EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP IN LAW ENFORCEMENT: CURRENT AND PAST POLICE CHIEF PERSPECTIVES

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As a part of a statewide educational program for Texas municipal Police Chiefs, issues relevant to the concept and practice of leadership within the law enforcement arena are examined. Texas communities employ more than 1,000 municipal police chiefs who serve in geographically and demographically diverse settings throughout the State. The Chief's responses include their perceptions of best practices of leaders; indispensable leadership skills; critical mistakes made by leaders; as well as essential qualities necessary for effective leadership. A unique opportunity existed in which this study was not only able to examine the responses from current police leaders, but also contrast those with responses from a survey of police leaders that was administered three decades ago, offering a glimpse of the changes in police-leadership practice and philosophy. Additionally, based on these findings, suggestions regarding topics for police executive training are offered.

Practitioners and scholar alike have struggled with the conceptualization of leadership for decades (Bass 1990, 1999; Conger 2013). More than 100 definitions of leadership have been developed over the years (Garner, 2009; Rost, 1991) and various points of emphasis have been stressed during the last few decades.

A review of the literature finds that leadership was initially characterized as a trait-specific activity. This was the origin of the so called 'great man theory' that offered the importance of innate qualities and characteristics of leaders (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2015). This focus waned in the 1940's but reemerged in the mid 1980's and remains viable today. However, the reconceptualization seems to have less emphasis on innate traits and more attention is given to how certain knowledge, skills, and abilities might be developed to enhance one's character and performance in order to become a more effective leader. In fact, much of this work has translated into a more relational approach to leadership (Day, 2001; Northouse, 2015).

There is ample research on the impact that certain traits or skills may have on leadership success (Conger 2004; Goleman, 2004); however, there has been scant exploration of such issues as they may relate to leadership effectiveness in the area of policing and law enforcement. Though these individuals operate in a somewhat unique environment, few researchers have studied leadership in this context. (See Dantzker 1996; Sarver & Miller, 2014; Schafer, 2010.)

Some of the more compelling and current research examines leadership both as a relational and as an influence process (Dinh, et al., 2014; Thomas & Carnall, 2008). As such, there is not only a focus on skills and abilities, but also more emphasis on the interactions that

occur between leaders and followers. Unlike times past, the examination of successful leadership explores not just the leader, but also the situational components and the importance of the followers involved in the leadership dynamic (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2015).

The present study examines various attitudes that law enforcement executives have regarding leadership effectiveness. Specifically, issues related to trait or skills theory are considered (Bass, 1990, 1999; Zaccaro, Kemp, & Baden, 2004), as well as opinions associated with diverse aspects of the leadership environment. Additionally, a unique opportunity existed to mirror a similar survey administered to police executives three decades earlier (Garner, 1988). As a result, there was an ability to not only consider the attitudes and opinions of those currently in leadership positions in law enforcement, but also how those opinions may have changed over time. Leadership today occurs in a much different environment than it did 30 years ago. Technology, legal issues, social norms, and cultural expectations are just a few of the areas that have seen dramatic change over these last three decades (McCall, 2004; Rowe, 2006; Schafer, 2009, 2010; Stamper, 1992). Each of these can have an impact on a leaders approach and philosophy in how they accomplish their role.

METHOD

Participants

Individuals attending a week-long training program for Texas Police Chiefs were recruited to participate in this effort. The training cycle occurs over a two-year period, with individuals attending one of the twelve week-long sessions offered during the two-year cycle. (The curriculum is the same for all participants.) More than 1,000 individuals are involved in this training and surveys were collected from 869 law enforcement leaders. The respondents were typically male, with a college degree, and over the age of 40. Participant characteristics are found in Table 1.

Table 1. Participant Characteristics

Age		
	Less than 40	14%
	40 to 59	75%
	60 and Above	10%
Education/Highest Degree		
	High School	19%
	Some College	15.6%
	Assoc. Degree	16.5%
	BS-BA	25.5%
	Grad Degree	16.2%
Gender		
	Male	93%
	Female	7%

Materials

Participants were provided with an open-ended survey that identified several issues related to leadership characteristics, leader traits/skills, and matters regarding leadership effectiveness. The instrument was modeled after a previous survey of police leaders conducted in 1987 by the Houston-Harris County Mental Health Association (Garner, 1988). Though some of the questions may not have been a preferred choice in wording or form, the fidelity of the original survey was maintained in order to take advantage of the unique opportunity to contrast results from a similar population of participants that occurred nearly three decades prior.

