

Current Climate and Morale in Law Enforcement

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Abstract

A current topic that is critical in police leadership is the challenges of keeping morale high throughout the agency, especially with the current political climate involving law enforcement. Over the last couple of years, law enforcement has been in the spotlight and hostility towards the profession has increased drastically. Maintaining high morale is challenging enough, but even more difficult when it seems as though every decision is being evaluated or criticized. Law enforcement agencies are currently experiencing recruitment and retention challenges, which is making it more challenging than it has in the past. The quality of new officers still needs to be high and finding individuals that have the appropriate qualities and are willing to work in a job that isn't always favored by the public can be extremely stressful, which has been frequently decreasing morale all over. There may not be one solution to those large problems, but administrators and leaders being more cognizant of issues in helping morale can exponentially assist the organization moving forward in a positive direction.

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Law enforcement has always been a challenging and dangerous job. It has greatly evolved over the decades, and it was usually considered a well-respected profession. However, over the last few years, the challenges and overall perspective from the public and media has shamed law enforcement and the officers that work in it. Numerous community activists' groups have formed with demands of law enforcement transparency and change. These new community expectations have created a paradigm shift within law enforcement impacting morale within agencies.

Significance & Purpose

Decreasing morale and an increase in hatred and negativity towards law enforcement, creates an extremely toxic environment for all that are involved. With that toxic environment not being broken, it creates issues with retention and recruiting new officers (IACP, 2020). Within the context of a toxic workplace, effective leadership is not only critical but also significant. Though leadership may not be able to address and fix all external issues such as community expectations and media negativity, it can focus on solving some of problems within the agency. As a result, effective leadership can help boost morale and encourage new officers to work in the profession. The purpose of this topic is to find ways for agencies to help boost morale within their department. If leaders can focus on issues within their own agency first, that will hopefully help the retention problems that they may be having. Once retention has been stabilized, recruitment can be the next focus.

Literature Review

There are thousands of law enforcement agencies throughout the United States. These agencies vary in terms of the number of officers employed by them. There are perks to having large agencies and there are also positive aspects to having a smaller agency with fewer officers. Some of the larger agencies have well over 1,000 officers and some agencies have as few as 50 officers including jail and dispatch staff. Larger agencies may have more officers to cover calls, handle large situations, and to use for any open shifts, but that doesn't make it a better or more of a positive agency to work for. A lot of the officers are unfamiliar with each other, and most likely never will even meet. According to Morin et al (2021), police in large organizations are several times more likely as those in small organizations to say they are never asked for their input. It would be extremely difficult to get serious input from all officers in a large department. It would take a lot of time and effort that a lot of leaders would claim not to have. If officers feel like they have a say or that their input matters, they will likely feel more supportive and take initiative in some of the decisions that are made by leadership. It is easier for management to reach out to all of the officers in a smaller department.

The decrease of morale within agencies could have several different causes but the impact will most likely be negative and will impact job performance the same way. Officers say that they have become more disconnected and are twice as likely as those officers that feel empowered within their organization to be disgruntled (Morin et al., 2021). If officers are already frustrated, putting them in stressful situations will only elevate the frustration and will cause them to be more hostile towards others and have more of a "hands off" approach. They may be reluctant to do anything that causes additional conflict or creates extra criticism from

their management, the public, or the media. If officers are more passive in their job, this could cause additional harm to them or others and may even be fatal.

In smaller agencies, it appears to be easier to notice and address low morale issues. Officers will more likely know each other and be able to address issues as they occur. For larger agencies where officers may not know many of their fellow officers, numerous issues will likely go unnoticed or be considered “normal”, and therefore, never addressed. Unresolved issues may escalate other problems in the organization. A poor work environment promotes negative behavior from employees, bad work performance, and a high turnover rate, creating additional overtime causing employee burnout. An agency that is known for its negative attributes will negatively affect future recruitment and retention.

