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Police Chief Magazine | Topics | Leadership | 10

Essential Attributes of Effective Leaders

## 10 Essential Attributes of Effective Leaders

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When it comes to the knowledge, skills, and ability to embody leadership qualities, most law enforcement executives have the tools and resources to lead successful agencies. These leaders get the job done while working with their communities to solve problems. Those same executives also excel at effective leadership today partially because of the continued career development and advice they received from successful commanders they worked for in the past. Being an effective leader is a great thing, but being able to articulate why and how one becomes a strong leader adds true substance and depth to the topic. Most law enforcement officials choose to lead within their respective discipline because they want to successfully direct the execution of the agency's mission statement as efficiently and effectively as possible. It clearly makes more sense to have someone who understands the goals and objectives of the department provide guidance and direction than to simply have someone without that institutional knowledge attempt the same. So, whether it's important to have the right people in place to lead in any law enforcement agency is not the question. The question is, instead, what does it take to be the best possible law enforcement leader?

There are 10 must-have attributes that managers (and followers) must possess in order to become highly effective leaders within their organizations.

## 1. Active Listening

Listening is a quality often not utilized properly as well as a natural talent frequently taken for granted. This innate gift is one in which constant exercise and awareness will put proven leaders at an advantage when it comes to getting the required and expected results from their followers. Listening, in and of itself, isn't what requires exercise—it's how to listen, and whom to listen to that does. How many times have commanders or supervisors attended a community meeting, an interview or conference, and forgotten some of the most important take-aways before even leaving the building? Or, how often have they forgotten an individual's name, almost instantly, after just being introduced to them? According to the U.S. Department of State, "[a]ctive listening is a skill taught to teachers and police officers, counselors, ministers, rabbis and priests. It is a skill we would all do better having learned, practiced."<sup>1</sup> To become an active listener, one must first understand the attributes of active listening:

1. Seek to understand before seeking to be understood.
2. Be non-judgmental.
3. Give your undivided attention to the speaker.
4. Use silence effectively.<sup>2</sup>

The "who" leaders should actively listen to is all stakeholders. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. once said, "[A] genuine leader is not a searcher of consensus, but a molder of consensus."<sup>3</sup> When a leader actively listens to and shows a sincere interest in his or her supporters and followers, the leader's desired outcomes will also become the consensus of the stakeholders. When the leader listens to, requests feedback, and gains insight from the people that matter, there is a higher likelihood that those stakeholders will buy in to the desired outcomes. Hosting periodic listening sessions with the rank and file is another method through which a leader can solicit valuable ideas from those who handle the day-to-day aspects of the job. In addition, those who buy in to the desired goals will put forth serious effort to see the projects to

successful completion. Including all stakeholders when possible and utilizing sound active listening skills will gain buy in to achieve goals.

## 2. Education

Education is an element of leadership development that is ongoing, regardless of one's skill as a leader. The list of training development options includes college degrees and certificates, virtual and on-site workshops and seminars, and self-education, among others—educational development opportunities are limitless. No matter where one is in life, learning to better oneself, his or her staff, and the department should never end. A commander should also consider instructing leadership training sessions within their agencies to better prepare the troops to take on leadership roles and to increase morale and efficiency. Experiences that were successful for the commander should be passed on to the line officers. Often, instructors themselves learn in the training environment through interaction with the officers who are being trained. If done correctly, this form of training for officers could be part of an agency's succession planning process.

## 3. Attention to Detail

Having a broad conceptual knowledge of the agency is, of course, important, but a strong leader is also aware of the details, such as knowing which personnel are best at what types of assignments. Law enforcement executives need to master this skill in order to build crucial relationships within the agency and community; to enhance the performance of the agency; and to build legitimacy and, thus, buy-in from the officers and the community.

For example, if a station commander presents a crime plan to his or her chief and other peers at a meeting, attention to detail in that presentation will most certainly be one of the determining factors in whether the chief believes in the commander or the plan. If that commander can present concrete information on how to address the community problem, the solution is more likely to be accepted. In contrast, if that commander simply did not conduct research, overlooked key details, and presented material in a broad context, chances are the desired outcome will not be

achieved. Before presenting material to any group, a good leader needs to be able to manage details well enough to answer all questions that could surface.

Demonstrating attention to detail also suggests to stakeholders that the leader is equipped to handle the issues at hand.

## 4. Directions

Directions provided to a subordinate are only as good as the method and manner in which they were given. An outstanding leader gives clear and consistent instructions. To do this, the leader has to understand the audience for his or her directives and needs to ensure that the message is received correctly. Often, it is effective to put directions in email or other written form, allowing the opportunity to review the document in roll-call or small settings, checking for understanding and answering questions to ensure the tasks are completed with minimal errors. This manner may seem redundant but people interpret information differently. Removing distractions and providing the information in the best possible environment will help the police executive ensure that the communications are received and understood. Remember, an excellent leader has to communicate effectively in order to be understood.

## 5. Evolution

The ability to evolve and adapt can turn a good leader into a high achieving leader with a loyal following. Once commanders feel secure in the way they have always conducted their business of directing, controlling, budgeting, inspiring, motivating, and so forth, it's a sign that it might be time to reinvent (or update) their leadership style. Chances are, the leadership styles police executives started with in their early career would have to be tweaked to keep up with the incoming generations and in order to attain personal growth. For example, younger generations relate and interact well with more recent technology such as virtual devices and social media platforms, so leaders have to adapt and educate themselves on a broad spectrum of the various forms of technology to become more relevant and to inspire and be inspired by these new officers. Police executives not only lead the members of the police departments, but they also help lead the community. The commanders have to relate to and communicate with all community members in ways that community

members are familiar with, in order to relay the messages that they need to receive. A leader that can evolve and adapt to the ever-changing times is a leader that other leaders want to emulate.

