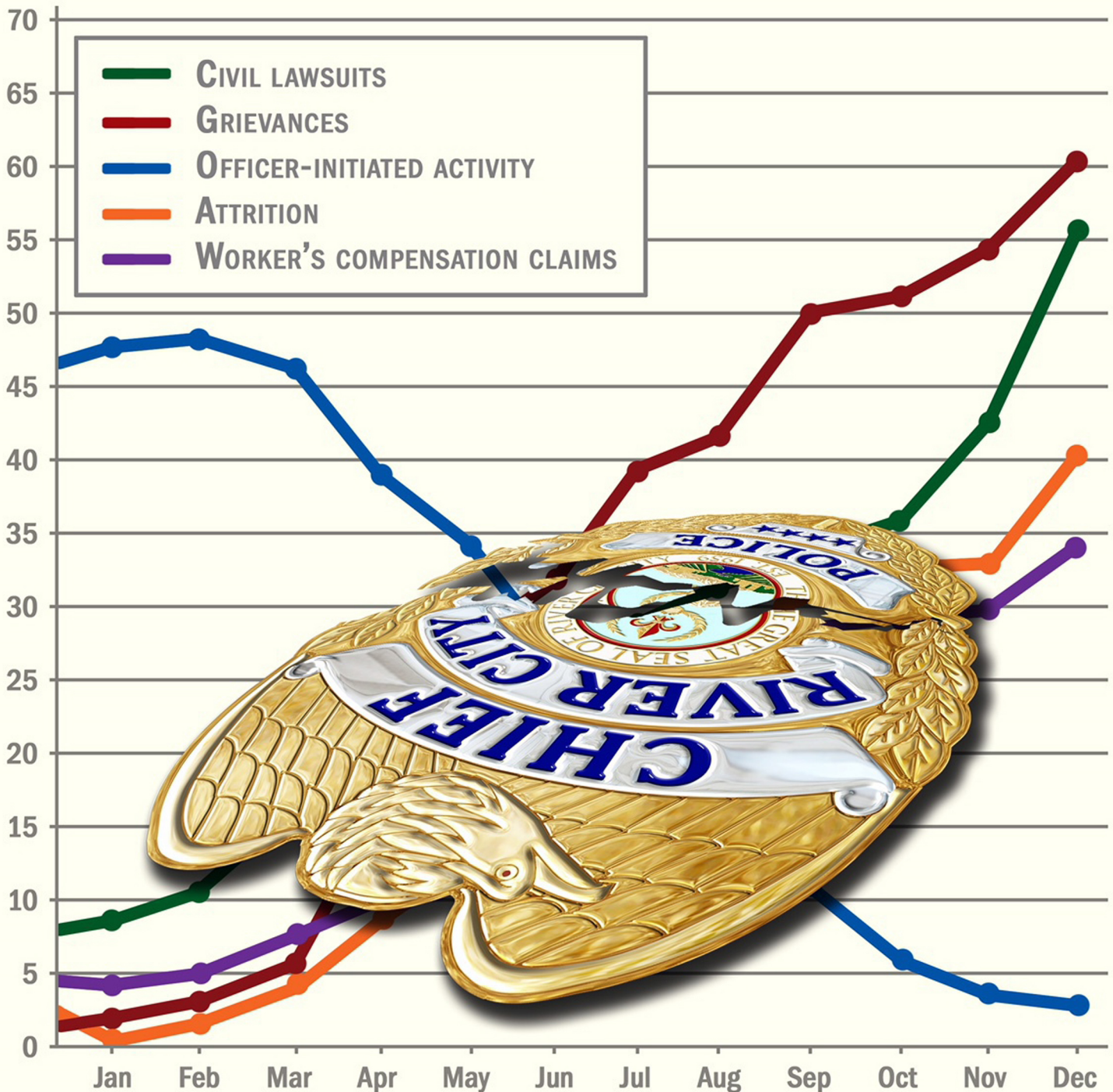


# CONSEQUENCES OF HIRING A WEAK POLICE CHIEF



KEITH D. BUSHEY

**Sobering Thoughts...**

# **CONSEQUENCES**

**Of Hiring a**

**WEAK  
POLICE CHIEF**

**Keith D. Bushey**

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## INTRODUCTION

The International City Management Association published the majority of the information contained in this booklet several years ago. \* Since that time, the issue has continued to grow in importance, with the challenges facing our profession and our chiefs seemingly greater than at any other time in our history. The need to institutionalize this information, both as previously contained in the form of a periodic article and with the additional perspectives, is such that it has now become one of the booklets in my Leadership Series.

