

Perceptions of ineffective police leaders

Joseph A. Schafer

Editor's Introduction

Most police (and - indeed – most public safety professionals) would be able to call to mind a leader that they have worked with who they regarded as ineffective. Perhaps this leader was too directive, or conversely, too laissez-faire. Perhaps this leader was dogmatic, or lacked warmth. Whatever it is about an ineffective leader, we tend to know it when we see it, although pinning down exactly what our discontent stems from can be difficult. Professor Joseph Schafer from the Southern Illinois University took up this challenge and sought to unpack what it is about ineffective leaders that we dislike.

In this paper Professor Schafer explores officer perceptions of ineffective leadership, and concludes by helpfully grouping these shortcomings into those that we might be able to intervene with through leader development, and those less receptive to change. Importantly, Professor Schafer concludes with the caution that we are all a hair's breadth away from ineffectiveness, and perhaps the most important task for an emerging leader is to be aware of one's own shortcomings, because they will undoubtedly be visible to those whom one seeks to lead.

Dr Victoria Herrington

Director, Research and Learning, AIPM

INTRODUCTION

When reading about leadership across a variety of career fields, the majority of what is written focuses on leaders who achieve favorable outcomes. The bookshelves of libraries and book stores are filled with volumes describing how to be a more effective leader and detailing the secrets and habits of corporate executives, military commanders, and professional coaches who are considered successful in their respective fields.

The outcome of this situation is that most writings make it seem as if leaders always succeed through their charm, intelligence, hard work, benevolent attitude, and caring personality. Harvard School of Business Professor Barbara Kellerman sees this situation as an extension of our society's love of a good story.

How should policing think about leaders who are regarded as less effective? How should leaders be classified if they fail to achieve their objectives or who only achieve their success in a manner that is harsh or abusive?

Barbara Kellerman offers a helpful perspective on this situation, writing that *"capricious, murderous, high-handed, corrupt, and evil leaders are effective and everywhere—except in the literature of business leadership."*¹ The risk of this situation is that far less is

known about ineffective leaders and leadership. New and aspiring leaders may be given the false impression that successful leadership is easy, and almost natural, provided one has good intentions and is pure of heart.

In this paper, when we talk about ineffective leadership, we are talking about behaviour that is ultimately damaging to the organisation and/or individuals, both internal and external. These ineffective leaders might at times also be characterised as bad, poor, abusive, or toxic. In this paper, we explore the traits and habits that mid-career police supervisors perceive to be associated with ineffective leadership.

BACKGROUND

Ample research and experience exists to demonstrate the range of favorable outcomes leaders and supervisors can achieve within the workplace. There exists tentative evidence suggesting supervisors can influence rates of misconduct² and can shape discretionary behavior³. Leaders who are open, follow rules, and lead by example are thought to achieve more favorable performance from subordinate personnel (e.g., followers), including greater organisational commitment⁴.

Leadership is not, however, always wielded in a benign

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and benevolent manner, even by well-intentioned supervisors. In reality, most experienced police officers will report routinely working with or for leaders who they regarded as “ineffective” either consistently or with regularity⁵. Poor leadership practices have been linked with a number of problems among employees, including stress, retaliatory behavior, and a sense of helplessness, alienation, anxiety, depression, and distress. Poor leadership and supervision practices, including bullying, abusive, and destructive behaviors, have been associated with decreased job satisfaction, organisational commitment, and professional motivation⁶.

Ineffective leadership, particularly the failure to act or respond to known problems, has been identified as a recurrent factor in organisational failures⁷. In policing, such organisational failures might extend into matters that generate adversarial relationships with employees and/or the community, increased unionism, litigation, staff turn-over, or calls for citizen oversight or review of police operation.

Police services, like many other organisations, have too often failed to identify those with strong potential to be effective leaders (and correspondingly those for whom a leadership role may not be appropriate). In the United States, and given the multiple and competing definitions and measurements of leadership, too often services have defaulted toward “safe” methods of assessing those seeking promotion. The tendency to base promotion assignments on performance on exams measuring mastery of bureaucratic rules and protocols (i.e., “book smarts” and “bean counting”), as well as the interfering influence of internal politics and personalities, can contribute to the trust and communication gaps often observed between front-line personnel and supervisors.

