



# Servant Leadership: Propositions for Improving Police/Community Relationships

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## Abstract

*There little disagreement that the relationships between many police agencies and the communities they serve in the United States are strained in early part of the 21st century (Stogner et al., 2020), and police officers are struggling with their role in the community (Fernandez, 2020; Stogner et al., 2020). Political discussion on policing issues in the US is caustic, and the national level narrative during the past several years has largely condemned police officers (Maciag, 2018). The jury's conviction of former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin for murdering George Floyd in 2020 has not reduced the tensions in police/community relationship (American News, 2021; Armstrong, 2021; Fox News, 2021). Complicating matters, police officers are receiving conflicting messages on how they should relate to the community: "The message from many of their chiefs and mayors is to tolerate, connect, and empathize. The message on the streets. . . is that they are part of the problem. The message from the news media is watch what you say and do" (Fernandez, 2020). How can police leaders navigate these challenges to repair the relationships between the department and their community?*

*This paper suggests that the idea of service that permeates the leader-follower relationship in a servant leadership paradigm (Greenleaf, 1977;) and motivates police officers (Lester, 1983, p. 173; Whitson, 2020, p. 241) could be a bridge to begin rebuilding the police/community relationship. After reviewing the literature on police leadership and servant leadership, this paper offers seven propositions—based on the seven dimensions of Liden et al.'s (2008) servant leadership framework—for how leadership behaviors could improve relationships between police and the communities they serve.*

**Keywords:** Servant leadership, Police leadership, Community relations, Law enforcement leadership

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There little disagreement that the relationships between many police agencies and the communities they serve in the United States are strained in early part of the 21st century (Adegbile, 2017; Ehrenfeld & Harris, 2020; Stogner et al., 2020), and police officers are struggling with their role in the community (Fernandez, 2020; Stogner et al., 2020). National level political discussion in the United States on policing issues is caustic, and the media narrative during the past several years has largely condemned police officers (Maciag, 2018). Police officers increasingly have become the focus of acrimony in race-related protests and riots because of "the deaths of Breanna Taylor and George Floyd at the hands of officers in Kentucky and Minnesota, respectively" (Stogner et al., 2020). Complicating matters, police officers are receiving conflicting messages on how they should relate to the community: "The message from many of their chiefs and mayors is to tolerate, connect, and empathize. The message on the streets. . . is that they are part of the problem. The message from the news media is watch what you say and do" (Fernandez, 2020, para. 6).

This paper proposes that police leadership has a key role to play in improving the relationship between police agencies and their communities. In this paper, the term "police manager/management" is used to refer specifically to law enforcement officers in a supervisory position, and the term "police officer" is used to refer to rank and file police officers. The term "police leader/leadership" includes both police officers and police managers. After grounding the paper in the academic research on relationships between the police and the community and reviewing the literature on police leadership research and servant leadership, the paper outlines seven propositions, grounded in servant leadership theory, for how police leadership can improve the relationship between police and the communities they serve.

## Police/Community Relationship

As the relationship between the police and community deteriorates, all parties suffer. Studies on depolicing—when police officers avoid a certain area or behavior (such as traffic stops) as a reflection of worsening popular perceptions of law enforcement—have found that depolicing frequently occurs in response to riots and because of racial issues (Chanin & Sheats, 2018; Oliver, 2017). After the riots in Cincinnati, Ohio in 2001, police enforcement, as measured in arrests, declined substantially and felony violent crime surged (Shi, 2009). In order to prevent being perceived by the community as targeting racial minorities, police chose to ignore criminal behavior that visible minorities were committing, thereby damaging both the officer and the community (Oliver, 2017). “The danger to the community and to the officers on the street associated with depolicing is very real. Depolicing can lead to apathy, apathy can lead to routine, and routine, in the officer’s world, can often lead to death” (Oliver, 2017, p. 453). Oliver (2017) found that police officers believed that police management held the solution to depolicing.

