

Traits that make good police leaders: identify leadership potential during recruit selection

Abstract

Police recruit selection is an important process. Few agency cycles for selection look for candidate with attributes that seek the potential of leadership. Generally, selection cycles use a screening out process by eliminating those applicants that do not pass a specific selection phase and are not allowed to move to the next phase of evaluation. This article is about the inclusion of leadership potential when screening applicants. This article also addresses quality leadership traits and how they differ from leadership styles. The instrument included four leadership questions asking about potential for future leadership and how important were certain characteristics. Police chiefs who were members of the state police chief associations of their respective states were asked their opinions on the importance of the recruits having the following attributes of leadership: potential, high school and college grades, hobbies and interests, and reading material. How strongly did they believe these attributes should be considered in the selection process for new police recruits. A brief review of the literature illustrates some of the contemporary and classic traits of good leadership. This article also illustrates differences between leadership traits and styles.

Keywords: leadership traits, police selection, police recruits, leadership potential, leaders, leadership

Volume 7 Issue 4 - 2019

Richard H Martin

Department of Leadership Studies, Mercer University, USA

Correspondence: Richard H Martin, Professor of Criminal Justice, Dept. of Leadership Studies, Mercer University, 419-348-4201, 25230 Heathrow St. Toney, AL 35773, USA, Email drdickmartin@gmail.com

Received: July 23, 2019 | **Published:** August 20, 2019

Perspective

Traits that make good police leaders: identify leadership potential during recruit selection

The concept of leadership has several definitions. One of the better definitions is by John Maxwell (as cited in McNamara,¹ who states that a transformational leader is defined as one who knows the way, goes the way, and shows the way. Since there are over 88 theories of leadership an inclusive consolidated leadership theory is near impossible. Calder in 1977 mentioned a stand out theory named the attribution theory of leadership. The theory is that whatever takes place in the agency it is attributed to either the prevention or enhancement of mandatory goals.² Attribution is used to explain the bases of behavior and performance. The leadership of the chief deserves a credit for the performance of an agency's personnel. Officers' good or bad performance is based on the leadership of the chief. Others use the attribution theory to explain accomplishments. Weiner, according to Eduardo et al.,² claims that the most significant elements affecting attributions toward goal attainment are ability, effort, task difficulty, and luck.

Subsequently, when an agency fails to achieve fixed upon goals, the chief is at fault, not the staff or officers.² Most leaders within the ranks are the first line supervisors. First line supervisors are in a position to practice leadership, but without the appropriate traits, they are just in leader position without the leadership. Attribution may be deserved of the chief, but first-line supervisors will be eventually be blamed. "One of the most important roles of a first line supervisor is to act as a mentor. Supervisors should ensure that officers understand and carry out the vision of the agency and inspire their teams".³ The leadership trait of inspiration is appropriate as a mentor to younger or inexperienced officers (Economy, 2019). Police supervisors should have the aptitude and commitment to effect the obligation to, and skill, with which first responders carry out the goals of the agency.

First line supervisors are a critical link between the top leadership of the agency and first responders. They are also responsible for fostering and sustaining an atmosphere that supports knowledge and growth of officers.³ Picking the right supervisor should begin during recruit selection.

Leadership traits and skills

The concept of management usually refers to the functions needed to keep an organization operative. But, for an agency to stay healthy, their leaders must be knowledgeable in fundamental skills of management as well as leadership. For example, it is beneficial to have the knowledge and skills to help prevent crisis situations in a community and agency. Economy⁴ separates the concepts of skills from traits. His fundamental traits will be discussed later. The fundamental leadership skills Economy⁴ writes about include problem solving, making good decisions, planning, delegation, communications, and self-management. These skills are essential in leadership and are the foundation for superior practices in management.

Purpose

The purpose of this article is to influence those involved in determining the selection criteria for police recruits to consider whether potential leadership qualities are attributes that should be considered during the police recruit selection process. Many of these recruits will become first-line supervisors in the near future.

