

The challenges of moving into management

What Canadian police really say about moving into management

Part 2
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It's difficult for surveys to penetrate below surface views to understand why respondents believe what they do. Anticipating the problem, this study was designed to build on our previous one by asking Canadian police officers to discuss their views about management.

The sample of interviewees included 50 active police professionals (38 males and 12 females of varying age, years of service and rank, including civilians working in human resources) from 11 police services across eight provinces (none took part in the previous survey).

For study purposes, the ranks of corporal, sergeant and staff sergeant were considered to be the supervisors/middle managers in question as appropriate to each interviewee's particular police service. The major themes running throughout the interview questions were the role and effectiveness of police management/supervision, the promotional process, availability and adequacy of training and recent changes to police management/supervision.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face in the police agency where the subject worked and were voluntary. Interviewees (and their agencies) were promised strict confidentiality and interviews were audio taped and transcribed verbatim so responses could be analyzed. We attempted to extract relevant themes that emerged, taking care to ensure that the concepts developed and illustrations provided typified the most common pattern in responses.

RESULTS

Role of middle management

As in the survey, interviewees believed strongly that middle management plays an



important role in Canadian policing. For example, when asked how important the work of middle managers is to the success of their service, the following response was very typical:

The sergeants are the ones that make the organization click and that's, to me, the most important rank, right from the commissioner on down... because they're out there 24 hours a day, day and night, crappy weather, good weather, whatever the case is, leading the troops, and I stand by that 100 per cent... I don't see that changing (participant g4).

In general, all interviewees viewed middle managers/supervisors as central to the organization, having a huge amount of responsibility, being held accountable for a vast range of actions and activities and playing a significant role in the day-to-day running of the agency as problem solvers, motivators and leaders.

Effectiveness

In line with the survey results, interviewees generally felt managers they've worked for have been generally effective. This despite the fact interviewees spoke of considerable challenges in transitioning from rank and file officer to supervisor. Various types of challenges were spoken of, including:

- Role confusion

You're a constable one day, you get your hooks and the next day you're a supervisor and you're still really feeling that you're amongst your peers (but now) you're now the one that's approving time off, assigning zones or assigning files; nobody really sits you down and says "okay, this is the divide" (participant j5).

- Lack of knowledge

The skill sets that they have (are) as either an investigator or beat officer and then they move to supervisor or a manager and they don't necessarily have those skill sets

(participant e3).

- Micromanaging

Number one thing is quit doing your old job, do your new job... That's the number one thing and we see it all the time, that's exactly what it is. You come and sit in your new chair but you're still going to go out there on the road with the boys, you're still going to take on files because you're not sure if your guys can do it properly and you're still going to do a whole whack of stuff that, as a supervisor, is no longer your problem (participant h2).

There was also a high level of agreement about factors that contribute to the successful transition from a rank and file officer to a manager/supervisor, including the following:

- Knowledge/experience of the position

They all had a good knowledge base, they had worked in several areas... so that definitely helped them because they demonstrated they could do more than one thing (participant b1).

- Motivated/desire to succeed/good attitude

Dedication. I think a general willingness to work at it and to do well... A genuine desire to do well with your squad and to do well in that position. So there's a work ethic there... and I think sometimes... if they can see that you're honestly there to try to serve, you're 90 per cent home (participant f1).

- Communication/interpersonal skills

Excellent communication skills, excellent team building skills, huge feedback... They need to think that their opinion is valued and they can only get that through a feedback mechanism - you're going out there and talking to them (participant c1).

- Respect/credibility

Credibility within the organization helps them from day one. The people who I've seen struggle at the rank of sergeant are people that got promoted that had really crappy

reputations, deserved or not; they struggled and got taken advantage of by their troops (participant f3).

Interviewees could also identify the attributes and/or behaviours of effective supervisors. Again, several themes emerged, including:

- Communication skills

Communication, the power to listen and to engage people that work with you -- and to understand that people don't work for you; my philosophy is people don't work for you, they work with you (participant f5).