Depolicing because of officers’ fear of lawsuits was common, and becoming more so, (Oliver, 2017) even prior to former Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin’s April 2021 conviction for murdering George Floyd in June 2020. Since Floyd’s murder, police activity across the US’ major cities has plunged with Chicago, Houston, Los Angeles, Louisville, Milwaukee, Minneapolis, New Orleans, New York, Philadelphia, Portland, and St. Louis all reporting that police activity (as measured by either traffic stops or making arrests) decreased by between 35% and 72% (Johnson, 2021). Violent crime in these areas increased between 58% and 255% during this same time period (Johnson, 2021). Scholars have not yet empirically studied causality in the relationship between police withdrawal and violent crime increases 2020–2021. However, regardless of the causal effect of depolicing on the increase of violent crime, the data suggest that the police and the communities they serve are experiencing the two phenomena in tandem.

As violent crime increases, communities are calling on the police to provide additional services with fewer resources, which exacerbates the long-term staffing challenge police managers have had: There are too few officers to provide services to the community (Davis, 2020). Local governments are having increasing difficulty filling police vacancies (Maciag, 2018), in part because individuals are applying for police jobs in lower numbers (Cain, 2020; Maciag, 2018). Officers are leaving law enforcement at an increasing rate as the Baby Boomers retire and officers seek out better opportunities in the private sector (Cain, 2020; Maciag, 2018). Between 1997 and 2016, the ratio of police officers to citizens in the United States decreased 11% (Hyland & Davis, 2021). The exodus of officers from law enforcement in the wake of the anti-police protests and legislation of 2020 and 2021, efforts to defund the police (Levin, 2021; Novacic, 2021), and the increase in violent crime—particularly in large cities—following police disengagement after violent protests over George Floyd’s death in June 2020 (Bedard, 2021), will further exacerbate the pressures on police leaders to uphold services and care for their officers with declining resources (Droney, 2021; Hoyt, 2021).

## Moving Toward Community Oriented Policing

Police departments at all levels officially exist to serve and protect the public. The law enforcement code of ethics, officially adopted at the International Association of Chiefs of Police (IACP) Conference and Exposition in 1957, identifies a police officer’s primary duties as serving the community, protecting the innocent, weak, and peaceful, and respecting all people’s constitutional rights (International Association of Chiefs of Police, 1957). In the United States, police organizations at all levels identify ethics, community service, and protection as key elements of their mission statements (Town of Warrenton, VA, n.d.; “What we do,” n.d.). This service-oriented identity exists within a police context characterized by a strong and pervasive organizational culture (Davis, 2020; Klindtworth, 2020) and a shifting operational paradigm, Community Oriented Policing (COP), in which the role of the police officer is changing from a law enforcer to a community partner and advocate (Sereni-Massinger & Wood, 2016).

Police agencies have been using COP to varying degrees for nearly 20 years (Sereni-Massinger & Wood, 2015). This view of policing involves law enforcement agencies and their communities cooperatively developing solid relationships with the goals of social cohesion and collective efficacy (Sereni-Massinger & Wood, 2015). Under a COP paradigm, law enforcement personnel work long-term in particular areas of the community to “co-produce public safety with the community to collaboratively identify and deal with problems and solutions” (Robinson, 2020, November 13), which develops relationships between community members and the law enforcement professional (Sereni-Massinger & Wood, 2015). The COP approach is inherently a transformational style of policing that the structure, governmental oversight mechanisms, and hierarchical culture of law enforcement agencies consistently undermine (Murphy, 2008; Pyle & Cangemi, 2019).

In 2015, former U.S. President Obama established the Task Force on 21st Century Policing to identify best practices and offer recommendations on how police departments and agencies could build public trust while also reducing crime (President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). The task force established six pillars on which policing should be built: (a) building trust and legitimacy, (b) policy and oversight, (c) technology and social media, (d) community policing and crime reduction, (d) officer training and education, and (e) officer safety and

wellness (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). The leadership challenges of the future for community and police leaders will be to integrate police officers into the fabric of the community while still retaining the ability to enforce the law and support law enforcement officers, which will require police managers to enact new leadership behaviors.