Literature review

Just as there are numerous definitions of leadership, there at least 88 theories of traits. What are leadership traits? There are at least 88 desired traits of leaders that have been recorded in the literature. This paper addresses some of the more commonly desired trait. Although traits are sometimes referred to as styles, they are clearly two separate concepts. There are numerous styles of leadership. Legacee,⁶ states

there are at least 18 different leadership styles. Styles are not static as traits are, they situational and require flexibility to meet the situation are. Therefore changes in the leader's style is acceptable.⁶ For example, an emergency requires a specific style much different than a training style. Styles are situation centered, whereas traits are an unchanging personality feature that is delivered in many different situations. A person with the right leadership unchanging traits provides the perception of a true leader, not just because the person is at the head of the agency or organization.

Preferred leadership definitions

According to Schwartz, a leader is one who influences followers to focus on working toward the organization's mission and goals causing the followers to expend energy toward achieving organizational goals.⁷ Winston and Patterson in 2006⁷ maintained that leaders use the traits of critical thinking, intuition, persuasion, and interpersonal communication to move the followers to envision the future condition of the organization as a desirable state worth requiring individual and communal assets toward achievement.⁷ Schwartz cited an example of a great leader as Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin. Begin is a leader with a personality that includes expressive rhetoric, strong self-assurance and communication skills, very pragmatic, and his leadership was heightened by his charisma as evident in his speeches and his oratory capability, all traits of good transformational leadership.⁷

Universal list of leadership traits

A leader before the 1980s was characterized as one who was somewhat taller and a little bit brighter than subordinates.⁸ Real leadership, however, comes from those who become leaders of an organization because of hard work, intelligence, ambition, political skill, and luck. But, many become leaders because of seniority in the organization, not always the best reason for the assuming the position.⁸ Snead⁹ states that a trait is mental quality that can endure a lifetime. An exact list of leadership traits is difficult because of variations of culture. Within a culture, a suitable trait varies on the environment. Hoppe¹⁰ believes five of the most important traits are honesty (integrity), forward-looking (vision), competent (knowledgeable), inspiring (motivator), and intelligence (IQ).

The first four traits can be gained through education and experience, but intelligence (IQ) is intrinsic and alteration is doubtful, and you cannot become more intelligent by your own efforts.¹⁰ In other words, a person can become more knowledgeable, but not more intelligent according to Hoppe. Leadership is a means when the attention is on methods and performances, but when the attention is on goals, objectives, and outcomes, it is an end.¹⁰ A frequent misconception about leadership traits is that one size fits all and is appropriate for all circumstances. For example, lying is not always a violation of integrity when it is to prevent harm to another.¹⁰ Drucker stated in 1996, as cited by Mango¹¹ that even some leaders without knowledge of leadership skills can make a difference in people's lives. But, according to Mango, when leadership lacks an impact of people's lives, the actions amount to nothing.¹¹ Effective leadership is about results. It is not about speeches, popularity or having certain characteristics. Leadership is a commitment of delivering results. Just as organizations have a purpose, a leader should have a purpose; leaders desire is to make a difference.

A leader without a purpose is a leader without an impact. A purpose is characterized as the engine of direction. Activities involved in the purpose serve as the strategy, strategy serves the vision of what

individuals and organizations want to be, and vision serves the purpose, that is, the reason for an individual's or organizations' existence. Vision is part of the larger leadership process of purpose. Purpose is the single most important factor of successful companies and is central to any meaningful organization. The purpose is equivalent to a goal and is necessary for organizational development. When there is no purpose within an organization, nothing will change.¹¹ A clear sense of purpose is a common denominator among leaders that have a positive impact on their respective organizations. Transformational leaders inspire change to the organization by providing a sense of purpose among the employees. The purpose inspires action and is the basis for problem solving.¹¹ Moral convictions lend support to the purpose and have three characteristics. The first is breadth, meaning all people should believe in similar principles regardless of culture and context. The second moral conviction is all experiences, good and bad, are as discernable as it is to easily differentiate day from night.

