

LEADING THE SMALL POLICE DEPARTMENT

Gerald W. Garner



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

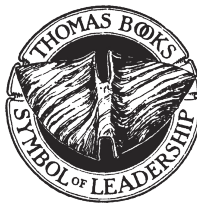
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To: Kathy, Sandi, and Samantha

PREFACE

Almost ninety percent of the police departments in the United States employ 25 officers or fewer. Many are staffed by fewer than 10 peacekeepers. The leaders of these small departments face some of the same challenges as do the bosses of the larger departments, but they encounter many additional problems, as well, and they labor in a somewhat different environment.

A lot has been written to assist the CEO of the larger department. Much less effort has been devoted to aiding the smaller agency chief in navigating the operational, personnel, and political landscape to be found in the smaller agency, to name but some of the challenges. This book is intended to fill that knowledge gap.

The author is a 53-year veteran of law enforcement who has served as a successful police chief in cities of 9,000, 26,000, and over 100,000 citizens. The book is a compilation of real-world experience and lessons learned, bolstered by the observations of many other police chiefs. Its goal is to assist the small agency chief in building and maintaining an exceptional police department. It is additionally designed to help the leader enjoy a successful and rewarding career for as long as he or she chooses to serve as police chief.

This is not a book about the theory of leadership or management. Rather, it is a handbook focused upon providing practical, time-proven advice for handling the small department chief's daily fare of challenges and opportunities. It will prove equally useful to the leader of a larger police department or the chief wannabe, but the focus will remain on the small agency boss.

Let the journey begin.

INTRODUCTION

There can be little doubt that today's American police chief has a tough job. That job can become even tougher if the chief is responsible for leading a small police agency.

This book will provide the small department chief with practical advice for mastering the special challenges of his or her difficult job. It will be very helpful to a chief serving in any size law enforcement agency, but its greatest focus will be on the department with fewer than 25 officers. The chief leading 10 officers or fewer may find it even more useful.

The volume's 18 chapters address a number of critical situations and conditions facing the small department leader. If you are coming to the agency from the outside, Chapter 1 provides a comprehensive checklist of things to examine and, if necessary, handle early on. If you are a long-term insider with the department, the chapter will help you in determining if there are still areas needing to be freshly examined by the new leader. Chapter 2 delves into some special challenges facing the small department leader and offers advice on how to address them successfully. Chapter 3 examines your vital role as a leader and offers you assistance in rising to the challenge. Meanwhile, Chapter 4 furnishes you guidance for the always critical decision-making process.

There is no more important task for you as a chief than serving as an exceptional role model for your employees and your community. Chapter 5 will help you fill that role well. Chapter 6 provides guidance for establishing an effective working relationship with your command staff and the rest of your employees, while Chapter 7 offers sound advice for working well with one of the most important people in your work life: your boss.

As chief you will occupy a major leadership role in your community, and Chapter 8 will help you to handle it well. Discipline of your employees also will be a responsibility of the chief, and Chapter 9 furnishes the guidelines for applying it both fairly and effectively. Chapter 10 recognizes that you have a host of responsibilities involving the different elements of your department and presents some proven guidelines for carrying them out effectively. Then, Chapter 11 explores each of your extremely vital obligations in taking care

of your most precious asset: your people.

The news media can have a lot to do with your success (or lack of same) as a law enforcement CEO, and Chapter 12 gives time-proven advice for establishing a mutually beneficial relationship with the minions of the press. Chapter 13 will help guide you through troubled waters when the news is bad. It also will help you take care of your own people when bad things happen. Next, Chapter 14 shares skills for communicating within your own organization and beyond, whether what you have to say pertains to “routine” matters or something quite beyond the ordinary. Then, Chapter 15 presents some practical guidelines for evaluating the job performance of your employees and providing them with some direction for their future endeavors. The critical incidents you must handle well as a leader are discussed in Chapter 16, with solid advice provided for effectively handling each.

The book’s final two chapters will help you deal with the complex political challenges that accompany your role. The very last chapter features some life- and career-saving advice for the small department leader intent on surviving the job and eventually leaving it while still in good health. That leader, of course, should be you.

