

**GENERATION X LED POLICING:  
NOT YOUR MOTHER'S POLICE LEADERSHIP**

**By**

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

The views and conclusions expressed in the Command College Futures Project and journal article are those of the author, and are not necessarily those of the CA Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST).

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Think about the future, the future of policing, not from the perspective of today's leader but instead from the viewpoint of that thirty-five year old sergeant. Do you see a significant difference between the California law enforcement of today vis-à-vis the police agency of 2019? Would it shock you to find tomorrow's police department employing flexible schedules to accommodate its staff's desire to balance work with their life outside of work? What if the paramilitary hierarchical structure so common in today's environment gives way to a more egalitarian approach, where the employee that contributes the most is considered the leader and thus, leadership becomes transitory? Imagine the traditional career ladder being replaced with one that allows for flexible career paths where the title "Specialist" replaces rank. Can you envision contemporary organizational policy manuals and rule reliance transforming into a philosophy that focuses more on results than on process?

Although outlandish by today's standards, this scenario may become a reality when Generation X moves into executive leadership positions in policing. Today's law enforcement culture is largely shaped upon the beliefs and values of the Baby Boomer generation, those born between 1945 and 1964, and those who preceded them. Yet their replacements, Generation X (1965 – 1980), possess a different view on employment, relationships, loyalty, motivation and organizational structure.

There is clearly the potential for significant transitional change as Generation X becomes more entrenched in executive law enforcement positions. As an example, the Citrus Heights Police Department came into existence June, 2006. The new Chief, a Gen X'er himself, was responsible for building this organization. A recent CHPD employment application reflects the

influence of Gen X values. While addressing the stress associated with police work, the job announcement indicated CHPD wanted its, "...officers to have a work/life balance." In addition, According to the Citrus Heights City Manager, each police officer works only eleven months out of a calendar year; with a one-month *paid* sabbatical given to each officer to "...recharge their batteries," (2010).

As more police agencies come under the executive leadership of Generation X, organizational chaos may grow as generational-based change weaves its way through the profession. This could impact the delivery of service, recruitment and retention of personnel and organizational cohesion until the dust settles. Why should today's leaders worry about something that will not occur in earnest for several years, and likely not affect them? Because it is the duty of today's law enforcement executives to safeguard the profession's stability and integrity while creating a vision of the future beyond their tenure. In short, the leader of today must begin preparing his or her replacement in ways that have never taken place before.

### **Generational Values: Is there really a difference?**

According to Author Drew Sanders, in his article *To Protect and Serve: What Generation Y Brings to the Law Enforcement and How Police Agencies can Benefit* (2008), the difference between the workplace characteristics of Baby Boomers and Generation X are quite different. To the Boomers, work equaled their worth; they stayed loyal to a single employer their entire adult life, remained at their desk until the work was done, were motivated by being valued and needed, and they lived to work.

In contrast, Sanders (2008) indicates that Generation X views work as the elimination of a task, nothing more. They are self reliant and independent and view work as a contract rather than a relationship. They also believe everyone is equal – rank means little and view freedom as

a reward. They are motivated by freedom and the removal of rules, and work to live – a balance between work and life is of utmost importance.

While it is dangerous to paint the entire generation with such a broad brush, clear differences have been suggested between today's leaders and those of tomorrow. In her article, *When Gen X Runs the Show* (2009), Anne Fisher states that when Generation X is in charge in 2019, "...they will make some big changes." She suggests that the Generation X leader will lead a workforce that will have little resemblance to what we know today; primarily staffed by other Gen X'ers and those of Generation Y (born 1981 to 2000). They will define success not by the position they hold, but rather what they accomplish to give them personal satisfaction. Additionally, the hierarchical management styles of the Boomers will go by the wayside and morph into a more collaborative decision-making model. In essence, the values of Generation X, coupled with the needs of Generation Y, will reshape the face of California law enforcement.

