

Current Recruiting and Retention Challenges in Public Safety

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Abstract

Today's environment has realized significant challenges with regard to recruiting and retention efforts in public safety organizations. The field has experienced broad, negative impacts to service models across the United States, especially of late. As a result, severe staffing shortages and experience deficits have become problematic throughout the field, potentially endangering the public. Such has been widely reported in both mainstream media and professional research venues. Thus far, no agency has been immune. This phenomenon has affected large and small agencies alike. Accordingly, the focus and purpose of this research effort is to explore and identify the most prevalent root causes of recruiting and retention deficits in the public safety arena with proposed solutions grounded in a solid foundation of leadership and adaptability. In addition to examining the root causations of recruiting and retention deficits, considerations will be offered regarding emerging technologies, socio-political implications, solutions to retention and recruiting issues and the appropriate role of leadership in addressing this dilemma.

Current Recruiting and Retention Challenges in Public Safety

Recently, recruitment and retention rates in public safety organizations throughout the United States have reportedly exhibited a marked decrease (Minock, 2021; Roufa, 2021). There have been many postulations regarding root causes of this phenomenon, in addition to reported exacerbating circumstances, which have added a new degree of complexity to this issue (Roufa, 2021). Commercial and social media outlets have reported unparalleled difficulties in both hiring new police officers and retaining those already on the job (Mintzer, 2021). Many of these colloquial assertions are buttressed by professional research efforts. Accordingly, the resultant perception of the public is that the law enforcement system's ability to successfully achieve their mission of protection and service is significantly diminished (Cain, 2021).

Human factors have also been identified as an exacerbating ingredient. The lack of sleep and increased stress levels of officers, likely a result of staffing shortages, have created a dangerous cycle. It is difficult to sell retention to officers who have no life-balance. In turn, these issues have likely played a key role in retention of experienced police officers (Harrington, 2021).

Additionally, there is a broad sense in many communities that public safety agencies have less of a focus on diversity in their recruitment and hiring practices, which has further fueled dissatisfaction with the police, holistically. In reality, the public's perception does appear to have some degree of efficacy (Tuccile, 2019). Leaders in the public safety field have opined the woes of recruiting and retention, especially in the last few years (The Marshall Project, 2019). Law enforcement leaders have broadly warned that recruiting has suffered from a myriad of recent events. These assertions have identified a general displeasure with policing agencies, to include tactics and practices held by the public as untenable, lower salaries, an improved economy and

personal danger, to cite but a few. Further, socio-political aspects associated with the low esteem afforded to those in the law enforcement profession have been mentioned and widely reported (Bing, Harrison, Branch, & Coston, 2017).

Civil unrest throughout the country has provided a significant, recurring platform for those who wish to advocate for heavy police reform. Not all of these suggested reforms are negative. Many, such as intervention policies, have sound reasoning. However, some of the more radical suggestions, such as defunding police agencies, staff reductions, and a moratorium on equipment and technology upgrades may have the effect of impeding recruitment and retention efforts.

A recent report from South Carolina also highlights the dual problem of recruiting and retention. A discussion between media and the Director of the South Carolina Criminal Justice Academy revealed one third of new training graduates have already left the public safety field. The Director cites low morale, from a lack of appreciation, as the main culprit. The Director goes on to report that departures in past years have lingered around 7%, but most recent data has shown a marked increase of just over 23%. This has occurred as South Carolina has seen an unprecedented rise in crime (Mintzer, 2021). This debacle seems to be echoed across the country.

Ironically, much of the public's ire with the police may actually be infringing upon their own safety as policing capabilities potentially diminish (Horowitz, 2007). This has been widely reported in the media and this perception continues to unfold as police reform is considered by national, state and local leaders. Not surprisingly, these occurrences also have the potentiality of severely curtailing diversity recruitment within the law enforcement arena. Long a standing bedrock principle of community policing efforts, diversity recruiting, and efforts to craft police

agencies that mirror the communities they serve, are put at substantial risk (Bing et al., 2017). Such issues can potentially wreak havoc on an agency's ability to achieve its mission, meaningful and necessary police reform, and sound succession planning.

