The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership was 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://bjaleadership.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.

The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership: An Overview of the Approach

by Steven Edwards, Nancy McKeon & Darrel Stephens

Introduction

The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership was a multi-year endeavor (2010-2014) with a goal to develop innovative thinking that would help create police leaders uniquely qualified to meet the challenges of a changing public safety landscape.

The Executive Session’s design and infrastructure had some innovative features that helped shape its outcomes. People have expressed interest in the way we worked so in response this paper provides a summary of our approach.

We describe the approach in five sections:
I. Context. Why this project at the time.
II. Goals. What we set out to accomplish.
III. People and Structure. How we adapted an Executive Session model to meet our goals.
IV. Activities. The flow of major meetings, multiple rounds of initiatives and other key activities.

V. Reflections. The challenges and benefits of our approach as we see them.

For those interested in process, we hope this summary provides a sense of how we organized the work. The authors can be contacted for a fuller discussion.

I. Context

The project grew out of a sense that the time was right to take a long view of police leadership. It was the brainchild of Steven M. Edwards, Ph.D., senior policy analyst at the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA). Several decades had passed since the President’s Commission of the late 60s-early 70s took a comprehensive view of the state of policing. Now, in the early decades of the 21st century, a focus on leadership in particular was called for. The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership was the result.

Two powerful forces in particular suggested that this was the right time to consider leadership. As the new century unfolded, the role of institutions and their leaders was changing dramatically. Technology was a major driver in redefining the relationship between heretofore monolithic institutions and the public. New, alternative channels to longstanding, traditional institutions were putting choice and a new kind of authority into the hands of consumers of all sorts. When we started our work, one could argue that some institutions—journalism, medicine, education among others—were already being radically affected by these changes, and law enforcement was not immune. Police leaders needed to be mindful of their own future.

The great recession of 2008 hit policing hard. Police departments, often the largest component of the municipal budget, found those budgets significantly cut for the first time in recent memory. It was becoming clear that while the economy would recover, we as a country would face a “new normal.” Unlike in the 1970s, crime in the United States was way down in general, and the public might no longer sympathize with underfunded police departments. Yet, as the project’s principals pointed out, public expectations would remain the same. With these shifts—the focus away from crime, the institutional change, and the economic discontinuity—it made strategic sense to look at the work of policing, the police department, and the leader of the future.

II. Goals

Despite compelling reasons to do so, we recognized that taking on leadership was a daunting task. We decided to approach the subject from a vantage point different from many similar efforts. Instead of working from universal truths about strong leaders or working toward a redefined set of competencies or a new development program or curriculum, we decided to look first at the world in which leaders would have to function—at the external and internal realities and challenges that would face them in the coming decades—and go from there, wherever it took us.

Accordingly, we loosely framed the work of the BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership around three questions:
• What forces in the world generally and public safety in particular will challenge policing in the coming years?
• What will characterize the kind of leaders we need to meet those challenges and guide policing into the future?
• How can we provide the opportunity and support that will allow those future leaders to develop?

Based on this framework, our desired practical outcome was always to develop new ways of thinking that would prepare police leaders to meet the 21st century needs of their communities. From the beginning, we wanted to focus on the future.

III. People and Structure
To meet our goals, we used the strong traditional Executive Session model and tailored it in some innovative ways.

The Executive Session Model
The Executive Session (ES) was developed by a number of think tanks, including Harvard’s Kennedy School of Government. Mark Moore and Frank Hartmann identified three essential elements of the ES based on their experience at the Kennedy School: “(1) A sustained conversation… (2) among a core group of members selected for their ability to provide leadership to a practice field that… (3) produces learning and transformation in a practice field through continuing dialogue, digestible publications, and education.”

The authors describe their meeting format and principles as follows:
“Individuals are selected based on their experiences, their reputation for thoughtfulness, and their potential for helping to disseminate the work of the Session. Typically, a meeting will convene on a Thursday evening for a working dinner, and then continue to work all day on Friday and part of the day on Saturday. Meeting over a three-day period (two working days) makes it possible to delve deeply into an issue. [U]ltimately the members must take responsibility for the work of the Session. The members are the experts. The convening organization basically serves as a staff, preparing background documents, summarizing the discussions, and preparing products for the members to review. It also serves as synthesizer and challenger of the conversation.”

