

SME RESEARCH BRIEF

Research Review — The Critical Leadership Contributions of Sergeants from the Front Line

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How do the leadership methods and approaches of sergeants influence the adoption of policy decisions at the street-level?

Police leaders are often met with fierce resistance from frontline officers to newly implemented policy decisions. This measurable threat to an organization's goals and objectives is more pronounced when a policy decision is perceived to be controversial or imposed without frontline consultation. To inform this issue, this research highlights the critical leadership contributions of sergeants when implementing controversial or unpopular policy in police organizations. Findings from the examination of a recently implemented racial profiling policy (hereafter "the policy") in a large municipal police service shows support for a number of effective leadership methods and approaches used by sergeants to influence and achieve compliance from frontline officers.

The leadership of sergeants is mission-critical

To achieve intended policy outcomes, sergeants are able to leverage aspects of occupational subculture; in particular, rank, the organization's authoritative structure and composition, common frames of reference, language, and assumptions that shape the everyday decisions and practices of police officers, and the unique conceptualization held by officers of their variable and contextual relationship with the public. Duly, sergeants operate as a facilitating layer of management and are relied upon to influence the implementation of new, reformed, and existing policy at the street-level (Engel, 2001; Skogan, 2008). The dominant leadership-capacity of sergeants should be considered mission-critical when planning aspects of police reform. This research provides additional confirmation that sergeants represent "the most proximate and perhaps most potent bureaucratic force" (Engel and Worden, 2003) in police organizations when it comes to policy implementation and compliance at the front line.

The challenges faced by sergeants

The supervision of frontline police officers is complicated by several issues. Sergeants find it difficult to provide consistent and effective feedback in ambiguous, complex, and subjective work environments. Often, the duties of frontline officers are contradictory, conflicting, inconsistent and regularly conducted in low visibility settings, which makes firsthand knowledge of what transpires hard to obtain. Officers enjoy high degrees of discretion in their choice of self-initiated activities, judgements, and the application of law and policy. Lastly, an anomalous relationship exists between sergeants and those that they supervise, which can be defined by suspicion, cynicism, and distrust relating to the potential for punitive outcomes. This issue is particularly acute given the policy under investigation, which calls for monitoring and objective assessments by sergeants of police-public interactions to encourage compliance.

The leadership methods and approaches used by sergeants to achieve compliance

Semi-structured interviews of 17 patrol sergeants were conducted and supplemented by a survey questionnaire to further our understanding of the leadership contributions of sergeants in the field and with a focus on the recently implemented policy. Thematic analysis demonstrated empirical support for the following six leadership methods: (1) auditing; (2) being present; (3) training; (4) encouraging; (5) rewarding; and (6) disciplining. The findings further support the adoption of two leadership approaches: an authoritative leadership approach and a supportive leadership approach. Sergeants who are able to adopt and integrate the above six leadership methods and two leadership approaches were generally able to improve the compliance of frontline officers with the policy.

Figure 1. Analytical model illustrating the leadership approaches and methods used by sergeants to achieve the compliance of frontline officers with the policy.



Implications for police leaders

Sergeants are integral to the effective communication of policy dictates and powerful in the change equation. Among the most notable findings from this research is that controversial policy decisions and dictates are met with less resistance on the part of frontline officers when they are delivered strategically by sergeants – policing’s frontline leaders - and in accordance with the specific leadership methods and approaches described above.

Key references

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