Employee Retention in Law Enforcement

Sergeant Joey Brown, Orange Beach Police Department
Captain Dustin Burlison, Walton County Sheriff's Office
Sergeant Steven Mahan, St. Charles Parish Sheriff's Office
Chief Stephanie Hollinghead, Fairhope Police Department
Sergeant Jerrod Sheffield, Baldwin County Sheriff's Office

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Abstract

Within this Capstone Project, we will conduct research in the area of Employee Retention in Law Enforcement. Agencies all over the nation are struggling to fill vacancies, and they are also struggling to keep valued employees. As Captain Abrashoff (2012) explained, 65% of employees leave their job because of their manager; our research will look at ways to improve the leadership capabilities of supervisors and how the organization may measure its effectiveness. We will look at ways organizations can create an environment that fosters inclusiveness and communication from every one of their employees so they may feel like they are a part of something much bigger than themselves. Additionally, our team will explore how organizations may build better relationships within their community, thus building avenues for employees to express their "Why." Our team will conduct research through reviewing literature and evaluating efforts that may already be underway by other organizations.

Employee Retention in Law Enforcement

Law enforcement agencies all over the country are experiencing difficulties in retaining qualified officers. In recent years the profession has been plagued with negative news media and relentless assault over social media, often based on incorrect information. This recent onslaught has driven our profession's more experienced officers to retire because they do not feel they are appreciated. This is especially heartbreaking for them because in the early years of their career our profession's courage and bravery were as demonstrated for the world to see during the attacks on 9/11. The response of the firefighters and officers on scene led the nation to show respect and love towards their public safety professionals. Additionally, our nation's workforce is now largely made up of the millennial generation and their needs or expectations are not met by traditional law enforcement. According to www.Gallup.com, (Adkins, 2019, para. 4) 60% of millennials are open to different job opportunities. One of the major reasons is "only 29% of millennials are engaged at work, meaning only about three in 10 are emotionally and behaviorally connected to their job and company. Another 16% of millennials are actively disengaged, meaning they are more or less out to do damage to their company. The majority of millennials (55%) are not engaged, leading all other generations in this category of worker engagement". Additional problems leading to lower retention rates have to do with a poor agency culture, often brought on by leaders refusing to be adaptive to their team and causing a toxic environment that potentially leads to poor community relations. While these obstacles seem insurmountable, there are ways that agencies can be intentional in creating an environment that entices employees to stay, builds upon their leadership ability, and rebuilds relationships with their community and the media.

Culture

Successful employee retention is essential to an organization's stability and growth. A law enforcement organizations culture is the shared set of values, beliefs and attitudes that guides the agency. An agencies culture is a key component that reflects the way leaders in the agency treats its employees and how the community views the organization. The culture of the organization has a huge impact on the candidates that you attract and the reputation of the department. Abrashoff (2012) advised," As I saw it, my job was to create the climate that enabled people to unleash their potential" (p. 29). When a law enforcement organization has a strong work culture it will boost productivity, improve employee engagement, and decreases a turnover rate. In every organization a work culture will naturally form within and will determine its success. In the absence of a strategic vision, effective communication, recruitment, officer development, and compensation process, an unfavorable work experience will be cultivated where good employees will want to seek other employment. However, leadership within the organization must be deliberate with establishing a clear image and initiatives that creates a positive work culture that will inspire the department's subordinates to flourish. The culture inside the law enforcement organization is the personality of the agency.

Moody (2002) revealed "leader's lead with a strategic vision that portrays how the future is supposed to look" (p. 118). This type of vision assists the generations below in a way they will understand the big picture to keep their "buy-in". During the twenty first century, agencies have been challenged during a worldwide pandemic. Though, when principles are instilled, it generates a positive work culture that helps guide them through challenging times and reduces retention. Next, an effective open line of communication strategy must be implemented so employees don't begin to feel disconnected. When the employee becomes cut off, they will begin

to look at other employment opportunities. This lack of internal communication will cause the organization and the ones within to fail at building a collaborative and productive environment for employees to prosper. Law enforcement executives must display a commitment to model culture at the highest level. Doing so will create a positive work culture where employees feel heard and valued. For example, reflect on implementing a recurring internal electronic newsletter that shares critical information with the team. Turvey (1999) reflected "that the quality of the leader's communication influences our decisions, and the quality of our decisions dictates our outcomes" (p. 473). Engaged employees will invest everything into the success of the agency that will build leadership trust. The recruitment and development processes are a critical component to keeping subordinates over the long term. Scott (2017) stated "a great leader defines excellence and inspires their organization to exceed through the development process" (sec. 3).