This methodology has been honed over the years into an effective approach to influencing research and practice of a given field.

Our Tailored Executive Session Design
We made several modifications to the traditional ES model that we thought would enhance the outcome of the BJA Session.

Principals. The key to success in an ES is to bring the right people to the table. We recognized that the future of public safety in America would lie in the collaboration of many players, so we set out to identify and assemble thoughtful and accomplished leaders in policing and other fields who were interested in the challenges facing police leadership in the 21st century. (See Figure 1 for the range of disciplines represented among the principals. Biographies of the principals are available in Who We Are). The 20+ principals also
had commit to working together over time to identify challenges that deserve priority attention, deliberate on the kind of leaders needed to successfully address those challenges, and recommend methods that show promise for developing such leaders more efficiently and effectively.

**Figure 1**

**The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership**

...experts of multiple disciplines...

- Academic/Researcher
- Attorney
- Campus Security
- Child Development
- City Manager/Administrator
- County Executive
- Civil Rights
- Community-based Organizing
- Community Development
- Education Reform
- Executive Search
- Federal Government
- Mayor
- Leadership Development/Training Design & Delivery
- Philanthropy
- Police Chief
- Police Executive (other than Chief)
- Police/Public Safety Policy Consultant
- Private Corporate Security
- Prosecutor
- Public Defender
- Public Health
- Small Business
- Strategic Planning
- Urban Planning

**Extended Teams.** We also recognized that our work would have greater credibility and impact if we involved future leaders—those who would guide policing and public safety in the coming decades. To this end, the principals worked with the project-planning group (see Project Management below) to select promising individuals—such as mid- or upper-level police employees, graduate students, public policy shapers—with the potential of becoming an important voice on public safety policy and practice within 5-10 years. (In a few instances, the principals also selected more experienced, current leaders in various fields.) As of early November 2010, the principals collectively chose more than 60 team members to participate in the project.

These teams worked on initiatives that were identified and scoped by the full group of principals group in the Executive Session Principals Meetings (more below in Activities). The teams conducted research, tested ideas, and made substantial contributions to the project work. At the same time, they gained important experience in working with the principals and project core team that will enhance their own careers. Selected biographies of team members are featured in Who We Are.

**Project Management (Core Team).** Darrel Stephens and Bill Geller served as the Executive Session’s co-directors. Darrel Stephens has served as chief in several cities.
Geller has contributed to the work of police leaders, especially with regard to community building. Nancy McKeon, the project strategy consultant, brought to the table a private-sector perspective and a background in organization, leadership, and large-scale project design. This team managed the overall arc of the project, designed its meetings, participated in some of the work of the field initiatives, and oversaw the development of the project website. In addition, the core team pursued some project work on its own. Core Team biographies are included in Who We Are.

Another important factor in managing the Executive Session was ensuring that the principals, initiative team members, and the core team maintained regular contact between the formal meeting sessions to work on products. Conference calls, emails, and small meetings provided the opportunity to focus on the issues identified in the Executive Sessions.

In addition to papers as Executive Session products we used video and audiotapes, case studies and short issue and policy papers to provide a wide range of material for developing leaders. We determined early on that we would work toward an online delivery model for our work.

St. Petersburg College in St. Petersburg, Florida, was the fiduciary institution. The grant was administered by Eileen LaHaie of the college’s Center for Public Safety Innovation. Her team was responsible for project logistics as well as website design and production.

**IV. Activities**

The first meeting of the principals took place in September 2010. Designed and facilitated by the core team, the two-day session had the goal of identifying the issues that would shape the initiatives to be led by principals and carried out by their team members.

The core team presented a schematic suggesting a potential path for the project (see Figure 2). At first, the open and loosely structured framework was troubling for some who were used to projects with more concrete objectives and defined end products. Others were skeptical that starting with the external environment would ever get us to leadership development. Most of the principals, though, were willing to “suspend disbelief” and jump into the challenge.
Through various discussions, exercises, and informal exchanges, the group identified a few hundred topics that could affect leaders in the future. These issues were narrowed down to six key issues. These six issues were called the “Round 1” initiatives, and each initiative was headed up by three principals—one of whom one acted as the leader with their team members. The Round 1 initiatives were:

- Community Building
- Leadership Development
- Organization of the Future
- Performance Measures
- Problem-Oriented Policing
- Racial Issues

Each Round 1 initiative pursued its own plan and process. Not surprisingly, at six months the initiatives showed varying levels of dedication and progress.

