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Police Leaders and Leadership Development: A Systematic Literature Review

Mitchel Pearson-Goff & Victoria Herrington

Executive Director's Introduction

What do we want from our police leaders?

This is a deceptively simple question. Answers can be drawn from a multitude of sources and actors, including the police, the environment they operate in, and policing stakeholders. In this paper the authors present findings from a systematic review of the research literature to answer three related sub questions: What do we know about who police leaders are? What do we know about what police leaders do? And what do we know about how best to prepare and develop police leaders? The purpose of this systematic literature review is to synthesise what we know, empirically, about police leadership. This systematic review is a step forward in establishing a foundation for devising, improving and implementing training to reflect the needs of police leaders.

I commend this excellent piece of research to you and thank Victoria and Mitchell for their valuable work.

Warwick Jones

Executive Director, AIPM

INTRODUCTION

Police are required to understand and effectively operate in a complex social, political and organisational environment¹. Good leadership is fundamental to high performance in such realms and as such the need for good police leadership is greater than ever².

But how do we characterise good police leadership? What are the characteristics of good police leaders, and what activities do good leaders undertake?

In attempting to answer these questions the AIPM undertook a systematic review of the research literature pertaining to police leadership. In order to orientate our analysis of the literature we asked three questions.

First, who are police leaders? This question allowed us to look at what police leaders are like and to identify what characteristics they possess.

Second, what do police leaders do that makes them leaders? Allowing us to identify the behaviours or actions that successful police leaders undertake.

And third, what is the best way to develop police leaders? The analysis will be presented in response to these three questions.

METHODOLOGY

A systematic literature review is an evaluation of the research literature using methodical, explicit and accountable methods. In our review we systematically searched five databases for empirical literature on police leadership from the UK, US, Australia, New Zealand and Canada. We used a consistent set of search terms, and limited our search to research undertaken between 1990 and 2012.

A total 270 searches were completed, which returned 9624 pieces of literature. After a process of screening, analysis and quality appraisal, 57 articles were deemed of suitable quality and relevance and analysed for key themes.

Overall, the quality of the literature was mixed, which is at least partly due to the complexity of the topic and the difficulties facing researchers in accessing police departments and police leaders with whom to conduct robust research.

Thus the majority of the research was based on convenience samples and perceptions of what constitutes good leadership, or on small case studies. No studies addressed, objectively, what is needed from police leaders, and how leaders might be best

developed. We return to this point in the discussion section.

A full technical report can be found in the main review document, available from the AIPM library, see end for details.

Who are police leaders?

We identified seven characteristics in the reviewed literature that are perceived to be typical of good leaders. First was being ethical, defined as exhibiting a sense of integrity and honesty and being able to demonstrate and generate a sense of trustworthiness amongst one's subordinates³.

Trust and trustworthiness were, then, related with research suggesting a need for leaders to act in ways that developed trust, through interpersonal communication, knowledge and an emphasis on debate, discussion and staff participation in decision making⁴.

With trust, officers were more likely to follow the vision and direction of leaders⁵. Importantly, the research we reviewed suggested that trust worked both ways, with the need for leaders to be trusting of their staff as well⁶.

Closely related to trust is the notion of legitimacy. We frequently hear about the need for legitimacy in terms of the organisation, with the need for policing to be seen as legitimate by the public, with flow on benefits for confidence in and cooperation with the police.

But our review suggests that police leaders need to be seen as legitimate inside the police organisation too. This type of legitimacy was described as the need to be seen as a good cop⁷, knowing that a leader could pound the beat, and do the job of a frontline officer. The implications of an absence of legitimacy include a lack of confidence and trust in management⁸.

Legitimacy in this sense is related, then, to credibility, and without this leaders were thought to have little hope of influencing behaviour and enacting change within their organisations⁹.

In a similar vein, being a role model was another typical characteristic¹⁰, with a need for leaders to accept responsibility for their role as a leader, to lead by example, and emulate the behaviour they wanted from subordinates. This was sometimes termed idealised influence, which is a characteristic of transformational leadership and refers to behaviour where a leader instils pride, faith and respect, has the ability to see what is important, and transmits a sense of vision¹¹.

Good communication skills was another key characteristic, and was conceptualised not only in terms

of communication within the police organisation and communication with one's subordinates¹², but also the need to communicate across organisations, and to be an active voice in government and stakeholder policy development¹³.

Decision making, and in particular being able to make decisions that led to the achievement of goals was seen as important¹⁴. And the way leaders made their decisions played a role in gaining legitimacy and respect from subordinates through knowledge and action¹⁵.

It was not just the ability to make decisions but also the ability and willingness to make unpopular decisions that was important, although these should be well informed and based on appropriate research¹⁶. Involving officers in the decision making process, with a flow on benefit of increased organisational commitment, (which we deal with in greater detail below), was important.

