously have a daily routine with their in-basket, yet there is no training or testing by some agencies on how to communicate effectively in writing, delegate tasks, or manage projects using this technique. Many supervisors will have to counsel, discipline,

or coach subordinates, but again, many agencies have no training or testing in this area, though employee development is a critical component of a supervisor's role. Instead, the traditional testing process is largely defined by who passes a written test, largely of things that they should already know as an officer, and then a subjective interview. In the interviews, we hear what we want to hear while candidates list their personal attributes.

In some states, new supervisors and managers must attend supervisor training after they have been promoted and within a year or so of being appointed. Although the training is essential, it has little relationship to the initial selection process to ensure the identification of the appropriate supervisor or manager.

The challenge for police agencies is to consider how best to develop their own replacements, using the basic knowledge, skills, and abilities that have already identified as desired traits for a prospective supervisor or manager.

Assessment centers have long proven their worth in their ability to predict long-term success in leadership and other positions. Assessment centers are extremely useful in identifying key leadership skills, but combining a leadership development process, including the use of 360-degree evaluations, a recommended study course on leadership issues, and psychometric instruments, can give both the candidate and the organization a more accurate picture of just what it is the candidate can or cannot do and where his or her strengths and weaknesses rest.

See Also

"Succession Planning:
Mentoring Your Replacement"

"Leadership Tactic:
Personal Strategic Planning
for Professional Development"

From the *Police Chief* magazine,
January 2006

On the Web at www.policiechiefmagazine.org,
in the archives

The Competition

In the midst of recruitment and retention efforts, some departments are facing cutbacks due to the municipal or county financial woes and are losing experienced officers based solely on dollars and cents. That is true in San Diego, according to officials there. "We have to fix this problem," San Diego's police chief, William Lansdowne, told the San Diego Union-Tribune last year. "We can't continue to lose the most valuable members of our police department. Money is a big deal. It is what is driving some officers to leave the San Diego Police Department as a result of taking pay cuts to offset the pension deficit."⁹ The salary and

benefit rollbacks spurred 15 officers to leave as of October 2005. Eighteen left in 2004. By comparison, only eight officers left five years ago, when the city's financial future was brighter.¹⁰ As a leadership issue, the retention of personnel is and will continue to be a primary concern.

Leaders in one California city realized they were facing a potential leadership vacuum when they discovered that 11 of 15 department heads would become eligible to retire in the next five years. The city recognized the impending loss of these key leaders and considered these two questions: "Did the city have qualified people ready to fill key positions now and grow the organization in the next three to five years?"

Will there be a sufficient number of qualified candidates ready to fill key positions in five to 10 years?"¹¹

The answers to these two questions led to the creation of a program to identify, develop, and support the city's future leaders. Through interviews with the city's department heads, the following eight dimensions¹¹ were identified as crucial to the success of future city leaders:

- Communication
- Decision making
- Interpersonal effectiveness
- Leadership style
- Administrative effectiveness
- Flexibility
- Planning and organization
- Developmental orientation

These are essentially typical dimensions or behaviors for any supervisor or manager and could be applied to a wide variety of public safety positions.

Making a Succession Plan

Any succession plans needs to consider the agency's personality, culture, history, politics, union issues, resources, budget, and community concerns. Succession planning is a long-term investment in the agency's future, not a short-term fix. Systemic and inherent problems aside, departments must be willing to try, to change, to imagine the benefits of developing internal candidates for their leadership positions. Working collaboratively with the human resources department, union leaders, city and county officials, and members of the community, a department will soon recognize that there is a high degree of success in such a proposal. Succession planning does not require extensive funding, equipment, staffing, or resources. It

does require a change of thinking. To paraphrase a mantra from community-oriented policing and problem-solving policing, it requires a philosophical and attitudinal paradigm shift in organizational thinking.

Any succession planning program should stress the skills required of the leadership position, the challenges the leader faces, and the transferable skills that any candidate for the position is already using in the candidate's present assignment. The department's role is to offer candidates the opportunities, the choices, and the challenges to succeed. In the end, it is all about skills, personality, and relationships.

The department could provide skill development opportunities to potential candidates by having them carry out a few tasks:

- Plan an event

- Write a training bulletin

- Review and make recommendations to improve or update department policies or procedures

- Conduct training

- Conduct research

- Write a proposal

- Write a newsletter article

- Write a grant

- Manage a committee, write a report on the committee's actions and recommendations, evaluate the committee's success, and make a presentation on the committee's findings
- Assess equipment and supplies, research replacement costs and options, and recommend replacing or updating them
- Counsel peers
- Become mentor to younger officers
- Become a mentor to high school and college students
- Make a presentation to a local community group
- Conduct a program evaluation with recommendations
- Recommend a peer or other for a commendation
- Write contingency plans
- Write after-action plans
- Work on unit effectiveness report, to include use of statistical analysis

- Review the department's and the jurisdiction's master plans
- Review staffing and budget requirements for the current and upcoming fiscal year
- Determine how staffing and budget will affect the role of sergeants and lieutenants

These and many other activities are functions required of managers in any police department. By involving the younger officers now, veteran managers can teach the necessary administrative and management skills beyond police work.

Transferable Skills

As a field training officer, tactical officer, K-9 officer, traffic investigator, or criminal investigator, many of the same skills one uses every day are directly connected to the new role of a sergeant. Some agencies use rotational experiences or at least a brief assignment with a variety of unit supervisors so they can see what's expected of them in the future.

Take the initiative and use transferable skills part of succession planning. Highlight these transferable skills and use them to build confidence and competence. Review the job descriptions with officers and help the officers to develop those skills where they have not had much experience.

The use of performance appraisals or evaluations, when done properly, is actually one of the best tools for succession planning. Give employee benchmarks and attainable goals to achieve to encourage growth and development.

The Officer's Responsibilities

The focus of this article has been on what the department can provide in succession planning but it does not overlook the responsibility of the individual to prepare themselves for future leadership role. Individual preparation for leadership requires the following:

- Undertaking a formal academic course of study
- Taking a team leadership role in departmental activities
- Participating and leading in civic opportunities, such as parent-teacher associations and civic clubs

- Networking with peers
- Engaging in intellectual discussion groups
- Attending voluntary conferences and training sessions
- Reading the professional literature
- Studying national and local reports and analyzing the report results
- Using the Web as a resource
- Serving as a guest lecturer in college class or accepting other speaking engagements
- Engaging in research and reporting the findings

In addition to developing these skills and knowledge, it is also important to document the major accomplishments. Any serious future leader would develop and maintain a detailed curriculum vitae.

Making it Happen

The challenge for police leaders is to consider how best to develop their own replacements, using the basic knowledge, skills, and abilities that have already been identified as desired traits for a prospective supervisor or manager. The challenge for future police leaders is developing their own personal strategic plan for professional development. The department and the individual should ensure that the activities satisfy the identified eight dimensions needed for leadership. The question really may be, what is it that is preventing the agency from developing a leadership development program now? If you really want to know, ask your officers, sergeants, lieutenants, or captains. ■