



## Fair Leadership Matters

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June, 2018

**“Procedural justice” is a popular term today. This term generally means fairness and respect in processes that resolve disputes or allocate resources.** Many use the term when discussing police-community relations, arguing that law enforcement officers must act in a procedurally just manner (showing professionalism and respect) when interacting with the public in order to have the support of the public. Whether or not he or she received a traffic citation does not matter much to the citizen if the officer making the stop profanely insulted the citizen. The substantive outcome may be a verbal warning, but the manner in which it was administered (the procedure) will be viewed as unjust if it was blatantly disrespectful.

**The idea of procedural justice can also be applied to the workplace. Research has revealed that when supervisors and managers within an organization are perceived to be acting in an unfair or disrespectful manner toward their employees, workplace performance suffers.** Law enforcement organizations are no exception when it comes to procedural justice.

### The Effects of Organizational Fairness in Policing

**One study, involving 292 patrol officers from eleven police departments in Arizona, revealed that officer perceptions of supervisor support and organizational fairness was the strongest predictor of organizational commitment.<sup>1</sup> It was also one of several predictors of officer job satisfaction.<sup>2</sup> The more that the officers perceived they were treated fairly, the more likely the officers were to speak positively about their organizations and plan to stay until retirement.**

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<sup>1</sup> Johnson, R. R. (2015). Supervisor feedback, perceived organizational support, and organizational commitment among police officers. *Crime and Delinquency*, 61(9), 1155-1180.

<sup>2</sup> Johnson, R. R. (2012). Police officer job satisfaction: a multidimensional analysis. *Police Quarterly*, 15(2), 157-176.

**In a national study of 843 law enforcement officers, it was revealed that officer anxiety, depression, and emotional exhaustion from their work experiences was significantly reduced if the officers reported that their leaders ran the organization in a fair manner and treated them with respect.** Even the stress from violent assaults on officers was lessened if the officer perceived his or her leaders were fair and just, while officers who worked for leaders who were unfair and disrespectful had high levels of depression and anxiety.<sup>3</sup>

A study of law enforcement officers from the Midwest revealed that the more these officers trusted their supervisors, the greater trust they also had in the public. **When officers perceived their supervisors treated them poorly, this negativity and lack of trust influenced their interactions with citizens.**<sup>4</sup> Yet another large study, this time of 590 patrol officers, revealed that the strongest predictor of officer support for fair treatment of the public was whether or not the officers felt their own bosses treated them fairly. Officers who believed their bosses were fair and respectful were more likely to treat members of the public with respect and less likely to accumulate citizen complaints.<sup>5</sup>

Finally, a study of 868 federal law enforcement officers revealed that supervisor fairness had its greatest impact when officers dealt with situations of uncertainty.<sup>6</sup> For example, because of the incredible variety of situations patrol officers encounter, and the fact it is often difficult to proscribe one exactly right way to handle many of these situations, patrol officers deal with far more uncertainty in their jobs than do officers assigned to training or other administrative tasks. A lack of fairness in managing officers in high uncertainty jobs, such as patrol officers or SWAT, has the greatest damage on officer morale, job satisfaction, mental health, and job performance.

### **What Does Fairness Mean?**

Some might ask, “What do you mean when you say supervisors are fair or unfair?” Here is how the research mentioned above measured fairness. **Basically, supervisors are perceived as being fair if officers tended to agree with these statements:**

- Citizen complaints are handled fairly on my department.
- **The majority of promotions and special assignments on my department are based on merit.**
- **When an officer is the focus on an internal affairs investigation on my department, he or she will be treated fairly.**

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<sup>3</sup> Santa Maria, A., Worfel, F., Wolter, C., Gusy, B., Rotter, M., Stark, S., Kleiber, D., & Renneberg, B. (2018). The role of job demands and job resources in the development of emotional exhaustion, depression, and anxiety, among police officers. *Police Quarterly*, 21(1), 109-134.

<sup>4</sup> Carr, J. D., & Maxwell, S. R. (2018). Police officers' perceptions of organizational justice and their trust in the public. *Police Practice and Research*, 19(4), 365-379.

<sup>5</sup> Sun, I. Y., Wu, Y., Van Craen, M., & Hsu, K. K. (2018). Internal procedural justice, moral alignment, and external procedural justice in democratic policing. *Police Quarterly*, 32(3), 287-300.

<sup>6</sup> Wolfe, S. E., Rojek, J., Manjarrez, V. M., & Rojek, A. (2018). Why does organizational justice matter? Uncertainty management among law enforcement officers. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 54, 20-29.

- The leader of our team supports us.
- My employer shares my same values, goals, and quality standards.
- My supervisor cares about my career development opportunities within this agency.
- **Supervisors on my department are considerate of their officers.**
- **My supervisor provides clarity in goals and role expectations.**
- **My supervisor regularly provides information and feedback on my job performance.**
- **My superior acknowledges it when I perform well at my work.**

Supervisors are also perceived as being fair if officers tend to disagree, or strongly disagree, with these statements:

- I do not identify with the values of this police department's leadership.
- The handling of citizen complaints on my department is the result of administrators and supervisors trying to appease the public rather than treating officers fairly.
- The majority of promotions or special assignments on my department depend on who you know rather than merit.
- When an officer is the focus on an internal affairs investigation on my department, the officer is usually presumed guilty even when it can be proven the officer was innocent.