When first published, the primary audience was municipal officials, primarily mayors and city managers. If the feedback that I constantly received was any type of a barometer, it appears that the material was most helpful in a number of police chief selection processes throughout the United States and, to a lesser extent in Canada as well. Beyond the typical availability of professional journals, I took the extraordinary measure of sending copies to virtually scores of elected and appointed officials in municipalities who at the time were conducting police chief selection processes. My passion in writing the article and pushing out the information, plain and simple, was somewhat of a catharsis based on my personal scar tissue from experiencing first hand the multiple consequences of a troubled process that resulted in the selection of a weak police chief.

My extensive interest in this topic was based on the selection of Willie Williams (RIP) as the chief of the Los Angeles Police Department, and all of the troubling consequences – some existing to this day – associated with his tenure. I am not critical of then-Chief Williams as a person; to the contrary, he was a good and decent man who competed in good faith and who tried his hardest to do a good job, he just plain was not qualified. Nor do I harbor animus for the five police commissioners who selected him; they exercised their best judgment and sought a person who they felt would do the best job for the City of Los Angeles; they placed a premium on the wrong things and also were not qualified to select a chief for one of the nation's most critical police positions. While I am not quite as charitable in my assessment of Mayor Tom Bradley (RIP), who made the final decision, I would be less than honest if not acknowledging the frustrations he experienced – many based on his own weaknesses in governing – with the police department and former Chief Daryl Gates (RIP). Chief Williams was selected to replace

Chief Gates at a time of great turmoil and when the city was in a massive social transition, one that is still very much underway.

The triggering event that culminated in the selection of Willie Williams as the police chief was the arrest and very troubling force used in the arrest of Rodney King in March of 1991. Although I was absent from the Department at the time of the arrest (called to USMC duty pursuant to the War in the Persian Gulf), I returned in time for the resulting civil unrest and all the trauma associated with the selection of Chief Williams and the departure of Chief Gates. Of special significance to this discussion, as an indication of just how fractured the municipal relationships had become, Chief Gates and Mayor Bradley did not talk to each other even during the massive civil unrest; I know that firsthand as I was the personal messenger that carried the communications back and forth between the two. With respect to blame for the process that brought Willie Williams into Los Angeles, there was plenty of it to go around. It was truly a confluence of many long and festering social and personal philosophical and strategic differences of opinion.

In the expansion of this material into booklet form, I also acknowledge the significant value of this information for prospective police chiefs. Very seldom does a new chief have all the knowledge and skills to succeed and thrive in his or her new position, but do typically have the professional background and personal potential to develop and grow in taking on the challenges of the new position, whether a new chief or a tenured chief moving on to another agency. Having said that, and without intending to discourage people from “stretching” professionally, it is also important that all of us be candid with ourselves about the realistic likelihood of success in positions for which we may be considering. Every one of us has a likely professional plateau where, in the absence of some strong mentoring and achievements, are likely to perform poorly. In addition to the obvious value to those municipal officials who play a role in selecting a new police, I hope that this booklet will also be of value to potential police chiefs in helping to decide where and what positions they may apply for. Taking over as a chief when not quite ready for that next step can be a lose-lose for everyone.

The importance of this issue cannot be exaggerated, as there are so many individuals and institutions, both public and private, whose safety and prosperity are linked to the performance of a police chief.

I hope that this booklet is helpful to the process of selecting the very best men and women to lead our police departments, and as a resource for those who aspire to police chief positions.

- ***“Sobering Thoughts for Municipal Officials – The Consequences of Hiring a Weak Police Chief.”*** PUBLIC MANAGEMENT – INTERNATIONAL CITY MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION (ICMA), March 2002

**Graphics by John Hollenbeck**

## **The Police Chief Selection Process**

Selecting a police chief is among the most, if not the most, critical personnel decisions a city manager, or an elected body, will ever make. Without minimizing the importance of other public executives, the actions and influence of a police chief have strong ramifications not only across the entire public spectrum, but also play a major role in the well-being and vitality of both residential and business communities. The actions of a police chief, more so than almost any other public executive, have long-term consequences that endure beyond the tenure of the chief who initiated those actions. The purpose of this booklet is to hopefully be of assistance to city managers and administrators, elected officials, police chiefs, police chief applicants, and others who may be involved in the process of selecting a police chief.