## Leadership and Policing

A leader's primary responsibility is building and managing the relationships that create organizations (Salehzadeh, 2019; Schein, 2017). Multiple studies have demonstrated the importance of leadership for developing people (Woolley et al., 2011), creating organizational culture (Schein, 2017), identifying and managing psychosocial risk (St-Hilaire et al., 2018), building relationships (Nienaber et al., 2015), and setting standards (Diddams & Chang, 2012). Police managers must accomplish all of these tasks within the constraints of a bureaucracy that is formally established by the governing authorities to function as a rank-based structure (Davis, 2020, p. 447). Police leaders work within the cultural constraints of hierarchical systems that tend to be masculine, paramilitary, and transactional in nature (Cain, 2020; Davis, 2018; Klindtworth, 2020; Kubala, 2014; Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). Almklov et al. (2018) found that in law enforcement, organizational culture is an important explanatory factor in collaboration problems that impact social safety.

Police culture tends to reinforce hierarchical and dominating leadership styles (Klindtworth, 2020; Kubala, 2014), and police leaders traditionally have relied on hierarchical authority and leadership practices to accomplish their objectives (Davis, 2020; Haake et al., 2015; Sarver & Miller, 2014). The conflict between cultural and social pressures to change and the realities of fiscal and structural constraints on function is creating incredible pressure on police managers (Cain, 2020; Davis, 2020; Maciag, 2018; Stogner et al., 2020) and situations in which police leaders need to learn alternative methods of leadership (Davis, 2020; Haake et al., 2015; Sarver & Miller, 2014).

The idea of service that permeates the leader-follower relationship in a servant leadership paradigm (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) suggests that servant leadership may be an appropriate and valuable leadership style in law enforcement contexts. Liden et al.'s (2008) servant leadership framework is particularly appropriate for assessing servant leadership behavior in police leaders and the impact that servant leadership has on the police/community relationship because of the framework's pointed concern for creating value for and encouraging follower involvement in the community (Eva et al., 2019).

## Leadership Styles

Scholars have studied leadership styles among police managers from a variety of perspectives and no one leadership style predominates among this population (Can et al., 2017; Huberts et al., 2007; Sarver & Miller, 2014; Swid, 2014). Garner's (2017) comparative study of leadership perceptions among police managers lends support for the idea that police managers are becoming more people-centric. In comparing leadership surveys of police managers from 1988 to the same survey questions administered in 2017, Garner (2017) found that in the later study police managers identified knowing about people as the most critical competency for being an effective leader, whereas in the earlier study knowledge of policy and procedure was most important. This focus on people is consistent with servant leadership's follower-centric perspective.

In a review of police leadership studies between 1990 and 2012, Pearson-Goff and Herrington (2013) found that effective police managers shared seven key characteristics: (a) ethical behavior, (b) trustworthiness, (c) legitimacy, (d) being a role model, (e) communication, (f) decision making, and (g) critical, creative, and strategic thinking ability. These seven characteristics manifested in five key behaviors: (a) creating a shared vision, (b) engendering organizational commitment, (c) caring for subordinates, (d) driving and managing change, and (e) problem solving (Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2013). The characteristics and behaviors that Pearson-Goff and Herrington (2013) found are components of multiple leadership styles including ethical leadership (Lawton & Páez, 2015), authentic leadership (Gaddy et al., 2017), servant leadership (Liden et al., 2008), and transformational leadership (Can et al., 2016).

### ***Ethical Leadership in Policing***

Lawton and Páez (2015) defined ethical leadership as "the demonstration of normatively appropriate conduct through personal actions and interpersonal relationships, and the promotion of such conduct to followers" (p. 641). The foundation of ethical leadership is character (Clark, 2016). Several of Pearson-Goff and Herrington (2013)'s ideal leader characteristics—including ethical behavior, trustworthiness, role modeling, and communication—are critical components of the character element of ethical leadership. Followers' ability to trust the leader is critical for organizational ethical excellence; ethical leadership, specifically congruence between organizational values and organizational systems, is critical for that trust to develop (Caldwell et. al, 2008). While ethics and ethical leadership are critical in the policing context (Tasdooven & Kaya, 2014), ethical leadership theory's focus on normative conduct does not allow for the healing aspect of repairing police/community relationships.

