# Motivating and Retaining Law Enforcement Officers in 2019

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#### Abstract

The research I have performed while writing this paper is intended to fill a gap in our understanding of two key issues; why smaller to mid-sized law enforcement agencies are having trouble motivating employees to be peak performers and why they are having trouble retaining officers. I have reached a conclusion that because of the tight fiscal constraints facing many law enforcement agencies, leaders should model their techniques as if they were motivating volunteers instead of paid employees. In this paper, I propose a new model, which I have termed the *Non-monetary Motivation and Retention Model*, to guide these agencies toward improving motivation and lowering turnover. This model is designed to challenge the prevailing opinion that money, or the lack thereof, is the root of all motivation and retention problems. It is important to understand that while I specifically developed this model from the point of view of a law enforcement agency administrator, the theory can be easily applied to other budget-constrained public service organizations.

Keywords: law enforcement, motivation, retention, administration

## Motivating and Retaining Law Enforcement Officers

Motivating law enforcement officers is one of the most common problems facing agency administrators of all sizes and types. The inability of leaders to keep their employees motivated inevitably leads to higher turnover rates, which further decreases individual motivation.

(Dewhurst, Guthridge, & Mohr, 2009). This cycle is more heavily realized in smaller and midsized agencies that don't have the necessary monetary resources to offer higher salaries or other benefits. This requires leaders to re-evaluate how to motivate employees to become peak performers and decrease the rate of employee turnover. I postulate that in agencies that are financially constrained, administrators must attempt to motivate their paid employees in the same manner as they would a volunteer. Through my research, I have developed a new model by which we can guide our actions and policies to foster a positive organizational culture, develop sound recruiting and advancement practices, implement fair recognition programs and nurture employee empowerment.

### **Understanding Motivation**

Even among identical twins, no two humans are ever entirely identical. Everyone perceives the world around them through layers and layers of filters that are unique to each individual. These filters are the result of the human experience; prejudices, social stigmas, home life, personal values, etc. And since no two people experience anything in the exact same way, it is reasonable to surmise that no two people are motivated by the exact same things. This is a key concept that administrators absolutely must comprehend in order to be successful leaders.

It is easy to break our employees down into groups based upon visible demographics such as race, age or gender, and doing so can be helpful in a lot of ways with regard to human resources management. However, to be the most effective motivators, administrators must

understand that much more obscure groups exist within our organizations, and that they also need to tailor their leadership and motivation techniques to them.

One of the most effective ways to group employees is by the individual's generational association. Leaders can take this generational identity and break it down so that they can build a tiered motivational plan for each group. In doing so, you will find that younger to mid-career officers are highly motivated by getting new training, opportunities for transfers or advancement and being given specialized assignments. (Robinette, 1982). For example, you notice a younger officer, who has spent his entire three-year career in the patrol division, is beginning to have reduced operational statistics, increased numbers of citizen complaints and lower performance review scores. It would be easy for the hands-off manager to identify the problem and attempt to resolve it with discipline. But would this be truly helping to fix the source of the problem for this officer? Chances are the answer is no. Given what is known about this officer's generational association, it is likely that leaders could help motivate him or her to get back to their peak performance by giving them new responsibilities, transferring them to a new district, shift assignment or even simply by sending them to a specialized training program.

In contrast to the younger officer, career veteran officers tend to be more motivated by stability. (Robinette, 1982). These officers view change as a threat to their status. They have taken great time and care to establish themselves as the expert that they perceive themselves to be within their operational world. They may take reassignment to another shift, transfer to another division or requiring them to learn new skills as a personal affront. Here we arrive at the old adage "You can't teach an old dog new tricks." I propose, however, that this generation's resistance to change isn't as much about status as it is about control. Motivating this group of officers to accept a change could be as simple as ensuring early communication as to the

necessity of the change. This gives leaders a valuable opportunity to learn from the officer why they don't like it. Do they simply not understand it, or is there something administrators have overlooked? Having this conversation with the career veteran officer prior to making a change gives them back the control they have worked hard for. More importantly, since they have been part of the process of change, they are more likely to perform better thereafter.