The selection of a new police chief is often a process that is heated, controversial, and dominated by individuals and organizations representing various special interests and points of view. Many will argue that the chief should be an insider or an outsider, a male or a female, of a certain ethnicity, a resident of the community or at least of the state, and/or other factors which are not related to potential performance. While the aforementioned factors may certainly be worthy of some weight and consideration in the selection process, there are far too many unfortunate instances – with catastrophic organizational consequences – where the zeal to select a particular type of individual, often reflecting the successful lobbying of special interest groups, has resulted in the appointment of a weak police chief whose non-performance-related profile weigh more heavily than leadership abilities. For the purposes of this discussion, a weak police chief is defined as an individual whose established skills and abilities are measurably below those of other candidates.

It is important to not demonize those individuals and/or organizations that place strong emphasis on non-performance-related factors. To the contrary, the selection of a chief who might be of an ethnicity that reflects the overall face of a community, or who is very familiar with the department, or who is a product of that community, can certainly be a worthwhile consideration(s) and should bear some weight in the selection process. The problem arises when that zeal is so strong as to ultimately minimize, and in some instances ignore, the weaknesses of a candidate, in order to hire a police chief that fits a certain type of non-performance-related profile. In these types of unfortunate instances, the subjective nature of evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of candidates can become interesting to the point of incredulous! Further, the often-predictable weak performance of an individual who is selected based upon questionable weight given to a non-performance-related factor can ultimately be harmful not only to the organization and the chief who fails, but also to the overall goals of the special interests whose actions contributed to that selection.

This discussion is not intended to be personally critical of weak candidates or of weak police chiefs. An occupational reality for top executives is strong personal confidence in the ability to perform well. Law enforcement executives, with the very best of intentions, apply for top positions because they believe they can either do the job, or develop the requisite skills while in the position. Unfortunately, there are times when most of us are a bit more optimistic than our skills and/or experience might suggest. An individual who is somewhat lean in the necessary qualities, and who may not perform as expected, cannot be faulted for competing, or even obtaining a chief's position. The burden and responsibility is upon those who make the selection.

Those who advocate "taking a chance" with a candidate in order to hire a chief who fits a particular non-performance-related profile, or who might argue that such a chief who fails can easily be replaced, or that solid subordinates can "take up the slack," are potentially mortgaging the future of the political entity that they represent. It is critical that those involved in the selection of a police chief do not risk the public trust by adhering to a lower selection standard than they, if business owners, would apply to their own companies.

The adverse impact of selecting an unqualified or marginally qualified police chief, and the impact of such a selection on various entities and functions, will be discussed in subsequent paragraphs. These difficulties are not far-fetched possibilities, but rather are based upon actual situations, hard lessons, and severe trauma experienced by individuals and organizations in a number of instances.

Without suggesting that all of the troublesome situations that will be discussed will in fact occur in every instance where an individual of questionable qualifications becomes the chief, they are very real considerations, which, to some degree or another, will come to fruition. Obviously, the degree of difficulties is influenced by other factors such as the size and complexity of the organization, political climate, and the tenure of the weak chief.

### **Impact on Police Personnel**

Just imagine how you would feel, as a high-ranking member of an organization, knowing full well that you and others who have long and honorably served an organization, are about to be lead by a less-qualified individual whose selection was based largely on factors unrelated to performance. Such an appointment sends out a blaring message that conventional and long-established accomplishments weigh less heavily than politics and special agendas. The sobering effect and negative message to those solid leaders within the organization is that advanced education, exemplary leadership accomplishments,

years of outstanding performance evaluations, strong contributions to the community, and just plain hard work really do not matter that much when it comes to selecting the chief. While the ethos of leaders in progressive organizations is to “suck it up” and work hard to help that less-qualified chief succeed, based on a higher loyalty to the community and the organization, the internal pain and external disdain, along with the loss of confidence in elected officials, is both real and severe.

Among the most difficult organizational dilemmas can be the actions of tenured command officers, who have a strong ethical base, when confronted with unethical behavior, either by design or unintentionally, by a weak police chief who is either indifferent to advice or strong-willed and stubborn. Such a dilemma can truly be a matter of survival; does that command officer take measures to influence the chief for the good of the organization and its personnel, or become a facilitator for something that is not right? In these types of environments, the distinction between that which is questionable and that which is just plain wrong can – over a period of time – become blurred. The politics also become interesting as sycophants thrive, others hunker down and survive, and candor – regardless of how well intentioned and diplomatically provided – often becomes career ending.