## 6. Resourcefulness

Being resourceful, clever, and innovative is particularly important when it comes to solving complex or tedious projects. Resourcefulness is certainly necessary when managing and leading any group of personnel within a law enforcement agency—if commanders cannot creatively lead their team to accomplish objectives despite potential obstacles, how can they mentor and guide the troops looking to them for skill development? Developing the followers' skills requires that leaders recognize followers' full potential by maximizing their performance skill sets and encouraging them to think outside of the box.

## 7. Service

Service is something all law enforcement officers know they professionally provide to the communities in which they serve. This community service is necessary from the most visible form of government representation—but there must be internal service to complete the concept. Managers must also serve the followers that serve on the front lines and who will become the future leaders of the agency. Commanders should ask their staff what the staff's needs are and what would make lives better in the performance of the staff's duties. The bosses may be surprised about some of the responses they'll receive when taking this approach because the replies will mostly be manageable requests. Serving the followers lets them know the managers truly care, and it provides much more incentive for productivity and morale to increase across the board.

## 8. Humor

Humor is perceived and delivered differently by everyone, and some people are naturally wittier than others. This social skill can work wonders with trust and morale

if executed in a timely and appropriate manner. A Bell Leadership Institute study found that

*The most effective leaders use humor to spark people's enthusiasm, deliver an honest message in a good-natured way, boost productivity, put people at ease, bring teams together, and see the light side of a situation. Less effective leaders use humor in negative ways—to show off, cut people down with sarcasm, and overly distract people from the task at hand.*<sup>4</sup>

The key here is to know one's limitations when attempting to tie humor in with law enforcement because leaders should not make fun of another's tragedy. Leaders should never demean or belittle any victim or circumstance because that attitude reflects negatively on the agency. For example, if an officer jumped into a body of water to save the life of a drowning citizen and lost one of her boots in the process, then the fact that the officer saved the life of that citizen should overshadow the missing footwear. A strong leader would praise the officer's efforts and most certainly give her the remainder of the day off to reflect, recover, and, of course, time to purchase more service boots. After things had settled, that would be an appropriate time to employ humor about the talented officer who saved a life—while wearing only one boot! Striking such a balance between recognizing the seriousness of the work the line officers perform with humor when the situation warrants it is an attribute that leaders should strive to achieve.

## 9. Integrity

The strong morals and honesty demonstrated by a leader with integrity will reinforce the agency's mission statement and the community's expectations of professional policing. Without integrity, there is little hope for trust and legitimacy to be perceived by the officers or the community. The 2015 report by President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing stated,

*Law enforcement agencies should acknowledge the role of policing in past and present injustice and discrimination and how it is a hurdle to the promotion of community trust.*<sup>5</sup>

This is one definitive way to display integrity and commitment to the community. An agency that has a reputation for having officers with integrity is an agency that has the trust of the community.

## 10. People

People are the foundation on which leadership is built—good leaders cultivate good followers. People need to be praised in public for a job well done, and they appreciate when leaders see beyond their uniform to individuals with personal interests and concerns. Also, people need to be coached in order to become better and more comfortable in their positions, and, at times, they need to be motivated to continue pursuing outstanding performance and congratulated on reaching successful goals. An effective leader discovers the strengths of individuals and helps them utilize those strengths, thus increasing both performance and morale. If a leader is a “people person” and remains humble, the leadership role will become exponentially simpler. Quite frankly, putting people first is something that an effective leader can’t overlook.

**L**istening, **E**ducation, **A**ttention to detail, **D**irection, **E**volution, **R**esourcefulness, **S**ervice, **H**umor, **I**ntegrity and **P**eople (LEADERSHIP) are the key ingredients to successful leadership. Of course, no two commanders lead the same way, but if each of the LEADERSHIP attributes are applied in one’s management style then the basics are covered. Law enforcement officials must be successful in carrying out their duties while managing others; attempting to lead without a strategic plan should not be an option. Understanding how to personally and effectively incorporate these attributes into one’s management style certainly develops with practice, but it should not be overlooked. Appropriately applying the LEADERSHIP concept amounts to a win-win for the agency, the followers, the leader, and the community. Developing and improving these attributes will put any leader on the road to success.

### Notes:

<sup>1</sup> U.S. Department of State, “Active Listening,”

<http://www.state.gov/m/a/os/65759.htm>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> “King’s Challenge to the Nation’s Social Scientist,” *Monitor on Psychology* 30, no. 1



(January 1999), <http://www.apa.org/monitor/features/king-challenge.aspx>.

<sup>4</sup> Bell Leadership Institute, "Bell Leadership Study Finds Humor Gives Leaders the Edge," press release, March 2012, <http://www.bellleadership.com/humor-gives-leaders-edge>.

<sup>5</sup> President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* (Washington, D.C.: Office of Community Oriented Policing, 2015), 12, [https://cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/taskforce/TaskForce\\_FinalReport.pdf](https://cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/taskforce/TaskForce_FinalReport.pdf).

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