By establishing an effective orientation procedure in beginning of the new hire's tenure will help to integrate the individual with information about how to cope with the demands of the workplace. This will help build interpersonal rapport that will assist in binding the team together as a cohesive whole in building a wealthy culture. The development process will constitute a visible investment that the company makes within the employee. When the employee is provided with new skills and greater competencies it builds confidence and will make them want to stay with the organization. If there is not a clear and defined career path for employees, with established goals and changes it will be very difficult for any organization to retain an employee long-term. The leaders of the organization must ensure they take the time to outline a development path for every employee and performance benchmarks that will go a long way in reducing turnover.

Employee Engagement

A common problem we see in law enforcement agencies is the lack of inclusion of lower-level agency members by their administration, often unintentionally. There are several causes of this, such as a lack of relationships, centralized command, implicit bias, or a lack of emotional intelligence demonstrated by leaders. While any one of these issues can cause a culture of separation, it is often a combination of factors that tend to cause issues. When those members, who are not involved nor feel like their problems are heard, they are left to feel as though their administration does not care about them. As Eric Therwanger (2017) conveyed, conversation leads to an empowered team. This tends to negatively affect the agency's ability to retain officers because those officers begin to look for other employment that fulfills their need to feel like they are a part of something greater than themselves.

To combat the vast number of officers leaving an agency, a leader must begin to build relationships with their team members. They can accomplish this by taking time to speak with their team members and learn about them, their goals, and their visions. When speaking on the subject, Lt. Col. Hal Moore (2019) stated that leaders should get out of their office and get to know their followers, take their advice and ideas, learn what motivates them, build two-way trust with them, and build strong alliances with them. By doing these things, the leader can now actively engage their team by ensuring the agency's values are aligned and ensure proper motivation for meeting expectations.

Some leaders fail to engage their team because they are afraid to fail, or they are afraid to give knowledge and power to their team because it will make them appear as though they are not needed. Leadership, however, is about empowering your people to make decisions without you. Every leader must make the mission, vision, and values unmistakably clear. Further, the leader

must take time to ensure their team understands the "Why" behind what they are doing. "People don't buy what you do, they buy why you do it." (Sinek, 2009) Then, they must be willing to delegate their authority in a defined manner and allow the team member to take control of the task. If they fail, the leader should realize it as an opportunity for them to learn and take the steps to teach them. By de-centralizing their command, the leader empowers each member of the team to accomplish the mission, thus allowing them to realize their full potential and buy in to the overall mission with enthusiasm.

Every person, regardless of their role within an organization, has developed some implicit bias. These biases are the result of their experience throughout their life, their education, and the media they consume. Implicit bias is tricky because we typically do not realize we have them until we truly become self-aware. Biases can develop when the leader connects with a follower more so than the rest of their team. It can happen very easily if they share common interests, such as a favorite football team, or if they have a longer relationship, such as they worked together previously. While these biases may seem trivial, they can destroy team cohesion because it gives the appearance of favoritism. As new assignments come up, the leader may rely on this person more than the rest of the team. They may also show them more leeway in completing their work. If gone unchecked, this relationship will be perceived as the "Good Ole' Boy" system and erode the foundation of the team. It is very important that the leader take an inventory of how they behave with each team member to ensure equity. If they find a lack of equity, it must be addressed in a way that makes the team stronger.

Emotional intelligence is another area in which many leaders struggle and fail to realize the impact they leave on their team. As a leader, we must show empathy to our followers. Every person on our team is struggling with something in their life, and as we build relationships with

them, we must learn to understand how they feel. Being empathetic towards our team lets them

know that we do care, and we will take care of them. Additionally, our reaction to them affects

their willingness to build those relationships. As Daniel Goleman (2017) says, "People look to

the leader to set the tone." If we constantly lash out, or act as if we are uninterested in them, they

will begin to develop the same attitude towards our mission. Every leader must regulate their

emotions and respond in manner that brings clarity to the issue, instead of making it worse.

