

LEADERSHIP AS A POLICE CHIEF: ADVICE FROM THOSE WHO'VE BEEN THERE

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A series of open-ended questions was posed to a group of Texas municipal Police Chiefs to identify the challenges they experienced during their first year in this leadership role and to identify the advice they might offer to a newly appointed Police Chief. Additionally, information was collected on the participant's perceptions of essential personal traits necessary for effective leadership as a Police Chief, as well as traits that might cause Chiefs to fail. The participants were involved in a recurring and mandated statewide educational program for Texas municipal Police Chiefs. Texas communities employ more than 1,000 municipal Police Chiefs who serve in geographically and demographically diverse settings throughout the State. The results identified several important areas for consideration that could be helpful for individuals who aspire to this top-level position or have been recently appointed. Additionally, based on these findings, suggestions regarding topics for police executive training are offered.

Keywords: police, police chief, leadership, traits, characteristics

It has long been a goal of researchers to better understand what traits, characteristics, or circumstances may provide an advantage for one to be a more effective leader (Garner, 2017). Practitioners and scholars alike have struggled with the conceptualization of leadership (Bass 1990, 1999; Conger 2013). Over the years, scholars have offered hundreds of definitions of leadership (Garner, 2009; Rost, 1991) and various points of emphasis have been stressed during the last few decades.

Numerous theories of leadership have been developed in the past half-century. The trait-specific theory of leadership 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 with a greater emphasis on how certain knowledge, skills, and abilities might be developed to enhance one's character and performance in order to become a more effective leader (Garner, 2017). This focus forms the basis of the more relational approach to leadership we see becoming more popular today (Day, 2001; Northouse, 2015).

Though leadership research abounds, including the impact that certain traits or skills may have on leadership success (Conger 2004, 2013; Goleman, 2004), much less evidence exists related to leadership effectiveness in the area of policing and law enforcement. (See Burns & Shuman, 1988, Dantzker 1996; Garner, 2009, 2014, 2017; Ranguet & Dodge, 2001; Sarver & Miller, 2014; Schafer, 2009, 2010.) This study will specifically focus on these characteristics as they relate to those at the top administrative position within a law enforcement agency.

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 an emphasis on skills and abilities, but on the interactions that occur between leaders and followers. Unlike times past, the examination of successful leadership explores not only the leader, but the situational components and the importance of the followers involved in the leadership dynamic (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2015).

The present study examines the responses of Texas Police Chiefs who have served in that role for more than three years. The approach was designed to emphasize a more reflective consideration by the respondents. The particular focus is on the actual experiences and advice of those who have served in this role and how that might be relevant and instructive for those newly minted Police Chiefs or those who aspire to that role in the future. Several researchers have expressed the importance of traits or skills (Bass, 1990, 1999; Zaccaro, Kemp, & Baden, 2004) in leadership success, as well as the significance of learning from the experiences of others who have been in a similar role (Hughes, Ginnett, & Curphy, 2015).

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 567 law enforcement leaders who identified as having three or more years as a Police Chief or Assistant Police Chief. 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	12%
40 to 59	77%
60 and Above	10%
Education/Highest Degree	
High School	13%
Some College	15.6%
Assoc. Degree	18.5%
BS-BA	29.5%
Grad Degree	19.3%
Gender	
Male	94%
Female	6%

Materials

Participants were provided with an open-ended survey that asked several broad questions related to effective leadership traits, skills and experiences.

The survey items included the following questions:

- “Thinking back on your first 6 months as a Police Chief, what was the most challenging issue you faced for which you felt somewhat unprepared?”
- “What is the most important advice you would offer to an individual who was newly appointed as a Police Chief?”
- “From your perspective, what are the traits/skills that you believe are essential to be an effective leader in a policing environment?”
- “From your perspective, what traits/habits/skills or lack thereof, cause police administrators to fail?”
- “What activities, habits, steps, techniques, etc. have you personally employed to help you become or remain more successful as a Police leader?”