Not merely surviving but prospering in your role as a small department chief is absolutely within your abilities as an intelligent and courageous leader. Here is how it is done.

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LEADING THE SMALL POLICE DEPARTMENT

Chapter 1

THE NEW CHIEF

Chief of Police. There is no other job in the world exactly like it. With the title comes joys, successes, failures, and disappointments. Fortunately for those holding or aspiring to hold the position, the good days far outnumber the bad.

Regardless of the size of their department or the location where they serve, police chiefs face many of the same challenges. Recruitment, selection, retention, and many other “people issues” make up the agenda for the average police leader’s day. But when the top cop is responsible for leading a smaller law enforcement agency, say, one employing 25 officers or fewer, new challenges can and do arise. Some of those also faced by the larger department leader can be magnified for the small agency head.

Challenges as well as opportunities exist beyond the reach of the small department chief. If you happen to be a mid- or upper-management leader working beneath the chief executive at one of these small agencies, you will share the CEO’s challenges. You will be expected to help address them. That is not a bad thing, as it will help you prepare to take on the role of head of the agency or another one at some point in the future. Even if you are not Number One today, what is contained in these pages will aid in equipping you with the knowledge, skills, and abilities you will need to succeed as a police chief. If being the chief one day is definitely not in your plans, the information to be gleaned here will help make you a better leader in your current or another position of authority. It will help you excel.

For present purposes, assume that you *are* preparing to be chief or have just been appointed to the position. Mentally place yourself in the role as if it were happening tomorrow, if it has not happened already.

What follows will aid you in succeeding as a leader of any rank at a small department.

DO YOUR HOMEWORK

Whether you are an outsider or someone who has moved up through the ranks in the organization, you will need to know as much as possible in advance about the agency you now lead. A lot can be learned from public sources such as newspaper stories, editorials, and letters to the editor. Social media also can tell you a great deal. Here you can learn what your citizen-customers have had to say about your people—pro and con—on your own agency’s social media platforms. Be sure to mine all of these sources for what they can tell you.

Now that you have been anointed as the new chief you will have access to many human sources of information that will help you discover what you are getting into. The list of sources can be practically endless and range from the janitor to the mayor, but the known, local “movers and shakers” are among those you need to sit down with, one on one, to get their views on how the department is doing and what they would like to see more or less of. Your city or town manager as well as your own staff should be able to tell you who these people are. Seek them out. Most of them will be honored to have a sit down with the chief. For you, this is a time to listen, not make promises or pronouncements. If your boss has no objections, connecting with each member of your city council or town board should be especially informative to you. These officials are important to you as, along with your town manager, they will control your department’s budget. Listen for any issues they bring up that may be hot buttons for them. Be especially conscious of any issues that are repeatedly mentioned. These topics certainly require your attention and, possibly, your action once you learn more.

Do not overlook your own employees while doing your homework to determine what is going on in the department and the community. They probably can provide you with opinions and insight that you cannot get anywhere else. Listen carefully but do not be tempted to respond instantly to concerns and complaints. A bit more information may reveal some of them to be unfounded. Always listen more than you talk during these interactions. You will learn a lot more that way.

It is important to get the opinions of your top leadership staff members about how things are going and where they see the need for change. You may or may not agree with their observations. Again, avoid making any major pronouncements until you know more. You can push your information-gathering even farther if you ask your leadership staff to put their observations in writing. Doing so may make them think a little more deeply about what they have to say. It also will give you an early opportunity to evaluate their written communication skills.

Other city or town employees, such as your fellow department heads, also should be good sources for information. Try to sit down individually with them over coffee or a meal. If you do not already know them well, this is a good time to meet with other area law enforcement agency officials, such as the sheriff and district attorney. You are seeking their read on your agency and its reputation. Keep in mind that they will be sizing you up as you are doing the same with them. Be sure that your connections with these people are as strong as possible. You are likely to need them down the road.

Finally, take advantage of the police department's own documents for what they have to teach you, assuming you have not done this while you were still in the chief application process. These information sources can include General Orders, Policies and Procedures, and other directives. You will be learning much more about the department while scanning for areas that may need shored up. Make notes if you need to aid your memory.