This has led to a phenomenon known in the popular vernacular as the “Peter principle”—that employees rise to their highest level of incompetence. Though a tongue-in-cheek phrase, tentative evidence for this principle has been established⁸. Such a phenomenon is undoubtedly linked to the aforementioned promotional process, where competence in one’s current job is often the criteria for assessing suitability for the next job up. In reality, of course, a good operator does not always make a good manager and we see frequently an interruption to a seemingly promising career when a leader is placed

in a situation in which their skill set no longer provides effective outcomes.

The absence of an understanding of the traits and habits associated with ineffective leadership led us to undertake exploratory research with course participants at the Federal Bureau of Investigation National Academy (NA) program. The research reported here focuses on the traits and habits mid-career police supervisors



perceive to be associated with ineffective leadership practices. The following pages report on the findings of that research and characterise what respondents perceived ineffective leaders did to contribute to that unwanted outcome.

METHODOLOGY

Officers participating in three iterations of the U.S. Federal Bureau of Investigation National Academy (NA) program (Sessions 227-229; held from October 2006 – April 2007) were asked to complete a survey addressing a range of leadership topics. The NA program is a residential career development experience delivered at the FBI Academy in Quantico, VA. Participants are supervising officers drawn from police organisations around the world, though roughly 90 percent are from the U.S.

In general, NA students are expected to be “up and coming” officers within their police force; it is expected they will serve with their current organisation or another police service for at least three years after completing the program. Within the U.S., the NA is one of three prestigious programs and that are often a prerequisite for applicants for police chief positions, making it a relatively selective, competitive, and coveted opportunity.

Participants in the NA are seasoned police officers (averaging around 20 years of service) and supervisors (averaging around 10 years of service in a supervisory role). The NA program is intended to be a leadership development experience and, as such, courses address aspects of leadership at some depth and detail. This means NA participants have dealt with a range of management and leadership experiences, though they

might not - initially at least - be well versed in the latest research, theory, and literature.

Surveys exploring participant perceptions about leadership were administered within the first two days of each NA session and prior to the first day of formal classes. This allowed us to capture baseline data prior to the development or training “effect” asserted by the NA program itself. Participants were asked to describe the traits and habits of police supervisors they considered to be particularly ineffective. The responses were in the form of narrative statements; a small number of excerpts are provided below to illustrate some of the insights derived from the participants. Of the 418 officers asked to describe ineffective leaders, 304 (72.7 percent) provided a response.

CHARACTERISING THE INEFFECTIVE LEADER

Though subsequent sections elaborate on specific common elements of ineffective leadership practices, some responses provide rich insight into the overall characteristics of the ineffective police leader. A captain described ineffective leaders as:

...quick temper, judgmental, lazy, inability to follow through, lack of focus, poor communication/ interpersonal skills, moody, negative thinkers, lack of ability to delegate, lack of confidence in others, micromanagers. These are all things that make people poor leaders. Most of these, they would like to overcome, but are either unable, or don't know how.



The experiences of another captain demonstrated that ineffective leaders display (emphasis provided in the original response):

Dishonesty, lack of candor, lack of empathy, selfishness. They fail to inspire, fail to lead by example, and fail to work hard to solve long-term problems, and fail to empower subordinates to solve the short term problems. Failure to recognize good, hard work.

Similar themes emerged in the response from a lieutenant who noted ineffective leaders are

...usually inconsistent and do not possess the characteristics or self discipline needed to become

and effective leader. Where many fail is by not taking a balanced approach to their role; either too authoritarian or fail to transition into the role and try to remain 'one of the guys.'

These global responses illustrate the traits and habits associated with ineffective leaders can be separated into negative actions/behaviors and absent actions/behaviors that should have been taken, but were not. The former (acts of commission) served to erode leaders' efficacy because they work against a leader's long-term goals and objectives within the workplace (recognizing that at times a leader cannot satisfy all followers in all situations) and her/his ability to secure followers.

