

Understanding the Benefits of Emotional Intelligence for Officer Growth and Agency Budgets

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The public image of the law enforcement profession is as diverse and complex as the people served by this profession. Due to the nature, visibility, and impact of law enforcement services on society, the occupation is highly scrutinized regarding its tough demands on personnel and leadership to meet increasing public expectations. