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## Officer Retention: The Next Leadership Challenge

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Officer retention is one of the biggest challenges facing today's law enforcement leaders, particularly those who lead smaller departments. According to *The Police Hiring and Retention Survey*, a report for the U.S. Department of Justice, it takes an average of 31 weeks to screen, hire, and train a new officer for a small department (cities with population under 50,000) and up to 43 weeks for a large department.

As difficult as it is to find qualified applicants for vacancies, it is going to become even more critical to keep the ones you have. According to the fourth edition of *Management and Supervision in Law Enforcement*,<sup>1</sup> it costs approximately \$58,000 to select, hire, and train a new officer. Overtime costs associated with working short handed drives this cost even higher. As you can see, retention saves dollars.

Money aside, an often overlooked cost of officer turnover is the loss of experience, community contacts, and institutional knowledge. Departments with high turnover often suffer reduced productivity, lower quality of service delivery, more frequent complaints, and increased liability risks.

Now that we have the bad news, *what do we do about it?* The old "my way or the highway" approach to management is not going to work anymore. The new Generation



X and Y officers of today are better educated and are prone to change jobs more frequently. This is illustrated in a quote from a survey of police academy trainees in *Management and Supervision in Law Enforcement*: "Forty percent of academy recruits plan to leave their current agency within three years of graduating."

Agency leadership must develop strategies to motivate their employees to stay. Can leaders motivate their subordinates? According to some, motivation can only come from within. I've heard leaders lament, "You can lead a horse to water, but you can't make him drink." The challenge for today's leader is not to make him drink; it's to make him thirsty.

According to George Warrell in *Turnover: A Small Agency Nightmare*,<sup>2</sup> the factors affecting retention are **benefits, working conditions, training, and equipment**. While we have made strides in improving these factors, we will never be able to pay officers what they are worth and/or give them all the newest and up-to-date equipment that is available. Because of this, we need to concentrate on other factors over which we have more control.

### Providing Ample Training Opportunities

Training is essential to equipping law enforcement officers with the tools necessary to do their job effectively and professionally. Well-trained officers are confident in their ability to perform their job and solve problems as they arise.

Training should be realistic and purpose driven. The old "sit down and listen" method of training won't work on today's officer. They prefer training to be active and

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hands-on. They need to understand how the training is necessary and meaningful. Repetition builds skills and endurance.

Training for the new generation also needs to be fun and stimulating. Your challenge as a law enforcement leader is to be creative and resourceful in providing this training. There are numerous training sites and resources available to assist you in developing a dynamic training program. In addition, a variety of educational and training programs are available to

your officers free of charge through the Criminal Justice Institute.

### Improving the Work Environment

Working conditions probably play the largest role in a leader's ability to improve officer retention. According to Ferdinand Fournies in *Why Employees Don't Do What They're Supposed to Do and What to Do About It*,<sup>4</sup> not knowing what is expected of them is one of the most often cited problems with working conditions. Changing expectations keep officers on edge and create stress and dissatisfaction, thus creating turnover. They rob officers of internal security and make them feel unsuccessful.

According to Douglas McGregor's "Theory Y," the vast majority of people want to do the right thing and do a good job. However, officers need agency expectations defined for them. An effective leader creates and communicates his expectations and vision to the organization.

The quality of supervision an employee receives is critical to retention. People leave their managers and supervisors more often than they leave their job. As mentioned earlier in the article, 50% of officers leaving small agencies go to another law enforcement agency. As Dr. Jack Enter says in *Challenging the Law Enforcement Organization*,<sup>5</sup> one of the biggest problems in departments today is "they are over managed and under led." Anything a supervisor does to make an officer feel unvalued will destroy motivation and morale and contribute to turnover.

## Officer Turnover At-a-Glance

- Half of the officers leaving large agencies are retirees, but only about 20% of officers leaving small agencies are retirees.
- 67% of departing officers in small agencies and about 33% of officers in large agencies leave within five years or less.
- It is estimated that nearly half of departing officers from small agencies and about 25% of officers leaving large agencies go on to other law enforcement work.

Excerpt from "Calculating the Cost of Police Turnover," *The Police Chief*, October 2002.<sup>3</sup>

So, what can you as a leader do to make your officers “thirsty?” What things can you do to provide opportunities for employee motivation and increase retention? According to Frederick Herzberg in *The Human Need for Work*,<sup>6</sup> “The leader’s task is not to motivate his people to achieve; he should provide opportunities for people to achieve so they will become motivated.”