- Interpersonal skills

Number one you've got to be a people person, (able) to deal with people on different levels... Keep it personal. I mean, I became a police officer to help people, it's no different than when you're a sergeant. Don't elevate yourself to a level where you think you're better than those people (participant d2).

- High integrity

Your behaviour has to instill respect because the whole rank and file has to respect the position and it's a lot easier to respect the position if you respect the person in the position (participant i1).

- Strong decision making skills

You can't have things just piling up on desks. The work has to keep moving, the decision has to be there and you have to put out the direction you want your team to go in (participant h1).

- Good policing knowledge

You certainly have to have a certain amount of job knowledge. The more across

what we call the three branches of the service the better; that would be administrative, investigative and operational (participant c1).

Interviewees were also able to identify reasons for difficult transitions from rank and file policing to middle management. According to the interviewees, several factors could explain difficult transitions, including:

- Poor communication skills

Poor communicators... if they're not communicating their vision, no one has a clue what they're up to (participant c1).

- Lack of training/experience

Lack of preparation on their part in terms of knowing you're going to a certain position and not bothering to figure out what goes on there before you get there (participant f2).

- Overly authoritative

One went with a totally autocratic leadership style -- "my way or the highway" (participant b1).

- Inability to accept/make changes

I think that they have to be willing to accept change, to change their methods... I find in the policing industry we don't adapt to change very well. We like doing things the same way, we get set in our methods and I think you need that quality to say, well, we need to do this a different way (participant b2).

- Lack of motivation/promoted for the wrong reasons

I think part of the negative thing is the sense of entitlement. There are some people who get promoted who think "well I've paid my dues, therefore now it's my turn to sit at this desk and you guys go out there and do the

work (participant c2).

- Inability to make decisions

How to put this politically correct -- he's just as dumb as a post, can't make a decision to save his life. I swear to God it probably takes him a half hour to figure out which sock to put on first in the morning (participant b1).

Promotional process for middle management positions

Unlike the survey results, most interviewees did not voice serious concerns about promotions. Indeed, the majority believed current promotion practices were reasonably effective at identifying officers who are ready and able to assume new and greater responsibilities. For those that did voice problems, most indicated that promotional practices were improving:

At the end of the day I think there's less of this "how the hell did he or she make it?" ... I think people are qualified and are recognized as being qualified and I would hope that there's a recognition out there, that if you spoke to someone genuinely and privately, they would acknowledge that there's integrity in the system. I also believe that there's no perfect system (participant b4).

Many other interviewees recognized that there are inherent problems with promotional practices, but appeared to have a relatively positive view about their agency's promotional process:

It works relatively well. I'll go back and qualify that because you can never take the human aspect out of promotions, you know "I know this guy, he's a good guy, I like him,

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he's worked for me before, I want this guy to get bumped (participant a4).

Despite the fact the majority viewed the promotional process in a relatively positive light, some still held very negative views about the process:

The promotional process does not identify those people who are the informal leaders on a platoon. The ability to write an exam and do an oral interview is more important than being a leader (participant d2).

Adequacy of training

A number of results emerged from the interviews about adequacy of training for middle managers that sat nicely with the survey results. For example, interviewees were unanimous in their view that training was very important. In fact, they highlighted a wide variety of training approaches when asked how the challenges of the new position could be overcome, including:

• Formal training

We don't really prepare people, I don't think, in advance of the position, even in terms of the formal training... we don't go for supervisory training until after we're actually in a position (participant b3).

• Mentorship

We should have a mentorship program... and when I say mentorship, I mean that is your transitional period where you are actually linked up with a supervisor and learn the supervisory role (participant a2).

• More thorough orientation

As far as I'm concerned, and not just here, everybody who applied... should be taken to a room and told: "boom, this is going to happen to you, boom, this is what we expect from you"... before they want to jump in that ring so they can't say, "well I didn't know about that (participant j3).

