

The BJA Executive Session on

Police Leadership

2013

The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership is a multi-year endeavor started in 2010 with the goal of developing innovative thinking that would help create police leaders uniquely qualified to meet the challenges of a changing public safety landscape.

In support of an integrated approach to creating safe and viable communities across America, the project directors recruited 20+ principals from a range of disciplines. The principals, in turn, led national field teams of practitioners focused on the work of policing and the organization of the future.

To gain new insights on leadership, the *BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership* engaged police chiefs in documenting their own paths and invited leaders to participate in various audio and video forums to tell their stories and discuss the future of policing and police leadership.

Please visit our website, <http://bjaleader.org>, to learn more about this project and to access a broad array of interactive, multimedia resources.

The principals are supported in their work by a team that includes project co-directors Darrel W. Stephens and Bill Geller, project strategist Nancy McKeon, and BJA Senior Policy Advisor Steve Edwards.

In Their Own Words: Police Leaders on Leadership Discussion Series – Leader Profiles

by
Nancy McKeon

#3: Having the Stuff – It Really Can Be Lonely at the Top

Introductory Note: As part of the core work of the BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership, selected police chiefs agreed to create their individual leadership profiles. The collection of profiles provides an engrossing set of narratives and a wealth of data to draw upon as we shape leaders for the future. In Their Own Words: Police Leaders on Leadership features brief papers with companion exploratory questions to be used in a wide variety of venues. Each paper highlights a key aspect of leadership and is illustrated with the chiefs' real-world examples from the roles they have held over the course of their careers.

One of the universal anthems of leadership is echoed succinctly by Chief Monroe in his profile: “It’s lonely at the top. I had to live with my decisions; no one else looks to share that ultimate responsibility.” Another chief quips, “knowing this job will basically kill you in office is very important.” More on that one later.

The job of chief is hard in its own unique way. It is a mix of paradoxes and balancing acts. The balancing act begins with the job’s terrain or landscape. As described by Commissioner Davis, that landscape features three intersecting environments: “1) The **internal** environment, commanders, rank and file, union leadership, civilians, and various constituency groups, including detectives, plain clothes officers, uniform, gay officers, veterans, women, minority officers, and others, [which] is daunting in its volume and complexity. 2) The **external** environment, the community and non-profits, businesses and neighborhood activists, and the press. 3) And finally the **political** community, especially the mayor, city and state political leaders, and especially the press, [which is] a category that spans the external and political in my estimation” (emphasis added).

The profiles suggest that successful leaders are clear-eyed about the reality that their job is indeed a constant balancing act, that they will be scrutinized and always retain some elements of the outsider, that all upsides have downsides, and that even popularity has a price.

Reflections from the profiles create a mosaic of the tensions and trade-offs of the job:

- “I promised to work ‘100 days straight’ and then report back to the Council with my review and the ‘state of the PD.’ This was one of the best things I could have done and it was worth the extra time. The Mayor at the time strongly supported my selection and hiring, so I was viewed as a ‘political hire’ from the start” (Halsted).
- “You are always preparing for what can go wrong, for the next crisis. A team that constantly monitors and advises is crucial to success. A crisis can come from any of the [three environments mentioned above]. Preventive leadership is as important as crime prevention. Problem solving in the board room is as important as problem solving by line-level officers” (Davis).
- “Prior to getting the job as Chief, I was a Deputy Chief for 4 years. So I had a large role in developing the organizational structure and priorities, and selecting the senior leaders. As a new Chief, we revised our 5-year strategic plan, which of course focused on reducing crime, and we prepared to host the 2010 Winter Olympics. When I got the job, some perceived me as an ‘academic.’ One media pundit labeled me a ‘bookworm.’ So an early public priority for me was to show I was a crime fighter” (Chu).

- “Politics will always play a significant role in policing; therefore, you must always develop strategies and visions that can withstand political pressures. Being able to rally majority support from workforce and the community at-large greatly enhances your opportunity to succeed. Never lose sight of who you work for in a strong mayor form of government. [You] must remain in-line with their priorities and allow them to share the credit for any successes” (Monroe).
- Doing the right thing can bring unintended consequences. “First-year crime dropped significantly, and productivity increased until 20% of officers were laid off. The Department’s morale dropped. Productivity decreased. A hopeless attitude began to impact work attitudes” (Batts). “A solid working relation with the troops, the union, is very important. Communication with all levels of the department is essential but [a] constant struggle. [An] open-door policy for the troops can be seen by the command of the Department as a negative, ‘interfering’ with the chain of command” (Gainer).
- And even popularity has a price. “I am surprised how being a Chief really is a 24/7 type of job....[Y]ou can never simply be in public on your day off and not have a citizen want to meet you or talk about their community issues. I had to prepare my family for this because in Fort Worth, they love their police department and really view their entire department as ‘friends’” (Halsted).

In addition to being clear-eyed about the realities of the job, how else do chiefs ensure they “have the stuff”? In the easier-said-than-done category, chiefs recommend having a sense of humor, not taking things personally, and working on self-awareness. Humor, thick skin, and self-awareness are all wrapped up in this sardonic comment: “You as the outsider need to be aware that your leadership style in previous organizations will follow you to your next job. From day one until the end of your tenure, your next effort and every change will be compared to the last chief and your past performance. We all know that the best chiefs are the last and the next chief, never the present chief” (Hurt).

Expanding on his dangerous-to-your-health remark quoted at the beginning of this paper, Chief Halsted offers a particularly 21st century perspective on what the job takes by introducing wellness into the equation: “[Future leaders] need to be able to handle the stressors of this position. Keeping in shape, having wellness goals, and knowing this job will basically kill you in office is very important. I will never sacrifice my wellness time every day for the demands of this job.”

The final words on this subject come from Commissioner Davis, who states the ultimate paradox of the chief’s job: “Embracing these concepts and putting them into action is exhilarating and potent. It is a challenge that few have the pleasure of enduring” (emphasis added).

#3: Having the Stuff – It Really Can Be Lonely at the Top
Discussion Questions

1. What does this paper suggest is the main reason leaders can find their role “lonely”? Is this phenomenon good for policing? Why or why not?
2. One of the profiles quoted here suggests that the public sees police as primarily crime fighters? Is that fair? Why or why not?
3. Why do leaders, even those promoted from inside, always retain elements of an outsider? Are there ways leaders can overcome that?
4. What is meant by “preventive leadership”? What do you think is meant by linking the board room and the front lines?
5. Do you think a leader has an obligation to take care of his or her health? Should leaders be held accountable for doing so? How?

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