



Street Sergeants Leading by Example: The Evidence

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Leadership in law enforcement, especially at the street level, is extremely important at a time when there is evidence of de-policing in certain neighborhoods and communities across the country, contributing to rising crime levels in those areas.ⁱ There is a strong temptation for many officers, in light of a barrage of negative media attention and other demoralizing influences, to engage in less pro-active policing.

Even more concerning is the temptation on the part of supervisors to concede that forces outside of their control—such as negative media coverage, political leadership and agency administrators—render them powerless to motivate their people to actively engage on patrol rather than simply answering calls for service.

But the available research suggests that front-line leaders have the ability to take the lead in a given precinct, district or department to overcome this temptation to “kill time” in between calls for service. This research indicates that the actions of front-line law enforcement leaders can have a substantial influence on officer morale and officer work productivity.ⁱⁱ **The idea underlying this influence is a simple but vital one: *leading by example*.**

Leadership by Example: The Evidence

A number of studies have revealed the power of leadership by example among patrol supervisors within law enforcement agencies. One study examined computer-aided dispatch (CAD) data from two suburban law enforcement agencies, one in Wisconsin and the other in Massachusetts. Proactive activities recorded in the CAD were tracked for 11 field supervisors (sergeants and lieutenants) and 68 patrol officers over 320 shifts. The proactive investigative activities of the patrol supervisors – such as vehicle stops, pedestrian stops, business walk-throughs, or after-hours building security checks – were compared to the same proactive activities of the patrol officers working on the same shift. This examination revealed that **when the patrol supervisors engaged**

in proactive investigative activities, their patrol officers responded exponentially with proactive activities of their own.ⁱⁱⁱ

In both departments (separated by a thousand miles), the same results occurred. On shifts where the supervisor never left the station, most of the patrol officers failed to engage in any proactive activities at all. On shifts when a supervisor went out on patrol, but never engaged in any proactive activity, the patrol officers averaged a little less than one proactive activity each. On shifts where the field supervisor engaged in self-initiated activity, the amount of proactive activities by the patrol officers also increased. In other words, *simply leaving the station resulted in an increase in proactivity and supervisors personally engaging in proactivity correlated with a substantial increase on the part of the officers.*^{iv}

The Effects of Supervisor Proactive Activity on Total Shift Proactive Activity

Another study, conducted by Criminologist Robin Engel, observed 79 field supervisors (sergeants and lieutenants) in Indianapolis, Indiana and St. Petersburg, Florida. The shift activities of these supervisors were then matched with the work activities of the patrol officers they supervised during the shift. The results revealed that supervisors who were routinely out in the field, proactively showing up at calls and making stops of their own, had the greatest influence over the work behaviors of the patrol officers on the shift. **Officers working on a shift with a proactive sergeant in the field were more likely to make vehicle and pedestrian stops, make criminal arrests, and engage in problem-oriented policing activities.**^v

Another study surveyed 64 road patrol duties with a sheriff department in Ohio. The deputies were asked the following question. “If you were faced with a new situation that you were unsure about how to handle, in which of the following ways would you be most likely to handle it?” Only 5% of the deputies indicated they would make up a new solution on their own, and 35% indicated they would handle the situation like they thought their peers would handle it. However, **60% said they would handle the situation like they think their immediate supervisor would handle it. These deputies acknowledged that they watch and imitate their supervisors.**^{vi}

Finally, a study of the influence that field supervisors have on the amount of time patrol officers spend on personal business while on duty. On-duty personal activities include such things as taking extended meal breaks, visiting a family member or any other activities completely unrelated to their patrol duties. Data for this study were gathered from the observation of 906 patrol officers, and 27 field supervisors, from 24 municipal police departments in Florida, New York, and Missouri.^{vii}