### ***Authentic Leadership in Policing***

Authentic leadership incorporates self-awareness by the leader, the leader's willingness to be vulnerable, and transparency between leader and follower to establish a trust relationship between leaders and followers (Brown, 2012; Diddams & Chang, 2012). Authentic leaders intentionally focus on self-development through self-awareness and embrace the vulnerability that this awareness creates (Brown, 2012). Avolio and Gardner (2005) proposed authentic leadership as the root of all positive leadership constructs and identified an authentic leader as one who is highly self-aware, aware of both the leader's own and others' value systems and capabilities, aware of the context in which one is leading, and highly moral. Banks et al.'s (2016) empirical meta-analysis of the relationship between authentic and transformational leadership suggested that the two theories are not distinct. While García-Guiu López et al. (2015) found that authentic leadership positively related to group cohesion and organizational identification among Spanish police officers, this study does not use authentic leadership theory as a framework because of the theory's focus on the leader's development, rather than on followers or the community, and the theory's definitional overlap with other leadership theories (Avolio & Gardner, 2005; Hoch et al., 2018).

### ***Transformational Leadership in Policing***

Bass (1990) expanded on Burns' (1978) work on transforming leadership and proposed transformational leadership theory as being one end of a spectrum of leadership behaviors ranging from transactional to transformational. Transformational leadership had four characteristics: (a) charisma, (b) inspiration, (c) intellectual stimulation, and (d) individualized consideration (Bass, 1990). Podsakoff et al. (1990) found six behaviors associated with transformational leadership: (a) identifying and articulating a vision, (b) providing an appropriate model, (c) fostering the acceptance of group goals, (d) high performance expectations, (e) providing individualized support, and (f) intellectual stimulation. Transformational leadership is the positive leadership style most studied in policing (Rubim et al., 2019). However, police organizations' underlying cultural dynamics inhibit transformational leadership practices among police leaders (Murphy, 2008; Pyle & Cangemi, 2019). "Although leaders and subordinates may desire to embrace transformational processes, organizations with an increased degree of public scrutiny must inherently navigate a relationship housed in transaction" (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019, p. 87). However, transformational leadership has not been able to solve the problems between the police and the community, which suggests the need for a new approach.

## **Servant Leadership**

The idea of service that permeates the leader-follower relationship in a servant leadership paradigm (Greenleaf, 1977; van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011) and motivates police leaders (Lester, 1983, p. 173; Whitson, 2020, p. 241) suggests that servant leadership may be an appropriate and valuable leadership style in law enforcement contexts. Servant leadership is an "other-oriented approach to leadership that is manifested through one-on-one prioritizing of follower individual needs and interests and the outward reorienting of [the leader's] concern for self towards concern for others within the organization and the larger community" (Eva et al., 2019, p. 114). Servant leadership theory evolved out of Greenleaf's (1977) assumption that people who chose to be servant leaders genuinely cared about others, wanted to make a difference in their followers' lives, and had a "better nature" (Keith, 2015) that emerged when the leader allowed themselves to reflect and act on their deepest being.

Servant leaders' objectives are to empower and develop followers to the followers' greatest individual potential (Greenleaf, 1977; Parris & Peachey, 2013). To accomplish this objective, servant leaders get to know their followers as individuals (Liden et al., 2008). This behavior is directly applicable in a community policing paradigm in which police officers co-create safety with the community by developing close relationships with individual community members. By getting to know their followers as individuals and using that knowledge to help each follower develop to their fullest potential (Liden et al., 2008), the servant leader works toward creating a better community both inside and outside of the organization (Kiker et al., 2019).

Servant leaders' focus on developing others and making a difference for the community is in line with a main goal of policing: community improvement (Russell et al., 2018). Servant leaders act on a desire to serve, empower, and develop followers in order to build a better society (Greenleaf, 1977; Parris & Peachey, 2013). The servant leader tries to prepare the organization and its members to serve the community and to build a better community (Kiker et al., 2019), which speaks directly to the police leader's role in improving police/community relations. Multiple studies support the claim that servant leadership behavior promotes positive follower behavior. In a sample of 961 employees working in 71 restaurants of a moderately sized restaurant chain, Liden et al. (2014) found that serving culture (the servant leader's propagation of servant leadership behaviors among followers) was positively related to employee job performance, creativity, and customer service behaviors. Serving culture was also negatively related to turnover intention (Liden et al., 2014), which is critical in an environment characterized by too few officers to respond to community needs.