The impact of a weak police chief on the promotional process, and the long-term consequences, can become organizationally catastrophic. It is unfortunately not uncommon for a police chief whose selection is overly influenced by non-performance-related criteria to apply those same troublesome criteria to key assignments and promotions. It is also quite common for those same special interests that contributed to the selection of the chief to attempt – often successfully – to influence that chief to apply the same unique criteria to the promotional process. These dynamics can result in the promotion of individuals who, although competent, are less qualified and deserving than other candidates, and to distort the merit principle to the point where it exists in name only. In such instances, the consequences can include – due to civil service realities – the occupying of supervisory and management positions by less qualified individuals far beyond the tenure of the chief who made those appointments. In the business world where profits translate into survival, lesser individuals are moved aside for the most capable; in the police world, lesser individuals – absent serious misconduct or downright unsatisfactory performance – can remain in key positions for years.

The pain and trauma, and often disbelief, in the appointment of a weak chief are equally as evident with the rank and file as it is with supervisors and managers. Just as athletes look to their coaches, and military personnel look to their officers, law enforcement officers look to their chief for leadership. The respect of personnel for the chief is reflected in the overall performance of the police



department. The great majority of law enforcement officers are smart and intuitive individuals who clearly understand right from wrong, strong from weak, and recognize when politics weigh more heavily than practicality and performance. Let there be no doubt, the selection of a chief who is less qualified than other candidates is clearly and immediately obvious to the rank and file. It is also a reality that programs, regardless of their merits, are often doomed to fail if those responsible for implementation lack confidence in the leadership. Despite the songs of praise and words of confidence for the weak chief by elected officials and others involved in the selection, the damage is severe and includes increased cynicism and decreased confidence in the political process.

Those who might suggest that the best strategy with a weak chief – and it has been employed from time to time – is to philosophically stand back and let the chief fail, themselves fail in recognizing the harm to the community, the agency and it's personnel in the interim. Equally as devastating – and also employed from time to time – are situations where the command staff takes covert affirmative measures to accelerate the failure of a weak chief. Months of dysfunctional behavior by the command staff of a department can translate into years of hard feelings and residual damage.

### **Retention and Loss of Key Personnel**

Weak leadership generally results in some degree of organizational deterioration, which often contributes to the premature departure of valued employees. Just as a weak swimmer flounders in turbulent waters, so does a weak leader flounder when faced with the predictable challenges encountered in the typical law enforcement organization. The challenges encountered by a struggling leader often include a number of the following difficulties: inability to develop a cohesive team, inability to appropriately prioritize, inability to develop and communicate a positive consistent vision, mixed and confusing messages in the assignment of tasks, reluctance to accept responsibility for failures and to attribute the blame elsewhere, overreaction to political influence and special interests, poor selections for promotions and specialized assignments, and related problems. While acknowledging that even strong leaders make mistakes and experience occasional difficulties such as those previously described, a continuing pattern of multiple leadership weaknesses is absolutely predictable when a weak or unqualified chief is selected.

Just as people want to be part of a proud and professional organization, there is also a very predictable trait on the part of individuals, especially those who are particularly competent and who have other options (lateral moves to other departments, career changes, eligible for premature retirement, etc.), to look elsewhere for employment if not satisfied with the current situation. From the highest to the lowest levels of a department, the frustration and disappointment,

which stem from weak leadership, especially when it is obvious that the difficulties are the consequence of a politically selected police chief, are key factors in attrition. Although expensive and organizationally traumatic, increased turnover at the lower levels is usually manageable; but the loss of tenured specialized personnel – with years of hard-to-develop expertise – is immeasurable.

### **Impact on the Internal Discipline Process**

Weak leadership translates into increased internal discipline! A competent and confident leader generally gives solid direction with minimal likelihood of misinterpretation, is firm in both the delegation of authority and the acceptance of responsibility, stays on top of issues and makes minor modifications before situations get out of hand, and selects for promotion those individuals with a demonstrated track record for those same attributes. In the absence of the aforementioned competencies, it is not unusual to encounter mistakes based upon misunderstandings, poor results based upon inadequate direction, finger pointing as opposed to the acceptance of responsibility, major problems that could have been avoided if recognized while in the minor stages, and the disciplinary interpretation – by weak and/or inexperienced supervisors -- of situations which should be training issues. Interestingly, the initiation of a formal disciplinary investigation is often the least difficult and controversial course of action for a police chief. It requires special courage, common sense, and political credibility – qualities often not possessed by a weak leader – to be firm in declaring a controversial incident, not involving misconduct, to be a policy and/or training issue.