Review of the Literature

As noted, there has been much coverage in the commercial and social media realms regarding personnel woes in the public safety field. Interestingly, professional examinations regarding this phenomenon also bear out the significance of this quandary. Recent efforts of numerous law enforcement research organizations and academics suggest there is cause for alarm when considering the continued safety of the public in light of deficits in recruiting and retention. Many of these reports have also brought to light an impending experience deficiency and succession crisis (Bing et al., 2017).

As the availability of data as to hiring, recruitment and retention among law enforcement agencies has significantly increased within the last few years, such information was not always so prevalent (Boyd, 2005). Much of this enhanced tracking can be attributed to more diversified technologies and better organized human resource efforts. The development of these new and enhanced practices offers a more specific view of practices associated with recruiting and retention in addition to aspects that affect such efforts. Further, such provides analyses of areas of opportunity in this regard. Accordingly, data are more prevalent with regard to agencies singularly, as well as collective evidence overall regarding new officer applications, retirements (both early and full-term) and resignations.

Cultural Considerations

Another consideration, and certain predictions as to recruiting and retention, is offered by Boyd (2005). He posits that law enforcement agencies represent an unparalleled culture, one that

must be considered when examining this phenomenon. As the public safety field has developed, many mindsets associated with traditional values and practices regarding retention and recruiting moved from a perceived stoicism to more progressive thinking. Generation X and Millennials have increasingly joined the ranks of law enforcement, bringing new practices and ideas that challenge dated processes. These include understanding the reasons public safety exists, the typology of individuals best suited for such an undertaking in addition to the development of a more service-oriented stance. New, developing cultures were identified several years ago that foresaw the significance of more partnered approaches with communities. Those expectations have transferred to more recent events as these predictions have come to fruition and are likely to continue as the field adapts to more specifically identified expectations of citizens regarding what their public safety apparatus should imbibe.

Professional Branding

Orrick (2007) recognized this emergence when postulating the importance of core values and branding, identifying both as being fundamental to recruitment and retention. He goes on to explain that an alignment of personal values between an agency, illustrated by successful branding, held a higher degree of potential success in anchoring the purpose of an agency's efforts in line with personal values of employees. Orrick's (2007) premise is that success in tying these concepts together, remaining adaptable and fluid, would incorporate a culture that formed a partnership between agencies and their members, thereby decreasing turnover and attracting solid candidates for entry into the field.

Orrick (2007) also identified the importance of illustrating branding via technological advances, such as the internet, by using such as a communications platform. Doing so ensures highly visible means of communication and has the potentiality of broadening interest. He also

lauds the importance of involving news media outlets in this regard. In his work, Orrick (2007) reinforces the need to reach more recent generations through social media outlets such as Facebook, Twitter and YouTube.

This concept also supports the use of career fairs for exposure, recruiting through cultural and religious venues to attract local interest, and apprenticing programs. A mainstay of Orrick's (2007) work includes the embodiment of viral recruitment. In doing so, he explains the importance of word of mouth. In essence, the attraction and employment of high-quality recruits is likely to pay dividends by association. The successful candidate, if they are content and happy with the agency, act as recruiters in their own right by encouraging like-minded individuals to apply for employment, thus broadening the potential applicant pool.

Internal Factors in Retention

Although Orrick (2007) addresses outside factors in retention, such as job availability in general, he focuses on internal factors as being the key to retention efforts. Of course, salary is of high importance, but he places an emphasis on proper agency leadership. He conceptualizes this tenet as the primary factor in retaining good team members. The development of leaders throughout an agency renders archaic practices of poor treatment obsolete. That is a key principle at the outset of retaining officers and ensuring stability and appropriate succession planning. Citations of poor hiring, or poor job matching is also considered, along with the issue of employees not feeling as though they are making a difference, as significant roadblocks to retention. He offers several over-arching strategies to further increase retention, to include accurate job matching, task force assignments, teaching and mentoring opportunities, and accountability. His most important perspective, however, centers upon providing a healthy team environment.

