

## POLICE LEADERSHIP: CHALLENGES OF DEFINITION AND MEASUREMENT

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Despite the existence of thousands of leadership programs, books, and strategies addressing leadership, as well as the incredible importance placed on the ability to lead, leadership remains one of those concepts that is relatively easy to recognize retrospectively, but much more difficult to identify, describe, and articulate prospectively. Perhaps the diverse types of leaders, leadership, applications of leading inhibit our understanding of meaning. If success is to be accomplished, leadership is necessary in every kind and at multiple levels of organizations. The questions remain, then: How does one define leadership? How does one define a leader? Many have tried to define leadership through examples of those we consider “great” leaders. Others do the opposite and use examples of bad leadership as guidelines for what not to do.

As is clear from the above discussion, leadership is in many ways an elusive concept. In the current article, leadership is broadly defined as *the ability to influence and work with others to achieve desired outcomes*, a definition closely aligned with that of Evans (2000, p.16), who states that “leadership is basically the capacity of someone to bring about change.” Both of these definitions focus on qualities we measure in individuals, i.e., traits. Others assert that leadership is something that relates to the organization under examination, e.g., organizational performance? If the focus is on only the former, what happens when organizational characteristics attenuate those individual traits? If the attempt is to capture the concept of leadership in this way, the question is, “Can an individual’s leadership be compromised or augmented by features of the organization that s/he is attempting to lead?” What must be remembered is that an organization is simply a collection of individuals, some with more leadership potential; some with less. It is for this reason that the focus of this paper is on identifying and measuring individual leadership characteristics.

There is some tendency in the literature to equate leadership with management. Graham and Hays (1993), for example, maintain that the activities associated with leadership

tend to be managerial functions such as directing and coordinating tasks that must be completed. Conger and Kanungo (1994, 1998), on the other hand, advocate a distinction between the two concepts. From their standpoint, leadership involves broader, long-term direction, whereas management entails more limited supervisory tasks. Popular business guru Stephen Covey (1991) concurs, adding that leadership tends to be more visionary, while management involves establishing structure to get results. Kotterman (2006, p.14) differentiates the roles of management and leadership: “Managers . . . plan and budget while leaders establish direction.” In essence, a manager is mainly responsible for overseeing subordinates to complete a task or accomplish a goal while offering the means and structure to do so. On the other hand, a leader is responsible for providing a vision and seeking new solutions for the organization. Guidance and creativity are major elements separating leadership from management. In this paper, leadership will include both the ability to oversee daily tasks to achieve desired outcomes, as well as to create a vision and a strategic plan to accomplish long term goals that will guide the way to change in the larger organization.

Of course, any conversation on leadership becomes complex once the different types of leadership that have been identified are examined. A quick search of the term “leadership” reveals a number of adjectives used to describe types of leadership – charismatic, strategic, tactical, bureaucratic, laissez-faire, emotional, task-oriented, transactional, and transformational – to list just a few. If leadership is to be measured in any comprehensive fashion, the different types of leadership must be taken into account in order to fully gauge the underlying construct. As an example, effective leadership varies depending on the context of the department or organization in which it is measured.

The requirements for a good leader in a business may also be much different than those needed for a good leader in a police department. Thus, it is imperative to take the goals of the institution and dynamics of the workplace into account when determining effective methods of leadership. A police environment differs greatly from the traditional business atmosphere, and the mission of each is unique. Therefore, the making of a great leader in policing may be exclusive to the field of law enforcement.

Within law enforcement organizations, the discussion is fortunately a bit more focused because strategic and tactical leadership are the most relevant of the various types of leadership identified in the literature on policing. Tactical leadership involves problem solving by examining the issue at hand, determining the most expeditious method for resolving the situation, and organizing and utilizing the resources necessary to address the problem. Strategic leadership, by contrast, involves a longer-term leadership view in which the direction takes into account the overall system and the contingencies involved (McKinney, 2008; Roberg & Kuykendall, 1990). Because leadership may exist at various levels within any given police organization, we suggest that tactical leadership is more likely to be exercised by mid-level management and even by line officers, while strategic leadership is more prominent among those in higher level management positions.