Tiered motivational plans must account for more than generational identity, though. Some other important groups that should be considered are the "Why not" and the "Why bother" groups. (Long, 2015). It is the difference in attitude among leaders and followers alike that predisposes a person, when confronted with a challenge, to either think of a way to accomplish something or a reason why we can't accomplish it. Motivating the "Why not" group can be easy. The challenge is in overcoming the "Why bother" attitude. In these cases, it is helpful to find ways to relate the intended positive outcome with being beneficial to the individual.

When considering motivation as a whole, and its role in achieving organizational goals, a good analogy to use would be a mathematical equation proposed by Randall Aragon in his article "Positive Organizational Culture". (1993). P = A x M; where P is performance, A is ability and M is motivation. Aragon definitively shows the relationship between ability and motivation in producing peak performance. As with a normal mathematical equation, if you reduce either of the variables, the total product will be reduced in kind. Administrators often cannot do much to empirically increase an individual's ability once they are a part of our organization. This leaves maximizing motivation as the single function that administrators can adjust to ensure superior performance and output.

#### The Non-monetary Motivation and Retention Model

With a clearer understanding of the need to individually motivate the several different subsects of employees, we can now explore the model I propose, which I have termed the *Non-monetary Motivation and Retention Model*. (See Figure 1.) This model provides a graphic representation of the different needs for an organization to reach its maximum motivation and retention levels, as well as their relative importance to the outcome.



Figure 1. The non-monetary motivation and retention model shows the progression of needs to reach maximum motivation and retention levels.

#### **Positive Organizational Culture**

The beginning of the journey towards achieving maximum motivation and retention lies in fostering a positive organizational culture. Many scholars agree that the culture of an organization is the lynchpin of keeping your workers working and keeping them happy.

Consider a time in your own life where you found yourself in a situation in which you were not happy. Whether you were unhappy because you felt like an outsider, or people were overly critical of you, or you didn't feel valued, think about what it would have taken to make you choose to stay there.

If it can be agreed that almost nothing short of large amounts of money can make a person stay in a situation in which they are unhappy, then leaders need next to examine how they can tell if they are creating that problematic situation within their own organizations. There are several components to be evaluated when determining if your organization has a positive culture. (Carpenter & Fulton, 2017). Attitude is one of the most important considerations. A majority of complaints that are made against an individual officer or an agency as a whole are related to attitude. This is summed up perfectly in the saying "It's not what you say, it's how you say it." In order to support a positive culture, organizations need to ensure that every interaction their employees have with members of the public, as well as their co-workers, is positive. Of course, in law enforcement this is not always possible. Sometimes officers have to take action that the recipient isn't going to like. But even then, a skilled officer can leave the recipient with at least a feeling of understanding if he or she takes time to explain why the unpleasant action was necessary.

Appearance is another factor that weighs heavily on organizational culture. If you have ever been to a professional sporting event then it won't take you long to understand this. What is the first thing you notice about the players? They're all wearing the same uniform. But more importantly, what is the first thing you notice about the fans? There is no requirement for fans to dress like the team they support. They do it voluntarily. For many fans, dressing in the uniform of our favorite sports teams gives them a sense of belonging. It is a way for fans to show their

support for and to identify with something that is bigger than themselves. It creates a tacit link between the successes of an organization and the individual. The uniforms and other equipment, such as vehicles, that organizations issue to their employees are a statement of their unity and successes as a team. A team in which each member is wearing something different from the other will have less cohesiveness than a team all dressed alike. Taking that a step further, the standards that agencies set for their employees in regard to their uniforms and equipment speak volumes about their culture as well. Well-kept leather gear, sharp creases and shiny brass all convey the notion that they expect exceptional quality and won't accept anything less. This is a very appealing quality for many of the personality types that are inherently drawn to law enforcement employment. In addition, projecting a high-quality appearance to the public can increase employee's perceived external image, which is thought to be a factor in employee engagement. (Crosby, 2014)

Nothing can be more demotivating to an organization than being surrounded by people who display poor conduct. Conduct is a crucial component in promoting a positive culture. This is the basis for everything we do. It is the standard against which individuals are measured as employees. Even the most educated and trained organization will be wholly ineffective if they don't conduct themselves properly.