The third is emotions have an intense conviction toward an activity.¹¹ Northouse argued the power of a leader's position influences others to achieve set goals, while others state that power alone and not the position is the ability to influence, and that leaders need the power in order to influence others.¹² There is a problem of determining the amount of power acceptable for ethical and effective direction. Northouse¹² believes the power required to influence must go beyond authority, and that moral authority leaders are followed because of what they represent, not because of their power. Drucker, as cited by Northouse,¹² stated in 2004 that successful leaders first identify a project and then determine the person to complete it, irrespective of who is better qualified to complete the project. Another important leadership trait is commitment. Committed leaders are dedicated to the option; they are dependable and have a level of stubbornness in their pursuit to impact lives. Courage is an action trait divided into four different qualities: trying something never done before, trusting others by their words, telling the truth, and listening to colleagues and subordinates.¹² Economy⁴ recommends nine basic traits of great leaders that define the qualities of outstanding leadership. The nine traits help motivate employees toward high levels of performance.

The first trait is awareness, being knowledgeable by understanding the differences of function between management and employees. Being knowledgeable gives the leader credibility and forms their persona; it is the basis of actions and communication. Knowledge allows leaders to have an objective assessment on what is happening in the organization. The second trait is resolve. The leader is decisive and does not hesitate when making timely decisions that may not please all employees, but is best for the organization. Good leaders know when collaboration is necessary. The third trait is empathy that allows close connections with employees. Good leaders praise employees in public and criticize them in private. Good leaders are always looking for solutions while guiding employees through challenges. Good leaders keep decision-making objective by not making things personal or by assigning blame to individuals when they encounter problems. They focus on moving forward with constructive solutions. Economy's fourth recommended trait is accountability. Good leaders take responsibility by monitoring officer performance toward the effectiveness of organizational policy. The fifth trait recommended by Economy is self-assurance.

The best leaders express contagious confidence. They stand their ground when challenged. They are unwavering in their ideas and strategies because of much hard work, but take responsibility when they are wrong and change direction when necessary. The sixth trait is enthusiasm or optimism that generates energy. Good leaders are

good communicators and show genuine worry for others' wellbeing. They reassure and avoid criticism and pessimism. They work toward consensus and teamwork. The seventh trait is being trustworthy. Strong leaders are considerate and believe that honesty is the foundation of success. They share information and do not attempt spin control. The eighth trait is focus. Good leaders are focused and well organized. They think through various scenarios of their decisions and consider alternatives. They have defined strategies of high performance and contingencies in case changes are needed.

The ninth trait is motivation. They give employees attainable goals with appropriate support and flexibility to reach the goals so employees become the best they can be (Economy, 2019). Accordingly, these nine leadership traits belong to a leader that clearly communicates and motivates personnel to give their best to the organization.⁴ There are three additional traits that should be added to Economy's nine.⁵ The first is commitment which can help the leader gain the respect and infuse energy in team members, which in turn helps them perform better. Motivation becomes more difficult when the employees perceive a lack of commitment. The second is empowerment, i.e., do not micromanage which can cause employees to develop a lack of trust. Micromanaging also diminishes a leader's focus. The third trait, creativity, is also known as having a vision. A good leader must have creative thinking and constant innovation to advance in today's fast-paced world; innovation is what makes a leader and a team stand out. Creative leaders think out of the box to find exceptional ideas and turn those ideas into reality.⁵

Methodology

In the current study, the author wanted to find out from the police chiefs in Texas whether they thought leadership potential should be considered during the selection process of new recruits. There were 374 initial survey invitations sent by email via Survey Monkey to the addresses listed on a list serve of the Texas police chief association membership. Of that number, 110 emails were opened, 200 emails were not opened, 43 emails bounced, and 21 respondents opted out of the survey. The bounced emails were assumed to be the result of agency turnover of chiefs since the purchase of the list nine months prior to beginning the survey. Fourteen days later, 351 email reminders were sent to those that did not complete the survey. There were a total of 15 reminders sent over a six-month period. The total number of chiefs participating in the survey was 110 and the number of returns was 46, almost 42 percent of the chiefs that were willing to participate in the survey. The opinions of Texas police chiefs were asked regarding the importance of leadership potential during police recruit selection included four questions on leadership potential. The four questions asked about of leadership potential, and the effects of school grades, interests and hobbies (all just somewhat important). The fourth question asked whether reading material should be considered, which was rated as not important.