It is an unfortunate reality that overly political police chiefs, whose actions are often heavily influenced by special interests, have on occasion misused the internal disciplinary process for political purposes. The determination of what is and what is not discipline is not always clear. As an example to illustrate this reality, the premature release of a prisoner could be an unintentional accident that stemmed from flawed procedures, or a mistake that would not have occurred with better training, or an intentional criminal act. Different people, depending upon a personal philosophy and/or the quality of an investigation, might see the same situation differently. The police chief is the person who decides what is and what is not a disciplinary issue, and is in a position to exercise a great degree of discretionary latitude, which can easily be abused.

It is also not unusual for overly political chiefs to misuse the internal disciplinary process as a mechanism to harm and/or discredit key personnel who have raised reservations about command guidance and propriety, or by inappropriately disciplining an employee(s) for non-existent or minor training issues, based upon pressure from a special interest group(s). There have been instances – where

weak chiefs have acted both out of malice and ignorance – where the pressuring special interest groups(s) have had actual or contemplated litigation against the agency that has been strengthened by previous or continued inappropriately sustained personnel complaints!

### **Loss of Moral Authority to Lead**

Weak skills result in problematic behaviors and troublesome decisions that most often become conspicuous to all. When the chief shows favoritism, how can he or she discourage others from questionable promotions and assignments? When the chief declares misbehaviors as non-disciplinary, how can he or she hold the line and set the standard on internal discipline? When the chief fails to terminate or significantly penalize an employee for misconduct, how can he or she expect subordinate command personnel from behaving in the same manner? When the chief exercises behaviors and statements that are inconsistent with professional demeanors, how can he or she expect others to behave in a professional manner? When the chief accepts items or services that are gratuitous in nature, how can he or she discourage others from doing the same? These are rhetorical questions in this document, but real issues within departments that are lead by weak police chiefs.

### **Reduced Collegiality and Cooperation Among Supervisors and Command Personnel**

Law enforcement agencies are just like other organizations in that there will always be differences of opinions and styles among the personnel. These predictable differences often become much more pronounced and hostile when the person at the tops lacks the skills to reasonably lead and to develop a cohesive team. Examples of different types of behaviors that different people may exhibit include: The “straight-shooter” who is candid, sometimes painfully so and at his or her own peril, in telling the weak chief what he needs to hear; The “apple polisher” who tells the chief what he or she thinks the chief wants to hear; the “weathervane” who determines which way the political winds are blowing before communicating his or her thoughts to the chief; and the “survivor” who essentially “hunkers down” and just tries to survive. Human behavior is such that the differences of opinion and styles among personnel who fall into the above categories, as the tenure of a weak chief continues, become more and more acute, conspicuous to the entire organization, breed hostility, and contribute to the already list of the adverse consequences of an agency with a weak police chief. In Los Angeles, where a decent man but a very weak chief served one term, there are still obvious hostilities among many retired staff officers for not trying to help the chief succeed, for not contributing to the efforts to accelerate his demise, for not opposing issues when others thought they should, and for supporting issues when others thought they should not!

## **Degradation of Police Effectiveness**

Strong organizations with solid leadership and direction, which recruit the best people and provide quality training, are needed to confront the law enforcement challenges facing our communities. Intelligent, motivated, and well trained patrol officers and detectives are needed to patrol our streets, solve crimes, and develop crime-prevention strategies. High-quality supervisors, who possess solid experience, skills, and leadership training, are needed to deal with crisis situations which include, but are not limited to: coordinating the apprehension of fleeing suspects; both preventing and dealing with acts of civil disobedience; containing and/or managing high-speed vehicle pursuits; ensuring appropriate training and application of uses of force; and the myriad of other critical and dangerous tasks and incidents that law enforcement officers are routinely called upon to perform.

Much can be learned about policing – to include agency and effectiveness variations – by watching the various television programs that actually depict law enforcement personnel performing their jobs. These programs, made possible by film crew ride-alongs, show everything from routine activities such as the handling of family disputes to critical situations such as high-speed pursuits and barricaded situations. In watching these programs, the objective viewer will in some instances be very impressed by what is seen, and in other instances unimpressed and skeptical at the performance of the officers and their supervisors. In many instances, the shows portray sharp and well-spoken officers who are clearly motivated and effective as they take on the various tasks, and also the performance of impressive supervisors who are conspicuous and who are providing solid direction where required. In some instances, however, the viewer will see situations involving slovenly personnel of questionable motivation whose efforts and effectiveness appear half-hearted, and whose supervisors are either not present or who reflect – to some extent – the same weak qualities of their subordinates. It is unfortunate to see a situation where the lack of motivation, or training, or supervision, or a combination of all three, plays a role in the failure to apprehend a suspect, suppress criminal behavior, or recover a victim's property. The skills and abilities of the police chief, more so than any other factor, are the reasons why some police departments are more effective than others!