Procedures

Participants were provided with an informed consent agreement and were asked to complete a series of open-ended question items that assessed their thoughts and opinions about leadership traits, skills, and circumstances, as well as advice they would offer to future Chiefs. 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. The instructions highlighted the importance of their opinions and experiences and how their contributions could provide guidance to others entering the field. The participants were encouraged to offer as many examples, expressions, or comments as they desired.

RESULTS

Because of the qualitative and experiential nature of this study, no effort was made to quantify or artificially weigh the comments offered by the participants. Each participant was allowed the opportunity to provide as many responses as they desired on each question. The responses were coded as to topic and a representative statement embodying the topical area was developed and reported. For example, responses such as “be a good listener,” “listen well,” “make sure you listen to others,” and so forth were coded to a single reflective category “Be a good listener” which captures the essence of several responses. Additionally, a representative descriptive statement followed the categorical topic that further summarizes the overall sentiment of the comments provided. The emphasis here is to

provide general information about opinions of leadership success (and failure), as well as practical guidance to others serving or aspiring to this leadership role.

Q1: "Thinking back on your first 6 months as a Police Chief, what was the most challenging issue you faced for which you felt somewhat unprepared?"

- The time commitments
 - The amount of time that would be required to oversee a 24/7 operation and address various community and municipal functions and meetings. Balancing personal and professional life became more challenging.
- Politics
 - Unprepared for the heightened attention to the politics involved in this position that were not nearly as obvious at lower levels of the organization.
- The budget
 - The budget was overwhelming and I had little preparation or training on the fiscal procedures.
- Dealing with the Media
 - The option to duck the media and defer to someone else is no longer available when you become the Chief. It would have been helpful to have had more exposure and training on how to deal with media requests and better answer their often pointed and sometimes accusatory questions.
- Communication
 - Many are good communicators; however, one must really learn to connect with those they lead. I knew communication was important and feel that I generally do a good job, but this role exacerbates your skills. Once one become the agency head, the responsibility is more focused on making sure you communicate effectively through various means available rather than trying to simply hold people accountable for getting the information you may have intended.
- Discipline issues with personnel
 - Discipline was often something that was pushed to the top administrators to handle, however, once you are the top administrator the entire weight falls on you.
- Accountability

- This role is very visible and every action is made with increased scrutiny. Every decision has the potential to rise to a higher level and review. One no longer has a personal life that is private; everything is open and one is held accountable for every action.
- Delegation
 - A better handle on how to more effectively delegate and what to delegate would have been helpful. It can be a struggle to determine what can be delegated and dealing with becoming a micro-manager to ensure things are done correctly.
- Staffing Issues and Administrative Personnel Issues
 - It was more of a challenge than expected to address the hiring, firing, and other administrative issues. Had no idea that one needed to be an expert on FMLA and other related labor laws.
- Understanding the Culture
 - Policing can have a unique culture and it is easy for individuals to become suspicious and not feel supported. A better understanding of how culture impacts the actions and decisions made within an agency would have been very helpful. A class in the psychology of groups would have been useful.

Q2: “What is the most important advice you would offer to an individual who was newly appointed as a Police Chief?”

- Be honest
 - People can tell if you are being less than honest and the damage can be irreparable. Keep your word and don’t promise things that you cannot deliver. If you are going to be a good leader you must be an ethical leader.
- Don’t “hide” in your office
 - If you want to be a leader you must be seen and your presence felt by those who are doing the daily work of the agency. You must practice MBWA – Management by walking around.
- Listen well and ask good questions
 - Unless you listen well you will not know what information is available or what others can contribute. Formulating a series of good questions can tremendously help in gaining knowledge and providing you with the data for more informed decisions.
- Network with others in your position

