**Introduction**

Throughout the last decade, the first-line police supervisor has found himself or herself in a rapidly changing work environment in terms of technology, job functions, and personnel management. Police agencies themselves, once hierarchical, autocratic, and closed organizations, are increasingly becoming open organizations in which lines of authority are dictated more by function and mission accomplishment than by rank. During this period of technological and organizational change, the police workforce has also diversified. Supervisors must now be acutely aware of far more issues in labor relations and labor law than ever before relating to cultural sensitivities, personnel disabilities, harassment and discrimination, responding to employee complaints, and related issues.

The line officer's perspective of the challenges and responsibilities of first-line supervision often varies from the realities of the job. Past performance is commonly the best predictor of future performance, and good line officers are often the best candidates for advancement to supervisory positions. However, past performance is not the only qualification and sometimes is not the best indicator of the successful and effective police supervisor. Many of the skills and competencies of a good line supervisor are very different from those of a patrol officer or detective. Therefore, highly qualified line officers don't necessarily make highly successful first-line supervisors.

The complexity of first-line police supervision promises to increase in the future. More than at any time in the past, the position will require the successful first-line supervisor to continually update his or her knowledge, skills, and abilities as new technologies emerge in policing together with changes in successful leadership styles, and the composition of the police workforce.

This document examines some of the areas of competency of first-line supervisors so that line officers who are considering advancement can compare them to their own personal and professional abilities and aspirations and gain greater insight into the skills that are required.

**The Changing Role of the First-Line Supervisor**

Some officers feel that their promotion to first-line supervision marks the achievement of a career goal that represents an end in itself, they mistakenly believe it is an end, rather than a beginning. At the core of this misconception is the belief that the authority inherent in the job provides the means necessary to lead. However, leading is not synonymous with giving orders. General George Patton once noted that 10 percent of his time was devoted to giving orders while the remaining 90 percent was devoted to making sure those orders were carried out. General Patton's comment recognizes that the cooperation of subordinates is not simply a product of their response to formal authority. Rather it is the product of influence, coupled with clear goals, good training and supervision, fair evaluation of officer and unit performance, and both positive and negative discipline, among other things.

Today’s police officers are more concerned with their ability to work in an environment where there is a personal and professional challenge and where they have broader discretion to solve problems on their own without the restrictions that governed most officers years ago. Clearly, those about to become first-line police supervisors are stepping onto relatively new, and often still shifting, ground. Police departments are increasingly encouraging the “empowerment” of line officers.
That is to say, the advent of community policing, problem solving, and related programs is based on the notion that line officers need to employ additional discretion and professional judgment in their work. Strict adherence to policy, procedures, and rules for supervisory oversight is giving way to more creative thinking. But more freedom for line officers to act on personal and professional judgment and training makes officer supervision and evaluation more difficult.

A first-line supervisor, whose primary responsibility once was control over subordinates, is now involved to a greater degree in the professional development of subordinates. Successful supervisors in today's world of policing are concerned more with the outcome or destination rather than with the process. This requires continual encouragement of subordinates who need to stretch beyond their standard professional comfort zone and routine activities. The supervisor is the strongest influence on the morale and performance of those who need to maintain a high level of motivation.

Prospective first-line police supervisors should also recognize that they are considering promotion during a period when many believe that effective police supervision is wanting. Recurring and high-profile incidents of officer misconduct, many of which have received broad media attention, have made the importance of effective first-line supervision a matter of common discussion not only among law enforcement professionals but also in the public sector. The fact that police misconduct is the exception to the rule does not negate the fact that first-line supervisors play the key role in ensuring that their subordinates carry out the day-to-day mission of the agency in an efficient, effective, and ethical manner.

The successful first-line supervisor also has to understand and apply management principles as well as the department's policies, procedures, rules, administrative processes, and management systems. He or she must communicate official policy and fairly report relevant information, to include any negative information about subordinates, to higher department authorities. This balancing act between management and line personnel can create stress for supervisors who may still identify closely and have personal ties with the line officers they supervise. The ability to remain fair to subordinates while taking necessary measures to protect the good of the organization is essential but often difficult. In some instances the supervisor must fairly communicate and support management decisions with which he or she may not agree. In other instances, the supervisor will have to bring to the attention of management, issues relative to a subordinate's behaviors, abilities or attitudes that he or she has perhaps failed to adequately monitor or correct. Especially in this realm, successful supervisors must consider the ethical dimensions of their position. He or she must keep the agency's mission central to his or her decision making, carefully examining his or her own biases while maintaining an equilibrium that reflects overall fairness.