The number of minutes each patrol officer spent on breaks and personal business activities was compared with the number of minutes the shift supervisor engaged in breaks and personal activities. The number of calls for service handled by each officer was the strongest predictor of time spent on personal business – the more calls handled by the officer, the less time the officer had to spend on personal business. After controlling for the number of calls handled by each officer, the next greatest predictor of time on personal business was the number of minutes the

supervisor also spent shirking. For every minute the supervisor spent on personal business, all of the officers on that shift also spent more time on personal activities.^{viii}

The converse was also true. The less time field supervisors spent on personal activities while on-duty, the less time their patrol officers spent on personal activities. Supervisors were also found to influence patrol officer shirking in one other way. For every face-to-face contact the officer had with a supervisor while in the field, the amount of time the officer spent on personal activities was reduced. Radio or phone contact with officers, and face-to-face contact at the station, did not have this effect. Only face-to-face contact in the field reduced patrol officer shirking.^{ix}

Conclusion

The available evidence appears to refute the idea that front-line supervisors are limited in their ability to impact officer proactivity due to influences beyond their control. This evidence consistently shows what many seasoned leaders know to be true: that patrol supervisors “leading from the front” can have a substantial influence on the work activities of the subordinates on their shift. When field supervisors mostly stay in the station house, and primarily engage in personal business activities when they do venture out, their patrol officers are more likely to avoid proactive investigative or crime-prevention activities, try to avoid taking reports or making arrests, and frequently engage in personal activities while on-duty.

On the other hand, **supervisors who act as “street sergeants”—leading from the front rather than waiting to be called upon—lead much more productive and motivated officers.** Street sergeants spend time in the field, proactively backing up their officers on calls and stops, occasionally engaging in proactive activity of their own, and not engaging in personal business beyond the time allotted for their breaks. Street sergeants are more likely to have officers who engage in proactive investigative and crime-preventing activity, engage in problem-oriented policing strategies, take reports, make arrests, and avoid on-duty shirking.

The most effective way to increase your officers’ engagement in vehicle stops, pedestrian stops, business walk-throughs and other pro-active “out of car experiences” on patrol may well be to *practice what you preach.*

Your officers are watching. Which kind of supervisor do you want to be?

ⁱ MacDonald, H. (2016). *The War on Cops: How the New Attack on Law and Order Makes Everyone Less Safe*. New York, NY: Encounter Books; Oliver, W. M. (2015). Depolicing: rhetoric or reality? *Criminal Justice Policy Review*, online first, 1-25; Pyrooz, D. C., Decker, S. D., Wolfe, S., E., & Shjarback, J. A. (2016). Was there a Ferguson effect on crime rates in large U.S. cities. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 46(1), 1-8; Wolfe, S. E., & Nix, J. (2016). The alleged “Ferguson Effect” and police willingness to engage in community partnership. *Law and Human Behavior*, 40(1), 1-10.

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- ii Johnson, R. R. (2012). Police officer job satisfaction: a multidimensional analysis. *Police Quarterly*, 15(2), 157-176; Johnson, R. R. (2015). Police organizational commitment: the influence of supervisor feedback and support. *Crime and Delinquency*, 61(9), 1155-1180; Nix, J. & Wolfe, S. E. (2016). Sensitivity to the Ferguson Effect: The role of managerial organizational justice. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 47(1), 12-20.
- iii Johnson, R. R. (2015). Leading by example: supervisor modeling and officer-initiated activities. *Police Quarterly*, 18(3), 223-243.
- iv Ibid.
- v Engel, R. S. (2000). The effects of supervisor styles on patrol officer behavior. *Police Quarterly*, 3(3), 262-293.
- vi Johnson, R. R. (2008). Effectively communicating performance expectations to subordinates: patrol officer perceptions. *Law Enforcement Executive Forum*, 9(5), 103-113.
- vii Johnson, R. R. (2008). Field supervisor behavior and officer on-duty personal business. *International Journal of Police Science and Management*, 10(3), 339-348.
- viii Ibid.
- ix Ibid.