Spears (1996) proposed that servant leadership "encourages everyone to balance leading and serving within their own lives" (p. 33). For leaders, this balance involved the continual reminder that one's primary

responsibility is serving others (Spears, 1996). For followers, this balance involves looking for situations in which to provide leadership as service to one's fellow human beings (Spears, 1996). In both roles, as leader and follower, servant leadership is a way of thinking about one's responsibilities and identifying ways to serve.

Having an appropriate self-other focus is important to an individual's ability to successfully resolve conflict (Gilin Oore et al., 2015), which is a critical skill for repairing police/community relationships in a post-George Floyd world. In a qualitative study, Jit et al. (2016) found that servant leaders manifested conflict resolution styles that were participative and involved co-creating an understanding of the situation causing the conflict. In creating a common understanding, servant leader moved away from the traditional, mechanistic method of problem solving and focused on meeting the aspirations of the conflicting parties (Jit et al, 2016). Though more research is needed before Jit et al.'s (2016) findings can be generalized to the wider population of servant leaders, it follows that the type of problem solving mechanisms that the servant leaders in Jit et al.'s (2016) study used could facilitate conflict resolution between police leaders and the community.

Servant leadership enhances employees' psychological well-being (Xu et al., 2020); engages followers on the emotional, ethical, relational, and spiritual dimensions, and provides followers with a sense of social identity (Eva et al., 2019; Parris & Peachey, 2013). Servant leaders prioritize serving and improving the lives of those in the leader's care and view the purpose of the organization as providing a service to its stakeholders (Kumar, 2010; Parris & Peachey, 2013). In a study of police managers from 23 US states between 2007 and 2008, Andreescu & Vito (2010) found that one of the key characteristics of an ideal police manager was the ability to recognize follower contributions and be considerate of the comfort, well-being, and status of followers, which suggests that servant leadership behavior is ideal for police managers. In their original study validating the SL-28, Liden et al. (2008) found that followers' perceptions of leaders' servant leadership behaviors influenced followers' organizational citizenship behaviors, organizational commitment, and job performance. The behaviors effective police leaders used created similar effects (Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2013), suggesting there is some similarity between servant leadership behaviors and ideal police leadership behaviors.

Scholars have investigated servant leadership behavior qualitatively and quantitatively across wide-ranging populations in multiple countries across industries (Liden et al., 2014), cognitive abilities (Sims, 2018), and ethnicities (Koyuncu et al., 2014) and found that servant leadership is linked to a variety of prosocial behavioral outcomes (Bauer et al., 2019), positively and significantly related to work engagement, and negatively and significantly related to workplace bullying (Sanchez Jones, 2017). However, despite the potentially good fit between servant leadership and leadership among police managers, empirical research into servant leadership among police leaders is nascent (Haake et al., 2017; Kubala, 2014). Preliminary research into servant leadership in police leadership supports the conclusion that servant leadership can and does occur at the most senior police rank (Jackson & Lee, 2019). In a qualitative single case study, Russell et al. (2018) found that openly declared servant leadership positively influences the health and well-being of police officers. A recent study found that servant leadership also positively related to motivation in police personnel and that servant leadership style and motivation positively related to security conduciveness (Ardiyaya, 2020).

## Propositions

This paper proposes that Liden et al.'s (2008) servant leadership framework would be particularly appropriate for assessing servant leadership behavior in law enforcement officials in order to assess the impact that servant leadership has on the police/community relationship because of the framework's pointed concern for creating value for and encouraging follower involvement in the community (Eva et al., 2019). Liden et al. (2008) defined servant leadership as an approach to leadership that "focuses on developing employees to their fullest potential in the areas of task effectiveness, community stewardship, self-motivation, and future leadership capabilities" (p. 162). Liden et al. (2008) contended that the relationships that form between leaders and followers are at the center of servant leadership. Liden et al. (2015) conceptualized servant leadership as multidimensional construct that functions as an algebraic model where the leader's behavioral expression of servant leadership resulted from the sum of the interrelationship of the seven dimensions of the concept: (a) emotional healing, (b) creating value for the community, (c) conceptual skills, (d) empowering, (e) helping subordinates grow and succeed, (f) putting subordinates first, and (g) behaving ethically.