It is not unusual for new supervisors to find it difficult to master the technique of delegating responsibility while they struggle with the notion of being ultimately responsible for their subordinates' decisions and overall behavior. This is largely due to a lack of the understanding of their influence on subordinates. This includes understanding the use of motivational techniques and group peer pressure and employing both positive and negative discipline. It means knowing one's subordinates and being able to balance the need to assign them where they are comfortable with the need to assign them where their abilities are both needed and challenged. The position of first-line supervisor requires emotional maturity, intellectual prowess, optimism, integrity, patience, and courage. Aspiring first-line supervisors should be aware that once promoted they will never enjoy the independence of a line officer again. On the other hand, they will be faced with challenges and rewards associated with effective line leadership. Most authorities agree that effective first-line supervision is the linchpin to effective and efficient delivery of police services and adherence of personnel to departmental policy. While the challenges for first-line supervisors are significant, the personal and professional rewards can be enormous.

Control through Leadership

Novice supervisors are often eager to exercise their authority. Controlling and directing others is the essential component of supervision, but it can also be an immense challenge. Over-reliance on bureaucratic power is a common problem among new supervisors and inexperienced or unskilled supervisors alike. In time, the exercise of power as though people were mere instruments, devalues subordinates. It does not recognize their accomplishments, potential, or worth as thinking and creative members of the organization. If left unchecked this tendency results in the use of petty bureaucratic controls that may be appropriate for the management of things but inappropriate for the management of people.

Subordinates subjected to this type of supervision tend to feel manipulated. They begin to lose interest in their job and in organizational goals and may begin to perform at a marginal level. They often fail to take the initiative for fear that their actions may be subject to criticism or even discipline. Agencies that squander their personnel in this manner tend to be seen as over-managed and under-led. Supervisors who have confused the sole exercise of bureaucratic power with the exercise of leadership have failed their organizations, their subordinates, their communities, and themselves. On the other hand, formal control mechanisms implemented alongside commonly accepted leadership principles tend to inspire, enhance understanding, encourage personal growth, create challenges, and maintain a high level of interest and energy.

Effective supervision is all about leadership. And leadership is more than having a position of command and the requisite operational knowledge of policing. Effective leadership requires understanding subordinates' strengths and weaknesses, employing motivational techniques that capitalize on their strengths, encouraging them to improve, and providing the environment in which this can take place. Central to leadership is respect for others, evidenced by trust in subordinates' motives and abilities. Not surprisingly, subordinates who are challenged and enjoy genuine input and autonomy within the range of their abilities are generally more productive than those who are not.

It has been suggested that most line officers are accustomed to managing things but not managing people. However, by the time an experienced patrol officer considers being promoted to a supervisory position, he or she has generally been in many leadership positions. For example, acquiring the willing compliance of an individual without resorting to an arrest requires weighing factors such as the potential for harm, urgency of the situation, and the likelihood of gaining the cooperation of those concerned. With these and related experiences behind them, most veteran line officers have learned to employ an array of strategies and have customized those that
work best for themselves. The more successful officers, not unlike the more successful first-line supervisors, have learned that acting out of genuine empathy for others and treating others with respect and dignity typically produces better results. When considering his or her potential for police supervision, a line officer should consider his or her leadership skills, experience, and success when dealing with the public. One authority has also identified behavioral characteristics that are possessed by effective first-line supervisors. These include a positive orientation toward people, personal independence, assertiveness, loyalty, risk taking, an ability to cope, trustworthiness, supportiveness, fairness, and reliability.

The search for the best style of leadership has been pursued by social psychologists for more than sixty years. Identifiable categories, based upon supervisory behaviors can be helpful to further illustrate the practice. One approach classifies four leadership styles and, although these four styles are superior to others, none is applicable to all situations or circumstances. Under this scheme, leadership is classified as being directive, supportive, participative, or achievement-oriented.

- **A directive style of leadership** is autocratic and derives from the military style organizational model. In this approach, uniformity of process and complete conformity to a hierarchical chain of command is encouraged in a rule-driven environment. The police profession generally operated in this manner during its so-called professional era between 1940 and 1970. It is an excellent style of leadership for some circumstances such as tactical incidents but is not suitable for community policing or similar styles that emphasize officer initiative.

- **A supportive style of leadership** is roughly equivalent to what has been coined the laissez-faire style. It is more of an absence of leadership than a leadership style. Within this approach, subordinates make all or most decisions with little direction or oversight by the leader.

- **The participative style** resembles what has been called a traditional democratic style. Its primary operative value is ensuring that all members of the group share in decision making to the degree possible and reasonable.

