Successful Police-Chief Mentoring: Implications from the Subculture

by Terry Eisenberg

For elected and appointed local government officials, management of the police department and its leadership is a demanding, complex, and challenging task. The cost of police services is proportionately the largest expense in local government budgets, and the adverse consequences of mismanagement are the most severe.

These adverse consequences, which are caused by dysfunctional organizational behavior, may take the form of unnecessary and/or extreme operating costs, big financial settlements from civil liability lawsuits, labor/management relations strife, and the loss of community respect and trust in the police and in city or county government.

Preventing these untoward outcomes is largely possible through good management: good management by executive-level police department staff, especially the chief, and good management by the elected and appointed officials. Excellent management by administrators becomes even more critical when the quality of police department management is lacking. Although most police executives are conscientious, skilled, and always respectful of the best interests of their communities, others are not. This article concentrates on the latter.

To a large extent, policing is enigmatic. Why the police do things the way they do is sometimes not understood by citizens or even by local government officials. Much of what they do and how they do it is dictated by the law. But other aspects of police operations are based on what traditional wisdom suggests and on what is best for the organization and its members.

When conflicts arise between what's best for the community and what's best for the department, it's not unusual for police executives to opt for the second choice. Gaining an understanding of the police subculture, especially when such conflicts occur, can aid officials in the management and mentoring of their top police executives.

The Police Subculture

Here are some "overheard" remarks and contentions made by police personnel. They're particularly revealing of the subculture.

"A police chief is a patrolman promoted." This statement, once made by an experienced and well-respected police executive, certainly does not apply to most police executives today, but unfortunately it does apply to some. What it means is that, for some chiefs, little growth and development occurs between the time they were patrolmen and the time they were appointed chiefs.

These executives continue, for example, to make decisions as chief as they did when they were police officers. The additional time available to the executive to gather and analyze information, which is typically not available to a working police officer, is not applied to the executive decision-making process. Accordingly, decisions are likely to be both premature and off the mark.

"Handle the call, and go on to the next one." From the first day of police officers' training in the recruit academy, they learn that sometimes it's necessary to placate citizens with whom they come into contact. This sometimes means not being entirely honest with them about their concerns. Telling burglary victims, for instance, that detectives will follow up on their cases, when they know that the circumstances of these cases will not result in any follow-up, becomes standard operating procedure.

Advising citizens that a particular desired action is not his or her responsibility, nor even that of the police department, is another example. Commonly, this is done to end the patrol assignment and get onto the next one. Even with the popularization of community and problem-oriented policing, some officers are neither taught nor encouraged to seriously engage in long-term problem solving. This kind of behavior carries over to the decisions and actions of some who are now in executive positions.

"We just don't have enough police officers." For almost any type of problem that a police department may be experiencing, the solution advocated by police executives is more officers. On occasion, it is the solution, but often it's not. The solution is more likely to be found in the way the organization manages the human resources it does have.

These questions need to be asked of the police executive: Are civilians being used effectively? Can volunteers be used to a greater extent? To what extent is sick leave being taken? Are alternatives to traditional responses to calls for service being employed? To what extent are officers put on light or restricted-duty status, and for how long? Are there too many supervisory and management personnel? Are there too many sworn personnel in administrative assignments?

"This is a family, not a business." There is no doubt that police work is dangerous, though it is not as dangerous as a number of other professions. This characteristic of policing produces a strong sense of comradery that is rarely found in other professions. The comradeship, although particularly evident among those at the rank of police officer, exists at all levels in the organization, up through the chief. This common bond has the effect of diminishing the importance of employee accountability. Tolerance for misconduct is heightened, and both the frequency and severity of positive and negative forms of discipline, when applied, are on occasion reduced.

"Clearance data? Who needs them?" Except when quoting crime statistics and noting whether they are up or down, some police executives are uncomfortable with management information data. For instance, clearance rates, which indicate the extent to which criminal cases are closed ("solved") through arrest or some other means, are sometimes not maintained or, if maintained, are not consulted to influence future operations.

Other forms of management information—sick-leave use, citizen complaints, disciplinary actions, awards and commendations, impacts of changes on departmental policies and procedures, fatal and nonfatal vehicle-accident characteristics, and applicant-recruitment and selection-process attrition—are often not even collected, let alone analyzed by police executive staff.