In their article *Solutions for Retaining Generation Y Employees in the Workplace* (2008), Kenneth Levitt, Debra Lowe and Terry Wilson described Generation X as the children of workaholic Baby Boomers who, as a result, grew to become self-reliant "latchkey" kids. Because they witnessed their parents fall prey to corporate downsizing, Generation X grew distrustful of corporations and their managers, and developed a survival mentality focused on individuality – looking out for their own best interests. Levitt, et al, describe Generation X as possessing poor social skills as a result of their isolation growing up and self-reliance. On the plus side, they are technically adept and embrace change. They want the opportunity to do meaningful work that makes a difference in the world.

In her article *Understanding Generation X* (2008), Helen Dennis indicated that Generation X wanted, among other things, for their employers to be cognizant of their need for

life beyond work and to be supportive in their quest for it. She also believed that because of the broken promises experienced by their parents in corporate America, Generation X was distrustful of those in leadership positions. That may explain why loyalty, in Baby Boomer terms, is not in the Gen X vocabulary. To them, loyalty and respect are earned; they are not to be bestowed upon someone simply because of their years of service or rank.

In *55 Trends now Shaping the Future of Policing* (2008), one trend identified by Dr. Marvin Cetron and Owen Davies was the belief that Generation X and the Millennials will have major effects in the future. Specifically, they suggest that, “Employers will have to adjust virtually all of their policies and practices to the values of these new and different generations, including finding ways to motivate and reward them.” Neither generation, though, seems inclined to allow the status quo to define their work environment and will not hesitate to change it to align with their values and desires.

In the future, it is possible we just might see a greater emphasis on results versus methodology, increased flexibility for and participation by staffing, more management support for employees’ lives outside of work and other changes that will be antithetical to the Boomer perspective (Fisher, 2009). By the year 2019, California law enforcement leadership could become more agile when it comes to changing the way systems operate or, more apt to eliminating systems altogether, as long as it means the job gets done efficiently and effectively.

### **So Why Worry?**

Not only is there potential for significant change in law enforcement leadership but also the potential for major conflict within the workplace as generations collide. Selecting the midpoint of this generation would indicate that the Generation X police chief would be 46 years of age in 2019. Generation Y, those who will make up the bulk of the line level workforce at

that time, values a team environment and longs for a leader who adopts a more inclusive style among his or her employees. In contrast, Filipczak, Raines and Zemke (2000) note that Generation X strives for independence. Independence can mean going it alone; working by oneself to complete a mission. Law enforcement by its very nature requires teamwork to accomplish the mission. If Generation X (e.g., the chief) is truly committed to independence in the workplace, they may find a revolt among their staff or, in the worst case, a mass exodus.

Why worry about change? As the Generation X leader alters the organizational environment, potential impacts to service delivery could arise. This could be problematic as the majority of the service population will be comprised of Baby Boomers who will not tolerate a loss of service. They remember how it was to deliver service the good old-fashioned way and will not tolerate Gen X's approach if it impacts service. Will their expectations be in conflict with the level of service being provided? Will the wants and needs of the employee supplant the expectations of the aging populace?

### **Leaders of Today Must Take Action for Tomorrow**

In his article *Who is Going to Fill Their Shoes? A Perspective on the Recruitment of Police Chiefs* (2002), retired Monterey Police Chief Gary Brown suggested that sitting Chiefs have done little to prepare those in line to succeed them. One main reason cited is their unwillingness to recognize the different values of Generation X and try to develop a better understanding of what makes Gen X tick. In the Forecasting International study, one of the respondents summed up the predicament facing California law enforcement best when he stated, "Boomers are reluctant to choose successors." In the coming decade, a leadership vacuum is likely to develop because of this reluctance. As a result, the profession may be faced with a tumultuous transition wherein existing systems, policies and operations are completely

dismantled; or they develop into a richer, more egalitarian work environment where the makeup of team becomes the most important part of the recipe for success rather than who is in charge.