Communication

Currently, the shifting environment within law enforcement being so contentious,

employee retention is something leaders must concentrate on and find solutions to. It is no secret

that the applicant pool for law enforcement officers leaves a lot to be desired. It is imperative that

leaders work hard to retain the desired personnel they have. As leaders we must ask ourselves

what can we do better or what can we do differently? According to Caitlin Percival of IC Thrive,

the leading cause of turnover is lack of engagement (Percival, 2022). Why are our employees not

engaged? The main root cause is the lack of proper internal communication (Orrick, 2018). As

leaders, we must analyze how well we communicate with our employees and how effective we

are in delivering the department's mission, vision, and goals. Employees are generally satisfied

when they know their purpose in the agency and what they are working towards.

Employees who do not feel engaged or involved tend to disconnect. When this occurs,

other employment opportunities become more attractive. When organizations lack internal

communication, they fail to build collaborative work environments for their teams. Employees

tend to isolate because they are not forwarded opportunities to be heard or engaged. Creating an

environment of open conversation within the organization is important for retaining the best

personnel. Actively listening to employee questions, addressing employee concerns, providing

feedback, and employing recommendations are standards for effective leadership. Open

communication is necessary for promoting greater employee performance and higher employee

retention. Open communication encourages higher quality work, understanding of important

policies, and helps build a relationship of trust between members of the agency (SHRM, 2021).

There are sensible ways to make communication the standard in organizational culture

while improving morale and improving the rate of employee retention. By combining

information and inspiration, employees will feel empowered to engage in the future development

of the agency (Percival, 2022). The goal is to constantly and consistently update employees on

important developments within the agency while showing them that they are important assets to

the growth and success of the organization. Allowing employees to express their thoughts and

concerns, allows positive engagement opportunities and buy-in to the overall mission of the

agency.

When agencies emphasize communication employees feel valued, satisfied, and

motivated, which enhances their morale and increases their output (Orrick, 2018). Developing

this type of organizational culture is valuable in that it helps organizations fix problems as they

arise. Open communication is a win-win for all involved because it keeps everyone in the know

and allows others to feel connected and accountable. Feedback is critical in reinforcing good

behavior and addressing performance issues before they become a problem. Supervisors who

consistently use feedback help their officers build self-confidence and achieve peak performance

which secures officers to the department.

Feedback provided frequently is vital to having a satisfied workforce. Employees want to

know how they are performing and what they can do to improve. When supervisors do not

provide frequent feedback, often poor work habits form which often results in needless mistakes, complaints from citizens, and managerial issues (Orrick, 2018).

An important facet of retention is communicating recognition on a public level. Employees need to know that they are valued. Feeling valued is a basic human need and good behavior that is recognized will more than likely be repeated. According to the Society for Human Resource Management (2021), a public reward and recognition system is a positive force in retention efforts. Leaders must seek opportunities to recognize good behavior by utilizing personal contact, regular meetings, relaying information to senior leaders, and informal gatherings. Positive reinforcement is one of the easiest, least costly ways to enhance good performance.

Communication is just as much listening as it is speaking. Every conversation should be a mutual exchange of ideas in which involved participants are allowed the opportunity to communicate their thoughts and ideas without interruption. This should be the rule for everyone in the organization, from the highest-ranking official to the entry-level employee. Consistent open meetings, provide opportunities to highlight creative or innovative procedures to address problems.

When used positively and effectively, communication often becomes an essential factor in the organization's long-term success. It is vital that leaders keep the lines of communication open, the extra effort will pay off in the end when your best employees are invested in the growth of the department.

Using Media in Retention

In Law Enforcement agency retention, we must consider the power of the media in all its forms. Forms of media include television, written, and the newest, social media. Part of retention is pride in an officer's agency and its vision. As police, we sometimes forget we are the community, and we must have pride in what we are doing. Dr. Mathers (2022) said," If your community trust you, they will trust the information you put out." As we all see and know, media coverage can destroy an agency's reputation, with one negative story destroying any bank of quality public contact that has occurred. We, as law enforcement, need to harness that power and use it for good. We should use it to show the daily acts of heroism and selfless service our agency's men and women daily. We accomplish complex tasks and do amazing acts each day as law enforcement. Through recognition, we stand to build inclusiveness and communication from every one of their employees so they may feel like they are a part of something much bigger than themselves.

In showing the community the virtues that our agency displays, we will recognize our employees' individual contributions and provide recognition to them for their work. Employees are quickly becoming younger, have grown into a social media culture, and are savvy to communicate through platforms like Facebook or Tic-Toc that previous generations are not accustomed to. That recognition and gratitude will reflect a culture of employees meeting the vision, providing the initiative, and the overwhelming integrity of our agencies. A flood of positive information provided will outweigh any negative sentiment.