The latter (acts of omission) were regarded as undermining efficacy by representing situations where leaders failed to live up to their expected role. This failure was regarded as systemic, rather than episodic, and included aspects such as failure to act in response to an established problem; failure to demonstrate ethical conduct; and failure to work as hard as expected of others. In the eyes of their followers they failed to lead.

Focus on Self over Others

Some larger law enforcement organisations use the term “careerism” to refer to employees who are focused on their own professional interests and aspirations above the concerns of others, the organisation, and the community.

Police leaders regarded by NA participants as ineffective displayed a “self-first” focus, a proclivity that appeared to generate additional problems. For example, leaders who are seeking continued career advancement are likely to be focusing on what is necessary to secure their next promotion, rather than doing what is needed to achieve goals in their current position. They may fail to be mindful of their current duties, what is in the long-term best interests of the office they currently hold, and the human needs of the personnel they supervise.

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As one investigator noted, “the largest failure occurs when leaders forget their own responsibilities to the position they hold and to the people under them.” The “self-first” problem is exacerbated when organisational structures create incentives that encourage a selfish focus and where leaders opt to do what will help them

secure continued career advancement (which might actually involve inaction or indecision – i.e. playing it ‘safe’) rather than what is best for the leader’s force and/ or community.

A commander noted that ineffective leaders are too often “not concerned about others and more focused on themselves and their progress, instead of the agency being successful and the community being a safer place – self above service.”

Ego & Arrogance

Ego and arrogance represent a fine line which leaders must tread. Arguably effective leaders must have a degree of confidence in order to attract followers and make key decisions. Taken too far, however, and self-confidence can be an off-putting quality and can result in leaders ignoring the advice and input of others.



As such ego or arrogance might both hinder connectivity and communication with followers, as well as generate problems arising from the positions and actions taken because of an inflated sense of one’s own infallibility. As one commander noted that in his/ her view ineffective leaders tend to adopt the attitude that it is “my way or the highway” and demonstrated “unyielding personalities, [and a] lack of self confidence” (implying that a leader who lacks confidence might be more inclined to not seek input from others, seeing this as admitting weakness rather than seeing this as a prudent step in some decision making processes). Their near-absolute belief in their own opinions and judgments might be their undoing.

Leaders who do not recognize their own faults and flaws are likely to encounter avoidable failures by not engaging in consultation and conversations with those who might have important information to guide decision making.

Assessing the tipping point between self-confidence and arrogance is a subjective process; what one person sees as self-confidence and driven, another may perceive as an arrogant refusal to listen to others. It may be difficult or impossible for the average leader to be judged as appropriately confident and humble by all

those around them.

Closed Minded

Related with arrogance and ego is the perceived tendency for ineffective leaders to be closed minded or unwilling to listen to other perspectives, opinions, and voices. As stated above, this represents a fine line leaders must navigate. They must have self-confidence and ultimately they are paid to be decisive, yet they must also recognize the value of other voices and the need to take time to consider alternatives and ramifications.

Closed minded leaders were also framed as not adapting, innovating, or changing when actions were needed within an organisation. They lacked the cognitive flexibility to adapt their way of thinking.

This approach can be challenging, as noted by a captain who characterised ineffective leaders as “inflexible, uncompromising, and...[failing to] foster a participatory style of leadership.” Closed minded leaders were also framed as not adapting, innovating, or changing when actions were needed within an organisation. They lacked the cognitive flexibility to adapt their way of thinking. A deputy chief noted ineffective leaders:

...fail to examine issues from all sides. They fail to consider unintended consequences. They don’t educate themselves on the big picture, so when circumstances change (as they always do) ineffective leaders fail to adapt (deputy chief large municipal agency).

This stands in contrast to the very concept of leadership, which implies a capacity to move a group to an alternative position. Being closed minded to see the need for leadership to guide a group or organisation toward an alternative state may be a reflection of a leader who is out of touch, is too stubborn to listen to others, or fears change might result in failure or loss.

Micromanagement

The concept of leadership has been subjected to a range of definitions, but is generally understood as the capacity to move a group or organisation through a process of change. Management, on the other hand, is more aptly understood as a level of proficiency over a set of technical tasks. Truly effective leaders demonstrate an ability to balance leadership and management; they motivate and develop personnel, while attending the nuances of budgets, law, and contracts.