## **Impact on the Community**

The quality of leadership exercised by police chiefs has a profound impact on the safety and well-being of the communities they serve. Residential communities, which historically have little or no crime -- regardless of police activities -- are relatively rare; the majority of neighborhoods can easily fall prey to burglaries, vandalism, code enforcement-related problems, and other situations, which detract from safety and the quality of life. Those related factors which are reflections of solid law enforcement leadership include, but are not limited to: continual situational awareness of trends, courage and the inclination to ensure dynamic deployment which is consistent with the periods when police presence can be the most effective, innovation and creativity with respect to the application of technology and new strategies, inculcation of a policing philosophy which results in a true partnership with neighborhoods, and the creation of an "ownership" philosophy on the part of assigned police personnel. Strong chiefs make for better communities; it is that simple.

The business community is generally quick to recognize a weak police chief. For the most part, businessmen and women are fairly intelligent individuals who place a premium on the variety of personal and professional skills that are necessary to run an organization, and are able to recognize individuals who are weak in those qualities. Because of the strong nexus between police performance and business vitality, the business community is most often anxious to develop and maintain a strong relationship with the police department, and to influence the police chief to take measures likely to enhance the security and safety aspects of business and industrial districts, most often in the areas of deployment and patrol strategies.

Simply stated, an inability to grasp the police performance-business vitality nexus by the police chief, as reflected in weak or non-existent strategies, translates into problems running the gamut from diminished profits to failed businesses. Solid police chiefs, while desiring additional resources, are not discouraged when those additional resources do not materialize, and are not reluctant to make hard calls and demonstrate innovation, such as recognizing that deploying resources to rid a downtown business district of homeless individuals may -- in the big scheme of things -- contribute more to the vitality of the community than arresting heroin users in a desolate commercial district at night. Finally, the selection of a weak chief often creates an ethical dilemma for those business people who, as is often the case, work hard to support the chief, whether weak or strong, and then when predictable problems arise, are torn between continuing that support or advocating the selection of a stronger candidate.

## **Credibility Throughout the Justice System**

Just about every police chief of any tenure can tell of a troubling situation where their personnel and/or the agency became the subjects of criminal or civil litigation, or poor public perception, because of joint operations involving another agency whose personnel lacked adequate training and/or supervision. Also, most chiefs can also tell of situations where – again because of a lack of training and/or supervision – agency personnel have been encouraged to avoid interaction with a particular law enforcement agency. Recognizing the clear nexus between the qualifications of the chief and the performance of the agency's personnel, a weak chief can translate into a police department which other agencies are reluctant to work with.

The exchange of information, especially that of an intelligence nature, can also be among the casualties of a weak police chief. Recognizing that competency and confidence are probably the key factors in the longevity and survival of a chief, and that struggling chiefs frequently increase their interaction with special interests groups and individuals that might be able to play a role in job survival, there is often a very real concern that the struggling chief can become a conduit for the transmittal of intelligence, or other sensitive information, to special interests and inappropriate individuals. Sad but true, and a factor that can be devastating to inter-agency relationships.

## **Increased Civil Litigation**

Less qualified new officers, weak supervision, inadequate training, and weak guidance – all potential consequences of hiring a weak police chief – translate into increased civil litigation. I doubt seriously that it is necessary to remind any municipal official of the adverse legal, financial, and societal consequences of the officer who makes an inappropriate arrest, the supervisor who fails to give solid guidance in critical situations, the officer who uses more force than is required, and/or the poorly planned and executed search warrant which results in unnecessary property damage, injury, or death.

The predictable internal impact of a weak chief is equally significant from the standpoint of personnel-related litigation. Weak chiefs who make weak internal decisions become a human resources nightmare. Under the best of circumstances, and with the best of leadership, there will be grievances and litigation on transfers, duration of assignments, promotions, and related issues. In the case of a weak chief, whose actions are controversial and often seen as questionable and/or unfair, personnel-related claims and lawsuits can be near overwhelming. An increase in troublesome personnel actions is usually among the first indications of top-level leadership difficulties. While even the most competent of police chiefs will occasionally experience spurts of litigation,

especially when changing the culture of an organization, there is a relative assurance that a weak police chief will result in more litigation that would otherwise have occurred.