We will plan to use the agency's P.I.O. (Public Information Officer) to record what our employees are doing and document their successes. It will be a way for the organization to communicate with the public and bring pride to what is being done. Dr. Long (2017) defined

organizational communication as "the symbolic act through which organizations adapt to, alter, or maintain their environment for the purpose of achieving goals." Our goal in this endeavor will be to spread examples of our agency's culture and bring pride to our environment.

The supervisors and employees will be asked to photograph and document events or occurrences they are proud of and forward them to the public information office. The P.I.O. would then be relied upon to organize and prepare the events and use the media available to them. Media platforms such Facebook, local newspapers, and television.

Through Facebook, the P.I.O. would be needed to generate a daily post, not only showing the agency's successes but reflecting the individual virtues of different employees. Through feedback, employees will see a daily reminder of the community and agency's impact from their individual efforts. Bringing that pride into their jobs builds loyalty for service.

The P.I.O. would need to bring stories to the local newspapers and present them with ideas of interesting people and events occurring. The newspapers depend on information about tragic events from law enforcement, and the agency could use that connection to provide positive and effective communication to shine a positive light.

Television being the most potent media source, it is also the most challenging to harness. Like all media, television functions on sales. The challenge will be to provide information on events that television news will deliver to the public. The P.I.O. should bring forward the extraordinary acts and occurrences that are sometimes overlooked or passed by in recognition. The P.I.O. should be providing stories for the nightly news of actions or virtues our employees illustrate that improves the community giving the employees a pat on the back and building better morale for all.

Leadership Strategies

As human beings we see ourselves becoming more and more opinionated in the various areas of life. There are various ways that us as individuals often have random thoughts about a particular event or situation in life and automatically formulate our opinions into a thought. This is certainly an issue in public safety. Developing good leadership proves to be essential in all aspects of life. Sometimes our reaction may not be best suited for the situation at hand, and we should strive to recognize this and change how we approach it especially when recruiting and retaining new prospective officers. This can be achieved and addressed through training on the topic and developing a different mindset as to how we deal with it so that we as an agency better retain the ones who work within our agencies. Dr. Alia Crum defines a mindset in one of her lectures entitled Change your mind-set, Change the game. She identifies a person's mind set as a lens or frame of mind which orients an individual to a particular set of associations and expectations (Crum 2014).

Not only should our mindset as law enforcement officers be changed but the mindset of the public's view on us should also be changed which includes our ability to choose the right person for the position we intend to fill. This can be achieved through a variety of ways one of which is for the public to be engaged with law enforcement in a manner that does not dictate a negative impact on them. In law enforcement we find ourselves becoming involved in a lot of bad things that sometimes makes us lose that touch with the ones that are truly appreciative of our mission and what we represent as an agency. I often find that sometime during the day people are thanking us for the job that we do and are encouraging us to maintain the course and continue serving the community because they see the need for our existence. Additionally, including the public in events such as coffee with a cop or a weekly session dedicated to hearing

the publics concerns may prove to be beneficial for all involved. Having a way to include the public in restoring unity into the community takes them being a part of the overall change. Once this change is evident, this may produce the desired outcome of a person taking a buy-in for the organization and may result in them wanting to be a part of the change by joining the agency and promoting this change to those around them.

Choosing people with the right mind-set at the beginning of the hiring process can be essential in the overall success of retaining them in the future. Being an agency that promotes all aspects of the position in a way that is inviting to others will filter into them also recruiting ones around them and adding to the pool of great candidates who will choose to remain with the agency even in hard times. The agency as whole may develop programs to better retain officers so that the fear of them departing from the agency will be minimal and overtime this will change the culture of the agency and produce quality officers who remain dedicated to the profession of helping others.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this capstone research has shown that law enforcement agencies struggle with filling vacancies and retaining qualified employees. This capstone has looked at improving leadership capabilities to better the organization's effectiveness. This capstone regarded ways of fostering inclusiveness and communication from every employee to feel a part of something bigger than themselves. This paper discussed and used the agency's culture, employee engagement, communication, and even the media to control declination of retention. Through the techniques and examples displayed, agencies can better reach employees to help them relate to their role and contribution to the larger vision. As a part of that vision or tenure of the "ship," we can retain the personnel whose value to the agency cannot be replaced.

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