Ineffective leaders may be proficient managers who ensure tasks are completed, but do so at the expense of appropriate levels of delegation across subordinates. This can lead to micromanagement, stifling creativity and demoralizing workers. They might place undue emphasis on management or, worse yet, micromanagement.

Lacking an adequate understanding of how to delegate and truly lead, newly promoted supervisors may default to bureaucratic management tactics.

A chief of detectives remarked that ineffective leaders “fail to delegate authority [to subordinates] that is necessary for the success of desired results.” Historically, police services have done a poor job developing leadership skills among supervisory personnel. Concerns about meeting legal requirements in case handling and minimizing the risks inherent in a dangerous profession tend to encourage extensive reporting, documentation, and permission requirements.

Lacking an adequate understanding of how to delegate and truly lead, newly promoted supervisors may default to bureaucratic management tactics. Such an approach may slow the pace of organisational action and output, squash innovation, and stifle employee input and engagement, while sending the message to subordinates that their judgment is not trusted.

Capriciousness and Politicking

Though leaders must make decisions within the context of a given situation and timeframe, NA respondents indicated they desired a sense of continuity in how their leaders’ decisions were derived. A commander described ineffective leaders as “inconsistent and [they] don’t adhere to a systematic approach.”

Followers like to have a general sense of a leader’s preferred response to a given situation. Followers want to function in a manner that supports the leader and her/his objectives, while knowing how to avoid the leader’s wrath and criticism. Lacking such awareness, it becomes difficult for followers to know how to exercise discretionary authority. Followers want to understand “what matters” within the police service and to the leader in furthering the standing of the force and, in some cases, advance their own career objectives.

Closely related to capriciousness are organisational politics, which have the potential to become significant sources of stress. One sergeant noted poor leaders often demonstrate “[i]nconsistent, arbitrary discipline... cronyism, [and] nepotism.” They tend to put personal

relationships ahead of what was right, just, and consistent with past practices. Followers want to know that all rules, criteria, and standards apply equally to all personnel; that friends and relatives of police leaders do not enjoy special privilege in how they are treated.

Likewise, officers may not trust a leader to support them if their actions are appropriate, but generate public outcry (i.e., the use of force or the handling of major cases). Absent an understanding of how decisions are guided by known principles and apply universal standards, distrust, hostility, and animosity may strain in the leader-follower relationship.

Poor Work Ethic

The concept of “leadership by example” conveys the vision of a leader who does not ask followers to perform any task or exhibit a work ethic the leader is not prepared to demonstrate themselves. In contrast, ineffective leaders were perceived as lazy, doing the minimal amount of work, and failing to “give 100 percent” to the job and their responsibilities.

Ineffective leaders were frequently characterised as having lost their enthusiasm for, and commitment to, the job.

By not displaying an honest work ethic and by not demonstrating the proper way to police a given community, ineffective leaders failed to show the dedication and standard of performance they presumably expected from others. Ineffective leaders were frequently characterised as having lost their enthusiasm for, and commitment to, the job. A lieutenant framed ineffective leaders as being “lazy, [they] don’t provide guidance, never jump in and do their fair share, [and] always have excuses” for why they fail to be productive workers.

Interestingly, this situation represents yet another fine line for a leader. To avoid being characterised as a micromanager a leader must seek to empower subordinates and delegate responsibility, while not being seen as shirking too many tasks. This inability or refusal to show commitment to the organisation and its objectives undermines the leader’s credibility and/or implies to followers that a committed, diligent work ethic is not expected.

Failure to Act

Leaders are expected to live up to their label—to lead. Though leaders might be expected to engage in appropriate contemplation and consult with relevant

parties, ultimately leadership requires decisiveness and action. Lacking sufficient self-confidence, a leader might struggle to trust his/her own judgment enough to select from a range of options when confronted with a choice.

As concisely characterised by a sergeant, leaders who fail to act have a *“fear of looking bad or not knowing what to do.”* This situation could also arise if a leader fears action later deemed inappropriate could harm their career aspirations, generate liability, or, in extreme cases, result in injury, loss of life, or property damage.