There was also some concern raised about various aspects of training. For example, in line with the survey results, most interviewees believed pre-promotion training was inadequate:

So the actual education doesn't happen until you're in that position and that's been a major criticism, like "give me some training before I'm assigned to this unit, I want it before I go in." It doesn't happen that way because it's not always last-minute but... you get assigned to that position and then the training happens. We just need a stronger orientation program (participant d1).

In terms of long-term mentoring and/or training, interviewees varied in their views as to whether this was formally available and if so, whether it was adequate. Some were clearly aware of a mentorship program being offered in their agency:

The third part of the module training system is a mentorship component involving a constable being mentored by an experienced sergeant in the duties and responsibilities of being a sergeant. Typically the mentoring is several weeks to a month in duration and concludes with an evaluation of the constable by a sergeant other than the one who was doing the mentoring (participant f5).

On the other hand, many interviewees indicated that no long-term training/mentoring was in place within their agency and if it was

available, it was only informal:

Not formally, not specifically, it would be on an ad hoc sort of basis so, depending on maybe if I was a new sergeant on a particular patrol section, I might find that my staff sergeant was a little more attentive or a little more interested in my development as a sergeant (participant b3).

Having expressed these views, a number of interviewees also indicated that the situation was improving.

Not surprisingly, given the concerns about promotions and training, some did not believe their agency was currently effective at developing the full potential of its officers, which is similar to what was found amongst our previous survey respondents. However, many officers believed the opposite, either feeling that there was improvement in this regard or that their agency was developing the full potential of its officers:

I would say in the last couple of years we have made a conscious effort to identify the fact that we need to develop them. It's improving (participant c4).

Nearly all interviewees indicated that training is a crucial part of allowing officers to reach their full potential. In addition, a number of interviewees indicated that officers would be more likely to reach their full potential if more effort was made to understand officers. For example:

I think if we had a better understanding of people's strengths and personality traits and matching those strengths and personality traits to actual jobs and competencies, you'd get a lot more bang for your buck (participant g2).

The changing face of middle management

Finally, the interviewees were asked if they think the job requirements and/or role expectations of middle managers will change and, if so, how. The majority do see change ahead and think it will likely make the police middle manager job even more challenging than it already is. In terms of how the job will change, a variety of themes emerged, including:

• More administrative duties

I think the staff sergeant's going to become more of an administrator and I think the sergeants are going to become more administrators (participant a3).

• Younger demographic

Younger people, changing demographics. As the younger generation, they're getting on, when they get to five years. They want things (and) there aren't opportunities for them. I think that's going to be a very tough role as a supervisor to motivate those people who want to get ahead and there's just not the capacity for them to get the things they want to get ahead (participant g2).

• More workload

A lot of stuff's coming down to the mid-managers. I think it's because they're so bloody understaffed up there. They are seconding our guys to do things that really a senior manager should be doing (participant c3).

• More accountability/liability

More accountability to the community, doing more work with fewer resources (participant k4).

Discussion

Currently, Canadian police organizations are contending with a number of pressures (e.g., large-scale retirement of senior officers) that reinforce the need for management and supervision of the highest calibre. The next five years will see an unprecedented influx of new police officers and newly-promoted officers into middle management roles. We believe the current study can help inform Canadian police agencies during this challenging transition period. The following implications may be particularly important:

1. As with our survey respondents, the interviewees believed strongly that middle management is a vital part of any Canadian police organization, both in day-to-day operation of the agency and in implementing long-term organizational change. As one put it, "That's your meat and potatoes, my friend."

2. The challenges faced by middle managers spoken about also matched the sorts of mistakes that our survey respondents said they had personally witnessed in new managers. The "big three" challenges faced by middle managers, interviewees said, were role confusion, lack of relevant knowledge related to the new management role and a tendency to micromanage.

