

THE “BUFFY FACTOR”: VAMPIRES IN ORGANIZATIONAL LEADERSHIP

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One of the purposes of research in criminal justice is to develop knowledge that can improve conditions or operations. It is with this thought in mind that we explore how the study of leadership should reveal information that can be transformed into education, training, or other preparation for persons already in or for persons who aspire to assume positions of leadership.

As complex as the subject of leadership can be, police leadership presents special challenges. Instead of generic inquiries into leadership styles¹, traits, or personal memoirs that focus only on the person occupying the leadership position, a more robust template is needed. Mastrofski (2007:24) echoes this point in commenting on the present state of research on police leadership. In addressing this issue, however, it will become clear that even more questions arise than will precise answers to them. Perhaps Dobby, Anscombe, and Tuffin (2004:2) state it best: “Whilst police leadership has fallen under regular criticism, owing to perceived failings in police performance, it has never been clear precisely how police leadership needed to change.”

We do not presume that this chapter is definitive: our purpose is to open a more extensive conversation on what is needed. Though experience can be a powerful teacher, trial-and-error has risks to the agency, and to the polity by which it is sponsored. Not everyone placed in leadership positions has the ability or the instinct to succeed that is demonstrated by those revered as exemplars. Whether comparable skills can be built, and how we might better move beyond the current curricula based upon general principles, are central problems for research.

Instead, we present several propositions to inform new research on leadership. It must incorporate both organizational and individual attributes, and must distinguish between situational and long-term leadership performance. It must incorporate political and economic

contexts, including the interactions of organizational leaders with other leaders in network configurations. We also propose that leadership should not be limited to the top of the organization and that development of leaders throughout the organization is a key reflection of successful top leadership. To that end, examination of those leadership models that provide subordinates the autonomy to actively participate in this process is of utmost importance.

Organizational Attributes

We propose that research on leadership must incorporate organizational attributes as well as those of the individual. While the actions of a leader are important, the opposing or conforming responses of the organization are equally important to understanding effectiveness of leaders.

The history of an organization, and of the polity it serves, provides a critical framework for evaluating the accomplishments of an agency's leaders. The least mutable qualities center on the agency's personnel: conditions and personalities of the previous twenty to thirty years shaped the hiring, retention, and orientation of the personnel a leader inherits. A large body of research and practical experience points out the obvious, namely that the bureaucratic nature of law enforcement agencies impedes change – even when all (or most) would agree that it is necessary. At the same time however, attempts by supervisors and administrators to implement large-scale changes can be met with resistance from officers (Engel & Worden, 2003). This statement is not intended to attribute blame, but to point out those perceptions of what constitutes effective policy (and leadership) can differ among the public, politicians, and front line personnel (Bryman, Stephens, & a' Campo, 1996). Attempting to do so oversimplifies a very complicated state of affairs. For example: How does one balance the different and sometimes competing philosophies of the Community-Oriented Policing versus Problem-oriented Policing versus Compstat versus Hot Spots paradigms (Mastrofski, 2007)?

Arguably, the most important dimension for success or failure lies in the realm of capitalizing upon – or reshaping – the organizational culture itself. Organizations are shaped as well by the political leadership of their jurisdiction. Individual competence and collective competence (which includes an ability to work with each other) may vary widely. Ideological

orientation, the shifting priorities of the electorate, and the inroads of corruption (where they exist) all influence the makeup of the elected bodies that determine budgets and appoint officials. These realities make “selling and implementing a vision of the future of policing... especially difficult” (Bryman et al., 1996:364). However, Kim and Mauborgne (2003) note that a major component of the changes implemented by William Bratton in New York City lay in his successful efforts to influence the culture of the NYPD itself, particularly in terms of making officers and supervisors alike believe they were part of the solution.