- Others who have held or currently hold similar positions have likely experienced many of the issues you are now addressing. Their counsel can be very beneficial and help to ensure that you are not unnecessarily ‘plowing ground’ that has already been tilled before.
- Seek as much relevant training and education as possible
- Professional development is key to being successful. Read, study, and seek information and advice from others. Experience is important; however, do not overlook what others found and what research may offer. The more you know, the better leader you will be.
- Learn to better deal with criticism
 - The inability to handle criticism or be ‘thin-skinned’ is a tremendous liability for those in this role. As the figurehead of the agency, the spotlight will always shine on you first and you must be able to handle the heat. Similarly, you must be prepared to offer criticism in a manner that is more positive than offensive if you want to maintain the respect of those in the organization.
- Be alert to the potential for burnout: Sharpen the Saw
 - This relates to making sure that you take care of yourself in all of the dimensions of your life; professional, personal, spiritual, and so forth.
- Be flexible and open to change
 - Inflexibility and rigidity are detrimental characteristics for those in the role of Police Chief. The world and the environment is always fluid and one must be willing to adapt as necessary.
- Practice patience
 - Be patient with others and yourself. Over-reacting and unnecessarily rushing to a decision absent good information are the opposite of careful reflection.
- Be humble; Don’t become a braggart
 - “Humility” and “humble” both come from the root *humus*, which means down to earth. So to be humble is to be down to earth and most people will respond more favorably to one who is humble versus one who is arrogant.
- Make good decisions and trust yourself
 - The decisions made in the Chief office have the potential for impacting everyone else in the agency and, sometimes, even the wider community.

Pride yourself on careful reflection and weigh all costs when making a decision---then trust that you have done all you can to make the best decision based on the information available.

- Be fair and consistent
 - You must not play favorites. All of your decisions will be open to review and scrutiny. Others will constantly be examining your actions and decisions to see if they are consistent with what has occurred before and if they pass the fairness test.
- Be respectful, even to those who may not deserve it
 - In this role, it is to your advantage to be respectful in your manner with others. They may not return that courtesy; however, ultimately you will be viewed the better person.
- If you make a mistake, own it
 - Everything will not always work and not every decision will be a success. However, to ensure your own credibility, if you make a mistake do not attempt to hide it, scapegoat it, or blame others. Better to be upfront and acknowledge this issue.

Q3: “From your perspective, what are the traits/skills that you believe are essential to be an effective leader in a policing environment?”

- Effective Communicator
 - One must connect with their audience and have the ability to effectively provide their vision and their message.
- Honesty and integrity
 - One cannot be situationally honest.
- Maturity
 - Maturity begins when one can appreciate that other perspectives are not always unreasonable.
- Intelligence balanced with common sense
 - Some can be educated but not practical. This job requires both.
- Effective Listener
 - One must listen first in order to know what is really being addressed. People feel valued when others listen---even if they cannot fix the problem.

- Model positivity and ethical behavior
 - Leaders must be the front-and-center model for their expected behavior.
- Decisive
 - A chief cannot suffer from analysis paralysis. Once the facts are in, a decision is necessary. Failing to make a decision is actually a decision in itself.
- Ability to see the big picture and not get lost in the trees
 - Leaders must have the long view of what is important. One must be able to see beyond the ‘noise’ of the immediate circumstance.
- Accountable
 - Work hard and hold yourself accountable first.
- Ability to focus
 - Focus on what is truly important which may not be what is easiest to accomplish in the short run.
- Resourcefulness and ability to innovate
 - Police Chiefs are often dealing with limited resources, both fiscal and human. One must be able to adapt and innovate to accomplish the mission.
- Ability to empower self and others
 - People want to be valued and contribute. We must find ways to empower others to reach their potential.
- Balance work and personal life
 - A life out of balance will not benefit either dimension. Strive to set boundaries and value both.

Q4: “From your perspective, what traits/habits/skills or lack thereof, cause police administrators to fail?”

- Focused on self-interests; egotistical
- Fail to effectively listen
- Being a know-it-all
- Poor communication abilities
- Inability to effectively work with others

- Lack of respect for cultural or generational differences
- Lack of personal accountability
- Fails to connect with others; seldom interacts with others or gets out of the office
- Overly aggressive behavior which often covers incompetence
- Laziness and lack of drive
- Reactionary
- Indecisiveness
- Inability to deal with criticism or scrutiny
- Inflexibility
- Lacks emotional connection or empathy
- Unresponsive to the needs of others
- Lacking confidence

Q5: “What activities, habits, steps, techniques, etc. have you personally employed to help you become or remain more successful as a Police leader?”