External Influences

Orrick's work is buttressed by an effort from Wilson, Dalton, Scheer and Grammich (2010). In their work, they cite decreased recruitment numbers due to a change in the complexities surrounding police work. Essentially, they posit that law enforcement agencies are competing with higher salaried fields, less schedule flexibility, and a diminished emphasis on commitment as being major factors in hiring. They further assert retention issues do and will continue to stem from an overabundance of baby-boomer retirements and budget crises as being key issues in the retention of experienced personnel.

Bing et al. (2017) build upon Wilson et al.'s (2010) concept and synthesizes their work to introduce the significance of diverse recruiting in building credibility and more successful workforces in the public safety arena. In addition to earlier mentioned roadblocks to recruiting, the effort recognizes the impact of recent and most current events such as community protests and the perceived optics associated with diverse candidates choosing a career in law enforcement. The research cites a cumulative effect of community unrest and improper police performance in regard to a diminished desire for diverse candidates to embark on a career with perceived low community acceptance. Findings also represent the importance of involving diverse agency members in recruiting efforts and pushing the message for inclusivity at all levels, especially in recruiting.

Building on that effort, in 2019, the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) offered further clarification of issues associated with respect to law enforcement recruitment. In their work, the organization cites then unemployment data as representing an availability of 7.1 million total jobs with only 1.3 million unemployed individuals. This data represents an overall accounting of available jobs and does not break down specific law enforcement vacancies.

However, of importance is that the reported data translates to a significant shortage of applicants for employment with police agencies when extrapolated amongst the approximately 18,000 organizations within the United States. Data provided goes on to reveal that, although an increase of newly funded positions have occurred, the increased population has surpassed appropriate ratios of citizens to officers. This imbues the public may be more at risk from crime due to thin coverage abilities, with 25% of reporting agencies indicating they have had to eliminate or significantly curb some services. Further data indicates 65% of respondent agencies assert a significant applicant deficit.

Additional Considerations

The IACP (2019) effort also addresses the criticality of understanding the cultural and generational variances in potential applicants. More recent applicants seek more of an equivocal life balance and flexibility in their employment options. IACP's (2019) offering indicates older generations may not be as concerned with such, and value more traditionally accepted practices. This long-held, and ill-advised acceptance may include heavy overtime and holiday assignments, as well as acceptance of dated management principles, which do not necessarily imbibe sound leadership principles. Like many other studies, the IACP (2019) suggests several means to address recruitment and hiring. These include, broadly, the inclusion of apprenticeships, compensation inducements, recruitment expos, and increased use of technology to push branding and outreach. More refined suggestions include, loosening applicant disqualifiers, and implementing refined leave policies.

In a 2021 effort, the Police Executive Forum (PERF) posits recent surveys that indicate respondent police departments report they have filled only 93% fillable vacancies. Further, there has been a 5% overall reduction in hiring of new officers. This seems minimal at first glance, but

the study only received 194 responses. Currently there are approximately 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States. Larger agencies reported a higher degree of inability to fill vacancies.

However, the numbers regarding resignations and retirements are alarming. Respondents reported an 18% surge in officer resignations in 2020-2021 when evaluated against 2019-2020. Retirements were reportedly 45% greater for the same time. The retirement data was consistent pro-rata for all large and small agencies alike. Some departments commented in the survey that they have experienced a 40-50% decrease in new applicants over the past fiscal year. Interestingly, many retirees are reported as wanting to remain in law enforcement but leave as a result of the current negative socio-political environment. The report cites significant issues with officer morale as being a prime factor in the exit of officers, not just from the agencies they have served, but the profession. Prognostications are that this trend will continue (Bing et al, 2017).

