Title: Leadership & Law Enforcement

Presenter: Zoran Endekov
                 La Trobe University,
                 Victoria, Australia

Email: z.endekov@latrobe.edu.au

Stream: N - Leadership

Title: Leadership & Law Enforcement

Abstract:

This study examines the leadership issues that impact on the roles and responsibilities of senior sergeants within an Australian police organisation. This study employs a qualitative approach where twenty senior sergeants participated in either individual interviews or focus groups. The study found that senior sergeants want and need police organisation to move beyond rule adherence and introduce more flexible operations. There is also a need for greater autonomy, training and education, communication, and formal lines of career development. Implications for leadership and law enforcement development are discussed.

Keywords: Leadership, Senior Sergeants, Law Enforcement

LEADERSHIP & LAW ENFORCEMENT

Introduction

The institutional leadership of a police organisation is of vital importance to a community. It plays a crucial role in the criminal justice system. The criminal justice process, including courts and prison, are largely dependant on the activities of the police force, and inevitably are affected by its leadership (Queensland Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and associated Police Misconduct, 1989).

Police leaders have a significant position of influence within their organisations. The effectiveness of law enforcement is dependent in large part upon its leadership. The position of leadership in policing requires the balancing of fundamental and often conflicting values in environments just as volatile as any competitive global marketplace (Goldstein, 1997 cited in Densten, 1999). Survival in such environments places constant pressure on senior law enforcement officers to change and adopt in order to cope (Densten, 1999).

Much of law enforcement life is arguably characterised by problems – sometimes impossible problems, with no easy solution and which are not easily solved administratively or technically. Police leadership and management has been described as an "impossible job" striving to balance the mythical long-term goals and pragmatic reality (Vickers, 2000). Police officers must often make snap decisions and justify their behaviour whilst recognising the constant tensions associated with the need to cope with multiple and conflicting constituencies (Vickers, 2000).

Previous research into police leadership has focused on the lower or junior levels of sergeants and patrol officers. Only a few studies have focused on the most senior levels of police organisations.

This paper explores leadership issues that have a significant impact on senior officers, specifically the rank of senior sergeant. Senior sergeants are described as the "backbone" of most police organisations. It is therefore vital to identify and understand the issues that impact on their daily roles and responsibilities. This study uses qualitative means to explore issues previously unidentified in the literature. Also, the use of qualitative research provided opportunities to explore these leadership issues at a deeper level.

Background

As society continues to undergo major transformations along political, social, cultural, economic, technological, and demographic dimensions, law enforcement agencies will need effective leadership to meet these unprecedented challenges and opportunities.

Leading people and organisations effectively is a tremendous challenge, a great opportunity, and a serious responsibility. Leadership is a complex process that results from the interaction among a leader, follower, and the situation. Leadership is often regarded as the single most critical factor in the success or failure of institutions (Dansereau & Yammarino, 1994).

The effectiveness of law enforcement is dependent in large part upon its leadership. Without question, effective leadership is

the key to maintaining society's expectations for quality of life. Whether in law enforcement or any other major service delivery agency, one can hardly expect to have effective organisations without effective leaders (Bennis, 1993). Australian society, like the rest of the world is changing at a record pace. Every major social institution, law enforcement included, is affected by this change. We now live in an information age world with a global economic system. As a result of these changes crime has evolved from a localized phenomenon to a transnational activity. Within Australia several changes have taken place that have had a direct effect on law enforcement service delivery. These changes include an ever-increasing number of aged citizens and a continued increase in immigration resulting in changes in the ethnic make-up of the population. Additional changes to law enforcement include as enhanced automated information technologies, a new focus on community involvement, and communication technologies. Effective leadership is critical if institutions are to respond to these changes at acceptable levels of confidence and public expectations.

According to Engel (2001), the effectiveness of the traditional, authoritarian, and bureaucratic police model adopted by many law enforcement organisations is under challenge and a call for senior police to accept more modern approaches to leading is becoming louder.

Senior sergeants in particular have a significant position of influence within their organisation. Their position requires the balancing of fundamental and conflicting values in environments just as volatile as any competitive global marketplace. The increased complexity of police work is a worldwide phenomenon. Police management traditionally involves the management of special projects, handling citizen complaints, setting operational priorities for subordinates, scheduling work, communicating with other personnel, and taking charge of complex operations (Vickers, 2000). Recently, police have been expected to better help redress and prevent crime, disorder and fear of crime through multifaceted approaches, including the building of trust between officers and citizens.

