Leadership in Policing:
A Bottom-Up Approach

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Key Points

- The top-down approach to law enforcement management offers limited ideas and solutions.

- The bottom-up approach to law enforcement stimulates thought and ideas at the ground level.

- The bottom-up approach to law enforcement takes into consideration key stakeholders such as the community and business leaders in setting annual goals for the department.

Executive Summary

Law enforcement executives have generally followed a traditional quasi-military approach to leadership and managing their organizations, but in recent years there has been a greater interest in a more ground-up approach. In this perspective, we look at the difference between the traditional top-down approach to management and the bottom-up approach. We examine cognitive biases that occur more often in the top-down approach, as well as the unintended consequences associated with decisions made when using the top-down approach. The perspective contends that the bottom-up approach is more inclusive and accepting of employees, the citizens of the community, and the greater business community, and of their opinions and suggestions for goal setting of the law enforcement departments' plans. Finally, the perspective offers a successful model used by a local law enforcement agency and a plan for success going forward in leading police organizations.

Leadership in Policing: A Local Approach

Modern law enforcement agencies are managed and led using a quasi-military approach. They also follow the traditional principles of management that include planning, organizing, directing, staffing, coordinating, reporting, and budgeting. Like the military, law enforcement agencies are organized along structures of authority and reporting relationships. Law enforcement personnel wear military-style uniforms, have military ranks, use military-style weapons, and are authorized to use force, if needed. But unlike the military, most law enforcement agencies do not have the military bureaucracy, policies, procedures, and control mechanisms in place to be successful in this quasi-military approach to leadership.

Military bureaucracy has a united structure of five main armed forces that comprises the Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, and Coast Guard. But within law enforcement, there are approximately 18,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States (Banks et al., 2016). This includes police departments, sheriff's offices, state police agencies, and federal law enforcement agencies, each having separate and individual leadership structures, policies, procedures, and governance.

However, this is by design. Under the principles of federalism and states' rights, our Founders envisioned a public safety structure that was free from national power and governed at the local levels. As Madison (1788) opined:

> Those [powers] which are to remain in the State governments are numerous and indefinite. The [powers delegated to the federal government] will be exercised principally on external objects, as war, peace, negotiation, and foreign commerce; with which last the power of taxation will, for the most part, be connected. The powers reserved to the several States will extend to all the

objects which, in the ordinary course of affairs, concern the lives, liberties, and properties of the people, and the internal order, improvement, and prosperity of the State.

Law enforcement's role in a free society is to protect rights, promote public safety, protect the citizenry from criminals, and uphold the rule of the law according to the Constitution of the United States. It remains a core function of government.

The Top-Down Approach: Leading with Bias and Conjecture

In 2016, more than two thirds (71%) of all local police departments in the United States served populations of less than 10,000 residents ([Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2019](#)), and these agencies were usually in areas with shared jurisdictional responsibilities with other law enforcement agencies, such as a sheriff's office. The management or leadership style of these agencies is generally a top-down management style, not unlike the military. However, this management approach is not best suited for strategic decision making in policing and can lead to decisions being made in a vacuum because it does not include key stakeholders in the community. This approach can also lead to making decisions with cognitive biases. In this paper, we will examine all three of the aforementioned phenomena that occur with top-down decision making and provide a framework of arguments for why a bottom-up approach is more effective as a law enforcement management or leadership style.

Top-Down Management Examined

Top-down management occurs when goals, projects, and tasks are determined among the organization's senior leaders, usually independent of their respective teams. Then these goals, projects, and tasks are communicated down to their teams for implementation. Top-down management tends to allow decisions to be made in a funnel and sometimes does not include important data and key performance indicators. And even when gathered, the information is usually not weighed or evaluated and might even be ignored if the data does not support the intended outcome. Cognitive biases occur often in all organizations, but particularly with top-down management styles. Cognitive biases "are repeated patterns of thinking that lead to inaccurate or unreasonable conclusions" (*[Psychology Today](#)*, n.d.). Some examples of these cognitive biases that occur in top-down management decisions are the following:

- *Confirmation Bias* – This is favoring information that conforms to your existing beliefs and discounting evidence that contradicts them. As psychologist Catherine Sanderson points out in her book *Social Psychology*, confirmation bias also helps form and re-form stereotypes we have about people: "We also ignore informa-

tion that disputes our expectations. We are more likely to remember (and repeat) stereotype-consistent information and to forget or ignore stereotype-inconsistent information, which is one way stereotypes are maintained even in the face of disconfirming evidence" (Sanderson, 2009, p. 344).

- *Availability Heuristic* – This is placing greater value on information that comes to one's mind quickly. One tends to give greater credence to this information and tends to overestimate the probability and likelihood of similar things happening in the future (Sanderson, 2009, p. 147).

- *Anchoring Bias* – This is the tendency to rely too heavily on the very first piece of information you learn. With anchoring bias, the first person to lay out the foundation for the first argument establishes a bias within the greater group (Sanderson, 2009, p. 151).

- *False Consensus Effect* – This is the tendency to overestimate how much other people agree with you. Researchers have suggested that there are three main reasons why false consensus occurs: (a) our family and friends are more likely to be similar to us and share many of the same beliefs and behaviors (which would be particularly true in the profession of law enforcement with its strong subculture); (b) believing that other people think and act the same way we do boosts our self-esteem; and (c) we are most familiar with our own attitudes and beliefs, and we are more likely to agree with those who share similar attitudes (Sanderson, 2009, p. 87).

- *The Dunning-Kruger Effect* – This is when people believe that they are smarter and more capable than they really are and they cannot recognize their own incompetence. Dunning and Kruger suggest that this phenomenon stems from what they refer to as a "dual burden" ([Dunning, 2011](#)). People are not competent, and that robs them of the mental ability to realize just how inept they are. Incompetent people tend to

  - ► overestimate their own skill levels;
  - ► fail to recognize the genuine skills and expertise of other people; and
  - ► fail to recognize their own mistakes and lack of skill.

In addition to biases, unintended consequences can often occur in topdown managed organizations. The law of unintended consequences posits that the actions of people and especially of government always have effects that are unanticipated or unintended ([Norton, n.d.](#)). Top-down management often fails to consider potential unintended consequences and the effect that can occur within the police

organization as it carries out a decision. The community that has to live with the consequences of the decision might also fall victim to the unintended consequences of a policy decision. This ultimately brings us to the final top-down management point of failure: not involving stakeholders in the decision.

It is vitally important for organizations to include other groups and subgroups of the organization in decision making. An example of not including subgroups in a decision would be if the patrol division decided to change its policy and no longer had patrol officers conducting neighborhood canvasses for detectives investigating crimes. A neighborhood canvass is when police officers visit neighbors surrounding the crime scene to learn if the neighbors have any information regarding the crimes that have occurred. If the investigations division was not involved in this kind of decision, that lack of teamwork could unintentionally have an adverse impact on an investigation. Law enforcement agencies should also consider the same communication process within the community. If the patrol division is considering a change to a policy, such as enforcing a curfew, then the community should be well-informed of that change in advance and understand the community's challenges with that new policy.

Figure 1
Bottom-Up Policing Management Model

One of the most effective ways to achieve success in public safety is through the use of "Community Policing" concepts. A DOJ report broadly defines community policing as "a philosophy that promotes organizational strategies that support the systematic use of partnerships and problem-solving techniques to proactively address the immediate conditions that give rise to public safety issues such as crime, social disorder, and fear of crime (Community Oriented Policing Services [COPS], 2014). In theory, this philosophy is meant to be a strategic mindset permeating the entire department, encouraging community collaboration and input into departmental decision making. However, many departments have become nothing more than a federal grant program where officers are assigned to a community-policing unit that has sporadic events and limited neighborhood meetings. It is essential that the community police officer be the main conduit for community involvement and sharing of information and the implementation of goals for the greater community (Policing Project, n.d.).

