

Head Starts: What Policing Can Learn About Leadership from the Military

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Cops frequently point out the differences between policing agencies and the military. In no subject is the difference more clear than in views toward leadership; it is also the area in which police can learn the most from the military. The state of leadership in law enforcement has long been lamented. Curiously, IACP has endorsed the West Point Leadership Program as a solution. This endorsement recognizes a simple fact: the military is miles ahead of law enforcement in developing leadership throughout its ranks.

Leadership is probably one of the most variably defined concepts in modern society. Leadership literature is abundant, and a great many gurus have their own particular brands. The variation informs us of an important aspect: leadership comes in many forms, each more or less suited to particular situations. Consequently, terms like “servant leadership” and “orchestral leadership” have emerged to describe the approach of leaders in modern Information Age organizations. As a complete survey of leadership is beyond the scope of this essay, I will restrict myself to a recommendation of Clippinger’s (n.d.) concise articulation of different leadership roles.¹

Leadership is not a function of rank. The military recognizes this fact, attempting in its training and culture to encourage leaders to act. The military adopts a total career perspective in its

development of leaders. With separate paths for officers and enlisted, each service provides an incremental array of training designed to reinforce socialization, develop leadership, build management skills, and improve awareness of the strategic environment. For officers and enlisted, the journey begins with an accession training in its various forms (service academies, ROTC, officer candidate school, or basic training). For officers of each service, the training is remarkably similar: (1) a commander school as a senior lieutenant or junior captain, (2) a staff officer school as a senior captain or major, and (3) War College as a colonel (or lieutenant colonel). Typically, enlisted will complete an introductory course before becoming an NCO (non-commissioned officer). An NCO and a Senior NCO course follow at subsequent grades. The curricula of these courses are similarly structured, with higher-level courses covering subjects in greater detail and with increasing emphasis on managerial skills and strategic awareness.

While exceptions may exist, most police agencies spend little time on developing leadership. At best, cops receive training when they reach middle management,² yet even this training is predominantly focused on management, rather than leadership. As Warren Bennis³ so ably distinguished, management and leadership are not synonymous; the activities activate completely different perspectives and skill sets (Nanus, 1992). Generally, police agencies are seen to be flush in managerial skills and impoverished in leadership.

² For example: California’s Command College requires applicants to be “employed in a management position or higher.”

³ Nanus, B. (1992). *Visionary leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc.

¹ Clippinger, J. H. (n.d.). *Leadership*. Retrieved from <http://www.socialphysics.org/images/leadership.pdf>.

Ironically, the operational mode of modern policing (in which we deploy units of one or, less frequently, two officers in response to calls for service) makes the need to recognize, encourage, and shape leadership even more important. Leaders exist at every level, and the “natural” leaders who influence their peers can greatly influence the behavior of police agencies. At best, such leaders are untapped resources; at worst, they are free-roaming agents driving the organization in a direction counter to the values of the public.

We are living in interesting times. We are nearing a historical threshold: the point at which the knowledge economy supersedes the industrial economy. Only twice before have economies transitioned at such scale: the move from the hunter-gatherer economy to the agrarian and, subsequently, from agrarian to industrial. Amidst this transition is an accompanying fact; we live in a time of accelerating change. The first signs of agriculture occurred around 9,500 B.C.,⁴ more than 11,000 years ago. Although incomplete information makes identifying a point at which agriculture became the predominant economic activity difficult, it was well established in most civilizations by 5,000 B.C.. Industrialization emerged in the United Kingdom in the mid 18th Century and became dominant in the 19th Century. The time between transitions has shrunk from around 6,900 years in the first case to 150 years in the present transition.

The pace of change challenges modern organizations. Industrial Age hierarchies are proving too intractable to be able to process the information demands placed upon them by the

rapidly changing environment. Agility is emerging as a critical attribute for success in the Knowledge Age, which creates a tension with the need to manage. *Management* imposes structure and institutionalizes relationships and procedures; the installed base that results impedes adjustment. Management resists change; physicists call this phenomena inertia. Organizations pursuing agility are transitioning “management” from a human resource to a software asset in their information infrastructure. In these organizations, leadership comes to predominate. Management is a necessary skill, but supervisors are, nevertheless, leaders rather than managers. In order to enable the operational edge⁵ of the organization to adapt rapidly to changes in the environment, the edge must be empowered to act independently. How do we entrust them to do so in the appropriate way? Knowledge Age leadership exists in two places: the center (command) and the edge. The center shapes the organization through constant expression of command intent that sets the boundaries of behavior. The center shapes the culture of the organization by controlling its membership (through recruitment and termination), making known its value preferences, and defining the training. Edge leadership employs operational resources within the boundaries set by command through coordination, collaboration, and reinforcement of cultural norms. Information infrastructures that enable broad communication help to create a condition of shared awareness. With shared awareness, shared experience (through common training), trust, and clear command intent, the conditions for agility are created. Once again, the

⁴ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Agriculture#Ancient_Origins

⁵ The edge is the portion of the organization that interfaces with the external world.

military is at the forefront of leadership in the Knowledge Age (see also Alberts & Hayes, 2003; Alberts, Garstka, & Stein, 2000).⁶

In the coming years, police will likely continue to face constraints on resources, particularly its human capacities. At the same time, they will face a rapidly changing world that creates new problems for order maintenance and new opportunities for criminals to exploit. In the face of such challenges, organizations will adapt agility or fail. While failing organizations may not disappear altogether, the public will lose faith in their police, political bodies (particularly municipalities) will suffer, and police substitutes, such as private security will prosper. Ordered agility will require a revolution in leadership, at the top and at the bottom of the enterprise. Leadership must be emphasized among all ranks, and promotional processes must be redesigned to select leaders over managers. In all this, police should look to the military for guidance.

⁶ See the Department of Defense Command and Control Research Project: www.dodccrp.org.

Includes:

Alberts, D. S., & Hayes, R. E. (2003). *Power to the edge*. Washington, D.C.: DoD Command and Control Research Program.

Alberts, D. S., Garstka, J. J., & Stein, F. P. (2000). *Network centric warfare: Developing and leveraging information superiority* (2nd ed.) Washington, D.C.: DoD Command and Control Research Program.