- **The achievement-oriented style** is characterized primarily by concern for organizational goals. Supervisors communicate these goals to subordinates and allow them the opportunity to determine strategies to reach such goals, albeit with ample oversight to ensure that they are met.

Regardless of which style or combination of styles the first-line supervisor employs, it is important for him or her to remember the basics. The level of group satisfaction is positively related to group productivity, and group satisfaction is positively related to leadership expertise. Thus, the promotion to first-line supervision is both a serious investment on behalf of the organization, the prospective subordinates and supervisor as well as the community.

**Effective Communication**

The ability to communicate effectively is perhaps the most valuable of all human capabilities and is essential for effective first-line supervision. Unintentional communication mistakes can occur in each segment of the communication process, to include the effectiveness of the intended communication, what the recipient heard, how the recipient interpreted what was said, and how the speaker’s tone and body language may have sent additional messages. The communicator can unintentionally change the importance or meaning of a message by being imprecise, overbearing, or by otherwise “coloring” the message. Likewise the receiver may not accurately obtain the message due to personal attitudes that filter or scramble the message, such as cynicism, failing to listen closely, or “reading” unintended motives of intentions into the message.

When not relaying instructions or orders, the purpose of first-line police supervisory communications is often focused on getting to know how subordinates feel about job-related issues. The supervisor’s understanding of the subordinates’ skills, abilities, and interests are essential. Supervisors must also be able to provide accurate feedback to subordinates when needed. The cliché “no news is good news” does not apply in supervisor-subordinate relationships. Subordinates generally want to know whether their performance is acceptable and be provided with information and instruction that will help them improve. Basically, people want to be recognized and appreciated. The success of these types of communications depends greatly on the relationship that has been established between the officer and supervisor. Generally, a supervisor will be respected, trusted, and liked if he or she routinely uses appropriate situations to express respect for and trust in subordinates. A large part of that respect and trust is based on the ability of the supervisor to listen to subordinates.

The successful supervisor must be able to listen closely to subordinates in order to thoroughly understand the individual’s position before the supervisor responds. This requires patience, emotional maturity, and a genuine caring and respect for others. It is often a good practice to summarize the other’s points to ensure they are completely understood. From the perspective of the subordinate, the very act of being listened to carefully is a sign of respect. As such it creates an environment that enhances the subordinate’s acceptance of supervisory direction and guidance.

Prospective supervisors should compare these skill requirements to their own and assess their ability and willingness to employ them. Insincere praise, perfunctory listening while one’s mind wanders, and like behaviors are immediately detected by seasoned officers and rookies alike. Supervisors who go through the motions of listening and responding to subordinates are often the targets of ill feeling and negative reaction.

**Decision Making**

First-line supervisory decision making can be regarded as either directed or nondirected. Directed decisions are those that fall within the realm of predictable circumstances and are typically those that are the subject of departmental guidance by way of policy, procedures, and rules. Examples include protocols for conducting investigations of suspicious deaths, responding to bank alarms, conducting vehicular pursuits, and responding to bomb threats and searches, among many others commonly found in departmental policy and procedure manuals. Based on these protocols, supervisors have the basis for making decisions that meet departmental approval. Directed decisions are the easiest to make. In fact, if a supervisor acts inconsistently with established agency procedures, he or she may be subject to criticism or even discipline. Successful decision making in this realm is based on a complete understanding of departmental policies, procedures, rules, and
training protocols and having complete and accurate information about the circumstance at hand.

Nondirected decisions are those for which administrative guidance does not exist, and in which the supervisor has discretion in his or her decisions. Policing requires quick decisions, often with incomplete information. Supervisors need to understand the environment in which information is obtained and relayed as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the subordinates involved. For example, determining whether to call off a vehicular pursuit by a subordinate has as much to do with knowing the officer's judgment and experience as it does with the reported reason for and circumstances surrounding the pursuit. In sum, nondirected decisions require more judgment and insight than directed decisions and as such they also carry greater risk. There is greater potential for the supervisor's decision to be seen as an overreaction or underreaction during review of the event.

Some common themes in preparing for both directed and nondirected decisions are apparent. The supervisor must remain thoroughly familiar with the political and legal environment of each situation; know the strengths and weaknesses of officers involved, and the factors in their work environment (such as stress) that may alter the facts being communicated.