The Bottom-Up Approach: Leading from Behind

In order to compensate for the failings associated with the top-down management principles, we should examine broader concepts that could make managing police agencies more effective. For public safety officials, this approach is the cornerstone for future success. Public safety executives need to learn how to lead from behind.

Leadership from behind goes against traditional law enforcement concepts. Law enforcement leaders have long viewed the key to leadership as providing full direction and orders of magnitude to their respective personnel on agency goals, policies, concepts, and crime reduction solutions. Leading from behind requires the willingness to engage officers and community early in the design and formulation of a concept or goal. Bottom-up management occurs when goals, projects, and tasks are informed largely by the employees and the community and not management. Employees and community are invited to participate in goal setting, giving them a formal stake in the decision. These goals, projects, and tasks are then communicated by each team to senior leadership for consideration.

In particular, law enforcement agencies must engage the community (citizenry as well as business) in this bottom-up approach. Officers who are at the line level and have the most interaction with the community are the gatekeepers of information and ideas. These officers working with individuals within the

community will understand better what the public needs and wants from their police department, and those ideas should be communicated up the chain of command to law enforcement leadership.

When employees and community stakeholders are treated as partners with a shared decision-making interest, they are valued and have a personal stake in solutions to problems. This process occurs more naturally in the bottom-up model. This bottom-up model can also shift from neighborhood to neighborhood, based on the crime problems associated with that particular area, which allows for a quicker response to crime areas and a more vested constituency in the policy or program decision. A manager controls resource allocation and should provide the employees and the community stakeholders with the support and materials they need so those individuals can accomplish the goals established, which should include—but are not limited to—the following: (a) reducing the amount of crime in particular service areas, (b) enforcing law and order, (c) responding quickly when needed for service to the community, and (d) providing individualized department goals.

The Johnson County, Kansas, Sheriff's Office: A Bottom-Up Leadership Example

In January 2016, Calvin Hayden was elected as the sheriff of Johnson County, Kansas. Johnson County has one of the largest sheriff's offices in the Midwest with a staff of nearly 750 employees and an annual budget of over $100 million, which includes one of the largest jail systems in the Midwest that can handle approximately 1,500 adult inmates (C. Myers, personal communication, 2020; Johnson County Sheriff's Office , n.d.-b). Sheriff Hayden was a 28-year veteran of the sheriff's office upon his retirement as a lieutenant. After his retirement from law enforcement, Hayden was also elected county commissioner and served two terms in that position. Hayden recognized that, for law enforcement to be successful in a county with a population of 650,000 and 25 separate police departments, the sheriff's office had to develop a mission and vision that included four key stakeholders in the county:

(1) the citizens of Johnson County,

(2) the employees of the sheriff's office,

(3) the police departments from the other jurisdictions in the county, and

(4) since Johnson County is considered to be one of the top 100 wealthiest counties in the United States, the greater business community.

Sheriff Hayden and Undersheriff Doug Bedford were committed to this new management approach. Bedford had learned about the approach as a Navy SEAL, a special

operation force committed to bottom-up leadership (Pagano, 2018). Hayden and Bedford attended the Darden School of Business at the University of Virginia for a course called Leading for High Performance which focused on bottom-up leadership principles (Darden Executive Education, n.d.). Sheriff Hayden then implemented strategies that incorporated the bottom-up leadership principles learned at Darden and reinforced with Bedford's real-world experience in the SEALs.

Sheriff Hayden's first step was to change the vision statement of the sheriff's office to include strong bottom-up leadership style language. The new statement read: "Achieve the highest level of excellence in law enforcement by empowering employees through courageous leadership and strong values, to better serve the community and be a model for other law enforcement agencies throughout the country" (C. Myers, personal communication, January 2020; Johnson County Sheriff's Office, n.d.-a, "Our Vision" section).