Results

In the survey, four questions concerning leadership potential were asked of the Texas police chiefs who were members of the state of Texas Association of Chiefs of Police. The purpose of the survey questions was to determine the importance levels the chiefs thought about evaluating police candidates for leadership potential during selection. The questions included certain behavioral characteristics that support potential, such as school grades, hobbies and interests, and reading material. In (Table 1), the respondents were asked about the importance of leadership potential of new police candidates.

Table 1 Q1: Is supervisory and leadership potential important in applicant selection?

Answer choices	Responses	
	Percentage	Number
Extremely important	13.04%	6
Very important	34.78%	16
Somewhat important	39.13%	18
Not so important	13.04%	6
Not at all important	0.00%	0
	Answered	46
	Skipped	0

They were asked to select one of five alternatives in a Likert Scale ranging from extremely important to not at all important. The total number of participants in each table was 46 with 100 percent of the participants responding. In (Table 1), the respondents indicated that leadership potential was either *very important* (4%) or *somewhat important* (39%), and only 13 percent indicated extremely important none of the participant respondents thought not at all important and 13 percent thought not so important. In (Table 2), participants were asked whether high school and college grades were an important consideration in determining future leadership potential.

Table 2 Q2. Are an applicant's high school and college grades important in selection?

Answer choices	Responses	
	Percent	Number
Extremely important	4.35%	2
Very important	21.74%	10
Somewhat important	54.35%	25
Not so important	17.39%	8
Not at all important	2.17%	1
	Answered	46
	Skipped	0

The total number of participants was 46, with none choosing not to respond. In Table 2, the majority of respondents chose somewhat important a little over 54 percent as their response. The next highest selection was very important at a little less than 22 percent, followed by a little less than 17 and a half percent that chose not so important. One person chose not at all important. Grades generally are an indicator of intelligence and/or knowledge. Table 3 shows the results of asking about the hobbies and interests of candidates. The chiefs were asked to respond to the question of about whether applicants' hobbies and interests were an important indicator leadership potential. As indicated, all of the 46 participants responded and none skipped.

As indicated in (Table 3), half of the respondents chose applicants' hobbies and interests as somewhat important during selection. The next highest level of importance was not so important chosen by almost 35 percent of the respondents. Only one chief indicated that hobbies and interests were not at all important. A little more than 13 percent of the respondents believed hobbies and interests were either extremely important or very important. Table 4 illustrates the importance levels about whether the quantity and types of books are important considerations during police recruit selection.

Table 3 Q3. Are an applicant's hobbies and interests important in selection?

Answer choices	Responses	
	Percent	Number
Extremely important	4.35%	2
Very important	8.70%	4
Somewhat important	50.00%	23
Not so important	34.78%	16
Not at all important	2.17%	1
	Answered	46
	Skipped	0

The results of the respondents' choices show candidates' reading material importance as it relates to selection and leadership potential. Over half of the respondents in Table 4 chose not so important for this question and a little less than a third chose somewhat important. None of the responses indicated that the participants thought reading material was extremely important. Three chiefs believed reading material was not at all important.

Table 4 Q15. Are the types and number of books read important in applicant selection?

Answer choices	Responses	
	Percent	Number
Extremely important	0.00%	0
Very important	8.70%	4
Somewhat important	32.61%	15
Not so important	52.17%	24
Not at all important	6.52%	3
	Answered	46
	Skipped	0

Discussion

In the police recruit selection process, candidates generally move on to the next examination phase unless the candidate fails the evaluation step in the process, resulting in the candidate being eliminated, or *selected out*. When a candidate fails, even with positive past experiences, a potential leader may be lost. Candidates who pass are *selected in* and move along to the next phase of the process. It does not matter that some agencies place a premium on past experience, because if they fail any of the selection steps, or examinations, they are still eliminated without regard to the experience. Why not look for attributes of leadership potential in candidates for the agency?¹³ Consider the example of an electronics retailer hiring a CEO who possesses ideal credentials and skills, but later finds the person ill-prepared to handle the dynamics of market change. In contrast, a modest sized brewery selects a project manager who lacks industry experience, but hires the manager based on a consultant's belief the man will succeed. The new manager advances in the company in a short time to a key part of a management team that turns the company into a multinational business.¹⁴