The principals gathered for a second full meeting in September 2011 to report on the work and outcomes of the Round 1 initiatives. We agreed coming in that, in keeping with our open approach and experimental mindset, the initiatives might continue, disband, or combine based on the direction that emerged. And, of course, new initiatives could be defined.
At the September 2011 meeting, the principals made presentations and some key team members were invited. After presentations, the principals held breakout sessions on “what are we learning?” and “where should this project go?” The discussions were candid, with some participants admitting to continued discomfort with the project’s open approach to problem solving. One breakout on the most impactful actions we might recommend produced little that was new or innovative and we concluded it was premature at this point. That insight was helpful to some (“we just don’t know enough yet”) and frustrating to others (“then what is this whole thing about?).

The Round 1 work of the “Organization of the Future” team became a focal point of the project. The team analyzed major changes in the environment that were changing the way police work was getting done and (potentially) affecting organizational structure. The team’s perspective broadened our discussions and influenced the work of Round 2. In turn, the broadened discussions led the Round 2 Organization of the Future team to move away from analyzing organizational structure and focus more on the work of police and on the way public safety will be delivered in the future. Specifically, policing will participate in a collaborative—co-produced - public safety system that will characterize and revolutionize the coming years.

As a result of the work of the second principals’ meeting, we had a redesigned and expanded slate of Round 2 initiatives:

- Collaboration and Trust—replaced Racial Issues
- Community Building—continued, but re-directed to leadership issues
- Leadership Development—split into two groups:
  - Experiential Learning (a new offspring of Organization of the Future)
  - Training (a continuation)
- Organization of the Future—continued
- (Creative) Problem Solving and the Law—new
- Work of Policing—a new offspring of Organization of the Future
Not only did we realign the work, we also realigned principals and their interests/expertise for Round 2. The open approach of the BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership was beginning to tighten its focus. Put another way, the project began at the end of 2010 with a highly decentralized Round 1 and continued a year later with a modestly more centralized Round 2.

Coordination (modest centralization) came in two ways. In Round 2 each initiative team working with the core team articulated a strategy with goals and processes. We also launched an internal website where, among project work products, these one-page strategies were posted for all participants to view. These strategies helped to focus the work of Round 2 and allowed some cross-pollination between initiatives.

In the fall of 2012, the principals held a meeting, in which each initiative team conducted an interactive session designed to engage the larger group in responding to work and participating in shaping and testing recommendations.

The interactive sessions included:

- A report on an Organization of the Future presentation to and survey of Major Cities Chiefs Association.
- A Yale law student team member discussing her onsite involvement on one of the city case studies for Collaboration and Trust team.
- A presentation on the rollout of a new approach to regional leadership training.
- A breakout brainstorming session on non-traditional roles in community planning and leadership.
• A roundtable discussion on personal experiential surprises that turned into developmental milestones.

From the fall 2012 meeting, Round 3 work was forged with a focus on developing the major products that would hold the content—written, audio and video works. The Work of Policing team conducted a videotaped forum, moderated by Chuck Wexler from the Police Executive Research Forum, with 12 experienced and prominent police leaders. The Problem Solving and the Law team produced “instructional dialogues” based on interviews with police and prosecutors. The Leadership Development team produced an interactive graphic of an open, non-linear learning environment for the 21st century leader called The Learner’s Marketplace.

In addition to the field initiatives, three other pathways wound through the project. These efforts were the work of the core team. The first focused on having leaders reflect on the paths their own careers had followed. Using the same template, some 20 chiefs created detailed histories of their careers. These histories provided a wealth of empirical data on how police leaders “really” develop.

