Stress in Law Enforcement: How Do We Keep Officers Motivated?

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Stress in Law Enforcement: How Do We Keep Officers Motivated?

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Abstract
Law enforcement is an extremely stressful career, requiring the right person equipped with the tools and ambition to take on the role of police officer effectively. Stress has a correlation with motivation, which is an important issue for law enforcement administration. How an officer feels about their career is directly related to the service quality they provide to the community they serve. Therefore, administration is tasked with the job of identifying what motivates officers to ensure they can complete tasks effectively and efficiently. This research demonstrates that programs and activities implemented by administrators reveals whether retaining officers by reducing burnout and turnover is a priority.

Stressors in Law Enforcement

• If officers are fatigued, it is difficult to do their job to the best of their ability and it can become dangerous for the officers and the general public. Identifying the reasons behind the development of sleep deprivation on the job will be beneficial to administrators so that they know how to reduce the likelihood of sleep deprivation as a result of the job (Senjo, 2011).
• Burnout affects the motivation level an officer possesses to do their job, therefore if burnout is present, an officer is less likely to perform at a high level (Euwema, Kop, & Bakker, 2004).
• When supervisors fail to communicate their expectations and objectives clearly, it may create a negative emotional attitude that may be difficult to change, decreasing officer motivation and negatively affecting job performance (Allen & Sawhney, 2019).
• Some officers consider their work highly stressful because they remain distrustful and disrespectful of the community (Anshel, 2000). A nonexistent or negative relationship with the community results in the community being less likely to come forward when crime takes place, and mistrust in law enforcement to come to the community’s aid.
• The less control employees have over job responsibilities and the outcome of their efforts, the more stress they are likely to experience (Stinchcombe 2004). Knowing that a person has done all that they can do to help, and there is any degree of uncertainty in that statement, the less comfort there is that a person did everything they could to help a situation.

Sources of Police Stress

Typology (Carter 1994)
1. Life threatening – potential & perception of injury & death
2. Social isolation
3. Organizational – formal & informal
4. Functional – related to performance of assigned duties
5. Personal – origins in off-duty life
6. Physiological – changes in physiology & health
7. Psychological – (could include most of the above)

Figure 1: Sources of police stress. From https://www.slideshare.net/CBiancullio/3-police-human-resources-49

Coping with Stress

Healthy coping mechanisms by police officers vary.
• Developing habits such as exercising, reaching out to a therapist or counselor about issues that take place, finding a hobby, etc. are effective outlets for managing officer stress.
• Unhealthy responses to stress include drinking.
• Domestic violence is also known to be common among police officers be (Anshel, 2000).

Enhancing Motivation

Administrators have an important role in motivating officers.
• The desire to ensure justice, crime fighting, and thrill seeking motivate individuals to pursue law enforcement careers; however, these activities are seldom a normal part of policing (Sollund, 2008).
• Actual experience of the job as a law enforcement officer is more of an accurate motivation than what is perceived to be the job of law enforcement.

Solutions

Police agencies need to be redesigned into learning organizations to keep officers motivated. Learning organizations:
• value open communication and cooperation,
• engages everyone in identifying and solving problems,
• promote employee and customer participation (Allen & Sawhney, 2019),
• improve the delivery of police services (Ford, 2007),
• include programs to identify what stresses officers on the job, which will promote so healthy outlets to manage stress and maintain balance,
• assess recruits prior to hire to identify what motivates them.

Figure 2: The psychology of motivation. From Brewminate.com

Discussion

Stressors in law enforcement can taint to quality of service an officer provides. The motivation police officers possess to do their job are activities and programs that can be implemented by administration that help address and combat stressors.

The recruitment, hiring, and retaining of quality officers is one of the main objectives of law enforcement administration. While administration cannot prevent officers from experiencing stress, they can be pro-active to ensure that officers have access to programs to effectively manage stress.

Having insight on what keeps officers on the job and encourages them to provide quality service to the community is important to the success of a police department. It also ensures that administrators have high priority over the safety of the public and the best officers are keeping citizens safe.

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