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The Manager-Police Chief Relationship

Build a respectful, supportive manager-chief relationship to ensure public trust and confidence.

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Local government managers and assistants must ensure their relations with police chiefs are strong, respectful, and mutually supportive. It is a classic symbiotic relationship. All departments are important, but there is more at stake with the police department than any other.



Ensuring community safety by preventing and addressing crime and incivility is the first priority of all local governments. The strength of a local representative democracy and the quality of life enjoyed by its residents is often a function of the way police officers carry out their duties.

There are 680,000 sworn officers in the U.S.¹ serving in 18,000 separate agencies.² Not surprisingly, police departments take up a large share of most communities' general fund budgets.

But what is most unique about police departments is the amount of discretion provided to line staff. We expect officers to be benevolent community problem solvers and compassionate role models, while at the same time being ready to attack and kill in the case of a mass shooting or terrorist incident.

An entry-level police officer is authorized to take a person's liberty during an arrest, or even a life if the circumstances dictate it. That's a lot of judgment for someone, perhaps in his or her early twenties, to exercise.

Generally, there's no time to request supervisory oversight of such a decision.³ Consequently, the cost of mistakes can be very high in civil liability and in lasting harm to community relations.

Trust and Confidence Are Key

Most important, residents must trust and have confidence in the local police to enforce the laws fairly if local representative democracy is to function properly. If the police lack that trust and legitimacy, the entire criminal justice system and, indeed, local government, is imperiled.

A crisis of confidence is increasing in communities over police departments' use of lethal force. Overly aggressive law enforcement strategies have torn the social fabric and undermined the confidence in and legitimacy of local governments throughout our nation.

The Washington Post created a database documenting 987 lethal shootings by on-duty officers in 2015.⁴ Even when you factor out those shootings in which the person killed had a gun, there were still hundreds of preventable fatal shootings that year. As a result, hundreds of police chiefs, Department of Justice officials, and White House officials are advocating drastic police reforms across the United States.⁵

Paradoxically, public confidence in police has been static or falling despite a 15-year reduction in serious crime beginning in the new century, which has resulted in some of the lowest crime rates in cities and towns since the 1950s.⁶

A Gallup poll in 2015 indicated only 52 percent of the public trust the police.⁷ It is lower for the poor, people of color, and young people. It appears that the public cares just as much about how people are treated by police as the crime rate.⁸ Procedural justice and dignity for all are paramount.

This isn't abstract theory. Lethal incidents involving police actions caught on video have rocked American cities in the past two years . . . from Ferguson to Cleveland to New York City to Chicago to North Charleston to Baltimore, Seattle, Cincinnati, New Orleans, San Francisco, and others. Big cities or little cities, rural or urban, rich or poor—no city is immune.

It would seem that managers would put a premium on close working relations with police chiefs. No two other positions have more influence on policy and culture of police departments. Yet, that often is not the case. Instead, relations between these two appointed officials can be distant, chilly, or mutually suspicious.

The reasons vary. Some managers are not knowledgeable about police procedures and can be intimidated by the language, uniforms, and methods of the police departments. After all, few universities with MPA programs teach police operations or administration.

Others see the police chief as an extremely powerful, visible, and respected public figure, and thus less likely to take direction from the manager. Some managers have gone head-to-head with chiefs over budget cuts or labor issues only to have their city councils back the chiefs.

Public safety holds significant political sway in most communities with elected leaders regardless of their political persuasion. Thus, a manager may feel highly constrained in dealing with difficult issues with a chief for fear of an end run to the council and community.

But it is a mistake for the manager not to consistently engage with the police chief, because the department's mission is too critical and its service impacts can be so widely felt by the community—for good and for ill. The manager needs close communication with the chief and to have full confidence in the chief's abilities, integrity, and commitment to the whole of the community and organization.

If that is lacking, the manager must be willing and able to make change at the top of the police department.

A Shared Vision

Managers and police chiefs must share similar visions and values for their police departments. These two highest ranking executives must understand each other's perspectives and support one another.

Specifically, the two must work hand in glove to ensure that police officers are properly recruited, hired, representative of the community served, trained, equipped, supervised, motivated, disciplined, treated for illness or injury, and supported in some of the most demanding work in our civil society.

Realities of calcified civil service systems; state statutes like "Officer Bill of Rights;" labor agreements; outdated hiring procedures; and age-old stereotypes about what makes for a good police officer often get in the way.

It is more than budgeting adequately and ensuring fair wages and benefits. It is not just about showing up for police ceremonies and speaking positively about the police in the media and at community gatherings. It goes to both policy and culture. Managers and police chiefs need to review these key policies for legality, fairness, and community acceptance:

- Use of force.

- Search without warrant or probable cause.

- Mass demonstrations.

- Gender identification, especially in regards to the non-mainstream sexual identities (identified by the acronym LGBTQI) population.

- Racial profiling.

- Incentives, overt or implied, for arrests, citations, summonses, or tickets.

- Tactics that disproportionately impact certain groups more than others.
- Data gathering and information sharing.
- Use of technology.
- Investigations of police-involved shootings.
- Harassment.
- Traditional “soft-look” uniforms versus the paramilitary SWAT-type uniforms.
- Public reporting.

