

**WHAT WILL THE IMPACT BE OF UTILIZING THE RESULTS OF AN
ETHICAL STANDARDS TEST IN THE HIRING OF POLICE OFFICER
CANDIDATES FOR MID-SIZE POLICE AGENCIES BY THE YEAR 2003?**

JOURNAL ARTICLE

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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).

Introduction

Utilizing the results of an ethics standards test will impact the hiring of police officer candidates. Extensive research indicates that unsuitable ethical trends and events are shaping the ethical behavior of the law enforcement candidate pool. The historical dynamics that have tarnished law enforcement's professional image have also triggered improved training and selection processes for police officer candidates. New testing dimensions in the ethical evaluation of police officer candidates are being considered.

Overview

Significant changes are occurring in the ethical behavior of our society, as evidenced by the erosion of the ethical standards in our culture. As a society, ethical issues are no longer limited to what's right and what's wrong. Increasingly, society must choose between two things that may be right, such as doing everything we can to save lives or allowing people to die with dignity. Successful moral leadership for the twenty-first century will be steeped in centuries old concepts, values and ethics. However, they will also be flexible, adaptable, and inventive. The moral landscape of the next century will be shaped by three factors. First, due to inventions, society will face entirely new ethical issues. Second, society will live in an era of increasing immorality. And third, individuals will experience greater separatism among people in society. This separatism will increase society's disassociation with the ethical

issues facing the world.¹ The private sector is struggling with the same ethical issues. The typical code of ethics includes requirements to comply with all applicable laws, to honor requests for confidentiality and to accurately disclose relevant information. Lying, stealing and bribing to gather information or gain a competitive edge falls outside the boundaries of acceptable behavior. Between right and wrong lies a problematic gray area that has led many well meaning companies into trouble.² Similar correlations can be drawn in law enforcement.

Today's teenager represents tomorrow's recruitment pool for law enforcement candidates. A teenager's perspective on classroom ethics is a strong indicator of their ethical standards. It is also a measure of the current ethical standard of a significant segment of today's society. In a recent study, it was determined that young students are about evenly divided on the question pertaining to classroom ethics, "Is cheating ever OK?" On the positive side, 53% of the 6,000 respondents said, "No." In response to the question, "Why do people cheat in school?" teenagers replied, 39% for the thrill or because they can, 30% because good grades are needed to get into a good college, 21% to live up to parental expectations and 10% because they haven't done the work.³

The deterioration of the ethical standards of society is reflected in the ethical behavior of Police Officers. Recently, 43 Cleveland area Police Officers and jail guards were indicted in a phony FBI drug sting operation. They were selling their badges for \$1500 in order to escort,

protect, or move purported cocaine shipments. Unfortunately, this is not unique. The FBI has been tracking a nationwide increase in police corruption since 1994. For example, more than 500 officers in 47 cities have been convicted of various federal crimes within the last 4 years. State and local authorities in 32 other jurisdictions are either engaged in active investigations or the prosecution of corrupt officers. Evidence of systemic greed and misconduct has launched this from a local issue to a national concern.⁴

Pervasive police misconduct has a dramatic effect on the public's confidence in law enforcement. A study ranking the public's trust in the police suggested a decline from the #5 position of 12 professions reviewed in 1980 to the #10 position in 1995.⁵ This decline may be viewed as an indictment of law enforcement and a failure of law enforcement to meet society's expectations. The need to improve the public's image of law enforcement is clearly warranted. Ethics testing of police officer candidates may be one solution, albeit long term considering the attrition/replacement cycle for police officers.

The convergence of a series of significant trends and events has prompted POST and Police Agencies across the State to re-evaluate the ethical testing and training of police officer candidates. Identified causative factors included a marked breakdown of family values, increased crime trends (specifically teen and domestic violence), extremely poor public perception of law enforcement, segregation of

cultural and racial groups, and proliferation of police corruption and scandal cases.

POST guidelines govern a variety of criteria for the selection of police officer candidates. State standards are established for physical fitness, writing ability, background, medical and psychological suitability.⁶ Presently, there are no POST standards for the ethical testing of police officer candidates.⁷ POST's role in the selection process includes the responsibility for instituting the minimum selection standards that govern the employment of peace officers in California. In addition, POST is responsible for conducting the research that results in the development of tests and procedures used by local law enforcement to adhere to these minimum selection standards.⁸ As reflected in POST's Strategic Plan for 1997, POST has recognized the need to assess an ethics evaluation process as part of the entry level selection standards.⁹ In addition, POST will be better defining cognitive and psychological dimensions as they relate to job duties, descriptions, and attributes. The difficulty with developing an acceptable ethics test is content validity, framework verses supposition.¹⁰ This type of test must be constructed to accurately measure job dimensions and not presumed personal traits. Professionals have been evaluating instruments to analyze and test ethical behavior. The central hypothesis in the research entitled "Prediction of Dysfunctional Job Behaviors Among Law Enforcement Officers," is that the personality construct of conscientiousness predicts

dysfunctional behavior subsequent to selection as a law enforcement officer. Conscientiousness as a construct relates to the degree of internal organization, control, and motivation in goal directed behavior.