Alternatively, this failure to act could reflect concern over personal popularity with subordinate personnel and/or an aversion to situations likely to generate conflict.

Another sergeant remarked that leaders who fail to act *“are afraid to be disliked by their subordinates and refuse to discipline them.”* A failure to act might also reflect the belief that change or decision are not warranted; a leader might be quite comfortable with the prevailing status quo in a system that followers view as being ripe for change, enhancement, elimination, or modification.

Ineffective Communication

Ineffective communication is not simply a matter of weak written or verbal expression skills. Rather, it encapsulates a number of fundamental communication omissions, including an inability or unwillingness to participate in two-way dialog, a refusal to explain key decisions and actions, and a failure to accept input and criticism.

This circumstance serves to constrain the input and outflow of communication through a leader’s office or position. Ineffective leaders may feel little need to seek out or listen to the suggestions of others; they may also see little reason to articulate their rationale for decisions.

A sergeant indicated ineffective leaders were typified by *“fail[ing] to effectively communicate change in an organisation or the reason for change or decisions made.”* Subordinates and co-workers find this situation understandably frustrating.

Whether this act of omission was thought to be due to arrogance (e.g., the belief the leader did not have to rationalize or justify her/his actions) or indifference (e.g., not being concerned that followers might desire more information) varied within the responses.

Lack of Interpersonal Skills

Often a corollary of poor communication is poor interpersonal skills or emotional intelligence. Ineffective

leaders were perceived to be those who struggled with interpersonal skills, such as empathy, two-way communication, and an understanding of human needs and motivations.



This problem is distinguished from poor communication by accounting for the informal and “human” aspects of the workplace. Interpersonal skills are not simply a matter of communicating and explaining policy changes; they are a matter of developing and maintaining positive relations with peers, supervisors, subordinates, and constituents. Unlike the charismatic leader, who exemplifies strong interpersonal skills, ineffective leaders struggle to develop and maintain personal relationships with co-workers, followers, and constituents within the community. Such relationships are important because they can engender a sense of trust and allegiance between a leader and those they seek to influence.

The absence of strong interpersonal bonds can erode a leader’s efficacy and impact. While charisma alone may not be sufficient to ensure leadership efficacy, it is necessary for leaders to be able to make some personal connections in the performance of their leadership duties.

Ineffective leaders were thought to either not recognize the importance of interpersonal relationships, or to struggle to establish and maintain these connections. Because subordinates and followers see the leader as distant, detached, and disinterested in getting to know them as a person, the follower’s starting orientation may not be to trust and act upon the leader’s call to action. When followers trust their leader and feel they have some level of personal connection, they are perhaps more likely to follow the leader in ways the followers are not innately inclined. Always having a good joke or remembering staff members’ birthdays are not enough, by themselves, to make a one a strong leader, however being able to connect with others and treating relationships with followers as important commodities can go a long way toward ensuring leadership efficacy.

Lack of Integrity

Honesty and integrity have long-been considered central to policing, and this is magnified in the leadership context. A leader's ability to establish effective relationships with followers is partially predicated on being viewed as trustworthy, honest, and ethical.

Honesty and integrity have long-been considered central to policing, and this is magnified in the leadership context.

Ineffective leaders were characterised by the NA participants as lacking the integrity necessary to maintain the trustful following of subordinates and others. As with leaders who were characterised as lacking an appropriate work ethic, leaders who lacked integrity were framed as being less effective due to their perceived shortage of professionalism, diligence, and dedication.

Of course there is a degree of subjectivity here. For example, a leader who allegedly engaged in marital infidelity or poor integrity in an off-duty business transaction might be vilified by some followers, while generating indifference among others. Poor integrity, be it real or perceived, has a lingering effect; trust and respect, once lost, are difficult to recapture.

DISCUSSION

In this research leaders were characterised as ineffective when they exhibited behaviors that undermined and eroded a follower's senses of trust, legitimacy, and confidence. Leaders were also characterised as ineffective when they failed to exhibit the key actions that might be associated with actual leadership.