### **Predictable Downward Spirals**

Organization problems that stem from weak leadership at the top are like dead fish in that they don't get better, until the source of the problem is resolved. A great example of a predictable downward spiral is the multiple consequences that flow from personnel shortages. As a department loses personnel, available and (initially) appreciated overtime often morphs into less time with the family and mandatory overtime, which aggravates a number of issues, including productivity morale and attendance. Then these problems just further exacerbate the issues of retention, absenteeism and performance. These types of downward spirals, in different forms, become obvious throughout the entire organization, and are not easily or quickly remedied.

### **"Broken Windows" in our Departments?**

The "Broken Windows" concept is something that has become near and dear to law enforcement personnel in efforts to make our communities better and safer places. Basically, the concept provides that our concern and pride for our communities is reflected in our care for properties and premises. Without suggesting that it is always the case, I encourage the reader to reflect on the outward appearances and conditions of the facilities, equipment and vehicles of various departments. To the extent that there may be a perception of a chief that has significant room to grow (as in a weak chief), are the chief's weaknesses reflected – perhaps to some extent – in the outward appearance of the organization. Again citing human behavior, it is an absolute reality that our pride in ourselves and in our organizations is reflected in a variety of personal and organization appearances. Certainly every chief wants the personnel, premises and equipment to look sharp, but not every chief possesses the leadership skills and moral authority to cause such to occur, at least to the extent desired.

### **Nightmare for Elected Officials**

The often difficult and controversial process of hiring a new police chief pales in comparison to the difficulty of removing a police chief! Without suggesting that all forced departures are appropriate, and in fact recognizing the reality that many fine chiefs have been forced out for questionable reasons, the fact remains that most ousted chiefs feel that they have been treated unfairly and are not reluctant to place the blame where they think it belongs. The forced removal of a chief who was – in large part – selected on the basis of non-performance-

related factors can be particularly painful to a city and its elected officials. It is not unusual for charges to be made – some subtle and others not so subtle – that the chief is being removed because of some sort of bias, be it related to outsider status, ethnicity, gender, or whatever. It is an absolute certainty that the influence of a special interest within a city is greatly strengthened when that interest contributed significantly to the selection of the police chief. In these types of instances, it is unfortunately common for the same special interests whose actions influenced the initial selection – and praised the process that resulted in that selection – to turn around and attack the same process and individuals who subsequently conclude that the chief must be replaced.

Short of malfeasance or illegal activities, making the case for removal of a police chief can be very difficult. Unlike other professions where there are often clear measures of effectiveness, the effectiveness of a law enforcement agency is often very subjective and influenced by a variety of variables that are subject to multiple interpretations. As an example, an increase in burglaries may truly be related to factors that the chief has little control over (influx of state-placed parolees, half-way houses, etc.) and a decrease may well not be related to police performance (exodus of commercial businesses, increase in alarm systems, etc.). In almost every instance, a chief can argue – with some justification – that various crimes are more heavily impacted by factors unrelated to police activities (economic issues, educational factors, immigration trends, court sentencing criteria, etc.), and that is unfair to hold the chief accountable for essentially uncontrollable variables. Attempting to remove a weak chief based upon factors which are subjective, and which different interests, can interpret in different ways, can get real murky real quick. The best way to remove a weak chief is to not hire one.

Most tenured municipal officials are aware of situations that illustrate the complexity of removing top officials for whom the appointing authorities have lost confidence. These situations become particularly troublesome – with typically higher litigation and buyout costs – when ethnicity becomes a factor. It is not unusual for the same special interest groups that played a role in the selection of a chief to also become vocal for the retention of that person once the appointing authority determines that replacement is warranted. These situations become very troublesome as appointing authorities attempt to gauge the true level of public opinion, and are forced to balance community input against leadership competencies. The collateral damage to the community, department personnel, and to the political process during such fiascoes can be significant.

While choosing not to provide my perspective on the merits of the situation, most who are familiar with Los Angeles politics will agree that the failure of James Hahn to be elected to a second term as the mayor of Los Angeles in 2005 was largely attributed to his failure to support then Chief Bernard Parks for his



second term as the Los Angeles police chief, and the subsequent statements and actions by a very disappointed Bernard Parks.