A professional supervisor also makes a routine practice of knowing about significant events, situations, and factors that could affect operations during the shift. For example, the supervisor must be aware of early school dismissals, the weather report, equipment that needs repair, officers who seem unusually agitated or distracted, the names and addresses of recent crime victims, and the busy periods and trauma specialties at area emergency rooms. He or she should know the times different stores close, which businesses have safes, alarms, and easily accessed roofs, the names of recent paroles and others with criminal records or reputations, their relatives, boyfriends or girlfriends, and habits. Especially when supervising a night shift the supervisor knows the names and habits of people who routinely are around, such as convenience store clerks, truck drivers, janitorial service providers, paramedics, and early morning newspaper carriers. These countless seemingly unrelated factors frequently come into play when quick, nondirected decisions must be made.

On the other hand, patrol officers and detectives come to know which supervisors do their homework and which are prepared for unforeseen situations. They gain respect for those who know the job and work more cooperatively and diligently for those who do.

Gaining subordinate input in decision making is another way supervisors can gain the respect and enhance the cooperation of their subordinates. By including subordinates in routine squad-level decisions, the first-line supervisor greatly enhances his or her officers' ability and desire to adhere to the resulting decision. Decisions such as these may relate to patrol patterns, the development of squad-level areas of expertise, equipment use issues, or the sharing of unusual or preferred assignments. Whether an issue is brought to the supervisor or the supervisor initiates a group discussion, he or she first needs to define for the group precisely what decision is to be made. In doing so the supervisor establishes guidelines for decision making and identifies issues that cannot be modified due to department policies, legal considerations, or areas of decision making that are the supervisor's alone. Skilled supervisors can develop and review alternatives with the group in such a way that opinions are first blended into a consensus and later a commitment.

Including subordinates in decisions is a primary means of overcoming resistance to change and gathering their support. Group decisions should not be so invasive upon a supervisor's role that he or she abdicates command responsibility, nor so restrictive that the work group is made to feel unimportant. With the proper balance the long-term result is mutually beneficial; subordinates tend to be more productive and efficient, and the supervisor enjoys a reputation for addressing difficult issues head-on with the help and support of those in his or her charge.

**Perspectives on Discipline**

The disciplinary process often has unpleasant connotations for law enforcement officers and is one of the most difficult responsibilities facing first-line supervisors. For some officers, disciplinary matters conjure up feelings of fear, shame, discredit, anger, and alienation from the department. The issue also raises concerns and stress for supervisors who have to administer discipline. The thoughtful supervisor may question whether the established mechanism for detecting officer misconduct achieves its goal, whether it is too lax or too harsh, whether it is applied consistently and fairly, and whether the disciplined officer will become embittered by the process or learn to become a better officer.

Some officers feel that the policies, procedures, and rules of an agency are primarily intended to assign blame when things go wrong rather than serve as a necessary means for directing, controlling, and managing employee conduct and operational practices. Such attitudes exist for a variety of reasons, not the least of which are divisions between line, supervisory, and management personnel. It also may be the result of a failure to engage officers in the establishment and justification of policies, procedures, and rules in the first place.

None of the foregoing views is healthy for the officer, the supervisor, or the police department. Each undermines the basic goals of the disciplinary system. The common adage "Actions speak louder than words" is appropriate here. To instill an unbiased philosophy of discipline there must be a history of dealing fairly, impartially, and consistently with officers in the disciplinary process. Unfair or unnecessarily harsh discipline or treating officers as criminals or as guilty until proven innocent generally has unintended negative consequences. Rather than serve to gain cooperation and respect of officers, such treatment most often serves to estrange them. Aside from issues such as fairness, a large part of the problem is how police agencies and supervisors view discipline in general, particularly whether it is regarded as a fundamentally punitive measure (negative discipline) or whether it also serves a constructive purpose (positive discipline).

**Positive vs. Negative Discipline**

In order to develop a sound philosophy of discipline and apply it effectively, supervisors must understand the distinction between negative discipline and positive discipline.

**Negative discipline.** The concept of negative discipline functions on one reactive and negative premise: A proven allegation of misconduct receives immediate punishment. This style is reactive because officer misconduct is addressed only after it has occurred. The disciplinary process is an end in it-
self and not a means of educating officers about appropriate types of behavior or a way to explain why certain standards are necessary. While negative discipline is long on punishment, it generally is short on reward.

**Positive discipline.** Positive discipline also focuses on determining why misconduct occurred rather than solely on punishing misconduct. For example, officer misconduct may be a result of poorly written policy or ineffective training. A positive disciplinary system analyzes each case to determine the cause of misconduct and develops appropriate remedial recommendations in addition to or in place of punitive actions.

Positive discipline includes reinforcement of excellent behavior by maintaining a reward system in addition to a punitive system. Actions by officers that exceed the norm deserve recognition. This may be done by special departmental commendations and medals or by recognition during performance reviews or similar means. In addition, each agency has officers who may not be outstanding but who are known for their reliability and consistent performance. Supervisors must be in a position to identify these individuals and single them out for recognition.