Potential was the difference in the two candidates with the ability to grow into more involved functions and complex roles. As society

becomes more multifaceted and competition for employees gets tighter, selection must transition into one in which evaluations include potential.¹⁴ It is just as easy to evaluate potential as past performance. Brin suggests looking for indicators such as motivation and an ambition to leave a mark in the pursuit goals.¹⁴ High potential recruits are humble and work at whatever they do. Other good indicators of potential are curiosity, insight, engagement, and determination.¹⁴ To be a competent police officer requires the person to be well trained in skills of the job. Consideration is given to those with potential for future success in training. Why not consider the potential for future leadership since some of these new recruits will be tomorrow's leaders? The right choice in selection is more important than ever, so it is important to hire based on potential and not just experience. Job changing among millennials, ages 21 to 35, who make up the largest share of the workforce is at an all-time high. Competence-based hiring has replaced potential based hiring in many sectors and may not be adequate any longer for those who have the potential to lead and learn new and evolving skills.¹⁵ When reviewing applications and resumes, look for passion and motivation in writing and the interview; what was their commitment toward goals.

A hallmark quality of high potential in recruits is curiosity. Curious employees learn quickly and solve problems because of an insatiable interest in their communities. Recruiters should learn to recognize grit and curiosity. The attribute of curiosity is important when identifying growth potential. Curiosity is among the key leadership attributes or traits for potential, for example, when a candidate asks intelligent questions about the position and company. Police recruits need to be curious and coachable, both characteristics of policing. Potential of recruits' commitment to self-improvement and whether they learned from their mistakes are good questions to ask. In addition, ask questions that illicit information about the strategic direction of the candidate's career, and where they see themselves as part of the agency. Probing questions to ask are what personal experience do you have? When have you been responsible for applying certain critical skills? Do you have any particular plans for this department if you were selected?¹⁵ Vasilios Alexious¹⁶ suggested asking whether the candidate can provide evidence of successfully doing the work they will be performing in the agency, such as public service.

Community service is a major function of the police and a good reference for potential, especially when the candidate does not have police experience. Leadership traits are universal and can be applied to different organizations including policing. For example, Edmondson¹⁷ states there are 10 traits valuable for church leaders that are also important traits applicable to police organizations. His list includes:

- i. Concern for others;
- ii. Not a complainer;
- iii. Teachable;
- iv. Excellence in following;
- v. Reliability;
- vi. Interest in organization;
- vii. Good character;
- viii. Potential;
- ix. Confidence; and,
- x. People skills.

Lavoie¹⁶ offers additional insight to determine leadership potential by asking candidates how they will be remembered. Lavoie¹⁶ suggests evaluators during selection should include a focus on the attributes of presentation, or command presence. Presentation means having command of yourself and what you believe. Does the recruit express ideas and beliefs with a sense of passion? Not all exceptional employees who get promoted are inclined to transition into leadership roles. Not all leaders are good at leadership performance. A big difference between an exceptional employee and one with potential for leadership is the willingness to be proactive. Instead of complaining, proactive employees look for ways to improve procedures for better outcomes. The universal identifiers that for good leadership that proactive employees possess are the universal identifiers of extensive learning ability, flexibility, a positive attitude, a desire to grow, high performance, high emotional intelligence, honesty and a vision for the future.¹⁶ Recruits that become candidates for leadership potential should be imaginative, big-picture oriented, focused, open-minded, and able to communicate a vision.¹³ The emotional intelligence (EQ) of a leader has a lasting impact on an agency asking questions that illicit behavioral responses effectively evaluate this EQ trait. A strategic plan is a critical piece to an organization's strategy according to both Cravenho¹⁸ and Sundheim.¹⁹

