

# **A Police Chief Owner's Manual**

**Sound advice for today and tomorrow**

**By**

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This Command College Independent Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue in law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future, but rather to project a number of possible scenarios for strategic planning consideration.

Defining the future differs from analyzing the past because the future has not yet happened. In this project, useful alternatives have been formulated systematically so that the planner can respond to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing the future--creating it, constraining it, adapting to it. A futures study points the way.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College project are those of the author and are not necessarily those of the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

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## Sound advice for today and tomorrow

By Bill Taylor

A newly appointed Police Chief once asked the departing Chief if he had any sound advice to give before he left his office for the last time. Looking up, the departing Chief said:

*I left these three specially numbered envelopes for you. Each time you get into trouble and you don't know what to do, open one of these envelopes and you will find the solution to your problem.*

The new Chief took the envelopes, thanked his predecessor for his "advice," and wished him well in his future travels.

About six months later, the newly appointed Chief found himself embroiled in his first crisis. He was being criticized from all sides and was pondering what to do. He opened the drawer, retrieved the envelope marked "#1" and discovered the following message: "*Blame everything on me.*"

The newly appointed Chief thought for a moment, and then did exactly as he was advised. He told everyone who would listen that the current controversy was the fault of the prior Chief. Magically, the advice appeared to work and the crisis disappeared.

A few months later, another crisis appeared, and the newly appointed Chief realized he could not solve this problem either. He hastily opened the second envelope and found the following message: "*Reorganize the entire department.*"

The Chief did as he was instructed. He told everyone in earshot the crisis was caused by the department not being properly organized. After radically reshuffling the department's organizational structure, this crisis also dissipated.

After a time, yet another crisis arose. This one, though, was worse than the other two crises put together. Knowing he could never solve a problem of this magnitude by himself, he scrambled to his desk one more time and tore open the last envelope. Inside, he found the following advice: "*Make three envelopes..*"

The moral of this story is "*you can only survive so many crises before you may be asked to leave.*" Generally told only in circles of Chiefs, this parable acknowledges the difficulty of the role of the Police Chief and illustrates an element of truth.

It also contains some sound advice; unfortunately, not enough to meet the needs of today's Chiefs as they wrestle daily with their own "three envelopes." Instead of envelopes, what we truly need is an "owner's manual" for the job; one that enlightens the novice as to how to avoid the pitfalls that lie ahead. If there were such a manual, what would it contain? Let's find out.

#### The need for an owner's manual

Often isolated, and under daily stress unrecognized by others, far too many knowledgeable Police Chiefs are quietly leaving this profession without undergoing the greatest exit interview of all time. The interview in question is not the one that is completed by the City's Human Resources Department. Rather, it is one that should be conducted by the City Manager, the Department's administration and all other interested parties.

A departing Chief can teach many valuable lessons in the waning days of their administration. They can reveal the secrets of their success and explain how to conquer the executive leadership conflicts of tomorrow. To glean this useful knowledge and insight from today's Chiefs who have "been in the trenches," it is important to envision what an "owner's manual" might look like for the job of tomorrow's Chief of Police. To accomplish this daunting task, ten percent of the current California Police Chiefs were contacted for input. Each Chief was asked what advice they would give a newly appointed police executive regarding a long list of topics. Several recently retired Chiefs were included, to gain their perspective from the "rearview mirror." The overall goal was to uncover the lessons learned, and the many methods of success for running a police organizations from day one.

### **Six Critical Insights**

The following advice has been distilled from the initial conversations and survey opinions of 37 Police Chiefs. These executives gave their critical insight into many topics. We will look at six of the most vital that affect a Chief's success:

- *Vision*
- *Their predecessor*
- *Goal setting*
- *Hiring*
- *Termination*
- *Promotion*

The lessons learned from these interviews are worth a fortune in psychological capital. They may also be the keys to your success if you are one who is seeking to maximize impact and minimize distractions while in the Chief's chair.