The survey items were all open-ended and included the following questions:

1. "Please identify a person living or dead that exemplifies strong leadership to you. Please indicate why you made this selection."

2. "Please list several Leadership Characteristics/Qualities that are most appreciated. (What qualities or characteristics do strong/good leaders possess?)"

3. "What are some of the most important SKILLS that a leader possesses?"

4. "When faced with adversity, an effective police leader _____."

5. "To improve teamwork, an effective police leader _____."

6. "When explaining a concept an effective leader _____."

7. "Employees respect a true leader because _____."

8. "The more you know about _____ the better manager or leader you can be."

9. "A safe assumption about employees is that they are all_____."

10. "As a leader, a good practice is to listen for _____."

11. "When someone is criticizing you, the worst possible response is: _____."

12. "As a police leader/chief what advice has served you well?"

13. "As a police leader/chief what was the worst advice you received?"

14. "What are the biggest mistakes that police leaders/chiefs make when it comes to discipline?"

15. "What do you know now that you wished you knew before becoming a police leader/chief?"

Procedures

Participants were provided with an informed consent agreement and were asked to complete a series of 15 question items that assessed various thoughts and opinions about leadership traits, skills, and circumstances. Participation was anonymous, optional, and no individual or personally identifying information was collected. The survey was part of an exercise in a session related to executive leadership. Participants were asked to carefully reflect on each item and to be as forthcoming as possible in their response. Responses were analyzed for concurrent categorization in order to establish topical themes and groupings that best represented various response to the questions. Individual statements were assessed and coded for inclusion into those identified categories when appropriate. For example, a response of "honesty," "integrity" "keeping ones word" were all classified in the response category labeled "Honesty."

RESULTS

To remain consistent with the data reported in the original survey, the top responses from each of the following questions are provided. For ease of reporting and comparison, each question item is identified and general responses from both the current and historic administration of the survey are presented.

Q1: "Please identify a person living or dead that exemplifies strong leadership to you. Please indicate why you made this selection."

The current (T2: Time 2) responses were similar to those identified in the previous (T1: Time 1) administration of the survey and fell into three broad categories: Political/Military Leaders (32%); Family Members (25%); and Religious Figures (6%). Other lesser-cited responses included actors, sports figures, and activists. Because of the wide variation, this question was not identified as being particularly meaningful in the current context. However, it did demonstrate a level of response consistency between the three-decade long administrations.

Q2: "Please list several Leadership Characteristics/Qualities that are most appreciated. (What qualities or characteristics do strong/good leaders possess?)"

Again, with this question, the responses were remarkably similar across the timeframe. In both administrations of the survey, "Honesty" is identified as the most significant leadership characteristic (70.2% T2: current; 70% T1: previous). In the current survey the remainder of the top five identified qualities that are most appreciated in a leader were: Competence (62%), Vision (58%), Compassion/Empathy (41%), and Inspiring Others (21%). The previous survey (T1) found the following (in addition to the first place category of Honesty): Competence (77%), Fair/Fair-Minded (58%), Vision/Forward-Looking (33%), and Courage (23%).

Q3: "What are some of the most important SKILLS that a leader possesses?"

Both the current and previous surveys find Communication (88% T2; 73% T1) to be the most cited skill needed by a leader. The T2 survey identified the remainder of the top five skills as: Delegation (32%), Handing Criticism/ Conflict/Difficult Conversations (31%), and Goal Setting (12%). The T1 survey identified Stress Management (42%), Technical Competence (29%), Delegation (19%), and Dealing with Punishment (17%) as the remaining factors of importance.

Q4: "When faced with adversity, an effective police leader _____."

The top responses to this question item by the T2 (recent) police leadership participants identified the following: "Stays/Calm," "Reflective," "Takes Necessary Action," "Stays Positive," and "Solicits Input." The T1 survey offered these responses: "React Assertively," "Responds Quickly," and "Takes Action." It is with this question that a difference begins to emerge that is likely best described by a changed leadership climate—one that is different from what existed 30 years prior. The focus today seems to be more measured and reflective. The emphasis in the 1980's was toward a quick response to an identified adverse situation.

Q5: "To improve teamwork, an effective police leader _____."

The top responses from the T2 group identified the following top elements: "Seeks Involvement/Input," "Communicates Effectively," "Delegates Appropriately," "Meets with Groups/Individuals," "Gives Credit/Praise.' The T1 group was more focused on taking charge, as their top responses were: "Identify Team Leaders," "Provide Direct Guidance," and "Avoid Delegation" (of critical issues). Kuykendall and Unsinger (1982) found a similar focus of police leaders of this era in their study of police leadership styles. Police leaders in this time were more likely to avoid seeking input and avoided delegation as both were viewed as risky. Burns and Shuman (1988) similarly found that Police Chiefs during this time may have desired more participative organizations, however, in that climate it was described more as Benevolent–Authoritative.

