

Agency Perception: Recruiting and Retention through Community Relations

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Abstract

In this volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous society, agencies are challenged with transforming and adapting their pre-employment and post-employment retention practices. This paper will identify current obstacles, future challenges, and solutions to strengthen law enforcement legitimacy with our community partners. By addressing the obstacles and challenges, we will demonstrate how community relations can improve team member recruiting and retention for all agencies through the lens of an open system model. Creating a culture of leadership and proactively recruiting people with desirable attributes in pre-employment and post-employment stages will allow us to adapt toward the future of law enforcement. Adapting to law enforcement programs such as Critical Incident Training, Community Outreach Programs, Employee Recognition and transforming agency's culture to nurture and strengthen interpersonal bonds can build camaraderie between agency members and through the communities we serve.

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Our thoughts collectively were to address various aspects that are affecting our profession in the realm of recruitment and retention through community partnership. Many significant challenges affect this topic from law enforcement recruitment competing with the civilian sector for qualified employees, to those current social trends that are affecting our environment. These financial and cultural obstacles in recruitment further enhance the recruitment and retention dilemma, which has been an obstacle for law enforcement organizations on a national and local level. A Police Executive Research Forum study in 2019 indicated a 63 percent reduction in applications occurred nationwide during the previous five Years (Murdock, 2020).

The decline of recruitment comes from varying factors as mentioned, but one of the more impactful social issues which were not present in past generations was the recruitment of Armed Service Veterans. Global events on terrorism and the VUCA that is associated to that service have caused psychological (Post Traumatic Stress Disorder-PTSD) concerns with this particular applicant pool. With the growing public perception on the use of force and increased psychological health concerns for veterans who were involved in conflict, law enforcement organizations now face additional challenges from a once vibrant candidate pool.

As law enforcement organizations continue to recruit through varying practices (social media, intradepartmental hiring, and or outreach programs such as job fairs) the challenge is discovering an individual who will accept the public servant duties. These duties pose many negative and positive obstacles which have gained recognition over the last century through the notoriety of media. In addition to these recognized obstacles, the law enforcement community has to compete with the public sector, which is gravitating towards technology. With the

increasing trend in technology, our current and growing generations have become dependent and now associate themselves with this culture. The law enforcement profession is competing with this trend. Law enforcement recruiters in past generations were able to seek candidates because the job market was not competitive in this field. Financial compensation is imperative for an individual that has finished his or her undergraduate degree where the contributing reason would be to offset their living expense. The average pay for law enforcement in the state of Alabama is \$46,510.00, and Louisiana is \$42,470.00 (DePietro, 2020). The average salary for an individual in the United States is \$56,466.00, with an undergraduate degree in an entry-level position with technology (Bowman, 2020).

Financial and cultural obstacles in recruitment further enhance the recruitment and retention dilemma, which has been an obstacle for law enforcement organizations on a national and local level. Smaller agencies in Louisiana face challenges with recruitment with due to the increase in the number of hours that are required for an entry level officer to obtain their POST certification. This is problematic for smaller organizations which are under financial constraints based on their limited economic resources.

These opposing and emerging forces relating to recruitment has placed innovative ideas on law enforcement organizations to adapt new innovative concepts to keep our profession relevant in the job market to ensure we continue to provide a service to our community partners.

Organizational Communication Influence on Agency Operations

Without communication from leaders in an organization, or agency, officers will not know what is expected of them, thus, setting them up for failure. The goals and vision of the organization must be known, without ambiguity, by every member of the organization. Lack of

communication can lead to failed operations in the field. Every officer must know their mission for the department to be effective in achieving the goals. Agency communication must be stated clearly, concisely, and defined by those in leadership positions. Communication is the key to any successful agency, and the leaders in command.

Based on experiences with the St. Charles Parish Sheriff's Office, we have seen that several officers leave the profession, not due to pay, but for the way they perceived they were mistreated. Those officers who have left the agency felt that the administration did not recognize or appreciate the work they were doing. This was based off the lack of effective communications which failed in the chain of command. Several officers have resigned from the agency who perceived that favoritism was being blatantly displayed by those in command and staff positions. Those officers further discussed their dissatisfaction with the shift scheduling, citing that the constant change between days to nights and nights to days was affecting them in their officer wellness encapsulating stress, fatigue, and physical conditioning.

Perception through Community Relations

As law enforcement agencies face the ever-growing problem of retention of employees, it is vital that supervisors within agencies have a good grasp on emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence is defined by Mike Robinson as, "The ability to identify, assess, and control the emotions of oneself, others, and groups" (2019). Utilizing this skill, supervisors can retain current members within their agency by identifying problems officers are going through and addressing those problems with empathy and sincerity. By instituting the actions, officers are provided with a culture of trust and understanding. Officers will be more inclined to stay with a department, or leader, when that officer feels that trust and understanding exists between them, their supervisors, and their peers. Furthermore, by utilizing empathy in a manner to connect with

co-workers and subordinates, those people will know that you are authentic by your ability to consider their feelings and emotions, and then act accordingly.