**The Caveat – just as one size does not fit all when it comes to matching a Police Chief with a department and community, one slice of advice is not guaranteed to work in every situation. Each Chief must calculate this into their equation before applying the forthcoming advice.**

**Vision** – when a new Chief steps into an organization, or moves up through the ranks, there is always a strong temptation to change the stationery, rewrite the general orders and create a new vision statement. Before diving into the fray, however, it is important to have a sense of direction and purpose for the future. This is accomplished through a well-crafted vision statement. Effective vision statements allow the department to establish goals and a long-term plan of where it should be in five to ten years, and a general sense of how to get there.

Whether you were chosen from inside or out of the organization, establishing a sense of direction and vision should be given careful consideration. Vision statements are unique, and call for specifically tailored words of inspiration to ignite an individual agency's passion. This process is best achieved through community, city, departmental and even association-based workshops. A vision statement should never come solely from the "mind of the Chief." It must be shared from the minds of many to be valuable. To achieve impact and longevity, it should be simple, clear and concise. It is also critical any statement contain a meaningful message, and not merely be "words on a page" as a formality in the organization.

A vision statement must be contemporary and futuristic at the same time. Some Chiefs have suggested a vision should be associated with simple, but powerful “tag lines” such as “Quality customer service, everyday,” “Back to basics,” “COPS Count.” “Protect and Serve,” “Courage Vision and Integrity” and “A future of excellence.”

Once a department’s tag line is established, a more in-depth vision statement can be written. The full statement should give the staff and community a greater understanding of the Department’s standards. For example, “Quality customer service, everyday” can be expanded to state “Quality customer contact and assistance, Quality enforcement for law violators, and Quality community interaction” as a foundation to the full vision statement.

As the vision statement matures, there is a need to periodically evaluate it for relevance and impact. In many cases, a well written, yet aging statement need not to be abandoned, but merely modified to more accurately provide the agency with a compass. Regardless of an agencies size or scope, having a vision of the organization’s desired future is the first step.

**Your Predecessor** –There are two important things to learn from one’s predecessor; 1) what they succeeded at, and 2) what was seen as unsuccessful by themselves or others. If you can meet with your predecessor prior to your inauguration, seize the moment. If not, there is still much to learn from the retiring Chief.

A number of Chiefs interviewed referred to the fact that a new Chief should never change everything their predecessor did just for the sake of change. An incoming Chief, especially from outside of the organization, will initially create anxiety and uncertainty in the minds of many. To radically change everything without purpose, or in haste, may

cause undue stress during the transition. It is beneficial, when applicable; to continue some of your predecessor's successful programs to sustain stability in the organization until new directions or modifications in practice are assessed and implemented.

Other Chiefs noted the importance of conducting thorough backgrounds checks on any agency, prior to interviewing and accepting the position at hand. Once you have this necessary insight, you can more effectively assess the health of the organization and fully understand what you are getting yourself into. Once in the position, this knowledge can also help to generate momentum quickly in those first crucial days and months.

It is also important to remember that you are your own person. You are expected to bring new ideas, goals and changes to the organization. Last but not least, remember, one day you will be someone else's predecessor, so speak cautiously and diplomatically about yours.

**Goal Setting** – may seem to some to be an easy process. Some believe “it's all up to the Chief.” In reality, this is rarely the case, nor can it ever be that simple to establish truly meaningful goals.

If the Chief comes from outside of the organization, he or she should spend the first several months of their tenure getting to know their local city, community and department personnel. This also includes forming relationships with their Police Association board members and others with a stake in the Department's success. Building these relationships will assist greatly to set and achieve personal and professional goals of significance.

A new Chief should subsequently create a list of short-term goals that can foster early success, and long-term goals that can be achieved over time with proper planning

and support. These short-term “quick wins” enhance the possibility of greater success in the minds of others, and can often be generated from a collaborative process of dialog with Department managers and line staff. Attend to chronic issues and people will tend to see the benefit in other changes proposed downline.