Q6: "When explaining a concept an effective leader _____."

The T2 group identified a focus on ensuring effective communication and a heightened importance on taking responsibility for message communication. Their top responses included, "Makes it Simple/Simplifies," "Offers Examples," "Makes it Relevant," and "Relates it to Goals/Mission." The T1 respondents offered the following: "Simplifies it," "Speaks to Get Understanding," and "Makes Sure the Message is Understood."

Q7: "Employees respect a true leader because they _____."

The T2 Group identified the following top characteristics: "Honest/Fair/Have Integrity," "Lead by Example," "Are Knowledgeable/Competent," "Display Empathy," and "Walk the Talk." Similarly, the T1 group identified "Honest and Knowledgeable" in their top responses; however, they also identified the following: "Are Tough," "Are Feared," and "Run a Tight Ship." Here again, we see a historical cultural influence in a more directed focus that demanded compliance in the past and a more humanistic focus today.

Q8: "The more you know about _____ the better manager or leader you can be."

This was one of the most dramatic difference noted. The T2 group's top responses were: "Human Behavior," "Your Employees," "Yourself," and "Interpersonal Skills." The T1 group had a much different mindset or focus on this question as their top responses were: "Policy," "Procedure," The Law/Rules" and "Politics." Glaringly absent was the more humanistic approach identified in the T2 group.

Q9: "A safe assumption about employees is that they are all_____."

The T2 group identified: "Human," "Different," and "Focused on Themselves" in their top responses to this question. The T1 group identified "Human/People," "Focused on Themselves," and "Need More Training."

Q10: "As a leader, a good practice is to listen for _____."

There was great agreement from both groups on this question. Both T1 and T2 identified the following in their top responses: "Feedback," "Disagreement," and "Understanding/They are Getting It." This demonstrates the view that effective leaders must be attuned to their audience.

Q11: "When someone is criticizing you, the worst possible response is: _____"

As with the previous question, there was great correspondence on the responses offered from both groups. Collectively they identified the following: "Lose Control/Anger," Become Defensive," "Counterattack," "Blame Others," and "Take it Personally."

Q12: "As a police leader/chief what advice has served you well?"

There was similarity between the T1 and T2 administrations of the survey with the following identified in their top responses: "Be Honest/Fair," "Be Open-Minded," "Think Before Acting," and "Know Your Limits." The T2 group also identified "Be the Model for Others," Respect Employees," and "Support Others and They Will Support You." The latter responses were seemingly reflective of

a more positive focus on individual contributions and a leadership shift toward seeing employees as a valuable resource versus a commodity.

Q13: "As a police leader/chief what was the worst advice you received?"

There was a great deal of overlap with this question as well. Top responses from both groups included: "Your are the Boss/In Charge," "Don't Trust Employees," "Make Your Own Decisions-Don't Seek Advice," "Never Change Your Minds-it's a Sign of Weakness," "Treat Everyone the Same," "Focus on Discipline," and "Never Be Friends with an Employee." The advice here was likely passed down from those who previously served in leadership/management roles and may be reflective of the style and approach to leadership that existed in the past.

Q14: "What are the biggest mistakes that police leaders/chiefs make when it comes to discipline?"

This is a general question rather than one focused on personal experience. Again, there was wide agreement in the responses from both groups. High on the list were: "Lack of Consistency (Deed & Reaction)," "Overreacting," "Jumping to Conclusions," "Criticizing / Embarrassing Others (in front of peers)," "Focus on Punitive rather than Corrective," and "Leniency."

Q15: "What do you know now that you wished you knew before becoming a police leader/chief?"

The responses from both groups included: "How political the job is (and everything);" "The importance of communication and interpersonal skills;" "Better management/Leadership skills–more knowledge and training;" "How to better deal with criticism;" "The stress, the pressure, the hours;" "How to better delegate"; and "The Importance of Knowing When to speak and when to remain quiet."

DISCUSSION

The ability to examine leadership attitudes from a group of Police Executives and the opportunity to compare those to a similar sample of Police Executives from three decades earlier is unique. Though the questionnaire might have been better refined for the current administration, the ability to gain insight from administering a 30-year-old survey to a similar group of individuals serving in the role of a Police Executive/Police Chief was valuable. This process allowed the capture of both the current experience of these executive, as well as some indications as to how the climate of police leadership may have changed over the past three decades.