- Read, study, and prepare for leadership; seek education and experience
- Develop a guiding vision with goals and plans in advance
- Focus on strategic changes that are meaningful
- Enhance my spiritual and social connections
- Keep focused and down to earth
- Ensure decision pass my integrity test
- Help others succeed – that helps me succeed
- Seek balance in all that I do
- Be willing to walk away/give up the role if integrity is compromised

DISCUSSION

The ability to identify and examine the responses from a large sample of current Police Chiefs can be instructive in our understanding of leadership in this dynamic role. The experience and wisdom shared by these participants can help others in the field who may aspire to that role or who are currently serving in this or a similar role. Some may find

comfort that their own experiences or struggles are not unique. Others may realize that there are areas in their leadership approach that might benefit from the guidance offered by these police executives. Additionally, several of the topics identified, particularly in those areas for which the Chiefs felt unprepared, may help to better develop administrative education and training programs for police executives.

Currently serving Police Chiefs identified a series of challenges when first assuming their administrative role for which they expressed concern and for which they felt ill-equipped to handle effectively (Q1). To be clear, not every respondent will experience all of these concerns and each topic offered may be present in varying degrees, based upon the situation and background of the particular individual. However, as a collective, these topics should be carefully considered by those who offer law enforcement educational, training, and executive development programs. Though many such programs offer information on various leadership theories and application, this study suggests that added effort should be directed to the more practical aspects of the role, including issues related to time-work balance, the political environment, budgeting, media relations, effective delegation, and understanding the organizational cultural influences.

One question (Q3) asked the respondents to identify essential traits for effective leadership as a Police Chief. These responses provide insight on those aspects of the role that should be considered for leadership success. Again, the more practical facets of the role regarding topics of effective communication, listening, decisiveness, and various psychological and emotional factors (psychology of leadership, emotional maturity and intelligence, empowerment, accountability) were highlighted by the participants. (Also see Dantzer, 1996; Garner, 2017; Krimmel & Lindenmuth, 2001; Kuykendall & Unsinger, 1982; Rowe, 2006.) Though effective communication and decision-making are often found in training and development programs for policing professionals, far fewer consider topics such as the psychology of leadership or enhancing ones emotional intelligence. The present study would suggest these essential elements, as identified by those serving in these executive roles, should be considered.

The survey question (Q4) identifying what traits, habits, or skills (or lack thereof) resulted in leadership failures is equally instructive. It is not enough to emphasize what might help one to be successful, one can also learn much from failure. In some ways, many of the areas identified by the Police Chiefs that related to failure are the antithesis of those which were identified as leading to success. For example, effective communication and listening skills were considered essential traits; however, in responses to this question the lack of those skills are identified with leadership failure. A review of these areas could help an aspiring administrator to identify pitfalls to avoid and assist executive development program coordinators to supplement their curriculum with fact-based evidence that was born from the experiences of leaders serving in the role.

Finally, two questions asked the respondents about advice they would provide to a newly appointed Chief (Q2) and insight as to what approaches (Q5) successful Chiefs have employed to remain on-track in their leadership role and continued development.

Continuing education, strategic focus, work-life balance, and attention to personal and professional integrity are highlighted. Knowledge, skills, and abilities are best supplemented with a viable strategy to remain an effective leader. It is more than simply knowing the information, the best practice or the most likely successful approach to a given scenario. Of equal importance is having a plan to better ensure that one actually follows the path they have previously identified.

The collective wisdom of more than 500 Texas Police Chiefs on essential leadership traits, characteristics of effective leaders, and useful strategies to ensure leadership success is important in our understanding of leadership and its application in this unique environment. The real challenge will be to translate this data into a meaningful education and development program that will better prepare future leaders for this challenging role.

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