Related to decision making was being a critical, strategic and creative thinker¹⁷. The literature suggested that finding the time and having the ability for strategic thinking was difficult for some leaders. Nonetheless the reality of a police leader's role – needing to think on the go, make tough choices, recognise patterns among different types of problems, search for facts to prove or disprove hypotheses, draw on one's own knowledge and the knowledge of others, and working collaboratively to imagine and shape the future¹⁸ – means it is key.

Summary: Characteristics of good police leaders

Ethical
Legitimacy
Role Model
Communication
Decision Making
Trust and Trustworthiness
Critical, strategic and creative thinking

What do police leaders do?

The second question asked of the literature was what do police leaders do? What are the activities that set police leaders apart? Whilst part of the answer revolves around leaders' day to day activities, we chose also to consider the more visionary activities that police leaders carry out. In fact creating a shared vision was a key activity perceived to be undertaken by good leaders. This was

sometimes referred to as inspirational motivation, which is one of the key activities within a transformational leadership approach. This involves setting, developing and sharing a vision for the organisation that creates a sense of purpose for followers¹⁹.

Related is engendering organisational commitment. Organisational commitment is a strong and reliable predictor of job satisfaction, performance, productivity and retention. By considering the way officers are managed, and by providing support to subordinates, promoting collaboration, giving them a voice in decision making, and providing appropriate feedback about job role and performance, leaders can influence organisational commitment, which is closely related to productivity, and furthering the organisation's objectives²⁰.

Also related to this is care for subordinates – sometimes referred to as individualised consideration – which is another important transformational leadership skill²¹. This involves exercising leadership that is concerned with subordinates as individuals, requiring leaders to seek out and provide development opportunities for staff, as well as engage in coaching and mentoring²².

Also of importance was displaying concern for the comfort, wellbeing, status and contribution of followers, demonstrating compassion and respect and seeking to create connectedness through collaboration, and the modelling of a good work-life balance²³. As such, somewhat related to care for subordinates is care for oneself, and work-life balance was noted in some of the literature as an important consideration for leaders.

Driving and managing change moves the role of the leader from one of managing the status quo to enacting and achieving reform²⁴. How well leaders take on new roles and responsibilities as change agent, facilitator, and motivator can have a major impact on the success of any change effort, and is linked to the ability of a police leader to exercise influence. Efforts to enhance or change police agencies are predicated on the abilities of leaders to properly manage, engage, monitor and encourage ownership with subordinate personnel.

Finally problem solving was an oft-cited activity required of leaders²⁵. This could be a negative as well as a positive, however, with recent research noting a leadership focus on cleaning up problems rather than preventing crime²⁶. This, the research argued, emphasised the reactionary approach to problem solving, or firefighting, which whilst characteristic of policing, we do not believe is characteristic of leadership. Instead problem solving in the form we mean it here refers to proactive problem solving.

What is the best way to develop police leaders?

The third question asked of the literature was what do we know about the best ways to prepare leaders for their role? There was little in the research literature that shed light on this, which is a limitation of the body of work well documented in itself²⁷.

Nonetheless our review found that good leadership development was perceived to be best encouraged through a combination of education, experience, and mentorship²⁸. Specifically building an understanding of leadership principles (education and training), providing constructive experiences (mentoring and feedback) and showing officers how effective leaders operate (modelling) were considered powerful influences²⁹.

Learning alongside leaders from other organisations was also considered valuable because it reflected the reality of police work, and increased understanding of how other agencies operated³⁰.

Finally, having the opportunity to practice as a leader and encounter some failures was a fundamental component of development³¹, although this of course requires that leaders are provided with the freedom to practice and make mistakes, which is not always comfortable for an organisation to do.

Summary: Activities of good police leaders

Creating a shared vision

Engendering organisational commitment

Care for subordinates

Problem Solving

Driving and managing change

Discussion

The findings of this systematic review suggest there is some consensus as to what constitutes good police leadership. By and large these characteristics are already known to practitioners, scholars and academics within this field and can be found in the leadership literature outside of policing as well. Which leads us to the question as to whether police leadership is different to leadership in other public or private sector agencies?

There is often a gut reaction amongst police that police

leadership is different and that the office of constable and ability to deprive people of their liberty is part and parcel of this. But the leadership literature we reviewed is less certain, with comparability between the qualities typical of good police leaders and those found in leadership populations outside of policing³².

In addition the leadership characteristics and activities we have identified are not police specific. Needing to create a shared vision is equally relevant for both a police organisation and any other organisation.

For those involved in leadership development another key question is can this research be relied upon to inform future leadership development? Through our review we found that the value of the evidence that does exist is inhibited by a number of factors.