Recruitment and Selection Process

Over the last decade, the ability for law enforcement organizations to recruit quality candidates to fill their ranks has changed drastically. Looking at the hiring processes in Wisconsin in 2011, it was a regular occurrence for an applicant to compete against several hundred other candidates seeking the same position. In response to such high interest in the law enforcement field at the time, agencies were forced to adopt several different hiring process techniques to narrow their applicant pools. One such technique was the use of standardized testing. Candidates were required to appear in person to complete a written test. If the applicant was not able to attend the scheduled date and time, they often were removed from the hiring process. These tests were then graded and only a certain percentage of the highest scores were considered for further evaluation. Those chosen to move on in the hiring process were then further scrutinized and the numbers lessened by challenging physical fitness courses and psychological examinations. Once the candidate pools were lessened to a manageable size,

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agencies conducted in person interviews, with some having multiple interviews on multiple days. These interviews then lead to final candidates receiving extensive background examinations before offers of employment were made.

Comparatively, in 2021, Wisconsin agencies are consistently seeing single digit or low teen numbers of applicants for openings. It is not uncommon for agencies to get the same applicants multiple times for a position even if they chose not to hire them in past processes. The use of standardized written tests is all but gone due to the lower number of people interested in entering the law enforcement career, as is the requirement of completing physical fitness examinations. Agencies are also finding that if they interview a quality candidate they may be interested in hiring, that it is not unusual for that person to have also applied at one or more other agencies and they run the risk of the other agency offering the candidate a position before they can do so (Personal Communication, 2021a). According to the International Association of Chiefs of Police (2020), over half of the agencies they surveyed have changed their agency policies in order to attract or increase their chance of attracting qualified applicants. As of June, 2021, 89 different law enforcement agencies are recruiting new employees, some of which are seeking to hire more than one employee and also maintain a list of eligible candidates for future openings.

In Wisconsin, law enforcement academies are run by technical colleges with the exception of only a few organizations that conduct their own training academies. Based upon information gathered from these technical college academy programs, there has been an increase in the number of agencies sponsoring academy students over the past few years (Personal Communications, 2021b). Law enforcement agencies are finding that in order to attract and employ worthwhile candidates, they must be willing to sponsor a newly hired officer by paying

for their academy tuition as well as paying them a wage while attending the academy. With the academy in Wisconsin taking a minimum of 720 hours of instruction to complete, agencies are forced to invest in an employee for a significant amount of time before being able to start their field training program and fill their ranks with a solo patrol officer. This is contrary to the common practices of just 10 years ago where the norm while seeking employment in law enforcement was for an interested candidate to put themselves through the law enforcement academy to be more marketable to agencies while applying. Academies themselves were much more competitive in 2011. An application process consisting of written essays and in person interviews was required to narrow the applicant pool for high demand academy spots. Today, technical colleges are running at less than full capacity for some sessions due to lack of candidates.

Employee Retention

Employee retention has become a struggle for many agencies across the country, particularly with the ever-growing call for police reform, defunding of police, and prolonged periods of civil unrest. In September 2020 the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) distributed a survey to its members inquiring about officer resignations and retirements between June 1st, 2020 and September 1st, 2020. The survey was completed by a variety of different agencies sizes. The results indicated that 36% of agencies saw a higher-than-normal number of resignations and retirements compared to the same time frames over the previous 5 years. It also found that large to medium sized agencies were more likely to see a higher turnover percentage than a smaller agency (2020). PERF also asked 200 law enforcement agencies to name the three most common career/life changes identified during exit interviews. In that survey, 171 of those agencies identified departing employees as leaving the law enforcement career altogether (2019).

Personal/Professional Experiences for Recruitment and Retention

To analyze employee retention within the St. Louis County Sheriff's Office, information was informally received from several individuals, including those with the assignment of hiring and training as well as from individuals who have recently left the agency. The St. Louis County Sheriff's Office is a medium size agency in Northern Minnesota with 250 staff and about 115 sworn deputies. While analyzing information, the focus was on the number of individuals applying to the agency and overall employee retention. As the datum was reviewed, several critical timeframes were identified. The first was pre 9/11 (late 1980's through 2000). The second was pre-Ferguson (2000-2014). The third was pre-Minneapolis (2015 – 2020). The fourth and final timeframe was post-Minneapolis, from 2020 to the present. Ultimately, the data showed significant differences between these timeframes. In the pre-9/11 era, the St. Louis County Sheriff's Office saw, on average, 300-400 individuals applying for open positions. The average number of new positions open each year was about 6. This statistic was consistent throughout the region, and competition for law enforcement jobs was very high (Personal Communication, 2021c).