According to Crank (1998, cited in Densten, 1999), police leadership is often not well developed because of the police culture, the bureaucratic structure of law enforcement organisations, and the civil nature of the job. An examination by Densten (1999) on police leadership identified three critical issues: the importance of leadership in the police organisations, the negative behaviours of police leaders, and the unique aspects of the law enforcement environment which affect leadership. It has been identified that actions, values, beliefs, goals and styles of police leaders significantly influence rank-and-file officers, and particularly any process of change within the police organisation. Further, police leaders control several key variables (e.g., interpretation of regulations, amount of support, and supervision) which influence individual police attitudes and departmental philosophy (Densten, 1999). Studies have also identified negative aspects of police leadership behaviours which include frequent empty and ritualistic gestures, conservative, cautious, and authoritarian management styles, poor

communication skills, and lack of managerial support.

As with any social phenomenon, culture strongly influences how we lead and what we expect of our leaders. Because of the business nature of the organisation coupled with history, the police force has a culture which is not typical of most organisations. These unique norms, customs, values and assumptions guide the behaviour of its members, which at times is seen negatively in the eyes of citizens. Culture, thus, influences what leaders consider right and wrong and influences what and who they value, what they pay attention to, and how they behave (Nahavandi, 1999).

As with their public and private counterparts, present and future senior sergeants need to include in their repertoire of skills and knowledge, the ability to create a shared vision, to turn that vision into a workable agenda, to communicate that vision throughout the organisation, to manage necessary change and to innovate (Etter, 1995). These leaders, and law enforcement organisations, need to become adept at the art of anticipating the need for, and of leading, productive change.

Police leaders face a rather different environment to that faced by most leaders because of structural and cultural considerations – they must deal with paramilitary, hierarchical organisations and a highly resistant organisational culture. These leaders must have the ability to manage change and to innovate.

Method

Data Collection

This study is purely exploratory within a single state of Australia. The data for this study were collected using two different methods. Initially, individual interviews were conducted with a duration of anywhere between 45 minutes to one-and-a-half hours. The common issues (most discussed issues) identified in the interviews were further explored in two in-depth focus groups.

The first nine participants were interviewed by using an in-depth individual interview method. According to Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell & Alexander (1995) "in-depth interviewing is conversation with a specific purpose…. a conversation between the researcher and informant focusing on the informant's perception of self, life and experience, and expressed in his or her own words" (pp.61).

Once common themes emerged in the interviews it was decided to further explore them in the focus groups. This provided an opportunity for the themes to be fully discussed as well as some new emerging issues.

Participant Selection and Sample Size

Overall, twenty senior sergeants participated in either the individual interviews or the focus groups. Nine senior sergeants participated in the individual interviews. Six of the senior sergeants were in charge of stations. The other senior sergeants in the sample worked in, or were in charge of various units and taskforces. The two focus groups consisted of six and five senior sergeants. The majority of the senior sergeants in the focus groups were also in charge of stations. However, three of the senior sergeants were in charge of, or working in, a response unit or taskforce. Of the focus group sample, two of the senior sergeants were female. The average working experience of the senior sergeants was 27 years with average of nine years in the rank of senior sergeant.

Findings

Organisational Needs Related to Leadership

According to Shafer (1997), most law enforcement agencies rigidly hold members accountable for adherence to rules and procedures, while little else is measured or demanded. Shafer (1997) further considers that consistent with this view is the low priority placed on leadership styles outside of command and control. A perception similar to Shafer's (1997) was expressed by several of the senior sergeants in the sample. In particular, the senior sergeants reported that at times *adherence* to the *rules and regulations* appeared to be *the only* standard of accountability. This was seen as promoting a culture where senior sergeants' organisational accomplishments were often overlooked in favour of *adherence* to rules and regulations. The perception seems to be that the imperative placed upon senior sergeants of *don't violate directives* was at the expense of the introduction of innovative organisation processes. This view was expressed several of the senior sergeants.

> *".… we don't take risks. We have to make sure all contingencies are covered before we follow through."*

> *".… a lot of the issues can be resolved if they (upper management) allow us to do things the way we want to.…"*

Although rules, policies and procedures are necessary in any organisation, especially those with the power and authority given to the police, police organisations need to move beyond rule adherence. This is especially true for the senior sergeant rank as much of what they do each day does not involve using force or taking official action. Most of their time is spent communicating with, and relating to, others.

The majority, but not all, of the senior sergeants in the sample reported that they required greater autonomy in order to fully contribute to the organisation. They did not appear to mean by this that lines of Command and Control related to traditional *policing* needed to significantly change but that, for example, directions introduced by Local Priority Policing (LPP) could be more productively explored by providing Senior Sergeants with greater autonomy for action. Through LPP, the organisation encourages and continues to develop and foster community relationships. The senior sergeants considered that they actively

contribute to this initiative. However, at times the senior sergeants considered that their initiatives were restricted by a *bureaucratic management system*. A number of the senior sergeants discussed examples where their initiatives to develop community links were *stifled by members of the hierarchy*. The senior sergeants perceived that they continuously spent considerable time and effort developing community initiatives only for these initiatives to be rejected by *senior management*. These hurdles were seen to be disconcerting and detrimental to motivation and consequently the development of community initiatives was seen as declining.