Closely related to conduct is the final element in promoting positive culture, professionalism. In the private sector, businesses routinely lose customers and fail because of unprofessional employees. The service industry is one particular example where this is abundantly evident. Restaurants place a high degree of emphasis on hiring professional waitstaff. The managers of these types of businesses understand that each individual employee is a reflection of how the business itself operates. To the customer, a business that tolerates a

rude or offensive employee must obviously not value their customers very much. Law enforcement agency administrators tend not to think of their own business model in this same regard. This is often a fatal mistake in the venue of public opinion. These organizations must return to the belief that the citizens they serve are customers, and that their officers are the waitstaff that are the public face of the agency and, as such, exemplify their values.

Now that you have evaluated your organization's culture, what can you do to make it more positive? One way is to remember that your organization exists to serve the public. It is easy to get distracted by the salary and fringe benefits, but leaders can refocus their organizational culture on providing a public service rather than serving themselves by placing a higher priority on non-monetary motivators. (Fulton & VanHuss, 2018). While salary and other monetary benefits are certainly necessary, when leaders place more effort into non-monetary motivation techniques, such as employee of the month awards, it demonstrates to employees a higher level of commitment and concern for their well-being. (Dewhurst, Guthridge, & Mohr, 2009). The thought behind this is that any detached manager can "throw money at a problem". However, for an administrator to take time to read nomination letters from dozens of supervisors, rank them individually and then make a determination as to who the winner is demonstrates that these people matter to him or her. (Price & Price, 2013). This is especially true in larger organizations in which lower-level employees don't regularly interact with administrators. This effect can be multiplied if the administrators convey the awards or other recognition in person. Personalized motivators such as this have been shown to be much more effective than blanket recognition such as a department-wide memo or email saying that the employee won the award. (Dewhurst, Guthridge, & Mohr, 2009).

While personalized motivators are certainly the preferred method of conveying recognition, larger programs also have their place in the organization's culture. Chief Todd Radford of the Lakeway Police Department in Texas has a unique program in place that he developed to show his employees exactly how much he is personally and professionally invested in their well-being. Chief Radford calls his program a *Total Wellness Program*. (Radford, 2019). The focus of the program goes beyond traditional fitness programs that encourage only good physical health. This program encompasses all aspects of the employee's welfare. The first portion includes free access to a traditional fitness facility located at the police station, which makes it extremely convenient to access. But to further show the importance of using it, the employee is given paid time during their workday to use the facility. In addition to this, each employee is given an annual psychological screening and opportunities for follow-up counseling. This program can be coupled with additional social outreach initiatives such as team picnics or other outings. In doing this, Chief Radford has established a culture of caring and compassion within his organization. This culture is why these officers choose Chief Radford's organization over similar ones that may have comparable salaries.

As discussed earlier, attitude is a large portion of what type of culture climate your organization exhibits. This is especially true of the supervisory level employee's attitude. Just as a single bad apple can ruin a bunch, a single supervisor with a poor attitude can infect an entire organization. Employees draw at least part of their values from their supervisor's attitude. Supervisors who have poor attitudes inevitably pass this on to their subordinates. (Fortenberry, 2015). Impressionable younger officers see this as an acceptable behavior and may even identify with it in a sardonic capacity. As administrators, you must take care to quickly identify this internal threat and to mitigate it as soon as possible to reduce the effects it has on the other

employees. The longer an employee is subjected to this climate, the worse their own attitude will become.