In order to have successful agency retention there are many dynamics that tie together to create an atmosphere that promotes community relations, such as the emotional Intelligence while implementing Crisis Intervention Teams (CIT). This team plays an essential part in an agency and helps the officers with the appropriate training to build relationships within the community. CIT success to agency perception, is knowing that the CIT programs are built on partnerships among mental health systems and law enforcement agencies. There have been many rumors that CIT is a training program. CIT has been determined that CIT trainings are partnerships and community-based ownership's. When becoming aware of mental illness within the community, it's been learned that approximately 46 percent of homeless individuals live with a severe mental illness and at least 21 percent of local jail prisoners have a history of a mental illness condition (Normore, 2019b).

The goal for CIT programs when compared with non-CIT law enforcement officers and officers that has gone through CIT training were more likely to feel prepared for situations involving persons with mental illness, being more likely to characterize the local mental health system, and more likely to describe the emergency rooms as a big help to the community. While showing awareness in mental health issues and being trained in CIT, it's been reported that the officer feels more confident and has the ability to identify persons with mental illness and increases the response more appropriate for the initial call at hand. CIT officers become more knowledgeable about local treatment centers in the area to better assist in the community (Normore, 2019b).

In CIT training, studies showed where officers were more likely to refer or transport subjects with mental illness to health services, and less likely to arrest them. Having officers trained in CIT can impact the relationship with the community and strengthen the trust they have towards officers making it easier and better way to have people in your community wanting to be recruited to assist in the community. Knowing that when an encounter with a mental illness person ensues, it will show the public that the officer is trained, uses sound discretion, and is empathetic which shows compassion within our profession (Normore, 2019b). Utilizing CIT and being properly trained contributes to a very positive increase in referrals to psychiatric services rather than custodial arrest. Also, within several agencies it's been reported that CIT trained officers responding to persons with mental illnesses experience a reduction in injuries which could impact the agency or organization morale while maintaining a healthy budget for recruitment and making officers knowledgeable of their duties (Normore, 2019b).

While learning more on CIT in recruiting, the social networking has become a very reliable tool for all law enforcement agencies, as well as it being an exhibit of evidence for the court system in prosecution settings. In using social media, it can be used in assisting with recruiting, especially attracting the younger generations by sending powerful content through a familiar medium. Using social media for recruitment will give more exposure to the agency, while displaying a servant leadership to the community; being more transparent and illustrating the goals and morale that the agency will bring.

In recruiting, posting videos online via social media can show and reinforce the higher ideals of law enforcement: community service, duty, and honor. During the recruiting purposes, videos can drive home messages to the community and add a lot of humor and fun to the recruiting process, by showing the lighter side to law enforcement (Coats, 2018).

Human Factors and Leadership Connections

In retaining recruits, agencies must consider human factors that can impact public safety employees. Dr. Rosalyn Harrington defines human factors as “How our brain interacts with our body and decision-making ability during stressful incidents” (2019). As of now, some of the human factors that we must take into consideration is the animosity aimed towards police officers, as well as the pandemic of COVID-19. These are stressors that must be assessed and addressed with each employee of the agency.

Law enforcement has never seen the issues that these officers and supervisors are facing daily. Leaders of agencies must address these factors head-on to show employees that the agency supports them. Furthermore, in an aggressive attempt to retain employees, agencies should be willing to assist officers in dealing with the three human factors with the most significant influence on officers, “physical conditioning, the effects of stress, and the effects of fatigue,” as stated by Dr. Harrington (2019a). Agencies should provide officers with some incentives so that those officers can address any of the human factors that may be impacting their personal and professional performance. The International Agency of Chiefs of Police (IACP) resolution, as relayed by Dr. Harrington, is to “restrict duty hours, provide training, and adopt policies which shall minimize the effects of fatigue on officers prior to and during duty hours” (2019a).

Dr. Harrington said it is the agency and officer’s responsibility to implement a fitness and stress-reducing plan and make physical fitness a priority (2019a). By showing empathy toward what officers are now faced with, and identifying how these factors can impact those officers, retention of employees are attainable by providing those officers with de-stressing techniques. By implementing community involvement programs and building positive relationships between

officers and citizens tension are reduced. This assists in reducing stress levels in both the individual officer and the communities they serve.