Doing your homework and taking in the big picture now can save you time, effort, and unnecessary headaches in the future. It will help you in making informed, solid decisions as you commence to mold your new organization. That will mean making it better.

DETERMINE WHY YOU WERE CHOSEN

It is vital to learn as early as possible in your tenure *why* you were selected as the new chief instead of someone else. If you were already part of the organization and have been paying attention, you already may have some idea as to why. If not, reviewing any recent news stories about the organization or its leader may prove highly informative. Past press should tell you if there have been concerns about corruption, malfeasance, excessive use of force, or unlawful or unethical behavior

by any member of the department, most especially the chief. Your meetings with your rank and file as well as your top staffers, as soon as you can arrange them, should assist you in determining if you are the new chief because someone else fouled up badly. If that turns out to be the case, you will need to know exactly what went awry. That's because you will be responsible for repairing the damage and rebuilding trust within the department and community. Naturally, your new boss also can fill you in on what went wrong and what you are expected to do about it.

It's your new boss, of course, who will be your best source of figuring out why you are the new chief. He or she may tell you at your very first post-hiring meeting why you are the new leader. It's great if you are now in the chief's chair because the old boss decided to retire or otherwise move on under clear and sunny skies. But often that is not the case. If your boss does not offer to tell you why you were chosen, *ask*. Knowing that will help you figure out what you are expected to do. It may help you determine what needs fixed and what seems to be working just fine. Use your good judgment in sitting down with the last chief, assuming he or she is willing and available. You can learn a great deal but remain mindful that what you hear will be colored by the former top leader's opinions. At the same time, you may learn of some mine fields to avoid. Per usual, listen more than you talk.

If all (or at least most) of what is going on in the department is peachy, your boss, your community, and your people may be looking for a *status quo* chief, or one who will not overturn the apple cart too much by changing things that really don't need changed. On the other hand, if general unhappiness or dysfunction reigns within either the community or the department, you will be expected to be a *change agent*, or one who stirs things up for improvement's sake. On occasion, a new chief will find himself somewhere in between the two roles. His early information-gathering and listening sessions should help him determine what truly needs repaired and what can be left alone, at least for now.

Ask plenty of questions when you are the new chief, especially of your boss. Watch, listen, and investigate thoroughly before you expend a lot of time and energy addressing things that really did not need addressed. Save your efforts for the truly important stuff that demands your attention. More about that later. ...

ASSESS THE ORGANIZATION

In the unlikely event that you did not already know, there is not a flawless organization on the face of the earth. Your new organization, no matter how good it may be, is not perfect, either. There are virtually always things that could be done better. That may be why you were selected for the position you now hold. By now you should have talked with quite a few people both inside and outside the police organization. That has probably given you at least an early picture of your agency's perceived strengths and challenges. You can learn even more by applying your experience and eye for what works to what you have observed to date. Consider keeping a checklist of tasks you need to accomplish. In addition to providing you with direction it also will give you a needed sense of accomplishment as you are able to check items off the list.

Hopefully you have discovered that you have inherited a pretty good organization, perhaps even an excellent one. There will be strong points already in place for you to build upon. But there may be things that need your attention, too. The issues could include just about anything. Perhaps officer safety practices are dangerously lacking. Maybe policies, procedures, and general orders have not been updated in a very long time or vehicles and other equipment may be in bad shape due to a lack of funds for maintenance and replacement. Those are just the "things." If your people have been neglected and have become jaundiced through lack of supervision and discipline, you and your agency could be headed for serious difficulties unless you act promptly and decisively.

None of this means that Armageddon is knocking at your door. Not every issue you discover will require instant, Herculean effort on your part. Make notes. Keep lists. Set timelines and deadlines for yourself. Check tasks off as you accomplish them. Keep asking yet more questions as you thoughtfully prioritize the things that need to get done. Celebrate the early victories but remain in motion, ready to take on the next challenge.

Your early days as the new chief will be busy ones as you assess your new department and initiate the actions needed to meet your new priorities. The good news is that you will not have to do it alone. That's where your good people come in.