His second step was to change the culture within the sheriff's office and encourage bottom-up decision making and empowering employees. He led by example by meeting both his team and each supervisor individually, so they personally understood the change of culture that needed to occur. He also made sure funding was dedicated to training his staff and brought in Darden trainers into Johnson County for a 6-day leadership course. This course was attended by every supervisor and commander in the department.

His third step was to ensure that the community had a say in the decision-making process and in forming the goals associated with the sheriff's office's programs. This community included not only citizens of Johnson County, but also the businesses within Johnson County and the other law enforcement agencies serving Johnson County. Hayden accomplished this task by funding and formulating citizen sheriff's academies and a not-for-profit program that was led by Johnson County business leaders. The sheriff also has a Community Advisory Relations Board with the mission to improve and maintain a respectful and trusting relationship between the sheriff's office and the community it serves. Community goals and ideas for these programs were formulated according to the bottom-up leadership approach. Hayden even included the press as stakeholders.

Johnson County, Kansas, has a low 2.1% violent crime rate per 1,000 and a low 17.8% property crime rate per 1,000 (Kansas Bureau of Investigation, 2019). There are certainly many reasons why crime statistics ebb and flow and not all lower crime statistics are associated with implementing the bottom-up approach. However, crime reduction was a goal of this program and crime so far has trended downward in a positive way, and effective community policing helps in

crime prevention if the community is heavily vested in the goals (COPS, 2018).

Five Questions to Consider

There are five questions any law enforcement leader should consider to determine whether or not they are primarily a top-down or a bottom-up decision-making organization. Those questions are the following:

1. Do employees feel connected to the organization's mission and vision?
2. Does leadership, at all levels, clearly and openly communicate with its teams?
3. How much ownership do employees have over their work, actions, and activities?
4. Is there a feedback-rich culture at all levels?
5. How is goal setting currently implemented?

Conclusion

Police organizations need to start studying their current management practices. This starts with leadership at the top and a willingness to embrace change that includes a bottom-up approach to police management. This includes developing curriculum in the training academy, as well as management training programs that have bottom-up policing concepts. Collaboration with community and business representatives across the community is also a cornerstone of the bottom-up approach. Finally, this approach to policing does not change at all the impact the police executive has on the success of the programs. As a matter of fact, even greater responsibility rests with the executive to ensure empowerment occurs at all levels, clear standards to hold those accountable are provided, and officer discretion is ensured as the clear rule of the day. ⭐

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Sheriff (Ret.) Currie Myers, PhD, is a senior visiting fellow at the Texas Public Policy Foundation. He has spoken on criminal justice public policy across the country, including at U.S. Senate round-tables. He was a participant in the White House's 2015 Criminal Justice Reform Summit.

Sheriff Myers has a combined 30 years of professional experience as a state trooper, special agent, sheriff, criminologist, professor, and university executive. He ended his law enforcement career as the sheriff of Johnson County, Kansas, which serves a population of more than 600,000 citizens in the Kansas City Metropolitan area and is one of the largest sheriff's offices in the Midwest with nearly 750 employees and a jail population of approximately 1,000 inmates. He is a nationally recognized expert in criminal justice public policy as well as organizational management and leadership and has spoken at more than 1,000 local, state, and national conferences.

As a professor, Sheriff Myers has developed and taught more than 25 undergraduate and graduate courses, including disciplines within criminal justice, criminology, organizational management, leadership, ethics, and in the humanities. As the dean of the school of justice studies at Rasmussen College in Bloomington, Minnesota, Myers led a student population of nearly 2,000 along with approximately 150 faculty and staff to include a state-of-the-art police academy and corrections academy.

Sheriff Myers earned a PhD in criminal justice from Southwest University and an MBA from Benedictine College. His B.A. in criminal justice management is from Ottawa College. Myers is currently the president of Sheriff Myers & Associates, which is a consultancy firm that focuses on business, security, and public policy. He is also on faculty in the Criminology Department at Benedictine College in Atchison, Kansas.