Akin to supervisory attitude infection, employees are subject to peer pressure influences also. Employees who are unhappy with an issue within their organization are much more likely to vocalize discontent or even to show discontent through their performance if their peers are also doing so. Conversely, an isolated employee who is unhappy with a situation but is surrounded by people who are not is more likely to find a way to "get over it." (Long, 2015)

Organizations who emphasize the importance of positive attitudes, good appearance, proper conduct and consummate professionalism will inevitably increase their employee's level of engagement in their work. This will directly lead to an increase of discretionary effort, effort above the minimum amount required, that employees are willing to give. (Crosby, 2014). This will go a long way in increasing desired work outcomes.

#### **Sound Recruiting and Advancement Practices**

The Theory of Public Service Motivation plays an important role in the understanding of how to motivate law enforcement agency employees as if they were volunteers instead of paid employees. In its essence, the theory attempts to explain what motivates an individual to forgo potentially more lucrative or glamourous careers in order to join an agency which serves the public. (Moynihan & Pandey, 2007). This is the key motivating factor in why people provide volunteer work. Discounting knowledge of local laws and ordinances, the skill sets required to be a police officer or other law enforcement official are essentially universal throughout the United States. They could also be easily transferred into another career choice, as is often the case for retired officers. Many career options are more financially and beneficially lucrative to the individual; private investigations, insurance fraud detection, college professors, etc. So, what

can law enforcement agency administrators do to attract and keep these people in their organizations? How can leaders keep them from leaving and moving to an agency that has a higher salary? Once you have developed and nurtured a positive organizational culture, you can move your attention to the second level of the non-monetary motivation and retention model, sound recruiting and advancement practices.

Recruiting is a large part of effective motivation and retention. It is not surprising to expect that employees want to surround themselves with the best. Recruitment of people qualified to be law enforcement officers is no new challenge. This is historically one of the most difficult and expensive duties of any organization's training personnel. Most organizations have a set of minimum standards a person must meet in order to be eligible for employment. This can be a challenge in and of itself, especially in smaller communities. As current events unfold and change public opinion of law enforcement officers in general, the pool of applicants continues to shrink continuously. Many organizations that feel the strain from high turnover and low interest from new applicants fall victim to the trap of hiring the wrong person simply to fill a vacancy quickly. Similarly, these same organizations may tend to promote people who are not qualified or suited to leadership roles because they feel they have no other choice.

Law enforcement agency recruiters should gear their efforts in the correct direction in order to gain the best results. Recruiting has to be a targeted effort, rather than just a blanket program. This requires more effort on the part of the recruiter, but it will provide much better return on investment overall. Imagine you were given a choice between two candidates with the same qualifications. One candidate has demonstrated, sustained volunteer experience and displays a true spirit of public service. Whereas, the other candidate has only ever worked in high-paying private corporations and has never volunteered for anything significant. Which

candidate would you choose to work in your public safety organization? A thought that is often lost when doing untargeted recruiting is that recruitment plays a very large part in the overall motivation of an organization. Recruiters should choose an audience of people that are already pre-disposed to be motivated by non-monetary factors, as is common in people who volunteer more. (Crosby, 2014).

Another important lesson learned for recruiters is that they must be absolutely upfront and truthful with candidates when discussing things such as opportunities for assignments or advancement. Lying to get people interested in applying may be initially successful in gaining employees, but it will quickly blow up in the faces of the recruiter. The attitudes of individuals who expected certain types of assignments or to be promoted within the first year, and then were not awarded them, will quickly turn negative. (Robinette, 1982). This, again, will spread like a virus to their peers.

Once an organization has recruited an employee that displays a propensity for public service motivation, it is important that they continue to foster this spirit as the employee grows. Advancement opportunities are a great motivator for almost every subsect of employee that we discussed in the understanding motivation section. As leaders retire, organizations often feel pressed to fill supervisory vacancies immediately. This is partly due to the negative stigma of having a "rudderless ship". In this analogy, the prevailing thought is that a ship with no rudder cannot be steered, and thus is subject to listing lazily. Rushing to fill a key vacancy with the wrong person simply to have it filled can have vast repercussions. It takes administrative courage to overcome this short-sightedness and leave that leadership position vacant until the right person is ready. Part of this courage comes from the understanding that individuals must be internally motivated to perform at their peak in any particular role. (Fortenberry, 2015). External

motivators can be applied to a certain degree, but a person cannot be entirely extrinsically motivated. Individuals that don't have the intrinsic drive to be the very best will fall victim to lackluster performance, or worse, self-centered leadership. As demonstrated earlier, a toxic leadership attitude can kill the spirit of an organization and cause it to crumble.