First, the quality of the studies was mixed and there was a heavy reliance on surveys. While survey data is easy to collect one of the inherent limitations of surveys is that they can oversimplify reality. In addition, survey instruments often relied on officer perceptions about leadership, rather than objective measures of leadership per se.

We found no studies that objectively measured leadership or leadership outcomes. Nor did we find research containing robust research designs such as randomised control trials or effective comparison or control groups. On the one hand this is not unexpected as leadership does not easily lend itself to this type of research; access to police leaders is often difficult and conditions are hard to manipulate. This does mean, however, that within the current literature, establishing what works, or what good leadership is, beyond individual perceptions, is difficult to do.

There remains too a lack of clarity about how we might measure leadership and the performance of leaders. Does the absence of failure suffice, or the absence of unfavourable media reports? Is subordinate satisfaction the best measure of effective leadership? Such measures are affected by multiple confounding factors; making it difficult to quantify or attribute an outcome solely to effective leadership.

A further limitation of the literature was a lack of reference to unsworn or civilian staff. Although one could argue that this is because in most jurisdictions we have yet to see unsworn staff in very senior ranks. Nonetheless this is a valuable area for future research. There was little commentary too about women in leadership roles, reflective perhaps of the slow pace with which women have entered executive ranks within the police. This is an important area of future research

particularly if - as Silvestri suggests - women's leadership is qualitatively different from men's²⁵.

The majority of the literature was from the US. This raises the question as to whether police leadership varies between countries. With few exceptions, the findings from our systematic review are broadly reflected across the UK, Australia, New Zealand and Canada, although this highlights an area for future research, and underscores the fact that much of what we know about police leadership across the world comes from research undertaken overseas.

Generally, the literature suggested that perceptions of good police leadership were relatively consistent between ranks. However, there were some differences regarding the value of certain leadership characteristics. For example, one study found that constables and sergeants placed very little importance on the attribute of vision³³. This is a function of course of research that relies on perceptions and we need to ask again whether such data is sufficient to inform our understanding of what leaders should do.

Many police organisations are in the process of creating competency frameworks to inform the development of their leaders. For example, in Australia, the Australian and New Zealand Police Leadership Strategy (ANZPLS), a program of leader development for senior officers, draws on a leadership competency framework.

These competencies reflect closely the findings from this review, and include an ability to set strategic direction (akin to engaging in problem solving, creating a shared vision and driving and managing change), achieving results (akin to decision making, problem solving and driving and managing change), building and managing relationships (akin to demonstrating care for subordinates and acknowledging the importance of coaching and partnerships), communicating with influence (akin to communication skills), exhibiting personal drive and integrity (akin to being ethical, trustworthy and acting as a role model), alongside policing skills (akin to credibility).

Whilst a competency-based development approach provides clear guidance for when one has achieved such leadership skills, it calls into question whether we develop leaders in a given way because there is a received wisdom about what good leaders have, or whether we are basing our leadership development on an objective understanding about good leadership.

To say the same thing another way, are we developing our leaders on a firm understanding about what good leadership is? The findings from this review, which calls

into question the quality of the literature, suggest that we might not. Relatedly, there was no measure of the impact of police leadership development activities.

Whilst policing can of course draw on the findings of leadership development research outside of policing, there remains a significant gap our understanding of what works in developing police leaders. The AIPM are currently undertaking research to address this gap, due for completion in 2014.

CONCLUSION

Through our review of 57 empirical research articles on police leadership published in the last two decades seven characteristics of good leaders, and five activities that good leaders undertake were identified.

Our systematic review revealed relative consistency across countries and across ranks of the organisation. That said, the literature relied heavily on perceptions of leadership, from both peers and subordinates, and as such does not allow us to establish clear and objective measures of what good police leadership is. Thus we still know very little about objectively measured successful police leadership and leadership activities.

Further, we found no research that assessed the impact of leadership on organisational or operational outcomes. Establishing a link between leadership and organisational outcomes is essential for measuring the value of leadership activities. At this stage, then, and despite the work done to date we still have little understanding of what works in police leadership.

Our understanding of the ways in which police leaders are best developed is similarly scant, although there is some evidence that a mix of formal education, mentorship and role modelling may be perceived as most effective. Nonetheless, these are findings from only a small number of research articles, which is surprising considering the amount of money organisations invest in leadership development and the importance of leadership development for succession planning, organisational renewal, alignment and performance. There is a clear need for further research in this area too.

So to conclude, there is a need for further, robust, research. We hope that researchers are spurred into undertaking research to establish objective measures of good and effective leadership, to link leadership behaviours to organisational outcomes, and to expand on our understanding of the best ways that individuals can be prepared for the leadership tasks they face ahead.

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The full report can be obtained by contacting the AIPM Library on (02) 9934 4743 or library@aipm.gov.au or downloaded from: <http://www.aipm.gov.au/research/research-focus/>

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