

## Can a bright, talented, middle-aged career-changer find a new calling as a police captain?

Almost certainly not. In fact, the career ladders within police and fire departments, like those in the military organizations they're modeled after, are strikingly different from career paths in most other areas of local government.

Most often, there is a single entry point in these occupations, and it is at the bottom. Police and fire departments take on fresh recruits to keep a steady flow of officers coursing through their ranks. The department, itself, trains each new class of recruits. And for the next 25 years, that cohort inches its way up the ranks, a winnowing process in which some leave, some stay put, and others move ahead at varying speeds until, just possibly, one or two may reach the top. But from rookie all the way up through deputy chief, it's a closed system. Traditionally, there's little to no lateral hiring<sup>1</sup>. A department may bring in fresh talent at the chief's level. But even there, external hiring is the exception.

That leaves police and fire departments with limited options for insuring they will have talented leaders in the future. One way is to attract and select the very best candidates—an option that, in many jurisdictions, the civil service board has more control over than the fire or police department, or by setting high entrance requirements, such as a bachelors degree. A second option is to make unerring decisions about promotions. That, too, may be outside the department's control if promotions are based, as sometimes are, solely on examination scores. That leaves a third way: to provide sworn staff with excellent training and development.

With that in mind, we began interviewing public safety experts to explore what seemed like a reasonable research hypothesis: Since police and fire departments rely almost exclusively on growing their own talent for leadership, they might serve as models for other areas of government.

Instead, after interviewing both senior command staff around the country and the heads of international associations of public safety professionals, we reached some very different conclusions.

## What Makes Public Safety Different?

■ **Distinctive cultures drive different approaches to developing leaders.** The occupational cultures of police and fire professionals are so distinctive from other occupations that their leadership-pipeline-building practices are not transferable to other areas of local government. In fact, many of the approaches we encountered in fire and police departments go against the grain of what our study identified as “best practices” in other areas of government. For example:

Virtually all of the formal leadership-development programs described in this report aim to expose participants to departments and functions outside their own. One way to do this is to ensure that the participants themselves represent a diverse mix. Yet the predominant model for developing leaders in public safety is to develop them with others like themselves. Participants who are sent to an academy or another external program may meet peers from other jurisdictions, but not from other areas of government.

Instructors at these programs are also typically sworn personnel from public safety. Civilian instructors don't have much credibility, according to the police and fire departments we interviewed. Outside speakers who are not sworn officers usually need some other credentials related to public safety.

The homogeneity of leadership-development programs in public safety is consistent with the occupational culture, which maintains clear boundaries between insiders (sworn officers or firefighters, who usually spend their entire career within a single department) and outsiders (everyone who's not a sworn officer or firefighter). However, this approach runs contrary to the intentionally heterogeneous cohorts we found in formal leadership-development elsewhere.

■ **Leadership development is not a recognized, core competency for most departments.** Virtually none of our public safety sources could recommend local departments that excel in the area of leadership development. Our data suggest several reasons this is so:

<sup>1</sup> Recent evidence suggests that some jurisdictions have begun to implement lateral hiring to offset the large number of retirements, but this practice is still unusual.

The first reason is that learning-on-the job, seat-of-your-pants-style, is the norm, rather than training officers either before they're promoted or immediately afterward. Even the 238-officer Lakewood, Colorado Police Department, which has produced a staggering 57 officers who have gone on to become police chiefs or sheriffs in other departments, has no formalized leadership training within the department. Although some aspects of leadership are incorporated into field training, Division Chief Clarene Shelley says that the department's steep entrance standards (including a college degree) are a major factor in Lakewood officers' career success. "We look for people who have some innate leadership skills," she says. "They are encouraged to develop and use those skills in all situations." In addition, the department evaluates leadership skills in annual performance evaluations and in its promotional processes.

The second reason that there's no recognized short-list of departments that excel at leadership development is that most jurisdictions send top candidates away for such training. They send their best and brightest to a national or regional academy (such as the FBI Academy or the California Police Officers Standards and Training Command College) or to a university- or college-based program such as the Police Evaluation Research Foundation's summer program, the Senior Management Institute for police.

There is also a third reason that may help explain why best practices in developing the leadership pipeline appear to be off the radar screen in public safety: In many departments, the senior person responsible for human resources is a member of the command staff, such as a deputy chief, rather than an HR professional. Because it is a rotational assignment, there is turnover every few years. While the incumbent is supported by permanent HR staff members, housed either within the department or at the jurisdiction level, they are civilians. Being civilians automatically places them outside the formal leadership structure, since it is composed exclusively of sworn personnel. This combination of factors, we conclude, could contribute to a de-professionalization of human resource management within police and fire departments. That would help explain the absence of any professional body or informal community of practice for public-safety HR. It would also help explain why our research was unable to identify any collective knowledge of best practices in leadership development in public safety.

## Tentative Conclusions

Leadership development in law enforcement and the fire service is not the focus of this research. Rather, our study included an abbreviated, somewhat tangential inquiry into leadership-pipeline-building within public safety. Its purpose was to explore a working hypothesis that law enforcement and the fire service might offer valuable leadership-development models for other public-sector organizations. On the basis of our interviews with police and fire departments and professional associations, we reject our initial hypothesis. There may be some police and fire departments that have exemplary internal practices for developing leaders. But if that's the case, their efforts are not well known.

That conclusion makes all the more remarkable the few exceptions we found to the prevalent practices described above. The Virginia Beach Police Department is the most striking example. Another can be found in the Plano, Texas case study. Plano's MP3 program enrolls a small cohort of city managers and department heads in a year-long program designed to broaden their perspective on city government and how all the pieces fit together. Two members of the police department — a lieutenant and a legal counsel — have completed the MP3 program. Each MP3 participant also worked closely with a manager from a different city department who served as his or her coach. As unremarkable as this pairing might seem in other occupations or departments, it's a radical departure from the norms we found elsewhere in public safety.

A third example that departs from traditional practice is Roseville, California's use of assessment centers to develop future leaders. Both the Police and Fire Departments have used assessment centers to prepare potential candidates for possible advancement—before they take the promotion exam. The assessment center lets officers preview the kinds of challenges they'd encounter in a more senior role. They also get detailed feedback about how they performed in the simulations, compared to the competencies needed at a higher level. Such an assessment process lays the groundwork for training and development—although, in Roseville's case, it's up to employees to take that step.

Such practices appear to be relatively rare in public safety. Yet Virginia Beach, Plano, and Roseville provide evidence that departments have benefited when they lower, ever so slightly, the boundaries that have traditionally separated them from other areas of local government, if only to borrow a few ideas.