**How would the officers on your department answer these questions? Every workplace usually has a few malcontented employees who gripe and display workplace negativity no matter how fairly they are treated. Concern should arise, however, when a majority (or a substantial minority) of your employees do not perceive the organization is being led fairly. Morale will plummet, good people will leave, depression and suicide risk will increase, and employee hostility will leak out into officer-citizen interactions on the street.**

### The Bad News

The bad news is that a substantial percentage of law enforcement officers do not perceive that they are being treated fairly by their supervisors or organizations. Many studies, ranging from the 1970s to the present, have consistently revealed a sizeable minority of law enforcement officers in the U.S. perceive they have been treated disrespectfully or unfairly by their supervisor and their employing agency.<sup>7</sup> For example, in a study of law enforcement officers from multiple agencies in the Phoenix area, a full third of patrol officers did not perceive they were treated fairly by their bosses and organizations.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Barker, J. C. (1999). *Danger, Duty, and Disillusion: The Worldview of the Los Angeles Police Officers*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland; Blum, L. N. (2000). *Force Under Pressure: How Cops Live and Why They Die*. New York, NY: Lantern; Crank, J. P. (1998). *Understanding Police Culture*. Cincinnati, OH: Anderson; Gilmartin, K. M. (2002). *Emotional Survival for Law Enforcement*. Phoenix, AZ: E-S Publishing; Reynolds, P. D., Fitzgerald, B. A. & Hicks, J. (2018). The expendables: a qualitative study of police officers' responses to organizational injustice. *Police Quarterly*, 32(3).

<sup>8</sup> Johnson (2015).

Some of the blame for this can be placed on officers over-investing in their careers and the experience of hyper-vigilance, as veteran officer and psychologist Kevin Gilmartin often notes.<sup>9</sup> Many officers place too much emphasis on their careers as their primary source of personal identity and significance, so that when they do not get the assignment they feel they deserved, they perceive it as a personal attack and a devaluation of their human worth. Because of the hyper-vigilance that comes from always being on guard against an attack, many officers also tend to view most in their lives with suspicion and cynicism. When they do not get picked for an assignment, or even if they do not get the day off they requested, there is a tendency to want to perceive these decisions as personal attacks or part of a wider conspiracy.<sup>10</sup>

Nevertheless, **the few existing studies on the subject have consistently revealed that law enforcement agencies often treat employees unfairly. Four different studies in the U.S. have demonstrated that the severity of disciplinary punishments officers receive is generally unrelated to the seriousness of their offense or their past disciplinary record – having more to do with internal politics and personal friendships with those in command.**<sup>11</sup> These studies have consistently shown two officers who have committed the same type of offense, and share similar past disciplinary records, often receive very different levels of punishment. In fact, the most common reason given by grievance arbitrators for overturning a police officer's suspension or termination is that other officers have committed the same misconduct and received much less severe discipline.<sup>12</sup> So in addition to the problems over-investment and hyper-vigilance, there is also evidence of some truly unfair leadership in many agencies.

### Conclusion

Leading your organization with fairness and respect for your employees is crucial to the operations of your organization. **Treating your people with fairness and respect will not only improve their individual job satisfaction, it will improve their mental health, help retain good people, and improve employee attitudes toward members of the public.** Fair and respectful treatment within the organization will seep out into fair and respectful treatment of

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<sup>9</sup> Gilmartin (2002).

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Harris, C. J., & Worden, R. E. (2014). The effects of sanctions on police misconduct. *Crime and Delinquency*, 60(8), 1258-1288; Reynolds, P., & Hicks, J. (2015). There is no justice in a police department: a phenomenological study of police experiences. *Police Practice and Research*, 16(6), 469-484; Shane, J. M. (2012). Police employee disciplinary matrix: an emerging concept. *Police Quarterly*, 15(1), 62-91; Solomon, S., and Johnson, R. R. (2013). Subsequent arrests of previously arrested officers: the influence of continued employment in policing. *Law Enforcement Executive Forum*, 14(2), 24-34.

<sup>12</sup> Blancero, D., & Bohlander, G. W. (1995). Minimizing arbitration "reversals" in discipline and discharge cases. *Labor Law Journal*, 46(10), 616-621; Bohlander, G. W., & Blancero, D. (1996). A study of reversal determinants in discipline and discharge arbitration awards: the impact of just cause standards. *Labor Studies Journal*, 21(3), 3-19; LaVan, H. (2007). Arbitration of discipline in the public sector: case characteristics and party behaviors predicting case outcomes. *Journal of Collective Negotiations*, 31(3), 199-214.

citizens on the street by your officers, thus reducing citizen complaints and improving public perceptions of the police.

There is a great deal of discussion around the concept of procedural justice in dealing with the public and that conversation is undoubtedly an important. **But how often do we consider procedural justice when it comes to the work lives of our own officers? The available evidence indicates that a perceived lack of fairness in police leadership among officers is a problem that should be addressed for the sake of law enforcement agencies and the communities they serve.**