Community involvement should be part of this policy and procedures review. The chief and manager must use their combined authorities and resources to promote a culture of guardians rather than warriors. Officers should be chosen and retained for their ability to serve and protect rather than subdue and conquer. Policy and culture must be aligned.

Community policing must be supported as a central philosophy and way of providing service. It is about police and residents coproducing public safety. A century of research indicates that informal social control is more effective in crime reduction than is formal punishment.⁹

Relationships with civic groups, schools, business community, faith organizations, service clubs, and others are key to a community’s faith in its police department. Managers and police chiefs are major players in these community networks and relationships.

Get officers into the community in non-law enforcement situations where people can better see their humanity and respect for the residents they serve. Make sure that the dialogue is indeed two-way. Give people a voice. Listen to officers, too.¹⁰ Support youth development opportunities in schools, sports, and after-school activities.

Pay Attention to Training

Managers and chiefs need to pay particular attention to training. The typical police academy followed by field training is inadequate. Beyond training in laws and tactics, officers must be offered scenario-based training to hone their judgment in difficult situations. There needs to be a shared understanding of the police department’s equipment and how and when it is to be deployed.

Crisis intervention training to better understand how to effectively deal with those who have mental disorders is essential. Conflict resolution, de-escalation strategies (calming and slowing things down), and alternatives to arrest are increasingly important in the myriad circumstances in which police officers find themselves in volatile situations that can become instantly deadly if mishandled.

Skill training in social interaction, including communication with the public and media, social intelligence, implicit bias, and impartial policing, must be offered alongside of tactics.

Officer safety and well-being should be high on the list of a manager's priorities and not simply left to the chief. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, more than 100,000 police officers are injured in the line of duty each year.¹¹ Make sure that officers have the tools to keep them safe, including bulletproof vests and tactical first-aid kits.

Proper entry testing, wellness services, counseling, peer support, and active intervention should be available to officers as they tend to experience high levels of stress. This can lead to depression, sleep deprivation, poor nutrition, lack of exercise, alcohol and drug use, family problems, and suicide. It has been said that "Hurt people can hurt people."¹²

Dealing with Tight Resources

It is also extremely difficult for most communities to provide all that is needed for modern, professional, equitable, and effective law enforcement. Most law enforcement agencies are fairly small with half having fewer than 10 officers and nearly three quarters with fewer than 25 officers.¹³

Budgets are tight. Collaboration, resource sharing, contracting, and mutual aid, therefore, are essential in today's new normal and resource-constrained local government world.

Managers and chiefs should be alert for ways to share resources with other local agencies, especially in training and advocating for state and federal assistance. High-tech simulators can mimic real life conflict situations to test officer decision making under stress, but the technology is expensive. Partnering with neighboring community police departments might make the expense manageable.

New technologies also pose policy challenges to local law enforcement. Unless policies are worked out in advance that address accountability, transparency, and privacy, technology outstrips policy every time. Body-worn cameras, drones, social media, less-lethal weapons, and facial recognition software are just some of the new technologies that are increasingly common, yet often are not accompanied by standard policies.

National standards are just beginning to emerge. Managers should assist chiefs and municipal attorneys in working out the policies and procedures.

Start Now

If you are not meeting regularly with your chief and working through these issues together, it is time to start. Managers should annually offer chiefs the chance to provide an assessment of the police department at a public meeting, including a council meeting.

Further, the issues addressed in this article ought to figure in the chief's annual performance evaluation. If you are not sure of your operational understanding of policing, ICMA and the Center for Public Safety Management offer training on asking police chiefs the right questions.

The COPS Office of the Department of Justice (www.cops.usdoj.gov) has useful resources as does the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP; www.iacp.org) and Police Executive Forum (www.policeforum.org), a policing policy think tank. The *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* published in 2015 also is a must-read.

Ride along with your officers once a quarter and see how they perform their work. Attend roll call and briefings on occasion.

Most importantly, show your chief that you are partners and will actively support him or her in overseeing this critical societal function. Your community will be better for it.

Endnotes and Resources¹ *Time*, August 24, 2015, "What It's Like to be a Cop in America," Karl Vick.² *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, May 2015, pg. 7.³ *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, May 2015, pg. 12.⁴ *The Washington Post*, December 26, 2015, "A Year of Reckoning: Police Fatally Shot Nearly 1,000," Kimberly Kindy, Marc Fisher, Julie Tate, Jennifer Jenkins.⁵ *The Washington Post*, "Police Chiefs Consider Drastic Reforms to Officer Tactics, Training to Prevent So Many Shootings," Wesley Lowery, January 29, 2016.⁶ *Final Report of The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, May 2015, pg. 9.⁷ *Time*, August 24, 2015, "What It's Like to be a Cop in America," Karl Vick.⁸ *Final Report of The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, May 2015, pg. 5.⁹ *Final Report of The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, May 2015, pg. 43.¹⁰ The Presidents' Task Force on 21st

Century Policing, *Implementation Guide: Moving from Recommendations to Action*, Washington D.C., Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2011, pg. 5.11 *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, May 2015, pg. 62.12 *Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, May 2015, pg. 61.13 *Final Report of The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing*, May 2015, pg. 29.

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