### Emotional Healing

Emotional healing is the degree to which leaders demonstrate that they care about an individual follower's problems and well-being (Liden et al., 2015). Jit et al. (2017) found that supervisors draw on their empathy, compassion, and a belief in their altruistic calling to adopt a compassionate approach to help their employees with emotional distress. In a study of police managers from 23 US states in 2007–2008, Andreescu & Vito (2010) found that one of the key characteristics of an ideal police leader was the ability to recognize follower contributions and be considerate of the comfort, well-being, and status of followers. Fair managers who honestly care about their employees' concerns and try to address legitimate problems, all traits consistent with servant leadership's

emotional healing dimension, were more likely to pursue organizational justice (Wolfe et al., 2018). Organizational justice, in turn, “has been shown to elicit officer behaviors that improve community relations and safety” (Wolfe et al., 2018).

As law enforcement officers’ roles evolve from warrior protector to community partner and advocate, the “soft” skills of policing, including interpersonal communication and emotional intelligence, are becoming increasingly important to officers seeking to improve relationships with the community (Sereni-Massinger & Wood, 2016). Leaders who assist their officers to manage emotions and effectively communicate with the public, particularly in those situations in which the public is hostile and angry, (Sereni-Massinger & Wood, 2016) will facilitate more positive relationships between the police and the community.

*Proposition 1: Police leader behavior consistent with servant leadership’s emotional healing dimension will facilitate officers’ emotional health thereby bolstering the officers’ ability to manage their emotions during conflicts with the public.*

### **Creating Value for the Community**

Creating value for the community is the degree to which leaders help their followers and their organizations to be involved in the community outside of the organization (Liden et al., 2015). There is little disagreement that the relationships between many police agencies and the communities they serve are strained in early part of the 21st century (Adegbile, 2017; Ehrenfeld & Harris, 2020; Stogner et al., 2020). Servant leaders can create an environment where employees perceive respectful treatment and organizational justice (Ehrhart, 2004; Wolfe et al., 2018), which is particularly important in law enforcement (Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Trinkner et al., 2016). In their study of 786 police officers in a large urban police force, Trinkner et al. (2016) found that officers working in departments that the officers perceived as just were less likely to have negative engagements with their communities and more likely to use procedurally just tactics and reject the excessive use of force. Further, supervisor behavior was the variable most strongly associated with officers’ perceptions of a procedurally fair organizational climate (Trinkner et al., 2016). As creating culture is one of the duties of leaders (Schein, 2017), these findings suggest that leaders could create value for the community by creating procedurally just organizations and relationships with their followers that help to repair relationships between the police and the communities they serve.

*Proposition 2: Police leadership behavior consistent with servant leadership’s creating value for the community dimension will create procedurally just organizations and relationships that help to repair connections between the police and the communities they serve.*

### **Conceptual Skills**

The leader’s ability to problem solve and understand organizational goals reflects the leader’s conceptual skills (Liden et al., 2015). In a study of 1000 participants in the Federal Bureau of Investigation’s National Academy, Schafer (2010) found that the five most important evidences of a police leader’s efficacy were: (a) the achievement of key tasks, goals, and mission; (b) the growth or development of subordinates; (c) the positive morale of subordinates; (d) the goal achievement of subordinates, and (e) the positive standing of the leader within the agency. Additionally, the police leader’s decision making ability, effective critical thinking ability, and ability to think strategically and creatively were key attributes of effective police leaders (Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2013).

Law enforcement leaders who promote critical thinking skills not only in themselves but also among their followers have an important role to play in bridging police/community relationship challenges rooted in multiculturalism. Bawden et al. (2015) identified decision making and problem solving capabilities, specifically the ability to question one’s assumptions and biases, as key conceptual skills for modern police. Police officers who can use structured critical thinking to prevent erroneous conclusions and identify inaccurate assumptions and causal attributions will be able to identify “more options to resolve difficult situations and will lead to better interactions in multicultural situations” (Bawden et al., 2015, p. 2).

*Proposition 3: Police leader behavior consistent with servant leadership’s conceptual skills dimension will foster structured critical thinking processes in their followers that facilitate officers’ ability to resolve community relationship problems rooted in multicultural communication challenges.*

### **Empowering**

The leader’s willingness and ability to give followers responsibility, autonomy, and decision-making authority demonstrate that leader’s level of empowering behavior (Liden et al., 2015). Leaders use listening skills, make people feel significant, emphasize teamwork, entrust followers with responsibility and authority, and allow followers to experiment and create without fear to empower followers (Focht & Ponton, 2015). The aim of a

leader's work to empower followers is to foster pro-activity and self-confidence (van Dierendonck & Nuijten, 2011). Vito & Higgins (2010) found that empowering others was the most dominate leadership practice among police sergeants and middle managers.