Another vital consideration to assist in forging meaningful relationships is through trust and collaboration with our community partners to make sure agency demographics are equivalent to the demographics of the jurisdiction. For example, Lafourche Parish's demographic shows: 76.9% Caucasian, 13% African American, 2.4% Native American, and 2% Hispanic (Data, n.d.). In reviewing its Academy attendance for new law enforcement officers in the years 2016-2020, the following breakdown was noted: 76.8% Caucasian, 15.2% African American, 4.3% Native American, and 3.6 % Hispanic. Keeping this balance is imperative to maintaining the trust of that community.

Leadership Creates Culture Through Recruiting and Retention

Why are law enforcement officers leaving departments and either going to other agencies or leaving law enforcement altogether? The answers are varied, as well as complicated. There will always be turnover in law enforcement from retirements and young officers leaving because they discover that law enforcement is not for them. The key to officer retention can be found in leadership or more precisely, lack of leadership. The VUCA, including generational gaps, community relations, and environmental factors, are compounded by the impending vacancies that will be created in the next five years as up to 24 % of the current law enforcement workforce reaches retirement eligibility (Mordock, 2020). New York P. D. has seen a spike in retirements in recent months (strongly influenced by the current political climate), prompting them to move the normal walk-in process to a "by appointment" only process with 35-40 applicants per day (POL Staff, 2020). While this leaves a large hole in veteran leadership and knowledge, it also opens the door to addressing community involvement by tailoring recruitment towards

community-specific minority applicants. This is further supported by information that was acquired from open sources of information that has indicated retirement filings with the City of New York, between June 29, 2020, through July 6, 2020, provided a 411 percent increase occurred within this time frame in comparison from the year before. The employment retention status illustrated that 306-law enforcement officials retired where another 503 are currently pending with 40 resignations. This increase was significant compared to all of 2019, which showed 254 retired. This topic was supported by New York President of Captains Endowment Association, Chris Monahan. Monahan stated the numbers represented in the above-mentioned paragraph are due to a lack of leadership within the NYPD and the City of New York (Ziegler, 2020). This statement alone should send chills down the spines of any police administrator or politician, but it has not. Across the nation, police departments' budgets are being slashed because of the "defund the police" movement. In New York, Mayor Bill DeBlasio has cut one billion dollars from the NYPD budget. In Seattle, Washington, the city council wants to reduce the police departments' budget by 50% for the rest of this year and 50% next year. The Minneapolis City council has voted to disband their police department altogether, and the City of Los Angeles has cut 500 million dollars from the LAPD budget.

These are the most extreme examples of what is transpiring as of date, but it underlines a problem that law enforcement has been dealing with for a significant amount of time. That problem is recruiting and the question of why would anyone want to be a cop today? So as the number of qualified and interested candidates dwindle, it becomes imperative that agencies retain the officers that they have. How do we accomplish this daunting task? It begins and ends with leadership. Officer retention actually starts during the hiring process. Agencies must look to the future when hiring in the present. In other words, hire the right kind of officer. Officers must

be made to feel wanted and appreciated by their agencies. If an officer knows that his supervisors and police administration care about his or her well-being, they are more likely to stay.

It becomes the responsibility of department leaders to cultivate and develop a culture of leadership within the agency. Developing or subscribing to leadership training for all officers is an excellent way to show officers that they are all expected to be leaders both on the job and in their communities. Giving officers the chance to attend training to enhance their knowledge is also essential to retaining officers. Another way in which an agency can show officers that their efforts are recognized and appreciated is through some award system. Some examples would be Challenge coins, Certificates of Recognition, recognition in a department newsletter, local media platforms, and social media.

One thing that has come into play to address the morale within an organization was establishing the “High Five Program,” which rewards officers each quarter with prizes or with paid leave. The program was designed to raise esprit de corps within the department and to recognize those who have gone above and beyond the call of duty. To address the shift schedule, a survey was conducted to poll if team members were satisfied with the shift schedule. The study revealed that the majority of officers were pleased with the shift schedule. Overall, plans were being instituted to retain officers within the agency.

In this highly volatile era of law enforcement, recruitment and retention have become a real challenge that is being felt across the United States. Finding qualified candidates from the younger generations is critical in sustaining and growing an organization.

What we find with Millennials and Generation Z is a culture surrounded by a mindset of instant gratification. These individuals want to advance quickly to higher ranks or specialized

divisions. This can sometimes clash with older officers who feel that advancement can only be accomplished after putting in time on duty or "paying one's dues." Retention can become an issue with younger officers when the perception is that it will take many years to get to the point of being ranked or specialized. This places a strain on relationships between the old regime and new officers.

The millennial generation is the largest age group to emerge since the baby boom generation, and as this group grows significantly as a proportion of the workforce over the next 20 years, employers will need to make major adjustments in their engagement models (Gilbert, 2011).

The future of law enforcement agencies is dependent upon a successful blending of the generations and retention of these officers.