Officers have indicated the need to feel like they are part of the organization, to be able to speak freely, and to feel like the leaders listen to what they say. Do you as a leader solicit input from your officers? Do you foster an environment where they feel safe in providing honest input? If so, employees will offer ideas, and feel free to critique and commit to continuous improvement. If not, they will bite their tongue or find themselves constantly “in trouble” until they finally leave the department.

### Encouraging Communication

Two-way communication is the key—information must flow *both* up and down within the organization. Officers often complain they don’t know what is going on at the top and even worse, that the leadership doesn’t know what is going on at the bottom. It is not enough anymore to say, “Because I said so.” Decisions and policies should be explained when possible. As leaders, resist the temptation to be too “busy” and take time to remember your roots. Officers will respond better and more productively to a decision they understand than to one they are force fed. I’m not saying they will agree with everything, but the likelihood they will accept your decision greatly increases if they understand it.

How do you find out what your officers have to say? Departments have tried suggestion boxes, with some success. Others have tried open door policies or formal staff meetings. While those are important tools in getting information moving, the best way to find out what is going on is to practice MBWA—Management By Walking Around.

MBWA is a very effective way to find out what is happening and also to be seen by the officers as caring about what they do. Too many leaders are “busy being busy,” and don’t take time to get out from behind the desk and simply talk with their officers. If they did, they just might catch officers doing something good. This leads to the next retainer—recognition.

### Recognizing the Worthy

Recognition, or lack thereof, is a big complaint of line officers. We often miss opportunities to recognize good behavior, but seldom miss an opportunity to criticize. Giving positive recognition is inexpensive; failure to give it can be disastrous to retention.

Napoleon knew this well when he said, “A man will not sell me his life but he will give it to me for a piece of colored ribbon.” Recognition not only rewards the officer, it shows other officers the benefits of good performance. Leaders across the country have developed many different reward programs. Some involve monetary incentives, others certificates or uniform ribbons. One that is popular now is the challenge coin given for exemplary service or actions.

I understand that not everyone is the employee of the month, and certainly people are going to make mistakes. The key to job satisfaction and morale is how we handle those situations. Be fair and even handed when dispensing discipline. What kind of mistake was it? Was it an honest mistake where the officer was trying to do the right thing or was it an “I don’t care” mistake? The disciplinary actions should be different. Don’t use “group spankings.” Address the action with the officer. Officers in your department watch your disciplinary actions for signs of fairness, integrity, and high standards. Do they see problems handled as they occur? Do they see the same incident have different results, depending on who is involved?

### Boosting Morale

“Morale” refers to a person’s or group’s state of mind, level of enthusiasm, and amount of involvement with work and with life. To quote Napoleon again, “An army’s effectiveness depends on its size, training, experience, and morale...and morale is worth more than the other factors combined.”

Organizational morale is the leader’s responsibility. Morale is always present—It might be high, low, or on an even keel, but it is always there. The leader’s job is to keep it as high as possible and be always vigilant in watching for signs that it is dropping.

## Conclusion

How do you retain the good officers that you have within your department? Once you take care of their basic needs, pay them the best you can and get them the best equipment you can, it all boils down to one word— leadership. It is a simple little word with huge implications for the organization. Leaders at every level of the organization should take an honest look at themselves and ask the question: “Am I doing everything I can to be the best leader I can?”

Leadership is a never ending quest and is not easy. If it was, anyone could do it. Your officers are always watching you. If they see you doing your best and trying to always do better, they will respect you and believe in you. If you are fair when dealing with their mistakes, your officers will give you the benefit of the doubt if they know you are trying and working for improvement instead of accepting the situation as is.

When officers know they are in a place where people are looking out for their welfare, they are more apt to stay. If you haven't established that trust with them, they will leave for a more positive environment, regardless of the money, the equipment, and the benefits. People want to be happy and feel valued. Leaders who are innovative and energetic and constantly working to facilitate this will be a step ahead in improving retention.

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## Recommended Reading:

<sup>1</sup>Bennett, Wayne and Hess, Karen. *Management and Supervision in Law Enforcement, fourth edition*, 2004.

<sup>2</sup>Warrell, George III. “Turnover: A Small Agency Nightmare,” *Law and Order*, September 2000, pp. 59-61.

<sup>3</sup>Orrick, w. Dwayne. “Calculating the Cost of Police Turnover,” *The Police Chief*, October 2002, pp.100-103.

<sup>4</sup>Enter, Jack E. *Challenging the Law Enforcement Organization: Proactive Leadership Strategies*, 2006.

<sup>5</sup>Fournies, Ferdinand F. *Why Employees Don't Do What They're Supposed To Do and What To Do About It*, 1999.

<sup>6</sup>Herzberg, Frederick. “The Human Need for Work,” *Industry Week*, July 24, 1978, pp. 49-52.



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