In the pre-Ferguson era, the St. Louis County Sheriff's Office began to see a steady decline in individuals applying for open positions. The average during this era was around 125-150 individuals. The average number of new positions remained consistent at around 6 per year. In both the pre 9/11 and pre-Ferguson era, the number of annual retirements also remained constant at about 2-3 per year. The retention rate among newly hired deputies remained consistent at around 80% per hiring group (Personal Communication, 2021c).

With the incident involving Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, in 2014 (A&E Television Networks, 2020) and the subsequent backlash against police violence, which led to

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protests and riots, law enforcement agencies began to see effects of employee retention. The pre-Minneapolis era saw a significantly decreased number of individuals applying for open law enforcement positions. The St. Louis County Sheriff's Office saw only about 50-60 individuals on average apply for open positions. Conversely, during this time, there was a general increase in unexpected retirements due to PTSD and those who chose to leave the field altogether. The agency also saw a slight decrease in the retention of newly hired deputies at around 70% per hiring group. In addition, the number of open positions increased from about 6 per year to approximately 10; this was mainly due to an increase in the number of deputies leaving through retirements or other unexpected reasons (Personal Communications, 2021d).

Since the incident involving George Floyd in Minneapolis in May 2020, law enforcement, in general, has seen stark effects related to the retention of officers. The St. Louis County Sheriff's Office saw the retention rate of newly hired deputies plummet to around 36%. While the applicant pool decreased slightly, there was a marked decrease in the number of quality applicants. The low retention rate resulted from recruits failing to pass the psychological exam, physical exam, academy, and field training process. This era also saw an increase in the number of open positions. Of the 14 new deputies hired, only five have been retained (Personal Communications, 2021d).

In addition to the low retention rate of new deputies, the St. Louis County Sheriff's Office also saw a marked increase in the number of retirements. The agency has seen 12 retirements in the past year, which is around 3-4 times higher than average. The agency also saw two individuals resign their positions, both of whom went to other agencies. It was learned many of these employees chose to retire earlier than expected; many felt the current climate of law

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enforcement was overwhelmingly negative and specifically pointed to politicians, the media, and recent law changes in Minnesota (Personal Communications, 2021e).

As of March 1, 2021, law enforcement officers in Minnesota are now held to a different standard concerning the use of force, specifically deadly force. This new law, which was passed quietly without input from the general public or law enforcement agencies (Orenstein, 2021), creates rigid new requirements for officers before they can employ the use of deadly force. This includes a three-part test and a ban on using deadly force on fleeing felons. These abrupt changes seemingly went into effect overnight and put many agencies into a frenzy to catch up on employee training and education. This abrupt law change has been specifically cited as a reason many chose to seek early retirements.

The other area where the St. Louis County Sheriff's Office saw retention problems was an increase in early retirements related to mental health disorders, primarily PTSD. Recent studies have shown that PTSD among law enforcement may vary between 7-35% (Lilly & Curry, 2020); this rate is, on average, much higher than the general population. Since early 2020, the St. Louis County Sheriff's Office saw four deputies take early retirements based on PTSD issues. Some of these issues were related to officer-involved shootings, which have increased dramatically. The agency has seen four officer-involved shooting incidents since 2019, which is about 300% higher than average. Many deputies leaving the agency feel that a sharp increase in violent crime and gun offenses and general disrespect toward law enforcement (fueled by the media and politicians) has been to blame. The result among the agency in the high employee turnover rate and lower retention has led to decreased morale overall. By the end of 2021, the St. Louis County Sheriff's Office is expected to have between 17-20 open positions, consisting of over 15% of all sworn staff. With so many open positions and an increasing workload, the employees

left behind must deal with a more significant burden. This greater burden increases agency stress, which becomes a vicious cycle.