One Chief listed their first goal as being “take care of their employees;” everything else would flow successfully from that. Find out what your employee’s needs are, and how the agency can address them. This will help them do their jobs better and they will treat the public accordingly.

If a new Chief is hired as a change agent resulting from major departmental improprieties or other problems, she or he may not have the luxury of time before they must act. If this luxury exists however, take full advantage. Regardless of whether the new Chief is selected from inside or out, most City Managers will have a list of goals and expectations already in place. A new Chief should value their City Manager’s input, but realize there are more goals to be collected from within their agency and the community.

Newly appointed Chiefs should shy away from grand pronouncements, such as “waging war on crime” etc., before grasping a full sense of the road ahead. It is more valuable to temper your statements with down-to-earth expectations. Lastly, a new Chief should never take all the credit or all the blame for goals realized and goals unattained.

**Hiring** – this topic, more than any other, generated the most passionate responses from the Chiefs. One Chief encapsulated it by stating he wants to “hire the stars from both genders and all ethnicities,” but realizing this type of success is not easy. Much of it depends on those responsible for the agency’s personnel and training functions, and from the history of previous hiring efforts. Assessing the kind of person you want to staff your

ranks, and then determining the best mix of strategies to attract them, is a critical step in the process of vying successfully to retain the best and the brightest. A Chief should strongly consider using her own “best and brightest” for this task. Developing programs to formally recruit suited individuals, and making the issue one of concern for every member of the Department, are crucial factors to achieve your hiring goals. Don’t forget to recruit electronically; departmental websites are a must for departments. This is a primary search gateway for prospective applicants, and we must be there prominently to ensure our message is heard in the environment of an ever-shrinking pool of qualified candidates.

According to the Chiefs, here are some critical points to remember in the hiring process:

1. Never rush the process just to fill a vacancy; allow it to percolate for best results. During this percolation period, people usually show their true character.
2. If possible, avoid hiring people, who live too far (more than 40 miles) from the organization they serve. Too often these employees get trained on your dime and lateral to an agency closer to their home. They frequently never connect with the department and community they serve.
3. If at all possible, depending on the size of your agency, try to remain an active member in this process. If your agency is too large for you to participate, ensure that your designee knows who you are looking for and have them take an active role in this process.

4. Also, set aside an adequate amount of time to interview your potential employees. As one chief explains; “it is important for me to look that person in the eye” when questions are asked and answers are given.
5. If you discover a red flag along the way, don’t hesitate to extend the interview to justify your suspicions or allay your fears. Don’t be afraid to pass on a candidate based on a bad gut feeling. In the end, the candidate and the agency will be better served. Remember, this person, if it is a sworn interview, is the Chief of Police in the middle of the night when no one else is around.
6. It is also important to effectively evaluate a candidate’s maturity, education, communication ability and enthusiasm when conducting this interview. If they score high in these areas and have a stable background, they usually become quality employees.

**Termination** – although the details vary in every case, most employees are terminated for one of two reasons. Either they were involved in an incident of serious misconduct, or they failed to meet probationary standards. In some cases, an employee becomes involved in a minor episode of misconduct, but lies about their actions when interviewed, thus transforming it into the “serious” variety. In these cases, the misconduct is suddenly trumped by the employee’s decision to lie. “You lie, you die” is a popular phrase among many Chiefs today. Due to the collateral ramifications of the Brady Decision (Noble, 2003) an employee who lies can no longer be of service to the department.

More often than not, the best chance to evaluate and terminate an employee is while they are still on probation. As one Chief expounded, “the best you will ever be is

while you are on probation” referring to an employee’s attitude and performance. Chiefs noted that character flaws amplify tenfold once a problem employee gets off probation. Due to that, the encouragement is to never allow problem probationary employees to become problem permanent employees.