In a study of 1000 participants in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Academy, Schafer (2010) found that the five most important leader characteristics for law enforcement officers were: (a) honesty and integrity, (b) caring for the needs of employees, (c) strong communication skills, (d) strong work ethics, and (e) approachability and willingness to listen (p. 651). These characteristics directly align with the servant leader's empowering behavior. Peaslee (2008) found that police departments whose leaders interpreted community policing as a philosophy empowered mid-level and front-line officers. This empowerment in turn facilitated a shift in organizational culture that was marked by an increase in social policies and programs to benefit youth and family welfare (Peaslee, 2008).

*Proposition 4: Police leadership behavior consistent with servant leadership's empowering dimension will result in mid- and front-line officers demonstrating initiative to enhance the social welfare of communities through more robust social programs and service delivery.*

### **Helping Subordinates Grow and Succeed**

The helping subordinates grow and succeed dimension of servant leadership involves the degree to which the leader prioritizes and assists followers' development (Liden et al., 2015). van Dierendonck and Nuijten (2011) viewed the need to create opportunities for followers to help them grow as the governing force behind servant leadership. In a study of 1000 participants in the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Academy, Schafer (2010) found that growing and developing subordinates was one of the five most important evidences of a police leader's efficacy. These findings suggest that servant leadership's helping subordinates grow and succeed dimension is the identical competency police leaders require to be effective.

In a study on shared leadership involving police leadership and minority ethnic communities, Craig et al. (2010) found that both groups recognized that a style of leadership that mixed problem solving and relationship building was key to success in the police/community relationship. Police managers understood that discussing community priorities had to take precedence over formal departmental objectives; however, police managers struggled to have the time available to make significant progress in building relationships with ethnic minority communities because of the managerial requirements of police leadership positions (Craig et al. 2010). Police managers perceived that while engaging with the community was critical for effective police leadership, there was significant pressure from government leaders to produce quantifiable results (Craig et al., 2010). The result of this pressure was that long-term community relationship building was separated from everyday policing activities (Craig et al., 2010). Community leaders, in turn, perceived that, while police policy documents outlining how the police were going to build relationships with the community looked and sounded appealing, police leaders were not committed to the policies and programs outlined in the documents (Craig et al., 2010). Shared leadership, which scholars ground in "an effective social process which allows a common understanding of public problems to develop" (Craig et al., 2010, p. 349) offers a bridge to authentic connection and relationship between police departments and the communities they serve. To achieve the goal of creating a common understanding of public problems, police leaders need to be genuinely committed to the community's growth and success.

Craig et al.'s (2010) discussion of police/community relationships and the role that shared leadership could play in building more positive relationships between the parties begs the question of whether community members could be "followers" in the leader/follower paradigm. Street-level police officers "play an essential role within their communities as individual leaders" (Pyle & Cangemi, 2019, pp. 82–83). Anderson et al. (2000) identify all police officers at any level as leaders in the community because of their responsibilities under COP to meet community needs and solve community problems. Pyle and Cangemi's (2019) proposal and Anderson et al.'s (2000) framework, by extension, identifies the communities officers serve as followers. Police officer behaviors consistent with servant leadership's helping followers grow and succeed dimension would demonstrate that police leaders were genuinely committed to their communities' growth and success thereby facilitating the social process which allows a common understanding of public problems to develop.

*Proposition 5: Police leader behavior consistent with servant leadership's helping subordinates grow and succeed dimension will demonstrate that police leaders are genuinely committed to their communities' growth and success, thereby facilitating the social process which allows a common understanding of public problems to develop between police officers and the communities they serve.*

### **Putting Subordinates First**

At its core, servant leadership is based on the leader serving the follower's highest needs. The degree to which the leader prioritizes meeting followers' needs over the leader's own demonstrates the extent to which the leader puts subordinates first (Liden et al., 2015). Putting followers' needs before their own is one way that

servant leaders demonstrate that they value their followers (Focht & Ponton), and the way police officers perceive they are treated affects the quality and type of service these officers provide to the community (Vito & Higgins, 2010).