Potential Recruiting Solutions

Clearly, based upon the research, there are significant issues nationwide with respect to recruiting and retention in public safety agencies. However, these challenges are recognized, and solutions do exist to address these pitfalls. Both historical and more recent research offerings suggest several avenues to improve upon these challenges. These range from utilizing emerging technologies, partnering with social movement entities, and socio-political actions.

At its very basic form, recruiting must be a team effort. It requires skilled teams to realize recruiting goals. Authentic leaders serve an important role in recruiting by developing departmental visions and a mission that serves the public well. In addition, authentic leaders are adept at matching the right people in the right billets, essentially picking those folks best suited for recruiting new teammates. Leaders who inspire their subordinates, show caring and empathy,

and invest in people draw folks to agencies (Irwin & Normore, 2014). This integrates and aligns values of recruits with those of the agency. This comports with the selection of individuals most appropriate for entry into the field. Members of the recruiting effort must also represent the utmost in professionalism and have a thorough understanding that every officer will be expected to be a leader (Anderson, Gisborne & Holliday, 2017).

Emerging Technologies

While more traditional technology has been a major player in police departments across the country for some time, new and emerging breakthroughs have been on the rise. Drones, surveillance systems, facial recognition software, and body cameras are now taking their place on the public safety stage. The adaptability of agencies in implementing these advances is a key measure in attracting new recruits. New candidates have a keen interest in being involved in applying these tools in furtherance of public safety. For a new recruit, having these tools at their disposal spurs reinforcement of officer safety and affords more peace of mind.

Instant gratification is prevalent among the shifting culture in younger generations. Recruiting websites are being created in several agencies to accommodate this demographic. Among the advantages of utilizing websites in recruiting include immediate information as to the hiring process, qualifications and disqualifiers, and community outreach for recruiting events.

Utilizing mediums such as Facebook, YouTube and Twitter can enhance an agency's recruitment efforts. This may include advertising as to upcoming hiring events, recruitment videos, and efforts that give candidates a realistic view of an officer's typical tour of duty. They also highlight potential developmental opportunities and areas of special interest, to include specialized units and expectations associated with forging community partnerships. This enhanced communications outreach aligns with newer generations and highlights an agency's

willingness to invest in technology that improves their future safety as well as a platform that pushes the brand of a police agency.

Solidifying Agency Branding Via Emotional Intelligence

Interestingly, emerging technology can also be applied in agency branding, and such may have an important impact on not only recruiting but retaining officers. This serves to also create viable succession planning models for police agencies. Conroy (2018) posits the significance of matching promising candidates that may be inclined to remain with a department if their values and morals are aligned with an agency for which they seek employment. In doing so, Conroy (2018) suggests the use of emotional intelligence screening for new candidate classes is viable and further helps to sustain proficient succession planning.

By emphasizing emotional intelligence in the branding of an agency, expectations are delivered clearly as to how a department conducts business. Viable candidates are more likely to identify with agencies that have like-minded values and missions. Further, employees who are treated well by leaders, are given a measure of life-balance and allowed to provide feedback to leadership are more likely to commit when it comes to remaining at their agency. Accordingly, this has a direct effect on succession planning.

This is a win-win for potential new employees as well as hiring agencies. The ability to identify candidates with a high degree of emotional intelligence correlates with creating officers who will become authentic leaders. Essentially, such candidates will be more able to engage the public successfully, lowering the risk for excessive force issues and service complaints, while increasing acceptable options for resolving high-risk incidents. A more empathetic officer is likely to be more effective and tends to remain committed to service, thereby strengthening community partnerships and buttressing an agency's credibility with the public.