In another significant effort, the core team brought a selection of the project principals together to articulate the beliefs that were emerging from our meetings and our initiative work. Extensive discussion resulted in the creation of six Core Statements that draw upon the original three questions that framed the work—that is, what challenges policing will face in the coming years, what kind of leaders will be needed to meet those challenges, and how we will ensure the development of these leaders. The six statements were approved by the full body of principals. That fall, the membership of the Major Cities Chiefs Association endorsed them in a survey conducted by the Organization of the Future team.
The six statements, integrated with the major work of the initiatives, led to the development of the three elements of the project’s final organizing framework: World of the Future, Organization of the Future, and Leader of the Future. These three elements shaped the messages and organization of our website.

The third pathway was to design our website and develop products for it such as a welcome video.

In late 2013, a principals’ meeting was held to discuss and finalize session products, such as—Work of Policing videos (“If I only knew then,…), a comprehensive paper on Partnership structures, and The Learner’s Marketplace and the placement of the executive session products on the website.

V. Reflections
What are the benefits and challenges of the approach we took to the BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership? We believe the benefits significantly outweigh the challenges; furthermore, some of the benefits are the direct result of the challenges.

Challenges
The challenges can be gathered into two categories.
Open approach. We decided to take an unconventional approach to thinking about leadership and started with a wide-open set of questions about the future that we hoped would narrow to a new point of view on how to grow the sorts of leaders we would need for that future. As we mentioned above, the ambiguity of this approach frustrated some and may have contributed to the loss of one or two participants at the beginning and a few more along the way.

Extended Teams. Decentralization is always a challenge. As noted above, the total number of selected team members at one point numbered over 60. The field structure included about 14 self-directed initiatives. This approach made it impossible to impose consistency; some of the initiatives worked spectacularly, others languished, and one or two never got off the ground. In addition, not all of the selected team members had the opportunity to be involved in a meaningful way.

Three things should be noted here. First, an open approach is likely to produce some false starts. Second, the principals and team members contributed to the project on their own time. Third, as mentioned above, while there were some intermittent small meetings, the full group of principals was able to meet only once a year.

Despite these constraints, a lot of people came together to make extraordinary investments that led to the work you see on this site.

Benefits

The benefits to our process were significant.

Open approach. The first benefit of the open approach is the wide range of professions in the principals group (and in the teams). This diversity enriched discussion. For instance, having municipal professionals, prosecutors, and law professors work hand-in-hand with police leaders led to new ways of thinking and to integrated models and recommendations. Including people at different points in their careers provided the same kind of benefit and a potential bridge to sustainability.

Extended teams. The key trade-off of this structure is between self-directed field teams and centralized transparency. While it is difficult to manage and sometimes produces inconsistent results, the trade-off is, as they say, a no brainer to what we hoped to accomplish in terms of exploratory thinking.

Two things helped us address the challenge of a decentralized structure. The project’s core team was available to step in and help when requested by an initiative team. Second, as documented above, we made course corrections throughout the project and made a major realignment of initiatives and teams after the first year. That re-alignment led to the development of some new principals and new team members.

Multi-Year Awareness. We said at the beginning that we would keep our antennae tuned to the environment throughout the project. We started the project with the recognition that public safety was becoming an integrated activity that involves many municipal
departments and includes community businesses and organizations. Over the life of the project, the city and municipal areas became the centerpiece of a vision of success in the America of the 21st century. We increased our emphasis on the local environment in the way police work, learn and lead.

Increasing attention to mindfulness in life and leadership found its way into our work on the traits of future leaders.

Finally, our thinking from the start on the new century’s challenge to institutions and their leaders continued to reveal itself throughout our project providing more empirical evidence in support of our incoming point of view.

**Framing the Story—Keeping Track.** The open approach to the subject made us pay more attention to where we were and what we were learning. Truth be told, the original three questions actually began as four but a quick filtering eliminated one. The three questions—what will be the challenges facing policing in the coming years, what kind of leaders will we need, and how will we ensure we develop them—were subsequently filtered through two rounds of initiatives, a set of six core statements and many live discussions and forum devoted to leadership. In the end, the three questions held up even more than we expected.

Our ultimate three part story woven into this website - World of the Future, Organization of the Future, Leader of the Future—echoes the beginning pretty closely.

For that story and a wide range of multimedia products, we invite you to explore the full site at [www.bjaexecutivesessiononpoliceleadership.org](http://www.bjaexecutivesessiononpoliceleadership.org)

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Delivering Public Safety in the Organization of the Future: A Model


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http://bjaleadership.org/

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