A number of the senior sergeants appear to have greatly benefited by the informal networks they created with other senior sergeants. They maintain a working relationship where they seek and help each other if problems arise. It also keeps them abreast of other issues and projects. However, they believed that the lack of a strong relationship between them and more senior personnel had a detrimental effect on their overall performance. They would be better able to manage their respective officers if more information flowed down the hierarchy. There was a feeling that effective lines of communication must be established between all ranks and that the efficient use of information technology can play an integral role in this establishment.

The majority of the senior sergeants appeared to be ready to accept greater responsibilities and play a leadership role in relation to organisational areas. However, a major issue identified by many of the senior sergeants related to tight restrictions placed upon their role as decision-makers in relation to organisational processes. They expressed a feeling that a number of issues could be resolved if they had the autonomy to make decisions within an expanded organisational context.

Senior sergeants believe that members from headquarters have a different perspective of what work is like in the suburban stations. Most of the time stations, taskforces, units are understaffed with minimal resources and constant increases in demands. The majority of senior sergeants expressed problems with replacing staff whenever one is sick, on leave, on training or other duties (e.g., Demonstrations). As a result, some members work across a range of duties depending on who is available. In turn, these members believe that others refuse to transfer to these stations mainly because of the increased workload.

The senior sergeants perceived that greater autonomy would allow them to be proactive and not merely reactive to organisational challenges. Despite the fact that the senior sergeants did perceive some change toward greater organisational empowerment, they still perceived systems of control in place that severely limited their ability to provide leadership and introduce innovative organisational practices.

Career Development and Promotional Needs Related to Leadership

The majority of senior sergeants in the sample expressed further career aspirations. However, at times these senior sergeants demonstrated a negative attitude towards higher-ranking officers expressing the belief that the gap between their rank and the next (Inspector) was widening. The senior sergeants consider it of some importance that Commissioned Officers recognise the significance of their (Senior Sergeants') roles. This point was again emphasised by some of their comments:

> *"…anything we do that's proactive gets thrown out of the window…"*

> *"…there is no consultation between the hierarchy and lower ranked officers. We are told what to do and how to do it."*

> *"..the Inspector rank and above are very ambitious people – they come up with different initiatives, however, they lack the foresight and create problems".*

The senior sergeants perceived one of their major responsibilities is the development and provision of career opportunities to lower ranked officers. However, they felt that upper management did not provide the same support to them. It appeared that although upper management continuously encourage senior sergeants to look after their officers, upper management were not seen as looking after senior sergeants. Although several senior sergeants expressed interest in moving to the next rank, currently their main job satisfaction appeared to come from overseeing the continuous development of their staff. These views were exemplified by some of the following statements:

> *"…one of our major responsibilities is to try and give opportunity to lower ranked officers so that they develop"*

> *"…upper management talk about looking after their people – they don't"*

> *"I believe that we are the pivotal rank – the link. If an Inspector or a superintendent takes a week off, no-one would know, they would not be missed. If we took time off, problems will build and problems are not really solved".*

> *"There is no motivation in this organisation to do well. There are no rewards or incentives to go that extra mile."*

The senior sergeants appeared to see the role of Inspectors as distant from their own position as front-line supervisors. This dislocation appeared again when senior sergeants addressed their needs for promotional support. While a number of the senior sergeants considered that the position of Inspector was their next career step, they were not confident that they would receive the necessary *support from above* for such a career move. There was some concern expressed that *promotion by association* appeared to be a more common route than *promotion by merit*. In terms of leadership skills, a number of the senior sergeants considered that they had demonstrated the necessary leadership to meet that aspect of the promotional system. A problem identified by the senior sergeants was that the organisation does not have an effective process for the further career development of senior sergeants.

