The Automobile Metaphor: *a framework for contemporary police leadership and management*

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We spent much time reading and studying through the many volumes of literature regarding the many different styles and theories about leadership. However, seldom do we find materials that focus on how to lead.

By analogy, we are trained in the police academy about the different manners of death, such as homicide, suicide, accidental and natural. In that vein we learn about post-mortem ecology, gunshot wounds and a whole array of issues related an investigation, but where do they teach us HOW to investigate. Sure, we learn interviews and interrogations, blood spatter interpretation and many other techniques but the practice of actual investigation comes from the experience of doing it.

Often, such is the case regarding our management and leadership responsibility. As a result, we rule our most important resource by trial and error and like Guinea pigs subject them to experimental environments. People should never be placed in the role of an experimental creature they ought to be nurtured, developed, guided and then released to accomplish the work they are there to do.

I have developed a model that serves to simplify and provide a contextual understanding of how one ought to lead.

I use the example of an automobile because leadership is a journey that requires course, navigation and travel. Sometimes travel is through our pristine interstate system, fast, efficient, safe and easily driven. Like leadership, Interstates do not exist in a vacuum. They are susceptible to construction, accidents and increment weather. Sometimes our destinations or environment required us to use the two-lane road through curves, hills and even mountains fraught with fog, snow, ice and even falling rocks. This metaphor demonstrates the importance of a reliable vehicle and a competent and confident driver.

In my model the vehicle describes how to lead, while the driver depends upon the style of leadership.

There are three (3) components to the model that are complex and interconnected and related. They are dynamically tied to one another and cannot move forward absent all three working in concert together. The three create a synergy that together provide a contextual paradigm for leaders to use in their efforts to manage people.

**The first component is THE ENGINE, Character and behavior**

Character develops as a result of values and integrity that are consistently demonstrated by behavior and conduct. Character and behavior are so important because it influence everything from us to everything and everybody around us. Character provides the architecture to build
good decisions and drives the motives for acting right. The scholar Ann Cutliffe captures this best with her quote. “if we know who to be, then what to do falls into place.”

Character motivates and drives a leader to embrace a framework of self-directed leadership development by constantly using three meta-skills. First, ability to manage emotional reactions to feedback. Second, to carry out effectively the practice of self-reflection, and lastly, enact self-regulatory processes for leadership development.

Character and behavior are listed together because they are not passive, they are active working in unison to cause a leader to have integrity and ensure ethical and fair conduct. Leaders must be role models for others to develop and forge the culture of their organization.

As a leader, the work environment often is an extension of yourself. The leader drives the shared values and beliefs that solidify and develop standards and conduct and shapes the “Culture of the work place.” The leader sustains the climate of the work place by managing through the lens of integrity and the actions based on ethical concerns. This prevents, reduces and mitigates problems. Helps people focus and understand the important issues afoot (Emphasizes your expectations, enhances awareness and promotes prioritization). Such promotes “consequence” thinking over reactionary thinking and creates a feedback-rich environment that spawns subordinate voice, reflection and input. Provides progress on expectations and encourages improvement. Develops shared consciousness where everyone is singing on the same sheet of music. Promotes sound decision making and reinforces outstanding performance while educating to prevent poor performance.

If the lower level personnel understand the vision and the values (How we do things) then it becomes accountability at the lowest level. They do not have to wonder or ask supervisors, they know the expectations and understand the consequences involved.

Character and behavior define who we are and what we do and work together to make us authentic leaders who are constantly self-aware of how they think and behave and are perceived by others as being aware of their own and others’ values/moral perspectives, knowledge, and strengths; aware of the context in which they operate.

The term authenticity as used here refers to one’s personal experiences, be they thoughts, emotions, needs, wants, preferences, or beliefs, processes captured by the injunction to know oneself and further implies that one acts in accord with the true self, expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inner thoughts and feelings.

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This is the engines propulsion that powers the drive train that steers the course through open road or more valuable when through obstacles and barriers.

The second component is THE DRIVE TRAIN, Contextual understanding:

Central to our understanding any set of facts and circumstances is our ability to objectively evaluate the totality of the context in which the situation that those facts and circumstances occur.

Our evaluation process should evolve from general to specific in scope, deferring judgments’ until all facts are gathered.

Central to this process is the application of a filter of objectivity and state of civility. The ability to interpret the richness of context comes from a neutral mindset dedicated toward listening, empathizing and learning, then synthesizing the information into an understandable form, builds on a foundation of credibility and specificity.

Equally important is the ability to resist the forces and influences attached to ideology or subjective beliefs that bend ones objectivity toward what we want versus what it is. In this information age we have a dysfunctional relationship with reality. Truth and untruth exist at the same level of authority it is difficult for people to judge.\(^6\)

You must never let your need to be right, outweigh your responsibility as a leader to know and accept what is true and accurate. It is natural to be more comfortable with what we know than what we don’t know. Uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity cause stress and can paralyze our decision making. Moreover, there is a tension between the “fast thinking” or the intuitive that is associated with learned patterns of behavior and the “slow thinking” or logic and reasoning that is required for managing.\(^7\) This emphasizes why objectivity is a hallmark of sound leadership.

There is a natural momentum to believe that every problem has a clearly defined solution. One system can be shoehorned to fit any environment and that variables and complications are bound to have some uniformity between them. While prudent leaders understand that they must be tolerant of complexity. They are aware that they don’t know all the variables, and they may never know them all. Moreover, they know that one solution may not fit all problems and some problems have multiple sources that need different solutions or no solutions at all.