Leadership

The results of the St. Louis County Sheriff's Office employee morale and retention study highlight three areas that seem to be the most significant. These areas include recent law changes and the political climate, a lower quality applicant pool, and an increase in PTSD or other early retirements. When looking at declining morale within law enforcement, it helps to clearly define what is the root cause of the declining morale while clearly defining morale is. Morale is commonly defined as "the spirit of a person or group as demonstrated by confidence, discipline, and a willingness to perform assigned tasks," according to Merriam-Webster website, (2021). Morale also "symbolizes a dedicated spirit which unifies individuals toward a common goal", Merriam-Webster, (2021) says. How we as leaders work through this, ensuring the vision and mission of the organization are kept in a clear light. When the vision and mission of an organization becomes cloudy, the ability to enact positive changes becomes infinitely more difficult (Abrashoff, 2012). It is important to take a step back and think about what is the most important part of the job each day for leaders. Leaders should take a minute to write down the negative effects of low morale and compare that to your most important task that you identified. This author fervently believes that our most important task as leaders is to ensure everyone goes home safe at the end of their shift. The negative effects of low morale in personnel will directly affect the likelihood that leaders will fail in their primary task. A small case study was utilized from a personal organization breaking down a division with historically low morale and how leaders can make immediate positive influences. These changes will bring about better morale leading to enhanced officer well-being, both professionally and personally, reduced citizen

complaints, increased retention, and an overall increased esprit de corps. This creates a work environment where personnel are proud to be a part of while achieving the overall mission of ensuring all personnel go home safely.

The focus of this research will clearly outline what is causing the morale and retention issues within the Corrections Division of the organization being examined in this case study. The first identified core issue is forced overtime and lack of consistent leadership. When we look at the issue of forced overtime, which plagues many agencies; leaders need to work through this issue which is directly causing the following negative organizational effects; reduced officer retention, fatigue, chemical dependence, depression, increased divorce rate, low organizational morale and increased citizen complaints (Personal Communication, 2021f). Forced overtime is a direct result of lack of personnel coupled with improperly deploying those personnel increasing the amount of forced overtime. When organizations view their personnel as a number and lose sight of the person, then the willingness and drive to solve the forced overtime issue becomes moot.

Supply and Demand

As leaders within an organization who examine issues of retention and attracting quality applicants it is important that we utilize the business concept of effective demand. (Choudhary, n.d.) To stay away from a full detailed economics paper into what is “effective demand” we will utilize the viewpoint of: supply plus demand with equal the output. Currently law enforcement/corrections have a reduced supply (amount of personnel attracted to the profession combined with decreasing internal retention) with a high demand equaling low numbers and decreased morale. An understanding of this principle will assist law enforcement and corrections leadership with a road map to improvement, increasing morale and retention. Over the past 10

years law enforcement/corrections nationwide has reduced benefits (health care, pensions, longevity) in the effort to curb costs (Peterson, 2015). This has led to a situation where law enforcement and corrections can offer pay comparable to the top 1% of comparable agencies yet still see low retention and forced overtime.

Emotional Intelligence

Implementing a project for a police agency involves empowering employees and emotional intelligence. Giving people that are being led, the tools and confidence to do their jobs and to be leaders as well, will help boost morale and give employees a sense of ownership in the agency. As part of implementing a new process, an agency should look to hire and promote individuals that display a high degree of emotional intelligence and are looking to improve emotional intelligence amongst staff. Leaders within an agency should create a nurturing environment. The lack of consistent leadership may vary from organization to organization, but the core concept is the same; authentic leadership is desperately needed, and lack of authentic leadership directly correlates to decreased morale and reduced officer retention (Hartman, 2003).

This cycle of rotating true authentic leaders into the correctional setting with a plan to quickly move them out while retaining weaker leaders in the division over the past 25 years has directly caused a leadership void within the correctional setting. This in turn has lowered morale and decreased officer retention. Numerous studies have shown that the top reason that personnel leave a job is due to their boss. These are solvable issues and should not be viewed as insurmountable obstacles. It is believed that when the below steps are implemented, within 180 days morale will significantly improve along with increased officer retention.

Improving Morale

The implementation of an employee improvement team would be an essential component in the process in increasing morale and increasing retention. When implementing change within an organization it is vital to create ownership of all involved. Creating this ownership will have untold benefits while at the same time an accurate picture is being created ensuring the appropriate changes are being implemented.

Creating a culture within the organization that nurtures and develops the leadership capability from day one is a long-term solution to the issues of low morale and reduced retention. As leaders we need to empower those, we are tasked with leading. We will see creative solutions to issues aligned with the differing generations within our organizations. The vicious cycle of immediately pulling strong, authentic leaders from one division will continue to leave a leadership void while exacerbating the issues of morale and retention.