Many chiefs offered the example of “mistake of the head” verses a “mistake of the heart.” If a good employee commits a “mistake of the head” such as a technical mistake or demonstrates low communication skills, they can be retrained or counseled. If an employee consciously engages in unscrupulous behavior “mistake of the heart,” show them the door as fast as you can before they do any more damage to the organization.

As one Chief reflected “if done right, the involved employee should never be surprised when they are terminated” if the ethical standards of the agency and its executive are transparent for all to see.

**Promotion** - “Don’t try this at home” appears to be an appropriate warning when considering this topic. This is true in part because making good promotions is not as easy as it sounds.

The level of personal pain a Chief is willing to endure in this process makes all the difference in the world. For example, if you are a Chief who believes in deploying the prescribed civil service test in the pre-approved manner and “the list is the list,” the pain will be less on the front end by avoiding potential grievances. Unfortunately, you may pay later. That payment may come from promoting good test takers, but bad leaders, who make bad decisions. Their tendency to make such decisions can get you and your organization into hot water, or even worse. These poor decisions might trigger an unstoppable critical incident (which might be your “third envelope”).

If you are a Chief who wants to have a stronger hand in the promotion process, then you may opt for a blend of some standardized testing and some creative in-house measurements, such as peer and command assessments, and multiple oral boards. If you utilize this promotional process, you should be able to identify and promote the most capable leaders. The “good test takers” who cannot adequately perform the job should be weeded out. This creative process can open the door wider for grievances; however, unless it is well coordinated through your City’s human resources office and vetted for possible challenges by the unsuccessful.

In the end, the Chief’s rule of three should always be included in any testing situation, as this allows the Chief some final say as to who gets promoted and who does not. Some of the Chiefs surveyed said that small or medium sized agencies actually have the best chance to identify the most capable candidates, as their strengths and weaknesses are more readily known. In larger agencies, the Chief must enlist managers and supervisors to help in selecting the right ones. Being able to exercise discretion and flexibility in this process is tantamount to success in selecting the best fit for the job. Like issues of termination while on probation, a little work at the front end of the task can save time, energy and employment later on.

Another Chief expressed the key to making a good promotion is to objectively assess a candidate’s history in the organization. He noted people are true to their nature - they will succeed or fail in most cases based on their history. Remember; never promote an employee with a “bad attitude” or poor interpersonal skills. Chief interviewed confirmed the common sense conclusion that you will then have a supervisor or manager with the same attributes.

Some Chiefs would advise a new Chief to consider all of his or her promotional options before they make a decision. This includes considering the viability of promoting from outside of the organization. This is a decision that must be weighed carefully before it is made, and past practices may ultimately dictate this option. Additionally, both gender and ethnic diversity should be considered when making any promotion. This is not framed as an encouragement to somehow alter standards. Any promotion should be based on a candidate's requisite skills and abilities. A diverse command staff can, however, avoid the pitfalls of "group think", viewing the world, and specifically the department, through only one perspective.

One Chief summarized the promotional process well by stating "identify the persons within your organization who have the education, experience and ability required and help them succeed."

### Conclusion

As this writing comes to a close, it's worth sharing one last piece of advice. A former Chief related that finding "the right fit" means matching the right Chief with the right department. At any given moment, one Chief may be in the right place at the right time, and possess the right personality, skill set and leadership style to perfectly match one specific community and organization in need.

This former Chief added, however, that timing and circumstances can change and subsequently so can the "fit." The trick is for a Chief to recognize this shift (long before the department's other stakeholders do) and plan their exit strategy accordingly.

This advice subsequently proved to be accurate. While soliciting candidates to complete this survey, one long-term Chief initially agreed to help, but suddenly vanished

from the profession. It appears that he was busy making three envelopes when he was first contacted, and enroute to becoming someone else's predecessor. Hopefully, this primer on the requirements of the job will help others avoid the same fate.