### **Measuring Leadership**

As the preceding discussion suggests, the concept of leadership is difficult to define, thus measurement is also challenging. Ultimately police leadership, comprised of all of the complexities suggested above, is also complicated to measure. While the remainder of this essay will not produce a measure, which addresses all of the issues, some of the important considerations for measuring police leadership in the future are explored.

### **Level of Measurement**

For the most part, the research on leadership employs measures of attributes possessed by individuals, such as vision, motivational capacity, innovative qualities, effectiveness, self-awareness, self-management, visibility, integrity, and communications skills (e.g., Evans, 2005; Goleman, 2000). Although researchers have created a number of methods, including surveys and interviews with subordinates, to gather data to measure leadership, such measures thus far fail to capture the meaning of a *universal* leader. Reasons for researcher's inability to universally measure leadership include reliance on feedback from subordinates, who may not completely understand the meaning of leadership, the tasks their supervisor has been assigned, or the lack of a universal meaning of leadership. Subordinates may judge their supervisor in

terms of their own interpretations, and in turn, negatively influence the validity and the possibility of generalization of such a study. So again, one has to be aware and understand the definition of leadership in order to measure it and judge others according to those measurements (Kotterman, 2006).

One popular philosophy of leadership measurement is the 360° Leader (e.g., Clark and Clark, 1996; Maxwell, 2005), which measures leadership up, down, and across levels of employment. The idea is that an organization is run more efficiently if there is leadership at every level. What must be done to properly understand the leadership of a particular individual is to embed the survey or interview questioning within the situational structure and triangulate the methodology. An ideal measure of leadership should connect individual qualities with organizational outcomes. All contingencies should be approached to express their opinions about the leadership being evaluated and the situational-influences should be explored. A police chief's evaluation, for example, should of course include information obtained from police officers who directly report to the chief, as well as those who work in the field. Data should also be obtained from staff, city commissioners, local citizens, the mayor, police chiefs with whom the chief being evaluated works on a regular basis, the sheriff, and any special groups with whom the chief interacts.

Surveys and interviews should be used in tandem to collect data. The chief should also have developed leadership goals, which are shared with these contingencies, for example, at the beginning of a five-year term and are then evaluated at the end of the five years by all of the groups noted above. Finally, the chief should be given the opportunity to provide a report outlining how the leadership goals that had been initiated five years earlier were accomplished, changed, or not accomplished. Once data is obtained from all sources, the findings need to be placed into a report by a neutral party, who is familiar with the specific police department. This step is important to provide a context for the results. If the police chief was hired with the understanding that an unpopular task must be accomplished for example, and it was accomplished to the dismay of one or more groups reporting to the chief, this must be spelled out in the report before the results can be fully understood.

As a second part of the situational context, consideration must be given to the organizational structure in which the leader is employed. In some cases, individual traits suggest that a police chief should be a good leader, but the police organization functions poorly. This type of situation requires further examination. As noted by Wendel, Schmidt, and Loch (1992), predictive leadership tests may reveal that an individual understands the concepts of leadership, but they cannot predict how well the person can implement leadership skills. Although some may immediately blame the individual leader for poor implementation, certainly the organizational structure may also inhibit some excellent leaders from being able to carry through on their goals. Thus, the neutral reviewer must be in a position to explain how the organizational structure may have negatively impacted the potential leader's ability to lead. This paper encourages using multi-level analyses to take into account both individual and organizational level characteristics when leadership is being measured.

