

The BJA Executive Session on

Police Leadership

2016

The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership is a multi-year endeavor started in 2010 with the goal of developing innovative thinking that would help create police leaders uniquely qualified to meet the challenges of a changing public safety landscape.

In support of an integrated approach to creating safe and viable communities across America, the project directors recruited 20+ principals from a range of disciplines. The principals, in turn, led national field teams of practitioners focused on the work of policing and the organization of the future.

To gain new insights on leadership, the *BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership* engaged police chiefs in documenting their own paths and invited leaders to participate in various audio and video forums to tell their stories and discuss the future of policing and police leadership.

Please visit our website, www.bjaleader.org, to learn more about this project and to access a broad array of interactive, multimedia resources.

The principals are supported in their work by a team that includes project co-directors Darrel W. Stephens and Nancy McKeon, and BJA Senior Policy Advisor Steve Edwards.

My Transition from Assistant Chief to Chief

by

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Although there are basic similarities and responsibilities inherent in law enforcement, every agency is unique. As such the position of Chief of Police is not easily definable or consistent from agency to agency. My aim here is to share some of the revelations and lessons learned during the transition from Assistant Chief to the position of Chief of Police.

In an attempt to set the scene I will provide a historical perspective of the Tampa Police Department and my career. TPD employs just under 1,000 officers and approximately 300 support personnel. I worked my way from patrol, through a variety of assignments, and was appointed to the position of Assistant Chief of Police, Operations Division, after 21 years on the force. This assignment was one of two Assistant Chief positions that reported directly to the Chief of Police.

Although I had an outstanding mentor in my chief and almost five years of preparation for the position of chief of police, I soon realized that there is no way one can fully prepare to run a law enforcement agency.

With that said, here are some nuggets of advice and a few suggestions that will hopefully make the road you travel as chief a little smoother.

First revelation - you are it. You are the face of the organization, final say on decisions, the one who sets the tone for enforcement and public perception, and you are ultimately responsible for the safety of your officers. Although you know this going in, what will surprise you is the amount of pressure associated with these and the myriad of other responsibilities you will have.

Once you are chief, your time is not your own. Everyone will want your attention. My advice is to make time for things that are important. This is easier said than done, as there are so many important components: community, organization, family, and finally—you. Ultimately you must determine what is important. Also, when you are focused on a person, group or issue—don't be distracted; be there in that moment! The issue or event must be, or at least appear to be, just as important to you as it is to the presenter.

Don't forget about yourself. Find ways to relieve stress that are healthy, or at least not destructive.

You must balance public and organizational perception. In the perfect scenario, the two would be the same, but as we all know—few things in law enforcement are perfect. Never underestimate the police culture. You want to be the leader people will follow into the fire, not push into the fire.

Never forget to delegate and surround yourself with competent people. Don't make the mistake of promoting on personality or perceived loyalty. One of the qualities that landed you in the 'big chair' was your ability to get things done, however if you don't share the load, you will not be preparing your staff for the future and you will burn out quickly.

There will be decisions that are more difficult than you ever imagined possible. My advice in these situations is to put yourself in the position of all involved parties (citizens, department, officers), get as much information as you can, get staff input and then make what you see as the right decision. This is simple to say, very difficult in practice.

As much as we abhor administrative duties, you should know how every aspect of your organization works. You must understand the intricacies and importance of the budget, grants, audits, accreditation, etc.

Maybe the best advice is to pay attention to the details. If you are not a detail person, become one. If that is not possible, find one and stick close. Whoever said, "the devil is in the details" was not exaggerating.

Don't get bogged down inside your organization, stay current on training and trends in law enforcement. The best way to do this is to belong to associations or subscribe to professional periodicals or blogs. This will also expose you to other executives you can lean on for advice and support, which you will need at some point.

Law enforcement is always changing and should be ever evolving. But, as we know, the only two things officers don't like is the way things are and change. You must believe in and champion any organizational changes, if not—they will fail. There are few things more difficult than organizational change.

Never assume people know or understand what you want (this from a person whose mistakes through assumption are limitless). The way to avoid this mistake is to communicate excessively and listen intently.

You will have good days and bad, as you come to realize that the position of chief can be more rewarding than you thought possible and, in turn, the loneliest place on earth.

Finally, remember that it's not about you, but rather the community and officers that you serve. Do all in your power to make the community safer and to leave your organization in better shape than you found it.

It is an honor to lead a law enforcement organization, do all in your power to leave an indelible mark on your officers, the department and your community.

This paper was developed by the “Leader of the Future” initiative of the BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership.

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