Rigid and inflexible responses to life’s demands mark an individual as unwise. Since most nontrivial problems are multiply determined, an openness to alternate views, information, and potential solution strategies optimizes the wise person’s efforts to surmount obstacles efficiently.\(^8\) We must strive to hold the space in our mind for an absorptive capacity, where we sustain the ability to value, assimilate and apply new knowledge for learning and problem solving.

solving. Such is paramount toward the critical thinking process. You must Challenge what you think you know…solicit other views and ideas. Create an environment for questioning and respectful debate focused on Specificity in content for credibility of context. Concentrate on objective perspectives and evaluations over subjective feelings and thoughts, using a fact driven process. Multiple perspectives filtered through objective analysis and pragmatic evaluation promote more accurate interpretations and support sound conclusions.

We measure what is deemed reasonable by analyzing and evaluating what we know at the time. Critical thinking is a “skillful” responsible thinking that is conducive to good judgement because it is sensitive to context, relies on criteria and is self-correcting.  

The same content may have a totally different meaning (or function), if it is put in a different context. This difference of meaning, function or process is closely related to the concepts of the totality of the facts and circumstances in each situation, issue, incident or event. The same features can have a totally different function or meaning, depending on which logical type they are situated in. Interpretation may result in objective characteristics or subjective feelings or both.

Context is a critical component in decision making, one remaining adaptable to the facts and circumstances as they evolve is crucial to successful results. The key is the contextual understanding to be able to frame thoughtful questions to learn more.

**The third component is THE STEERING, Interactions and relationships:**

Leaders must understand the value of ego-transcendence, where working towards a higher purpose in self-sacrificing mindset is critical to leadership and competence. When you are self-confident but not self-absorbed you have the power and ability to gain the influence to do anything. Great leaders are as much concerned about someone else’s situation as they are about their own situation. When subordinates perceive their leaders with a sincere organizational focus versus manipulative self-serving focus such promotes credibility.

Modern police leadership must embrace the mindset and be dedicated to the tenets of servant leadership. This leadership sets aside one’s self-interest to altruistically work for the benefit of their followers, and the communities in which they operate.

A hallmark of servant leadership is the investment a leader makes in the professional growth and development of their subordinates, provide supporting support as a role model, and involving their people in the decision-making matrix while maintaining an open process of feedback and evaluation.

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Research findings demonstrate that servant leadership enhances the quality of their relationship with their supervisor, in addition, servant leadership leads followers to engage in greater discretionary behaviors that benefit the organization.\textsuperscript{12}

The way we see, describe and evaluate people is tremendously important in today’s world. Our assessment and appraisal of a person has a direct result regarding how we treat them. Our interactions, exposures and vulnerabilities all factor into the dynamic equation of relationship. The influences and the nature and strength of the relationship that leaders develop with their subordinates. Treatment is essential to a judgement of trust. The perception of fairness or unfairness shape trust.

The fair exercise of authority by a leader is at the center of the perspective of legitimacy and trust. Trust becomes as a pathway to travel and prism to see through in one’s analyzation and evaluation of fairness.

Justice perceptions are important inputs into employees’ judgments of the quality of their exchange relationships with their supervisors and organizations.\textsuperscript{13} A culture of organizational justice solidifies when leader’s treat everyone with dignity and respect. Provide an opportunity for people to express their concerns, ideas or opinions, can comfortably explain their decision-making process while being open and transparent. Demonstrating loyalty to their ethical compass toward the true North and trusted to do what is appropriate under the conditions and circumstances.

When an organization has a supportive internal climate, workers internalize organizational values and are subsequently more motivated to comport themselves in ways that are in accordance with the overall ethos of the organization.\textsuperscript{14}

Police supervisors who use organizational justice as a guiding managerial philosophy are more likely to shield their officers from the negative work-related outcomes that can follow recent Ferguson-type publicity.

Supervisors should be fair, objective, honest, and respectful when dealing with their subordinates in order to communicate that the agency has their back even when it may appear the community does not.\textsuperscript{15}


Law enforcement officers who believe their supervisors are organizationally fair are more satisfied with their jobs, more confident in their authority, and more likely to use procedural justice themselves in their encounters with others. Further research has found that organizational justice appears to be more salient to officers facing uncertainty because supervisor fairness provides cues that the agency has their best interests in mind and will support them in the future.\textsuperscript{16}

**The necessity of the model in contemporary police leadership**

Leadership has a considerable impact on the performance and success of an organization, how the organization gets things done, the culture of the organization, and the quality of services the organization provides.\textsuperscript{17}

The organizational environment creates the work unit climate that evolves into workplace culture. Leaders influence this cultural phenomenon through creating and sustaining shared beliefs, values, policies, and practices. Culture describes the normal and accepted influences that guide and direct how people perceive, think, and shape and drive behavior and conduct.

D.D. Warrick says it best, “Cultures are like precious and prized treasures when they are strong, healthy, and driving the right behaviors. They are among the greatest assets an organization can have. However, they are vulnerable assets that can be damaged or lost if leaders are not aware of their value and are not keeping watch over possible culture-changing practices, attitudes, threats, or events.”\textsuperscript{18}

This model of leadership can serve as a framework to build the structure to secure a professional and healthy workplace culture within the organization, capable for the successful navigation through the complex, dynamic and often turbulent times we inherit in our roles and responsibilities as law enforcement leaders.