So what can we do? The leader of today must prepare an organization to become mature enough to weather significant change, proactively plan for the transition and recognize this is a process that will require substantial research, study and a concrete plan of action. The time to act is now. Law enforcement has done little to recognize the impending change. Most training is based on the current policing model; little exploration of the future has occurred. Today's leaders owe it to the profession to set the stage for as seamless a transition as possible. The California Commission on Peace Officers Standards and Training (P.O.S.T.) has begun to recognize the importance of this preparation by offering courses such as the "Managing the Generations in Today's Workplace" (POST website, 2010). Such courses, however, focus on the here and now; the profession must look to the future and prepare tomorrow's leaders beginning today.

In September 2009 a panel of subject matter experts from varied disciplines was convened by the author to study the potential challenges and opportunities facing the Generation X police chief. Through their work, the panel identified a number of recommendations the law enforcement profession should consider now so as to smooth the transition Generation X executive leadership (Monterey CA, Sept 24, 2009).

### **Recommendations**

- POST should partner with the large professional California law enforcement organizations to develop a transitional development training curriculum and implementation strategy. Organizations like the California Police Chiefs' Association (CPCA), California Sheriffs' Association (CSA), and California Peace Officers'

Association (CPOA) can partner with POST on a needs assessment. This assessment should focus on creating strategies for talent development, generational cohesion and understanding, succession planning, cross departmental learning opportunities, and the honing of hard and soft leadership skills to name a few. The California University system should be utilized to assist in the development.

- The profession should renew its emphasis on mentoring, pairing Baby Boomers with the up and coming Generation X leaders of tomorrow.
- Develop an annuitant program allowing recently retired Baby Boomers executives to come back to coach the new Generation X executive leader. This would be different than the mentor programming as it will allow the annuitant to give full-time attention to the development of the new leader, preparing their replacement for success.
- POST must develop a Generation X Advisory Committee to identify the significant differences between their view of executive leadership compared to that of today's leaders. This group should be comprised of Gen X'ers who aspire to lead an agency. It may be helpful to establish a virtual law enforcement agency to allow Gen X members to oversee an organization and demonstrate how they would lead. This may give a clear understanding of the mindset and values that most likely will shape California law enforcement in the future.
- A futures-oriented version of the Role of the Police Chief training course should be developed for the next generation of law enforcement executives. The curriculum should be based upon information gathered through the Gen X Advisory Committee and include

how their differing values could impact the organizational wellbeing and service to the Baby Boomers, their largest service population.

- Rather than assume it will not work, a flexible schedule designed to enhance the work/life balance must be thoroughly examined to determine if at least a portion of it can be incorporated into the law enforcement arena today. One of the major professional associations should examine how flexible scheduling is incorporated into the private sector to accomplish this assessment.
- Likewise, a revised organizational structure designed to level out the hierarchical silo should be examined to determine not only if it would be feasible to incorporate but equally important to mitigate the impacts that would follow.

## **Conclusion**

The culture and structure of California law enforcement has remained fairly consistent over the last several generations. The Baby Boomers embraced the paramilitary structure established by the generation before them. The Generation X executive leader will be different. Their unique values will be interwoven into the fabric of the law enforcement profession, creating a structure and culture quite different from the contemporary model. Because of the nature of change and accompanying resistance, the Generation X leader will be forced to focus on balance in all aspects of their leadership efforts. Clearly an all or nothing approach will not work; wholesale change to the structure and culture of law enforcement will not occur overnight. Incremental change is required to modify a system as rigid and well-defined as that found in current law enforcement agencies. Success requires the exercise of diligence and intelligence as the transformation occurs.

If POST and other law enforcement leadership entities develop a successful transformative model to implement, future Gen X and Gen Y leaders will be able to adapt and apply new principles of how to conduct police services in the future. Ideally, this new model will reflect their generational values and work ethic without sacrificing quality service and excellence their communities expect and desire. The alternative is to do nothing and hope for the best. Best practices in law enforcement have demonstrated that taking a proactive approach to address crime and quality of life issues provides far better results than waiting for something to happen. The latter approach has proven time and time again that, at that point, it is often too late to adequately mitigate negative impacts or successfully resolve a problem. The leaders of today must recognize this going forward to ensure the transition to Generation X leadership causes the least impact to the noblest of professions.

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