Generally, human beings respond to praise more positively than to criticism and punishment. Officers who perceive that their daily contributions are appreciated tend to feel better about themselves and want to continue doing a good job or even improve. They feel part of the agency and want to support its reputation. The use of threats of punishment alone to gain compliance with policy does not encourage excellence or promote the efficient delivery of police services.

Positive discipline involves administering counseling, reprimands, suspension, or other discipline in a fair and consistent manner. Inconsistent discipline can undermine the entire disciplinary process and lead to charges of disparate treatment and civil litigation. Where officers perceive that they may receive stiffer punishment than another officer for similar misconduct, any lessons that a supervisor hoped to impart through discipline will be lost. Supervisors must approach the disciplinary process with an unbiased attitude to ensure that they are acting fairly and impartially.

Finally, it should be noted that training is one of the most effective approaches to positive discipline. Some disciplinary matters are largely a product of inadequate training, a failure by officers to master what is being taught, or their inability to maintain specific skills and abilities or remember how to follow specific practices, protocols, or procedures. For them, refresher training may be more effective and appropriate than punishment.

Positive discipline is also more suitable when the transgression was a mistake in judgment, an error based in a lack of confidence, a lack of information, a minor transgression grounded in attitude, or one that circumstances tended to distort in importance. As with most effective supervisory decisions, when and how to use positive disciplinary strategies are a product of knowing one’s subordinates well. This is where a close supervisor-subordinate relationship is important.

Novice supervisors understand negative discipline strategies better than positive ones. It is wise for novice supervisors to consult more experienced supervisors whom they respect when considering negative discipline. Supervisors with greater experience better understand its long-term effects. It must be employed carefully and usually only when other options have failed. It should be employed with minimum im-pact on the dignity of the officer involved. These factors must be considered when initiating negative discipline in the most constructive fashion appropriate to the circumstances.

On the other hand, negative discipline is appropriate when serious violations of trust are at the core of the transgression rather than a simple error in judgment. On-the-job failures to learn from past mistakes that have been the impetus of past positive discipline are candidates for negative discipline. A subordinate who makes excuses, covers up, or scapegoats others usually accompanies these failures. Failure to understand the responsibility inherent in the position of police officer and/or the unreasonable resistance to goals of the organization tends to make negative discipline a required response. When applied, the supervisor should remain even-tempered, resist the urge to exaggerate to make the case stronger, and seek to understand whether there is a grievance at the root of the problem behavior that can be addressed.

The question of whether to employ positive or negative discipline is not always clear-cut. An over-reliance upon either negative or positive discipline suggests a supervisor needs to assess his or her motives or perspective. Supervisors need to ensure that their disciplinary decisions reflect the best interests of the organization and officers rather than being tainted by personal bias or other motives.

**Endnotes**

questions

The following questions are based on information in this Training Key. Select the one best answer for each question.

1. Which of the following statements is false?
   (a) A successful first-line supervisor must be able to understand and apply management principles in accordance to the department’s policies, procedures, rules, administrative processes, and management systems.
   (b) First-line supervisors must possess emotional maturity, intellectual prowess, optimism, integrity, patience, and courage.
   (c) A prospective first line supervisor is able to master the skill of delegating responsibility to his other subordinates without difficulty.
   (d) First-line supervisors should maintain fairness in all aspects of decision making while carefully examining their own biases.

2. Which of following styles of leadership is often called a traditional democratic style and is defined by all members of a group sharing in decision making.
   (a) Directive style of leadership.
   (b) Supportive style of leadership.
   (c) Participative style of leadership.
   (d) Achievement-oriented style of leadership.

3. Which of the following statements is true?
   (a) First-line supervisory decision making can be regarded as either directed or nondirected.
   (b) In order to develop a sound philosophy of discipline, first-line supervisors must understand the difference between negative and positive discipline.
   (c) A successful supervisor should be able to listen closely to subordinates in order to completely understand the individual's position before responding.
   (d) All of the above are true.

answers

1. (c) It is not unusual for new supervisors to find it difficult to master the technique of delegating responsibility while they struggle with the notion of being ultimately responsible for their subordinates’ decisions and overall behavior.
2. (c) A participative style of leadership, the primary focus of which is to ensure that all members of the group share in decision making to the highest degree possible and reasonable.
3. (d) All of the above are true.

have you read . . . ?


With a balance of theory and practical examples, this guide to personal and professional life describes seven principles of life management that is applicable to all police supervisors.