These traits and habits represent ways in which leaders work against their own interests and/or failed to live up to their label or position. The ten emerging traits and habits discussed above can be loosely grouped into three categories of problematic behaviors:

- individual problems,
- occupational problems, and
- leadership problems.

Individual problems are actions, inactions, traits and behaviors that more generally reflect the character and personality of the ineffective leader, including ego, poor integrity, a poor work ethic, and placing one's self before others. Certainly these characteristics have a strong subjective element; one observer's egomaniac is another's self-confident and decisive leader.

Occupational problems are, relatively speaking, more

susceptible to improvements and enhancements. Issues with communication, micromanagement, and being closed-minded can certainly reflect upon the character and personality of an individual leader, but they also can emerge within bureaucratic and litigious organisations. These problems also represent behaviors more amenable to correction through leadership development processes.

Finally, leadership problems most centrally relate with the failure of leaders to embrace their role and actually lead. This is an interesting point when we consider some of the emerging literature around complexity leadership and the delicate balance a leader faces in ensuring they generate an environment prepared for innovation and diverse thinking, rather than responding to directing.

Finally, leadership problems most centrally relate with the failure of leaders to embrace their role and actually lead.

Similarly subjective then, one person's characterisation of a failure to lead may be another's deliberate and conscious inaction to generate innovation amongst subordinates. This is markedly different, of course, from an abrogation of leadership responsibility, although the diverse origins of such make overcoming this inaction a challenge. It suggests the need for multiple potential corrective measures. The problem is not merely a function of the individual, but is also a reflection of the prevailing culture of the police organisation and leadership selection and accountability practices.

Certainly one of the greatest challenges in correcting ineffective leadership is deriving an understanding of why a particular ineffective practice emerges, and then fixing it. Some problems are a function of the individual leader's personality and predispositions; such matters are likely difficult to correct (e.g., poor interpersonal skills), though improvements may be possible when a leader is consciously dedicated toward that goal. Other problems emerge due to structures and processes within police organisations.

True leadership might mean current supervisors must work to correct organisational culture, sacred cows, and other peculiarities working against the development of the next generation of leaders (not just command staff) in the organisation. Many police services struggle to provide a sufficient amount of leadership development. Lacking education and mentoring on how to effectively lead, a new supervisor might revert to micromanagement without even realizing the fundamental problems with that style.

Leadership development can be a pathway to

overcome ineffective leadership practices through formal education, creating greater self-awareness and personal development, and creating an institutional culture that critically examines organisational practices that promote poor leadership.

Leaders are not perfect; they are humans who make mistakes. Too often society expects near-perfection out of leaders and is intolerant of failure. This encourages some leaders to play a safe game and pursue self-interests over doing what is right. If we want more leadership, then we need to be prepared to accept that this comes with an inherent risk that leaders will sometimes get it wrong. But by paying more attention to the traits and habits of ineffective leaders, police organisations can develop a more balanced perspective about leaders and organisational leadership.

Even highly effective leaders have weaknesses and limitations; even strong leaders make errors in judgment and have periodic lapses in personal conduct. The key, perhaps, is not for leaders to be perfect, but rather to understand their own weaknesses, limitations, and "dark side". Effective leaders are not perfect; more likely, they have a greater awareness of their short-comings and a greater desire to control or correct those traits and habits.

Those seeking to study police leadership might be well-served by considering poor leaders and leadership practices to develop a more realistic and robust understanding of the type of leadership that is effective and desired in modern police organisations.

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About the Author:

Joseph A. Schafer is Professor and Chair in the Department of Criminology & Criminal Justice at Southern Illinois University Carbondale. His research focuses on policing, organizational change, leadership, citizen perceptions of police, extremist ideologies, and futures research in policing.

He was the 2006-2007 President of Police Futurists International, is a member of the PFI/FBI Futures Working Group, was a visiting scholar in the Behavioral Science Unit of the FBI Academy (2006-2008, 2012-2013), and a 2012 Visiting Fellow with the Centre of Excellence in Policing & Security.

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Collins Beach Road, Manly NSW
PO Box 168, Manly NSW 1655

Ph: +61 2 9934 4800 (24 hrs)

Fax: +61 2 9934 4780

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