Local and regional economies also influence tax bases, which in turn influence hiring and retention. Low-paying inner city departments often serve as starting points for young officers who quickly leave for better-paying positions in the suburbs. Even well-regarded suburban and small-town agencies may be “puppy mills,” training entry-level officers for careers elsewhere. The sudden collapse of a local industry has serious implications for staffing (both for maintaining salaries and hiring replacement personnel), as well as for equipment purchases and capital budgets. A sudden influx to an area of new industry, new residential development, or a radically different demographic community may strain an agency’s existing resources for some time before budget and training resources can bestow additional advantages (or even restore equilibrium).

Context

We propose that context shares equal importance with personal attributes and decisions. Different demands are placed on leaders by conditions of change, and by conditions of stability.

In biography, leadership is most easily portrayed in its vivid “white knight” rescue mode. General George S. Patton’s reinvigoration of the battered army in North Africa after Kasserine Pass, Lee Iacocca’s resuscitation of the Chrysler Corporation in the early 1980s, and Commissioner William Bratton’s “Turnaround” of the New York City Police Department stand out as exemplars. In fiction, dynamic, inspirational personalities or immovable bulwarks against reactionary forces (Robert Redford’s *Brubaker*, the fictionalized story of Warden Tom Murton; Lee Marvin’s Major John Reisman in *The Dirty Dozen*, Clint Eastwood’s Sgt. Gunny Roads in

Heartbreak Ridge) dominate our view and shape our expectations for real-life transformational leadership. The sharp contrast between “before” and “after” – which is truncated at some finite point, usually shortly after the apparent resolution of the crisis – defines the leader’s success.

Most instances of leadership succession do not take place under such dramatic conditions, but that does not understate its importance. Mastrofski (2007) notes that the person who is hired for the position of chief is expected to have a marked impact on the department. Within this general expectation, however, there remains a distinct difference between the challenge of restoring a malfunctioning organization and that of maintaining and improving the performance of a good one.

Any leader brought in with a mandate to shake up a moribund agency, or to restructure a dysfunctional one, usually is supported by a political commitment stronger than that, which attends ‘stay the course’ successions. A reforming chief of police – if brought in with this purpose in mind – typically has at his or her disposal a battery of resources beyond what would be granted under conditions of normal succession. Political sovereigns who recognize the need for change are willing to take more risks, or more stringent actions, than would be considered prudent under conditions of greater stability. However, Kim and Mauborgne (2003) suggest that typically, external opposition is usually greater.

The binary division of “Change” and “Stability” is relatively easy to identify. The research challenge lies in developing a useful scale of measurement for the type and degree of forces demanding change, and conditions that are conducive to stability. In the latter category, there remain distinctions between “caretaker” administrations and those that are installed with expectations of improvement, but reifying those conditions in scientifically valid terms has yet to be done for policing.

Crisis and Continuity

We propose that both situational leadership (usually highlighted by conditions of change or crisis) and continuity of leadership are vital. The qualities and tactics that respond to crisis may differ from those needed to maintain an organization and build upon existing strengths.

Crises do not automatically precede or even coincide with changes in leadership, but arise periodically across the spectrum of leadership tenures. Stable, functional leadership deals with periodic crises that do not demand a change at the top: crime waves, episodes of misconduct by subordinates, or budgetary shortfalls. No standard metrics exist to chart the response of the leadership to such episodes, nor indeed of the extended consequences of the responses.

It is also possible for slow, unremarked conditions to contribute to either organizational decline or overall improvements in agency operations. The organizational culture is a fairly reliable canary in the mineshaft for such declines, although separating normal grumbling from insightful “early warning” dissent is extremely difficult. A useful set of longitudinal measures of police organizational health has yet to be constructed, and is a primary need for research into organizational behavior and leadership. Personal bias (borne of thwarted aspirations or unrealistic ideological expectations) must be separated from shared (and thus at least superficially validated) observations.

Distributed Leadership

We propose that leadership is not limited to the top of the organization. Community policing and problem solving demands leadership skills at the line level – the “chief of police of the beat” concept found elsewhere in the literature – but it is more honored in the breach than the observance.