It can be difficult to gauge a person's level of internal motivation. Job history, performance reviews, personal references and other sources can provide a useful perspective in doing this. But there are some other personal factors that administrators should consider that weight heavily on individual internal motivation. (Fortenberry, 2015). Some of the key personal factors that should be assessed during a candidate's background investigation include a history of family problems, health concerns, financial instability and even drug or alcohol abuse. It is typical for candidates to be subjected to these assessments in order to be employed initially, but organizations tend not to do this when considering them later for advancement or other assignments. Doing a quick check-up on these personal motivating factors throughout an individual's career can be very beneficial to an organization when deciding how to help them perform at their peak.

Regardless of the system that your organization chooses to employ for recruitment and advancement, there are two aspects that must be implemented. The systems must be standardized and they must be transparent. Without a standard by which you measure an employee's progress and suitability for advancement, you cannot fairly compare them to another when considering them for advancement. This can be very demotivating, especially when employees feel they were more qualified than the employee that was selected. The system must also be completely transparent. It can be very tough for leaders to face employees that were not selected for advancement. They face questions about why someone wasn't selected and they

face judgement for perceived prejudices. This is another situation where administrative courage must be present. Evaluating each candidate with the same standard and then being willing to explain the outcome of advancement processes is crucial to an organization's integrity, which directly affects employee's motivation to continue working there.

#### Fair Recognition Programs

The debate about what is fair is never-ending. And there is contention that what is fair is always equal and if it isn't equal, then it isn't fair. To understand the next level of the non-monetary motivation and retention model, we should have a clear understanding of the subtle difference between "fair" and "equal". The concept of equal is relatively easy to grasp. What one person receives is the exact same as what any other person receives. Doing this isn't always fair to the individuals, however. A good illustration of this is the Women, Infant, and Children (WIC) supplemental nutrition program. This program provides levels of support based upon the individual family's need. Not every family gets exactly the same, but every family gets exactly what they need. This is how we define "fair" for the purposes of this model.

In 1981, two special agents of the Federal Bureau of Investigation's prestigious training academy conducted a research study into the causes of marginal police performance. The findings made by agents Reginald R. Clay and Robert E. Yates indicated that almost a full 35 percent of "problem police employees" are doing only enough work to keep from being disciplined. (Robinette, 1982). Although these specific statistics may be dated, I submit that the significant effect on morale conveyed by them is still very true.

Ernie Capobianco, a private-sector CEO, states in his article on rewards and recognition (2014) "Recognition is priceless, and status is much more than money." (p. 4). In fact, it has been suggested that recognition routinely outweighs salary in employee motivation if salary is

already at an acceptable level. (Fortenberry, 2015). This principle can be applied similarly in the agencies that the non-monetary motivation and retention model targets; those who don't have financial resources to expand monetary benefits.

This returns the discussion to our thesis, that these organizations need to motivate their employees like they would volunteers. A common tactic that administrators use to do this is the use of some manner of recognition program. These programs vary widely based upon the size, type, location and values of the individual organization. They typically include some incremental award for performance such as an employee of the month, quarter or year. These are great programs and unquestionably add value to the morale of the employees. Often times, however, these awards are conferred too infrequently or inconsistently to be truly effective. In order to have the best benefit from recognition programs, organizations should take regular opportunities to showcase peak performance.

These opportunities don't have to be limited to overall job performance either. Many agencies are beginning to award badges, patches or certificates to employees to signify length of service with their organization. This can be a powerful motivator for an employee, especially when coupled with a status boost, like the new title of Trooper First Class. Similarly, allowing employees to wear a different insignia or badge to denote a specialized skill, such as a hostage negotiator or a field training officer, gives employees an opportunity to display their pride in their accomplishments. Another idea that could be adapted from the several branches of the military is a good conduct award. Although sometimes jokingly referred to as the "didn't get caught" award, good conduct awards take length of service awards a step further. They recognize that an employee has worked for a period of years without poor performance, disciplinary action or any other criteria the organization wishes to set.

