

THE FUTURE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT LEADERSHIP  
AND WHAT GENERATION X NEEDS TO KNOW TO LEAD

Article

By

Lieutenant Loren Cattolico  
Walnut Creek Police Department

Command College Class XXXV

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Leadership development in law enforcement organizations is one of the greatest challenges faced by all of today's police organizations. Leadership has been defined several ways. In police organizations, leadership is the ability to influence others, to have a vision of the future, the strength of will to engender confidence in followers and the strength of character to make ethically sound decisions in the interest of the greater good. Leadership is an endeavor of building and maintaining trust both inside and outside of the organization. Police organizations throughout the country have attempted a variety of leadership practices developed by private industry. The integration of some of these practices has proved to be difficult in the public sector. Some leadership principles are sound and their applications universal, while others have been judged as unsuccessful in law enforcement.

In the past, efforts have been made to make law enforcement organizations more businesslike. In the future, the successful police organization may be more comparable to the concept of marriage. Successful policing relies on the development and maintenance of relationships and revolves around trust. As in a marriage, trust keeps the relationship going and allows for the growth of all the involved participants. This is not to say that several aspects of running a police organization should not continue to be businesslike. As Steven Covey said, "management is what we do with things, leadership is what we do with people."<sup>1</sup>

So what will the leaders from Generation X need to know to effectively lead police organizations? How will they apply this knowledge within their own value systems and those of Generation Y who are right behind them in the field? After much discussion with Generation X leaders and experience in their development, I have noticed some leadership constants. I am recommending these leadership principles to law enforcement's future leaders.

Build a leadership team. Generation X people like to do things together. Anyone who has watched the generation X-based situational comedy “Friends” knows this. Effective leadership in a generation X team will look very different than it does now. The future will have more rotational leaders and less heroic leaders. Teams will consist of multi-talented people who are far more inclined to share leadership roles and far less inclined to compete with one another. As these teams become more prevalent, the generation X leader of the future must learn to harness their creativity. This will not be difficult, as collaboration is a natural way of doing business for generation X.<sup>2</sup>

Nurture creativity. If it is a fact that ninety-percent of what a leader needs to know to be successful in the future is currently outside of their realm of knowledge, then generation X leaders must spend time and energy encouraging creativity. The futurist Alvin Toffler once said, “The illiterate of the twenty-first century will not be those who cannot read and write, but those who cannot learn, unlearn and relearn.”<sup>3</sup> Again, generation X is positioned perfectly for success in this area. They are by nature problem solvers and creative thinkers. They value the recognition that creativity provides. Future leaders will find ways for employees to be creative. They will change the culture of organizations to allow and reward creativity, and they will find new ways of looking at old problems. The next leaders will head organizations that see rapid and constant change. In the future, the culture of organizations will be far more flexible and less resistant to change.

Make it happen. For all the consultant babble about leadership practices and theories and all the gurus who have made money from leadership books, the successes come to those who finally stop talking and do something. Talking about leadership and its priority in an organization is essential. But at the earliest moment, take some action. Too much talk without

execution will damage a leader's credibility. In the past, leaders have sometimes over relied on dogma. Talking about leadership does not replace the act of being a leader. Leaders of the future will need to be results-oriented.

It's all about trust. This is one tenet of leadership that will not change in the future.

The success of future leaders will still be tied to their ability to foster and maintain trust through the relationships that they cultivate. Trust will continue to be the key for leadership success in the future. This is not saying that it will be any easier to gain trust in the future than it is now. Generation X leader's will have their critics and attendant snipers. As society continues to evolve and becomes more complex, trust will become harder to achieve and maintain. The issues of the future that can affect trust are numerous. Trust is the glue that holds relationships, organizations and communities together. Particularly in law enforcement, effective leadership cannot take place without trust. "Leaders cannot take shortcuts. Mistakes based on ability can be forgiven, but lapses in character are lethal, for it is character that makes trust possible. And no one will follow someone they do not trust."<sup>4</sup>

Influence whenever you can; give orders only as a last resort. The most effective leaders of the future will maximize their use of influence. Generation X people are not usually hung up on authority to start with. As they become leaders in law enforcement, they will find that although police officers often use authority, they seldom appreciate its use on themselves. Future leaders will have fewer problems with the distinction between position and power. The use of influence at all levels of an organization will increase in the future. Old hierarchies of the past will probably cease to exist. Leadership should become the work of all employees, not just those with a title of authority. In the future influence may often take the form of storytelling. In the art of storytelling, a link to both Generation X and Y can be found. The successful leader

will be one who finds the appropriate story that the current employee can relate to and shape it to illustrate a point. In the United States, in the eighteen hundreds, this was a common technique of influence, and was a tool used often and successfully by President Abraham Lincoln. Lincoln was a master storyteller and often used his ability in this area to teach those around him.<sup>5</sup> Both Generation X and Y employees enjoy this type of learning approach and see it as mentoring and coaching as opposed to lecturing. The leader of the future will develop and utilize what Noel Tichy calls “living stories.”<sup>6</sup> Tichy believes that future leaders will have three kinds of living stories. The “who I am” story, where leaders describe themselves and their passions. The “who we are” story, in which those who work for you derive their organizational identity. The “where we are going” story: This is the most important, as it makes the leader’s vision come to life.