Training Needs Related to Leadership

A major concern expressed by the senior sergeants was the lack of management/leadership training offered to support their position. It was generally thought that the organisation did not have effective processes for senior sergeants to develop the competencies necessary for their leadership roles. Many of the senior sergeants reported that they had never received any formal training before or after assuming their positions. It appeared that currently the organisation selects senior sergeants mostly on merit, perhaps at times on seniority. It is expected that those selected have in some way previously developed the necessary skills through on-the-job training or will develop those skills as their job experience progresses. It was generally felt that as other members of staff progressed through the various ranks they received some form of training for their new positions. However, it appeared senior sergeants receive no specific management or leadership training at all prior to assuming those positions. Some of the senior sergeants discussed how they had been to various seminars and short training courses (some not compulsory) but had still not acquired the skills necessary to meet the demands of their role. Their belief is that they do need training (e.g., station management from an administrative side, OH&S, emergency management, personnel management). Although they consider that most of these skills are developed on the job, they still perceive a need for a good grounding prior to commencing their position. To successfully manage they felt they needed some type of formal training. This issue has also been identified in several of reports including the *Fitzgerald Commission of Inquiry into the Queensland Police Service* and the *Wood Royal Commission into the New South Wales Police Service* where the necessity of having management and leadership training was highlighted.

Limitations of Study

The present study has limitations that affect the generality of the findings. The sample of senior sergeants was small relative to the total number of senior sergeants in the organisation. Further, senior sergeants in the sample were chosen so that the researcher as able to consider views related to leadership from a diversity of roles and responsibilities. Therefore, the sample was not random, and consequently the findings may not generalise to the population of interest. The views of female senior sergeants were also under-represented in the sample. This study was also limited to a single police organisation and may not fully represent other police organisations within Australia or elsewhere.

Conclusion

The purpose of this exploratory study was to investigate the leadership issues that impact on senior sergeants and their ability to conduct their daily roles and responsibilities. The study reveals that there are several factors that influence and guide the

leadership styles. Factors such as support from above, experience, trust, and training received are examined and discussed in this study.

The use of a qualitative research methodology for this study was a logical and natural choice for unexplored issues. However, the present study was not intended to provide a definitive profile of leadership from the perspective of senior sergeants, but to give the researcher an introduction to the diversity of leadership roles available to senior sergeants within their current duties. This information will be used to develop a questionnaire specifically targeted at the leadership roles and responsibilities of senior sergeants. The questionnaire will be sent to all senior sergeants in the organisation and the resulting quantitative data will be used to explore the relationships between leadership style, work roles and experience, training and education, and personal attributes. The questionnaire may well provide the organisation with data that provide useful information to help shape the future leadership training of senior sergeants.

Qualities which make a good police officer are often difficult to identify. Therefore, identifying transformational leadership competencies within law enforcement will equip police leaders with more information on how they might more effectively lead their organisations through today's heightened demands and uncertainty. Although leadership is one of the most researched and published phenomena, there is a scarcity in relation to senior sergeants. Future research is required to understand how senior sergeants can develop and use transformational and transactional leader behaviours to better cope with the growing demands. Consequently, understanding how senior police are reacting to transformational leadership behaviours should also elucidate important insights into leadership at the most senior levels of police organisations.

References:

- Bennis, W. (1993). Leading Change: From CEO to CTO. *Executive Excellence*, Vol. 10, No.4, pp.5.

- Dansereau, T., & Yammarino, F.J. (1994). *Theory testing in organisational behaviour: The variant approach*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

- Densten, I.L. (1999). Senior Australian law enforcement leadership under examination. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, Vol. 22, No.1, pp.45-57.

- Densten, I.L. (2003), "Senior police leadership: does rank matter?" *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, Vol.26 No. 3, pp.400-418

- Engel, R.S. (2001), "Supervisory styles of patrol sergeants and lieutenants", *Journal of Criminal Justice*, Vol.29, pp.341-55.

- Etter, B., & Palmer, M. (1995). *Police Leadership in Australia*. Leichhardt, N.S.W: Federation Press.

- Minichiello, V., Aroni, R., Timewell, E., & Alexander, L. (1995). *In-Depth Interviewing*, 2nd edition. Melbourne: Longman

- Nahavandi, A., & Malekzadeh, A.R. (1999). *Organizational behavior: the person-organization fit*. Upper Saddle River, N.J: Prentice Hall.

- Porter, C.D.D. (1999). *From hero to leader: A leadership competency study for police chief executives*. The University Texas at Austin.

- Queensland Commission of Inquiry into Possible Illegal Activities and Associated Police Management. (1989). *Report of a Commission of Inquiry Pursuant to Orders in Council,* Brisbane, Government Printer.

- Shafer, K.H. (1997). High Performance Policing for the 21st Century. *The Police Chief*, November, 32-35.

- Turner, P.C. (1997). *Leadership in American law enforcement agencies: A study of the transition from management to leadership for the executive in American law enforcement agencies (Kentucky)*. University of Louisville (Dissertation).

- Vickers, M.H. (2000). Australian police management education and research: a comment from "outside the cave". *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, Vol. 23, No. 4, pp.506-524.

-