Social Movements

Although there has been some degree of angst, generally, among law enforcement agencies and social movements, such does not have to be the case. Police agencies must take the opportunity of newly developed dialogues between groups advocating for police reform, no matter how disturbing the rhetoric, and offer these groups a seat at the table. In doing so, an agency may wish to invite leaders of such groups to participate in discussions regarding hiring practices, especially in terms of diversity. Agencies must make an effort in this regard and should also consider offering participation on hiring panels. Such provides a venue for open dialogue regarding the difficulties of recruitment and lends credence to an agency's desire to be transparent. Further, it gives credence to the hiring process.

Political Actions

Positive and supportive political actions tend to enhance an agency's ability to attract lateral transfers, new recruits and enhance retention. An example would include the support and passage of budgetary means to allow for financial inducements or bonuses for newly hired officers by municipal and county governing bodies. Other considerations might include relocation allowances, take home vehicle programs and increased training budgets. Many departments may look to implement these types of programs, but may first need the approval of political bodies to move forward. The clear support of a political body for its law enforcement agency and its willingness to invest in the precious resource of personnel speaks volumes for recruitment and retention.

The Significant Role of Leadership in Retention

Magnanimous leaders can often affect whether officers remain engaged or leave an agency. Truthful leaders, with integrity, honor, and humility imbibe professionalism within the ranks of police officers. With the criticality of retention in succession planning, it serves the public's best interest to effect organizational change, when needed, to address this issue. Officers align themselves with individuals who embody professionalism (Normore, 2021). These folks can be relied upon because of their honesty and integrity. Police professionals desire to follow MAGNUS leaders who set high expectations, are action oriented, and are willing to stand with them.

Many officers leave the profession due to a leadership vacuum, or the lack of leaders who can provide a clear vision. The authentic leader addresses such issues by focusing more closely on retention strategies and providing potential solutions to such. These may include helping officers find a more tenable life-balance, increasing morale and buy-in via implementing progressive improvement teams. Further, the fact that authentic leaders are developed in an agency lends credibility, imbibes commitment and creates a professional environment of growth and service.

Transformational leadership approaches can also be effective in retaining experienced teammates. Leaders who best understand how to inspire, create, and communicate a clear vision and serve as role models will imbibe organizational change (Normore, 2021). In today's current environment, this will likely be necessary to address both recruiting and retention. It is imperative for leadership to communicate a clear vision and mission to foster a unifying culture. Most of those within organizations want to be a part of a unique experience. Oftentimes, this is associated with the characteristics of transformational leaders.

Personal and Professional Experiences

The research team, collectively, has several experiences regarding both recruiting and retention. The team concurred that retention seems to be more difficult at present than recruiting. This is in part due to the negative opinions and mindset currently noted in the media and, to some degree, the general public. These experiences include the loss of several experienced law enforcement officers not from the department, but from the profession. Additionally, the team agreed that diversity recruiting seemed even more difficult at present than recruiting as a whole. This too, has been attributed to the general lack of commitment from some communities with regard to policing agencies as well as a perceived discontent within diverse communities.

As leaders, the team concurs that transformational and authentic leadership approaches is best suited to address this debacle. The credibility, transparency and inspiration imbibed by the use of these approaches tends to support organizational change when needed. Concurrently, it is clear that organizational change is needed in a large quantity of agencies experiencing recruitment and retention issues. Proactively engaging in these practices allows us to push change as leaders, with a clarity that aligns with an agency's mission and values.

Conclusion

This effort has sought to provide perspective and solutions as to the debacle of recruiting and retention in law enforcement agencies. Several avenues of research were reviewed, which gave rise to an understanding of the problem in a holistic sense. This review also revealed widespread effect upon policing agencies from this phenomenon, which were identified.

In addressing the issues associated with recruiting and retention deficits, it is clear that a main theme emerges. An agency's credibility with the public plays a pivotal role in general recruiting, diversity recruiting, and retention. It is further of note that emotional intelligence can impact recruiting and retention and may even transform traditional models.

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