Another opportunity to feature peak performance is in informal, revolving awards. These types of awards are much less rigid, but can offer much the same benefit as traditional awards. During my time in the military, one group to which I was assigned completed weekly formation runs around the post to fulfill our physical training requirements and build esprit de corps. The runs started out simply as a team-building exercises, but quickly morphed into a friendly competition of who could finish first. On one run, a particularly spirited company commander sent his fastest runner out of formation to sprint ahead at the last minute and beat out another unit. The others in our group joked that the lanky sprinter resembled the animated character Gumby. As the weeks went on, other companies joined in with their own sprinters in their bid to finish first. Before long, the Golden Gumby Award was born. Each week, the winning company would take ownership of a figurine of Gumby that had been spray-painted gold in order to show that they were the superior unit. This type of recognition, while silly to some, builds a strong sense of belonging and pride among employees. It can motivate even marginal performers to achieve higher levels of success.

In the pursuit of following fair recognition practices, there are risks that should be avoided when possible. The ultimate example of an undesired outcome comes from the overuse of recognition programs. This may seem counterintuitive when thinking from a perspective of "some is good, so more is better". But it can be observed that awarding people too frequently can dilute the prestigiousness associated with the award, causing employees to stop working towards earning them. (Fortenberry, 2015). This issue is mirrored in many other facets of life. Returning for a moment to sports metaphors, the "participation award" comes to mind. While encouraging participants that don't win is certainly a noble act, and can help in retaining the losing individual's interest in the sport, the manner in which you do it is the discriminating

factor. Giving a losing participant the same large trophy as a winner makes that large trophy less distinguished. This can decrease the motivation of some to perform harder because they will get the same reward regardless of their efforts. Perhaps in this instance, a smaller trophy or a certificate would be more appropriate to recognize non-winners.

Another danger organizations face when developing recognition programs is mixing monetary rewards with other awards. This can even include rewards such as gift cards. (Fulton & VanHuss, 2018). Doing so will eventually dilute the importance that personalized recognition conveys and can actually demotivate the employee. This will inevitably lead to a condition where employees will only perform at peak levels when this type of award is possible. If the same principles as volunteer organizations are applied in motivating employees, then leaders must be careful to be fair and judicious in the awarding of recognition. Keeping consistency in how you choose recipients, how frequently you bestow recognition and the type of recognition you give can go a long way in increasing employee's morale. If the organization handles recognition programs properly, they will find employees staying longer and working harder because they actually enjoy it.

#### **Employee Empowerment**

The pinnacle of the non-monetary motivation and retention model rests with employee empowerment. Empowering employees is the process of giving up control of many every-day decisions and processes and trusting them to use their individual expertise to carry out the organization's mission. (Marquis & Huston, 2017). The benefits to the employee in this environment are immediate and compelling. When employees are granted larger amounts of autonomy, they tend to take higher levels of personal responsibility for their work output.

Consequently, they feel a sense of ownership in the organization. (Aragon, 1993). Once an

organization reaches this point in the model, the individuals stop thinking of themselves as employees, and begin to feel like partners. Administrators must grow and encourage this feeling of partnership in order to have individuals choose their organization instead of someone else's.

#### Conclusion

The goal of every law enforcement agency administrator is to provide the highest quality of service with the resources they have available. More and more frequently, administrators find themselves making decisions based solely upon budgetary constraints without regard to the human capital cost. Employee motivation frequently suffers due to this, and is too often entirely overlooked by administrators. (Leip & Stinchcomb, 2013). Organizations that motivate their employees like volunteers and commit themselves to the principles of the non-monetary motivation and retention model are far less likely to suffer the crippling effects associated with low levels of motivation and high levels of voluntary turnover.

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