Building a culture of family within your organization goes far when it comes to recruitment and retention. As stated by Eric Therwanger, 95 percent of people want to feel that they are part of something special (2019). Officers are less likely to leave an organization when they are intertwined within its culture. When you get officers to "buy-in" to what your organization stands for, it causes a trickle-down effect. Younger officers will help to recruit for you. These officers live in the community and have friendships with young people. When they grasp the concept of family within your organization, it will come out in the groups that they socialize with. It will come out on their social media platforms. It becomes a free positive advertisement that cannot be duplicated. Social interaction is a big proponent of Millennials and Generation Z. They tend to break from police tradition from interacting only with law enforcement personnel. The younger generation needs constant engagement. With this skill set, they can join the communities and engage with other like-minded people. Going to local

sporting events, joining in with groups that run 5k's, tough mudder, and other activities can lead to the officers being seen and heard. Having your agency sponsor these people in these events can help your officers be purposeful in engaging with people from these groups. For example, the Baldwin County Sheriff's Office has a barbeque team made up of young and older deputies with a particular skill set of smoking meats. They will compete in events around the county. The sheriff's office will sponsor the team. This creates a multitude of opportunities for the younger and older generations and gives them to bond over common hobbies. It allows the community to see and interact with a different and more community inclusive side of the agency. It enables prospective recruits a chance to see a community-oriented department that promotes its people and a culture of servant leadership. These are small things that, while spending very little money, will give you great return.

In a continuing effort to retain officers, the East Jefferson Levee District Police Department has adopted the theme that every officer is a leader. Because the agency is small and falls under the rules governing hiring set forth by the State of Louisiana Civil Service Commission, recruiting is a challenge. An applicant must already be POST certified and have one year of law enforcement experience. These restrictions, along with competition from other state law enforcement agencies, limit the pool of qualified applicants. The agency has found that a large number of applicants are unable to complete the hiring process. These issues in hiring and recruiting make it imperative that we retain the officers we have. To accomplish this, our agency has initiated several programs. In the area of leadership, the agency has subscribed to the Institute for Credible Leadership Development program and has required that all officers complete the course. The agency has initiated several reward programs. Examples include Challenge Coins for outstanding work, monthly officer of the month recognition for the agency

and the larger Southeast Louisiana Flood Protection Authority-East, and credit in the Flood Authority monthly newsletter. These efforts work to make officers feel appreciated and part of something bigger.

There is a current environment where some societal members want to defund police budgets or remove agencies altogether. Such ideas as removing qualified immunity and "no law enforcement zones" are coming up as possible future reforms. This causes recruitment to be even more difficult than before. It also poses a risk of retaining well-trained and seasoned officers who feel that they do not have the agency or community's backing, as mentioned previously with the NYPD statistics. With such a negative connotation, having authentic leaders within our community is more paramount in finding recruits with the moral character and compass to look past what they see on the news. Authentic leadership also goes far in letting your current officers know that they have the backing of the organization's leaders.

Being an authentic leader requires one's moral compass to always point true. It serves as a guide for credible leadership and can play an essential role in trustworthy communication and officer retention. By displaying the core values of the moral compass, "Knowledge, loyalty, humanity, honesty, sincerity, courage, intelligence, impartiality, kindness and integrity," as stated by Lorraine Synder, agency leaders can create a following of officers by utilizing their referent power base (Long, 2019). Officers will be more inclined to stay with their department because those officers can see the qualities they want to embody. The community will also benefit from these principles by gaining trust in the agency and the officers who work for them. The loyalty aspect of the moral compass values teaches us to be loyal to an agency and be loyal to a credible leader

Succession planning is key to sustaining an agency and provides the path that will move it forward in the future. It is essential to find future leaders within your community and recruit them into the organization. Based on your succession planning process, you recruit superior employees, develop their knowledge, skills, and abilities, and prepare them for advancement or promotion into ever more challenging roles in your organization. A good succession plan goes far in retaining people. It allows them a path to become the next leaders within your organization (Heathfield, 2020). Planning goes far in establishing a clear path that younger generations can see and understand. This helps build a foundation that can grow your agency by retaining good people and recruiting more good people.

Conclusion

The challenges to Law Enforcement Recruitment and Retention are varied and not all are dependent on each other. The issues are complex and include various issues. In order to address as many of these VUCA as reasonably possible we have to find a solution that also encompasses multiple layers of response. The challenges are not a single entity that can be destroyed with that magical silver bullet. Instead of looking towards destruction for the answer, law enforcement needs a layered approach, like that of a bullet-proof vest. Each positive step forward including organizational communication, perception through community relations, human factors and leadership connections, leadership creating a culture through recruiting and retention represents another layer in the vest of protection allowing law enforcement to meet the current and future challenges of recruitment and retention through community relations.

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