There was great agreement with a number of the questions. The valued characteristics and qualities associated with strong leaders found that "Honesty" was the most important for both groups. Both also identified "Competence" and "Vision." The current sample

(T2) rounded out their responses with traits of "Compassion" and "Inspiration;" whereas three decades ago the focus was "Fairness" and "Courage." This may suggest a greater emphasis today on the humanistic focus in leadership (Dinh, et al., 2014).

When looking at the skills question (Q3), it is noted that "Communication" was at the top of both lists. In fact, this has been found in several other examinations (Dantzker, 1996; Krimmel & Lindenmuth, 2001; Kuykendall & Unsinger, 1982) of necessary leadership skills more generally. Delegation was also mentioned by both groups and has been one of the most often cited training needs in surveys of criminal justice practitioners (Garner 2014).

The question addressing how one handles adversity (Q4) finds a difference between these two groups. In the past (T1) the focus seems to be on taking action and responding assertively or quickly. The T2 group offered more reflective responses, suggesting it was best to remain calm, stay positive, and seek input. Similarly, with the question related to improving teamwork (Q5), the current respondents identified that it was important to seek input, meet with groups, and give credit and praise. Consistent with the findings of Kuykendall and Unsinger (1982), the T1 group from the 1980's had responses that were more focused on taking charge and being directive. The environment of that time suggested that delegating or soliciting too much input was a risky venture and leaders of the day were cautioned to avoid oversubscribing to these type of practices (Burns & Shuman, 1988).

Thought the item dealing with effectively explaining a concept (Q6) found agreement from both groups, the question regarding why employees respect a true leader (Q7) seems to offer a differing historical context. Both groups had similar responses related to "honesty" and "competence;" however, the T2 group of today offered that "empathy" and "walking the talk," best explained how a leader earned respect. In the T1 group, the focus turned to more directive behaviors such as "being tough," "being feared", and "running a tight ship'" The leadership culture of the day was more directive….and the emergence of litigation concerns highlighted the need for tight control (Rowe, 2006; Schafer, 2010; Stamper, 1992).

One of the most dramatic differences was found in the item asking, "The more you know about___ the better manger or leader you can be" (Q8). TheT2 group's top responses centered on a humanistic approach to leadership with answers such as "Human Behavior," Your Employees," "Interpersonal skills," or "Yourself." By contrast, those in police executive roles three decades ago were more focused on knowing the rules, procedures, and policies. This was an administrative orientation that was popular at this time that emphasized the need for control in order to be effective (Rainguet & Dodge, 2001; Rost, 1991; Stamper, 1992).

Many of the remaining questions (Q9, 10, 11, 12) found strong correspondence between the groups and questions Q12-Q15 were more general experience question items (What served you best? worst? etc.) Strikingly, the Q15 question dealing with what the chiefs wished they had known before becoming a police chief or law enforcement executive found near perfect agreement between the groups. Regardless of the decade in which

police leadership was occurring, there was a desire to be a better communicators, to better understanding the pervasiveness of politics in the job, to have a greater understanding of the stress involved in the position, and the desire to have had more leadership-specific training and knowledge before assuming their leadership role.

The ability to utilize a questionnaire that was administered to a group of individuals serving in the role of police executive/chief in the 1980's provides an opportunity to examine some of the changes in leadership style, philosophy, and practice. The present study allowed a glimpse of the environment in police leadership today as compared with police leadership occurring three decades ago. The most obvious difference seems to be a recent managerial movement to a more humanistic approach. Leaders in the past were likely worried about losing control in a changing leadership landscape and the emergence of increased cases of complaint and litigation that defined the period. Additionally, attitudes toward employees during this time saw them more as a collective resource rather than individual contributors. Today's leaders have been exposed to these dynamics for their entire careers; they have always known a world of litigation and lawsuit. They have emerged in policing during a time when the public trust in effective policing has not been as strong as in times past. As evidenced from this study, current police executives and leaders have embraced a more employee-centric focus and developed a more humanistic approach in their leadership style. With regard to preparation for their leadership role, the findings here suggest a consistent message that spans three decades. Police leaders need to be better prepared for this dynamic position (Rainguet & Dodge, 2001). Police chief "survival" courses would do well to profit from this information and ensure that topics such as communication effectiveness, the challenges of politics, general leadership theory and application, and stress/criticism management be a part of their curriculum.

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