### Dimensionality

What should be clear from the discussion thus far is that leadership is a multi-dimensional concept. As a consequence, the mechanics of developing police leadership measures must involve the use of scaling techniques to reflect the multiple dimensions of leadership in the policing profession. This may yield multiple indicators of leadership for different purposes or, through employment of other data reduction techniques such as factor analysis to derive a single indicator or metric for widespread use to gauge leadership in law enforcement. In any case, the idea is to develop measures that take into account the complexity of police leadership. An alternative strategy, but likely much less useful, would be to conduct separate efforts with the goal of reaching conclusions about each individual aspect of leadership. What is clear from the most recent studies of leadership is that simple measures of leadership are no longer sufficient. Clearly the multidimensionality of police leadership demands that any future measurement or assessment of an agency's leadership be more sensitive to the varied behaviors both individually and organizationally that may comprise leadership as described above.

## Validity and Reliability

Issues of validity and reliability in measurement derivation must be considered. With respect to reliability, the specific question to be addressed is whether any measure(s) of leadership result in the same outcome across repeated measures. That is, will someone who scores high on leadership at one testing also score high on another testing? The more consistent the results across repeated measures, the more reliable the measure. This is a critical issue in measurement, in general, because it has implications about the assumptions of measurement error for statistical analyses. As it pertains to leadership within law enforcement, a measure that will consistently gauge the leadership capabilities of both the law enforcement agency and the law enforcement officer or management is required. Police leadership aside, if a measurement is wildly inconsistent, it will undermine and invalidate evaluation efforts that employ such measures. For example, if the measures of leadership by a police chief indicate high quality leadership the first time it is employed at a mid-year evaluation, and assuming no known or identifiable adverse event(s) occur, and then indicates the same individual to be a poor quality leader at the year-end evaluation, the reliability of the indicator is likely questionable, and the resulting evaluation becomes suspect. In contrast, validity concerns whether the measure(s) derived actually gauge leadership. This is the issue that has driven all of the previous discussion and is essential for any successful measurement.

## **Concluding Remarks**

Lacking precise definitions and measures of leadership, police agencies nonetheless still have recognized the need to cultivate leadership in younger members of their forces to secure the advancement of the organization's future direction. In policing, it has been important for senior officers to serve as examples for, and mentor to, the young officers. Mentors are extremely important for the purpose of providing new officers with an example of good and effective leadership, encouraging them to discover the traits of a good leader early on in their career (Conger & Benjamin, 1999). Mentors can also be of use for offering a knowledgeable opinion about the leadership potential of the new officers with whom they work closely.

Police could experience leadership gains by actively attempting to hire applicants with developmental and leadership experiences the potential officer has had in the past. For example, taking earlier leadership experiences and prior work experience into greater account can help law enforcement agencies understand how the applicant's background may contribute to his or her "language skills, basic confidence, achievement drive, interpersonal skills," and other traditional traits of leaders that add to a worker's success (Conger & Benjamin, 1999, p. 10). Additionally, Conger and Benjamin (1999) maintain that the importance of leadership education has been underemphasized; believing leadership programs can help provide young employees with a clear understanding of the organization's vision. Lastly, insights into the responsibilities of leaders to further the mission of the police department are critically important.

One of the biggest challenges to finding leaders to lead is an individual and personal obstacle. Each individual must recognize the leadership potential in him or herself in order to believe one is capable of effective leadership. Lee and King (2001, p. 138) define "bell ringers" as "insights that you accept as major truths about yourself—the kinds of truths or facts that can serve as lights for guidance into the future." It is important for law enforcement agencies as well as law enforcement officers and civilian police employees to identify their motivation for leadership before assuming a leadership role or position. There are many possible motivations for leadership in law enforcement, such as the desire to help people, organize a messy work situation, get credit for results, increase one's income, or validate one's abilities. Whatever the case, self-awareness is essential to take into account before a leader can be most successful. Research and other related work being conducted by Joseph Schafer, the 2008 Futures Working Group Futurist in Residence, explores many of these definitional and measurement issues (see Schafer, 2008, 2009). This work is promising and likely will provide significant insights and direction into these definitional and measurement challenges associated with police leadership in the near future.

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