Individuals exhibiting high conscientiousness tend to be organized, reliable, hard-working, self-directed, scrupulous, and persevering.

Individuals low in conscientiousness tend to be lazy, careless, lax, impulsive and irresponsible. Specifically, three classes of dysfunctional behavior were noted for law enforcement officers: negative work history, criminal activity, and drug use activity.¹¹ To be successful in measuring police integrity, measuring tools must be identified that not only determine when police officers effectively avoid certain behavior, but also regularly practice the seven core virtues of a police officer; prudence, courage, justice, honesty, trust, self-effacement and responsibility.¹² Pre-employment ethics testing of police officer candidates should include a two phase process: a written, followed by a series of scenarios engineered to evaluate the candidate's ethical consistency.

Recommendation

It is recommended that POST form a committee of diverse experts to research this dilemma and make appropriate modifications to the selection criteria for police officer candidates. This criteria should include the development of a pre-employment ethical testing procedure for police officer candidates. The outcome of utilizing the results of an ethics standards test should improve the quality of candidates entering

the law enforcement profession by deselecting those less qualified.

Following appropriate assessment, a Strategic Plan will need to be developed to implement this critical modification to the selection process for police officer candidates. To be successful, the input from all concerned parties must be evaluated. Law enforcement leaders across the state must work collaboratively with POST to jointly develop an ethics standards test. Particular care needs to be taken during development of the ethics standards test to ensure its validity. This is necessary to promote statewide acceptance of this test and to deflect any potential assertions that the test may be subjective, culture based, and prejudicial against minorities with a different value system. Buy-in from the stakeholders will be paramount to the successful transition. The Executive Director of POST should assume the leadership role in the transition process and should be designated as the Transition Manager. He is in the best position to provide the necessary vision, motivation, direction, and inspiration to implement this strategy. A Transition Team comprised of POST's Selection Consultants, Chief's/Sheriff's Association, CPOA, State Cooperative Personnel Services and the Psychologists Association would prove to be extremely valuable in assisting the Transition Manager with the required tasks necessary to effect this change.

Conclusions

As society moves into the next millenium, one of the most pressing challenges facing law enforcement leaders is the need to enhance the ethical image of the law enforcement profession. One of the most effective means of accomplishing this goal is to improve the selection standards for law enforcement officers. Selection is the most critical component of the hiring process for police officers. By adding an ethics testing dimension, in conjunction with other selection criteria, only the most qualified candidates will be selected to enter the law enforcement profession. The future conduct of those officers who were screened through the ethics testing process would have the potential to improve the public's perception of law enforcement. Based upon successful completion of the selection process, including the ethics test, those personnel who were selected would be less inclined to become involved in misconduct. Moreover, though media releases the public would see law enforcement taking affirmative action to improve the quality of their personnel. This would have a positive impact on the public's perception of law enforcement.

The outcome of utilizing the results of an ethics standards test in the hiring of police officer candidates can have a profound impact on law enforcement. Law enforcement leadership needs to take this opportunity to forge ahead and harness the existing inertia to develop an ethics

standards test. Stakeholder support would be crucial to the process. Given the current trends, events, and political climate, there is no better time than the present to initiate the ethics testing process to facilitate improving the quality of law enforcement officers and the public's image of the profession.

For further information on this topic, please refer to POST's Command College Class XXVI Journal Project entitled "What will be the impact of utilizing the results of an ethical standards test in the hiring of police officer candidates for mid size police agencies by the year 2003?"

Endnotes

¹ Rushworth M. Kidder, "Tough Choices, Why It's Getting Harder to Be Ethical," in *Exploring Your Future – Living, Learning, and Working in the Information Age*, 1996, 137-140.

² Nancy Rivera Brooks, "Career/Ethics at Work," *Los Angeles Times*, 3 November 1997, D 2-9.

³ Publication, The Ethics Corner, *Center for Law Enforcement Ethics*, The Ethics Roll Call (Winter 1998) vol. 5, no. 1, 2.

⁴ Kevin Johnson, "New breed of bad cop sells badge, public trust," *USA TODAY*, 16 April 1998, 8A.

⁵ Ed McErlain, "A perspective offered on ethics" *California Peace Officer's Association Newsletter, NETWORK* (December 1997) 8.

⁶ POST Administrative Manual, California Code of Regulations 12/97 B 4-5.

⁷ Spilberg

⁸ POST Administrative Manual, Law Related to Standards for Selection and Training 12/97 A 17-18, California Code of Regulations 12/97 B 4-5, Medical and Psychological Suitability Examinations 12/97 C 3-4.

⁹ California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training, Initial Strategic Plan, 1997, 3.

¹⁰ Shelley Weiss Spilberg, Ph.D., State of California POST Personnel Selection Consultant, interview by author, 6 July 1998.

¹¹ Charles D. Sarchione et al., "The Prediction of Dysfunction Job Behaviors Among Law Enforcement Officers," 1998. 8.

¹² Stephen J. Vicchio, "Integrity, Ethics & Policing," *The Journal* (Winter 1998): 33-38, 96-97.

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