Schafer (2010) found that the degree to which a police leader did not put others first and displayed inconsistent decision making contributed to their followers' perceptions that the leader was untrustworthy. More recently, Chénard-Poirier et al. (2021) found that leaders' choices to not always act in consistent ways toward their employees stem, in part, from the leader's ability to self-regulate. Inconsistency in leader behavior negatively related to subordinates' levels of self-efficacy, commitment, and sense of organizational justice which, in turn, undermined community relationships and social safety (Chénard-Poirier et al., 2021; Wolfe et al., 2018).

*Proposition 6: Police leader behavior consistent with servant leadership's putting subordinates first dimension will foster subordinates' levels of self-efficacy, commitment, and sense of organizational justice which, in turn, will bolster community relationships and social safety.*

### **Behaving Ethically**

The degree to which the leader is honest, trustworthy, and a model of integrity demonstrates that leader's level of ethical behavior (Liden et al., 2015). Being ethical was one of the seven traits Pearson-Goff and Herrington (2013) identified as attributes of effective police leaders. In the police context, being ethical involved exhibiting a sense of honesty and integrity and by doing so creating a sense among one's subordinates that one is trustworthy (Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2013). This sense of trustworthiness extended to the police organization being perceived by the community as trustworthy (Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2013).

Effective police leaders understand their responsibility to be ethical role models (Pearson-Goff & Herrington, 2013). In their study on the relationship between leadership behavior and ethical violations among Dutch police officers, Huberts et al. (2007) found that police officers copied the leader's integrity standards in their daily interactions with one another (p. 587). This finding suggests that the ethical element of servant leadership behavior is particularly relevant in the police context. While Dutch and US cultures vary, behavioral research suggests that imitating behaviors are a function of a human's cognitive mirroring system (Pope et al., 2018) rather than a Dutch cultural dynamic.

The role of leader modeling of ethical behavior in the police/community relationship cannot be overstated. Communities are demanding ethical business practices and "assess corporate ethics through perceptions of leadership and corporate culture" (Kiker et al., 2019, p. 172). There is no evidence to suggest that communities perceive ethics in police departments as a function of anything other than leadership and corporate culture.

*Proposition 7: Police leader behavior consistent with servant leadership's behaving ethically dimension will demonstrate sense of honesty and integrity and by doing so creating a sense within the community that the police organization can be trusted.*

## **Conclusion**

Most research into police/community relationships is focused on minority perceptions of the police (Peck, 2015), the role of demographics in citizen satisfaction with police (Kule et al., 2019), and issues surrounding police use of force (Engel et al., 2020). Empirical research into the relationship between police managers' behavior and police agencies' relationships with their communities is at best nascent. This paper proposed that servant leadership theory may be a mechanism for improving police/community relationships because of the theory's pointed concern for followers and for creating value for, and encouraging follower involvement in, the community (Eva et al., 2019).

Servant leaders create environments where employees perceive respectful treatment and organizational justice (Burton et al., 2017). This is particularly important in law enforcement as officers working in departments that the officers perceived as procedurally fair were less likely to have negative engagements with their communities and more likely to use procedurally just tactics and reject the excessive use of force (Hilal & Litsey, 2020; Trinkner et al., 2016). Supervisor behavior was the variable most strongly associated with officers' perceptions of a procedurally fair organizational climate (Trinker et al., 2016), which suggests the key role police managers' leadership practices play in the police/community relationship.

This paper made seven propositions, based on the seven dimensions of Liden et al.'s (2008) servant leadership framework, for how police leaders' servant leadership behaviors could improve relationships between police and the communities they serve. Leader behaviors consistent with Liden et al.'s (2008) seven dimensions of servant leadership—(a) emotional healing, (b) creating value for the community, (c) conceptual skills, (d) empowering, (e) helping subordinates grow and succeed, (f) putting subordinates first, and (g) behaving ethically—are not only good for people and communities, they also align closely with the behaviors both scholars and practitioners have identified as effective and ideal police leadership.



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### Notes on Auhtor

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