The strategic plan should include continuity of leadership and being able to identify those with leadership potential when there is a vacancy in leadership. Leaders are change agents who play a transformational role in an organization's efforts to change and oversee challenges within the community. This supports finding leaders from within the agency because they are well versed with the processes, systems, structure, and culture already in place, an argument to identify recruits with leadership potential during selection. When having potential leaders identified within the agency, they are aware of the agency's strengths and weaknesses.^{18,19} A good practice to follow when attempting to identify leaders within an organization according to Cravenho is to focus on potential rather than just performance.¹⁸ Potential leaders generally handle extra tasks assigned because they can multitask. They are individuals that bond with others in the agency and are good communicators.¹⁸

Conclusion

It appears from the literature that there are several traits for leadership. The selection criteria of police agencies for recruits do not appear to place much value on the importance of considering potential leadership attributes when selecting recruits. The survey of members of the four state police chief associations believed potential was only somewhat important and not very important.¹³ Do recruiters realize that today's recruit is tomorrow's leader? The literature does suggest that non-police entities look for leadership potential of candidates. The literature on leaders and leadership illustrates that a leader may have leadership traits and practice leadership using those traits, or the leader may not have the traits. A leader without leadership traits, leads an agency as a mere figurehead, but does not have leadership from that person. Leadership (verb) determines the success of a leader (noun) and those associated with the leader, and ultimately the success of the agency. Minimal success is the result of minimal leadership. Real leaders are transformation lists who motivate personnel and create change.

Lateral entry is acceptable among many agencies so an agency may hire supervisors and managers from the outside because they may not be able to identify leaders within the agency, or sometimes because of politics. Lateral entry recruiting would not be necessary if consideration was given toward leadership potential of recruits during

selection. When recruiters and agencies believe that leadership traits and skills can be learned through training, they may not bother to look at potential beyond the mainstream selection criteria. Based on the review of the literature, traits are not learned, they are personality based, but skills and styles can be learned. Some agencies believe that once a leader is selected, it is possible that leadership traits can be learned through training, rather than trying to select candidates who have the leadership traits when applying. In order for recruits to learn skills during training, they need traits, so it is imperative to identify recruits with the appropriate leadership traits during selection. Those developing selection criteria for police recruiters/agencies need more information about the differences between inherent traits and learned skills. Selection criteria and procedures should be improved for the entry-level process to include the potential for leadership during entry-level.

Acknowledgments

None.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

References

1. McNamara. *Building basic skills in management and leadership: Module #4*. 2019.
2. Eduardo J.P, Gabriel AG. Assessing the leadership skills of the chiefs of police in the towns of Nueva Ecija, Philippines: A dichotomy between managerial competence and decision making ability. *Open Journal of Leadership*. 2017;6(4):142–159.
3. Bronson J. Taking leadership to the next level. In special feature: Sexual and gender-based violence. *The Police Chief*. 2019;86(7):11–13.
4. Economy P. *The 9 traits that define great leadership*. 2019.
5. Tasque Blog. *Top 10 leadership qualities that make good leaders*. 2019.
6. Legacee. What are leadership traits? *Potpourri Leadership Traits*. 2019.
7. Schwartz D. The rhetoric of Begin: Leadership in changing times. *Online Journal of Leadership*. 2016;5(3):84–94.
8. Hogan R, Kaiser RB. What we know about leadership. *Review of general psychology*. 2005;9(2):169–180.
9. Snead, M. The five most important leadership traits. *Leadership501.com*.
10. Hoppe M. Culture and leadership effectiveness. *The Globe Study*. 2007.
11. Mango E. Beyond leadership. *Online Journal of Leadership*. 2018;7(1):117–143.
12. Northouse PG. *Introduction to Leadership: Concepts and Practice, 3rd ed*. 2015.
13. Martin RH. *Survey of police chiefs' preferred recruit selection attributes*. 2019.
14. Brin DW. Why you should hire for potential, not experience. *Hit the ground running*. 2019.
15. Matar J. *How to recruit for potential, not just credentials*. 2016.
16. Lavoie A. *How to identify growth potential during the recruiting process*. 2017.
17. Edmondson R. *10 traits to identify potential new servant leaders*. 2016.
18. Cravenho A. *7 ways to identify leaders among your employees*. 2015.
19. Sundheim K. *How to recruit leaders*. 2013.