There is a correlation with the issue of forced overtime and the need to implement the concept of effective demand when it comes to personnel within law enforcement (Personal Communication, 2021g). When personnel are being forced to work double shifts several times week with no end in sight, they are more apt to leave the agency or begin displaying the negative attributes associated with fatigue. This author having spoken in depth with our officer's union representatives believes that a short-term solution would be to offer double to double and half time for all weekend shifts worked. This would immediately stem the forced issue short term and leveling off the downward trend in morale and retention. Creating that positive work environment is a direct correlation to retention and morale. As leaders within an organization, the implementation of an employee improvement team will clarify what is important for our personnel.

When our personnel feel that they are taken care of and respected, organizations will see an increase in morale and retention. According to Abrashoff, (2012), we as leaders need to set high expectations for our personnel and organization. When our personnel meet and exceed those expectations, we need to publicly reward them. As leaders getting out of the office and speaking to all areas and personnel under our command will create that personnel connection.

Adaptive Leadership

We have discussed several issues related to morale and the impacts it can have on an agency. Morale can be used as a gauge to determine the overall health of an agency and its limits for what it is capable to achieve. It becomes critical for leaders to understand what steps they can take to continuously monitor and improve morale within their agency. In article written by Johnson (2019) she states, “we know what low morale produces, but high morale is not only necessary for a healthy department, but also for healthy members. When morale is high, there is a buy-in to the goals and the overall mission of the department. High morale helps officers cope with the day-to-day demands, the ups and downs of the job, and with issues and discouragement that often coincide with police work” (para 7). An 8-step process for improving morale within an agency is as follows (Johnson, 2019): First, give credit where credit is due. Always praise in public and discipline in private. Second, start looking for the good. It is very easy to see the bad or the wrong, but be intentional to notice officers doing things right and reward accordingly. Third, stop micromanaging. If you hire someone to do the job, then let him or her do it. You obviously thought they were qualified when you hired them. Mistakes will be made, but those are learning moments. Morale can drop if your officers don’t think you have faith in them. Fourth, plug in and mean it. Get to know the officers you are in charge of. Show real interest in them and their families. You may begin to better understand your officers and you may see

issues they are facing because you took the time to care. Fifth, work on eliminating unnecessary conflict. Stress is a part of life, but no one needs additional issues to deal with. Address any and all conflict so it does not affect morale. Sixth, as a supervisor, ask your crew what you can do to help increase morale. Set the example by acknowledging your responsibility to help increase morale. Seventh, try celebrating birthdays, promotions, etc., while on duty. This is a small gesture, but it really goes a long way. Lastly, communicate openly, honestly and most importantly, positively.

In a lecture by Chief Gary Benthin, he discusses leadership characteristics. He provides insight about arguably two of the greatest leaders in history and how they utilized methods similar to Olivia Johnson's 8 steps to improve morale amongst their followers and increase their success (Johnson, 2019). Chief Benthin (2017) indicated both Captain Michael Abrashoff in his book, "It's Your Ship" and Abraham Lincoln in the book "Lincoln on Leadership" show leadership styles consistent with authentic and adaptive leadership. When discussing similarities between Abraham Lincoln and Captain Abrashoff, Chief Benthin (2017) stated, "great leaders get out of the office, let followers get to know you, learn what motivates them, take advice and ideas, build two-way trust, build strong alliances, encourage innovation and risk taking, empower subordinates, give credit when due, and accept responsibility for failures, repeatedly share vision, set goals and achieve results, lead by example, influence by conversation, practice honesty and integrity." These leadership practices have proven to be effective and allowed both Abraham Lincoln and Captain Abrashoff to build a strong reputation of being authentic, credible and adaptive leaders. They both understood the need to have followers with a healthy morale to be successful.

Conclusion

It is apparent that morale, retention, and recruitment issues are widespread throughout many law enforcement agencies. Not only are those issues prevalent in many areas, but they are challenging to fix, especially with the current climate throughout the country towards law enforcement. Law enforcement used to be a competitive profession to gain access. Now it seems as though there are very few people that want to join due to all of the tension and hostility towards officers. This, in turn, has decreased morale and drive in current agencies and officers. In a leadership role, it is extremely vital for those individuals to recognize the problems within their department, and come up with ways to address them. It is clear that having a plan and a process to fix them is what needs to occur. Without that, nothing will change and things will likely continue to get worse rather than improve. Empowering all people to be leaders regardless of position or rank within an organization creates ownership encouraging positive agents of change.

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