Where Do I Start?

As a local government manager, you have a lot on your plate. Your role, of course, is not to manage the police department but to allow your police chief to do so. After all, he or she has been selected and is being paid to perform this function. You need, therefore, to do some prioritizing as to what deserves your attention. Four areas emerge as particularly important: high-risk incidents, employee-misconduct corrective actions, workforce diversity, and organizational performance.

High-Risk Incidents

High-risk incidents are those events when some form both of legal intervention and of organizational turmoil are likely consequences. There are three particularly important types of high-risk incidents: vehicle pursuits, use of force, and fleet-vehicle accidents. Recent trends in these areas have included limiting the circumstances under which vehicle pursuits are permitted and increasing the use of nonlethal weaponry.

Corrective action for fleet-vehicle accidents has not changed and typically comprises remedial training of officers involved in preventable accidents. Understanding the causes of such accidents, as a result of the investigations, eases the design of the remedial training and is worthy of incorporating into your in-service training curriculums.

Other than year-to-year data that may be available, there are no comparative data from police department to police department. So, you must assess the significance of your information in isolation from other departments' experiences.

If you trust and have confidence in your chief, answers from him or her to the following questions will help you understand the significance of the risks and see the implications for change, if any:

- Are written reports prepared on these types of incidents?

- Are these written reports individually and collectively analyzed?

- Have any changes been made, or do they need to be made, as a result of analyses?

- Is there written policy on these types of incidents?

- Are these incidents taking place within policy?

- When conduct was not in compliance with policy, what corrective actions have been taken?

- Are there any trends in the frequency and/or severity of these types of events?

Employee-Misconduct Corrective Actions

These corrective actions occur when management decides to apply positive or negative discipline to officers in response to complaints of misconduct filed by citizens or internal staff and when, through investigation, the complaints are found to be sustained. Positive discipline is best exemplified by the application of remedial training, while negative discipline may involve a sanction like suspension without pay.

Employee grievances, legal intervention, and organizational turmoil are likely consequences of a disciplinary style that is heavy-handed or inconsistent.

Police-executive disciplinary philosophies vary from being lax and permissive to being heavy-handed. The importance of finding the middle ground here is great, for major negative results can ensue from either too much or too little discipline. Employee grievances, legal intervention, and organizational turmoil are likely consequences of a disciplinary style that is heavy-handed or inconsistent.

Different but equally important harmful effects are likely when discipline is lax; there may be continued or severe forms of employee misconduct, for instance. Analysis of complaint data must always be subdivided into sworn- and civilian-employee, and citizen and internally generated categories, for the results will be significantly different. Civilian employees are likely to receive more severe discipline than sworn employees for comparable misconduct, and internally generated complaints are more likely to be sustained than those filed by citizens.

Employee grievances often evolve from disciplinary actions. When such grievances are rarely filed, it's possible that the disciplinary climate is too permissive and forgiving. When these grievances occur in abundance, an unnecessarily severe disciplinary climate may exist. Answers from the chief of police to these questions will help you understand the issue and any implications for change:

- Is there written policy on the processing of citizen and internal complaints of employee misconduct?

- What are the nature, frequency, and disposition of citizen and internal complaints?

- What percentage of citizen complaints is sustained, and what percentage of internal complaints?

- If the percentage of sustained citizen complaints is less than 15 percent, why?

- What percentage of complaints is sustained for civilian employees?

- What sanctions have been imposed on both sworn and civilian personnel when complaints have been sustained?

- Have there been any trends in the nature, frequency, and disposition of complaints?

- Are there any officers who are repeatedly the subjects of complaints, whether sustained or not?

- What is the nature, frequency, and disposition of employee grievances?

- Is there an early intervention program in place, and is it being used?

Civilian employees are likely to receive more severe discipline than sworn employees for comparable misconduct, and internally generated complaints are more likely to be sustained than those filed by citizens.

Workforce Diversity

A highly desirable goal for all police departments is to represent, especially among their sworn personnel, the racial and gender diversity of the communities they serve. Progress has clearly been made in this area over the past two decades, but proportional racial and ethnic representation often falls short at both the entry and higher-rank levels.