3. As with survey respondents, interviewees appeared to have little difficulty in describing the characteristics of good managers/supervisors. The ideal: (a) understand specific job expectations before they get there; (b) have previous police experience to perform their new jobs well; (c) are motivated to succeed and sought promotion "for the right reasons;" (d) are perceived by others to have a good attitude toward their jobs and subordinates; (e) possess a high level of integrity; (f) are viewed as credible by upper management and respected by their subordinates; (g) are good communicators, both in listening and giving clear commands; (h) are interpersonally skilled and can interact comfortably with police officers of various ranks, including previous peers; (i) can make good decisions quickly, including appropriate delegation; (j) resist the temptation to micromanage; and (k) can embrace and adapt to change.

4. While the survey respondents voiced some concern about management promotions, the majority view was relatively positive. While some felt their agency's promotional practices would be unable to identify people willing and able to take on management/supervision responsibilities, this view was very rare. Most felt that current promotional practices were improving and had a role to play in selecting effective managers/supervisors.

In an attempt to understand the differences between the survey respondents and interviewees, it is noteworthy that a larger proportion of the interview sample consisted of higher ranking police officers, including current police managers and individuals with some potential stake in current promotion practices (e.g., human resource staff, who may have played a role in designing the promotion process). Given this, it is perhaps unsurprising that interviewees generally felt more positive about the promotion process than the survey respondents (they, after all, were successfully promoted into management positions).

5. The interviewees suggested several ways

promotions could be improved to enhance the integrity of the process: (a) better connections could be formed between police officer appraisals (e.g., annual performance reviews) and the promotion process; (b) reduce the weight put on promotion exams, as suitable candidates sometimes fail to score high enough and these exams are often viewed as less important than other criteria such as signs of leadership ability; (c) more focus on assigning promoted individuals to the right positions where their strengths can be capitalized upon; (d) early career “pathing” should be considered as a way of ensuring that suitable officers are selected for management positions and that they are prepared for the job; and (e) upper management needs to be more continually aware about which officers are showing signs of leadership (e.g., volunteering for extra duties).

6. Like the survey respondents, lack of pre-promotion preparation was a concern for the interviewees, as was inadequate long-term training and mentoring. Most interviewees indicated that they felt under prepared going into their new management roles and commented that, after being promoted, long-term training and/or mentorship opportunities were only available informally and then only if they took the initiative to seek out these opportunities.

7. When asked to list the criteria that characterize effective managers/supervisors, interviewees and survey respondents did not list irreversible personal characteristics or rigid personality traits, but rather specific skills sets (e.g., communication skills) or areas of knowledge (e.g., expectations of the new position) that can potentially be altered through appropriate training.

8. Despite the fact the middle management/police supervisor role is already exceedingly complex, it seems it is becoming even more challenging. The interviewees believed that the next five year will see middle managers experience an even greater workload than

they already do, with more administrative duties and a greater level of accountability. The interviewees also appreciated that changing demographics in Canadian policing will also result in distinct challenges for middle managers and/or police supervisors (e.g., higher expectations on the part of recruits for a productive and fulfilling career).

Conclusion

The interview results must be interpreted with an appropriate amount of caution and cannot necessarily be generalized to police officers and agencies not sampled in the current study. We believe the results represent an important step forward in developing an understanding of issues surrounding middle management/police supervision. This is especially true when the current results are viewed in combination with the previous survey results.

We believe the results emphasize the importance of middle management in Canadian policing and suggest ways of ensuring that the right people are selected for these positions and trained in such a way that they can reach their full potential.

In our view, steps taken to improve the quality of middle managers, whether through improved promotional systems or more credible leadership and management training, will necessarily and positively influence the long-term health and viability of police organizations throughout Canada.

James Hogan is a sergeant with the Toronto Police Service (TPS). Craig Bennell and Alyssa Taylor are with Carleton University. The research presented was made possible through a scholarship to Hogan and a contract to Bennell from the Canadian Police College (CPC). The authors thank Catherine Lavergne of the CPC for her assistance and dedication to this project. The views expressed are those of the authors and do not necessarily represent the TPS or CPC. Contact Sgt. James Hogan at james.hogan@torontopolice.on.ca to comment or for more information.

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