### **Police Chief Selection – Get it Right!**

The process of attracting and identifying the best candidates who truly possess exceptional leadership qualities can be a challenge. Think of an hourglass with the candidates at the top and the chief's position at the bottom; the filtration that sometimes occurs as candidates pass through the center can easily deprive an agency of the best choice. Despite the very best of intentions and a clear understanding of the qualities being sought, the process is only as good as the person(s) who conducts it. Whether conducted by the municipality or an outside search firm, the most likely phase for a breakdown is during the review of resumes and the screening-down of candidates. It is not uncommon for screeners – some of whom are previous law enforcement administrators – to screen-down based on a short, simple, and unstructured resume; resulting in a process that may well screen-out candidates who should continue in the process. It is also not uncommon for the process to be tainted when the activities of a single screener reflects his or her personal, organizational, or style biases. Equally as troubling, some screen downs place almost complete emphasis on rank with seemingly little or no consideration given to other performance-related factors.

A comprehensive police chief selection process must include an evaluation of how each candidate is perceived by the membership of the police officer association (POA) with whom he or she has previously interacted. While difficult and fraught with dangers, such an evaluation is possible. The three key behaviors to be determined are: (1) is the candidate perceived as accessible and desirous of input from the rank and file; (2) is that input seriously and conspicuously considered, and; (3) is the candidate perceived as fair? There have been instances where POA representatives have given inaccurate assessments for a variety of reasons, including: personal retribution, encouraging the selection of a favorite person, accelerating the departure of an unpopular individual, and strengthening the political clout of the association. For these reasons, it is critical to not place absolute stock in the POA organizational stance or the assessment of any single person, but rather to seek a collective assessment based on a number of individual interviews.

My suggestion is that municipalities conduct their own in-house selection process, consisting of the following major stages. First, be very clear about the qualities that are being sought, reduce those qualities to a detailed questionnaire, and have each potential candidate respond to that questionnaire. Secondly, assemble a small panel of law enforcement executives, with solid reputations for performance and credibility, to screen down the candidates.

Third, subject those successful candidates to a comprehensive leadership oral interview process conducted by selected law enforcement executives and appropriate city staff. Fourth, subject those surviving candidates to an outside oral interview process conducted by appropriate community and business representatives. Finally, subject the remaining candidates to the final selection process (city council, city manager, etc.). This recommended process is likely to yield the strongest candidates, and to clearly separate the leadership review from the portion of the process where non-performance-related factors may be considered.

## **Summary**

I hope that the information contained in this booklet is helpful in terms of providing food for thought for those elected and appointed officials who play a role in the selection of police chiefs, and for those men and women who aspire to become police chiefs, and/or to move into departments of increased challenges and responsibilities. Without suggesting that every troubling situation that I have discussed will come to pass in every instance, the reality is that these difficulties – to some extent – are likely to become apparent as a weak police chief settles into the position.

This discussion also illustrates the criticality of recruiting and hiring well-qualified entry-level employees who reflect the diversity of the community. Those law enforcement agencies that have solid outreach and mentoring programs, often to include feeder pools that start at the high school/explorer scout level, seldom find themselves in the position of having to place inordinate emphasis on non-performance-related considerations. Further, such agencies do not typically find it necessary to resort to the recruitment of outside candidates. Municipal leaders should insist upon, and hold police chiefs accountable for long-range efforts and planning with respect to recruiting and hiring qualified men and women who reflect the face of the community, and ensuring that strong internal development and mentoring is provided.

Regardless of the nature of the community, the majority of the residents want ability and effectiveness to be the primary considerations in the selection of a police chief! It is critical to not lose sight of the reality that most of those individuals and organizations that are the most vocal and visible in insisting that they represent the overall community, usually do not. Unfortunately, it is not unusual for the selection of a police chief to be heavily influenced by special interests that, although insisting widespread community representation, truly have little influence beyond others with the same limited agenda. It is important to solicit and consider input from all sources and factions, but to be continually cognizant of interests who will employ strategies intended to create the illusion of more influence than actually exists.

The process of hiring a police chief, if the best candidate is to be selected, is difficult and requires special efforts and wisdom. There is probably no such thing as the absolute perfect candidate, nor is there ever an absolute assurance that the new chief will perform – across the board – as expected. The bottom-line factors that most can probably agree upon is that the best indication of how someone is likely to do in the future is how they have performed in the past, and that stronger demonstrated skills and experiences are likely to translate into better performance.

Finally, a very personal thought for those men and women who aspire to become police chiefs or to move onto other chief positions of increased challenges and responsibilities; don't be dissuaded, but be smart. Very few chiefs have all of the skills necessary to survive and thrive as they move into new positions, but make sure that you have all the personal, emotional and professional qualities that make it likely that you are realistically ready and prepared for that next step.

Those who play a role in the selection of police chiefs, and those who aspire to become police chiefs, have much to consider...

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