Good comparative data exist through the National Criminal Justice Reference Service (NCJRS) so that any police department can be compared with others of similar size serving like populations in similar geographic locations. In recent times, though, it has become more challenging to successfully recruit applicants of all racial/ ethnic backgrounds.

Many reasons for this problem have been cited; some are even accurate, like an inability to pass a background investigation. Sometimes, however, the reasons given for not meeting recruiting goals are little more than excuses for not getting the job done.

Related to this problem are the kindred realms of internal departmental discrimination and sexual harassment. As is happening in the area of workforce diversity, these difficulties appear to be improving, but the necessity for continued sensitivity and vigilance is clear. Seek answers from the chief to the following questions:

- What is the nature of preemployment applicant attrition, from the first stage of recruitment through hiring and appointment, as broken down by race/ethnicity and gender?

- What is the nature of post-employment employee attrition: which employees leave the organization after they have been hired, and for what reasons, as broken down by race/ethnicity and gender?

- Have recruiting strategies been evaluated to determine their efficacy?

- Have all hiring standards and procedures been assessed to affirm their legal basis and to determine their job relevancy?

- How have racial/ethnic and gender minorities performed, compared with majority employees, in various promotional processes?

- What have been the nature, incidence, and disposition of employee complaints of discrimination and sexual harassment?

- What have been the corrective actions taken on sustained employee complaints of discrimination and sexual harassment?

Organizational Performance

In addition to the most specifically relevant aspects of organizational performance described in this article (high-risk incidents, employee-misconduct corrective actions, and workforce diversity) a clear understanding of the overall performance of the organization is important. This can be accomplished by assessing processes, that is, the means to certain ends, as well as their impacts or end-results.

The manner in which resources are used (hours of work, caseloads), whether the department periodically specifies objectives and goals (to reduce the incidence of fatal vehicle accidents by 15 percent, to reduce patrol response time by 10 percent), and the number of sworn and civilian personnel on board—all of these are processes or means designed to achieve certain ends.

The *ICMA Municipal Year Book* contains comparative data on the number of sworn and civilian police personnel, as well as other statistical information for many police departments and localities of different sizes throughout the United States. Information is available on the ratio of police personnel to population, a gross measure of efficiency in the use of human resources. Comparative data on the incidence of different types of crime, together with clearance rates, are available through the FBI's Uniform Crime Reports.

The impacts or end-results expected from the processes used include such indicators of organizational performance as community survey responses on police service, incidence of crime, elimination of "hot spot" problems, reduction of injury/ fatal vehicle accidents, and upturns in clearance rates.

Requesting answers from the chief of police to the following questions will help you understand the issue and any implications for change:

- To what extent is the current patrol work schedule an effective and efficient one? (The recent increase in use of the 12-hour patrol schedule, with an extra day off per week, is an excellent example of where some police executives, in their attempts to curry favor among rank-and-file employees, have placed the interests of their own people above those of the community.)

- Does the department periodically specify objectives and goals?

- If objectives and goals are established, to what extent has the department met them?

- What is the department's workload in patrol, as measured by calls for service? Have these calls risen or declined?

- What are the current caseloads for investigators? Are they too heavy or too light?

- What are the clearance rates for different types of crimes? Have they been going up or down?

- What are the crime rates for different types of offenses? Have they been going up or down?

- What is the ratio of sworn personnel to population? Is it too high or too low?

- What is the department's percentage of civilian personnel? Is it too low?

- Have there been any significant advances in policing? What is the department doing to implement them?

- Have "hot spots" (i.e., specific crime problems and areas) been identified? What is the department doing about them?

- What is the incidence of injury and non-injury vehicle accidents? What is being done to reduce them?

- What do community residents say about the quality of police services?

Summary

We have discussed some of the more important police management issues for elected and appointed officials to look at. Obtaining a greater appreciation of the police subculture will aid local government professionals in understanding why police executives take the positions and make the decisions they do. With such information in hand, mentoring your police chief can be accomplished more gracefully and effectively.

Terry Eisenberg is president of Personnel Performance, Inc., San Diego, California (sjpddoc@cs.com).