Leaders who develop a new cadre of leaders among their subordinates are substantively different from those who surround themselves with followers. Police culture teems with tales of cronyism, RIP (Retired in Place) figureheads, and “the blind leading the blind.” Even prescient leaders may find their latitude of action restricted by union contracts that dictate the conditions of promotion processes (honoring seniority at the expense of ability may seem antiquated, but remains entrenched in far too many agencies).

Delegation of responsibility is critical to skills development in up-and-coming subordinates, but is largely unmeasured. Within organizations, the tools for evaluating

managerial and leadership abilities in the limited roles of shift supervisor and unit commander are lacking as well, defaulting the responsibility to intuition and formulaic processes.

Complicating the task of measuring or assessing this dimension is the multi-layered responsibility: the role of chief of the organization is attenuated, diluted through the individual abilities of his or her deputies, and the section and unit heads for which each is responsible. Identifying and measuring the relative success of delegation and development through multiple layers of an organization is a technical problem still to be resolved.

Networks: Leadership among Equals

The evolution of policing will demand leaders who can work with other leaders in larger networks and partnerships. Operating as a leader of subordinates is a different framework from operating within a team of leaders from different organizational contexts. We propose further that these same concepts apply at all levels of the twenty-first century police department.

Effective creation of networks hinges upon their ability to adapt to new circumstances. While not discussed specifically in this essay, Pillai and Williams (2003) suggest that an alleged (but thus far unconfirmed) advantage of transformational leadership lies in the numerous networks through which it operates within an organization.² One measure of police leadership might be the degree to which it encourages subordinates' participation in networks and adapts the agency's structure and operations to accommodate them. The very nature of networks requires a multi-textured approach.

The nature of leadership changes when leaders are placed on a team with other leaders. The assumptions of command must be renegotiated among peers; those accustomed to making decisions for their units or agencies are faced with carrying out decisions made by others. Though the anecdotal evidence suggests that these adaptations are made routinely, little is known about the mechanisms for success, and less about the incidence where strong egos clash to the detriment of the endeavor. Even in more limited, role-defined multi-agency environments like task forces, adapting to new and different status references is not always an easy path. Good faith, professionalism, and dedication are reasonably credited with success;

whether additional training and orientation could improve the composition and operations of task forces is largely unexplored.

Further research on the demands of social networks upon police leaders will be needed as the nature of the demand for networks expands. Community policing has provided a first step for police, a basis upon which to build, but in its formative stages it has been police-driven and largely police controlled. The dynamics of networks when the police are brought in to them on the initiative of other elements or sovereigns is still to be explored. On the other hand, the post-9/11 era has, particularly for the United States, resulted in a concerted effort to increase communication and cooperation between agencies and departments that have traditionally, experienced difficulties in working or “playing well” together. The Joint Terrorism Task Force concept is but one example (Mastrofski, 2007). Other important post-9/11 development is the reorganization of various agencies and departments under the auspices of the Office of the Director of National Intelligence (ODNI), consisting of no less than sixteen entities representing the military, the intelligence community, law enforcement, and other “first responders.” Similarly, the advent of fusion centers is another attempt to facilitate cooperation among various organizations. One starting point is to identify those multi-level, multi-jurisdictional efforts currently in existence and to determine the mechanisms through which cooperation and coordination can be facilitated.

Leadership demands and skills in public service settings are fundamentally different from those of the private sector. Multiple constituencies, external sovereigns, a different legal framework and history, and multiple – often conflicting – goals present a landscape for special research into the demands, successful strategies, shortfalls, and qualities of police leadership. A new effort is needed to develop multiple scales and interpretive values for that effort.

Endnotes

1. While not a focus of the present effort, research by Pillai and Williams (2003) examining transformational leadership in a fire-rescue department suggests it is particularly well-suited for this arena, as well as for law enforcement. For a brief yet excellent review of the principles of transformational leadership as it relates to law enforcement, see Negus (2002).
2. An equally important research question lies in determining if or how transformational leadership may affect multi-agency, collaborative efforts.

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