Develop and use intuition. The use of intuition is easier for some people than it is for others. The truth is that everyone is intuitive; some are more able to tune into issues at lower levels than others are and they process thoughts and feelings on this level. Everyone has intuition; the leader of the future will have to tap into this strength. Intuition is not a sixth sense or some psychic phenomenon. I describe intuition as the ability to analyze a person or situation at a level beneath the conscious surface, and to process those findings with a mixture of logic and experience. Use of intuition often allows a leader to be able to identify what underlies a situation.

There are some concepts that have been applied to law enforcement leadership that have not been successful in the field. Some mistakes of the past that future leaders should not repeat are: Mistaking rank or position for leadership. In many cases, an informal leader is as powerful as a formal leader. Leadership is an attitude not a title. Those whom you lead will respect and trust you if you have earned their respect and trust. If you are forced to order someone to do

something that they should be willing to do, you have probably identified a relationship that needs work. Even difficult people can be influenced. The leader of the future will need all members of the organization to share equally in the responsibility of leadership. The future may well see the demise of rank and title altogether. In law enforcement organizations, a leadership void will always be filled. The question is whether the void is filled by those who have the organization's best interest at heart or their own.

Surrounding oneself with similar points of view. Leaders of the future may be tempted to develop and cultivate those who have similar points of view as their own. This can be particularly dangerous after a period of relative success. Leadership is about constant learning and renewal. The desire to coast for a while is tempting but can create a false sense of security. Leaders cannot afford to sit on their laurels. In the future, organizations will change at a greater pace than they do now. Challenges that took months to address in the past will arise and be quelled in weeks. Having a team with diverse opinions and perspectives is important. Being insulated will not allow a leader to keep up with the dynamics of change in future police organizations.

David Taylor wrote about the five pitfalls of leadership.<sup>7</sup> What he said will continue to apply to leaders of the future. Taylor cautioned against focusing on your own achievement instead of that of your employees; he cautioned against practicing communication instead of openness; providing answers instead of guidance; putting popularity before respect; and being visible but not available.

The issue of leadership in law enforcement will continue to dominate the profession for years to come. The calling is so unique and its powers so broad that leadership cannot be left to chance. Law enforcement sells no product yet has millions of consumers of its service. It

requires that its members spend much of their working time with a small percentage of the population who are often anti-social and sometimes violent. It is a profession where society allows for the practitioners to use force to affect some outcomes, then judges the effectiveness of the leadership by how often and how much force is used. Being in law enforcement is a profound experience that forever changes the lives of all who are called, as well as those who are served. By granting the police their unusual power, citizens expect fairness, accountability, honesty and integrity.

By developing the leadership potential in each employee, law enforcement leaders can best fulfill the contract they have with the citizens they serve. Effective police organizations share a bond of trust with their communities. The fact that law enforcement personnel carry weapons is not what grants them the authority to enforce the law. It is the public's trust and its agreement to be governed that gives the police their authority. By use of discretion, fairness, integrity and leadership, law enforcement will continue to be allowed to function in the public's interest.

Understanding leadership is fundamental to understanding the role of law enforcement in the community. Leadership is imperative to assure that the public trust is cultivated and not broken. The future leaders in law enforcement will continue to be tasked as caretakers of the public trust. They will be charged with the shaping of organizational cultures that reflect the communities they serve as well as the values and expectations of society as a whole. They will be responsible for the development of subsequent generations of leaders, who will ultimately be their replacements. How well they learn the role of leadership is partly incumbent upon the work done by their current mentors and coaches. It also may be determined by their attention to history. The world is rife with examples of poor judgement, failed character and immoral

behavior. Something Sir Winston Churchill said sums up the sacrifice and dedication needed to be a great leader. He said, “ There comes a special moment in everyone’s life, a moment for which that person was born. That special opportunity, when he seizes it, will fulfill his mission – a mission for which he is uniquely qualified. In that moment he finds greatness. It is his finest hour.”<sup>8</sup> Striving to be a leader in the law enforcement field has been, and will continue to be, each employee’s finest hour. In the long run, future leaders “will not be judged by what their organizations accomplished during their tenure, but by how well the organization does after they are gone.”<sup>9</sup>

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## ENDNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Covey, Steven, Leadership-Monarch <http://www.franklincovey.com/>
- <sup>2</sup> Zempke, Ron, Raines, Claire, Filipczak, Bob, Generations at Work, 3
- <sup>3</sup> Toffler, Alvin, “Learning for the 21<sup>st</sup> century”, <http://www.okcareertech.org/jpr/pdf>
- <sup>4</sup> Maxwell, John C., The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership
- <sup>5</sup> Phillips, Donald T., Lincoln on Leadership
- <sup>6</sup> Tichy, Noel, The Mark of a Winner, 24-29
- <sup>7</sup> Taylor, David, “The Five Pitfalls of Leadership”, Computer Weekly, 1999
- <sup>8</sup> Churchill, Winston, Address to the nation on the Royal Air Force, June 18, 1940.
- <sup>9</sup> Maxwell, John C., The 21 Irrefutable Laws of Leadership

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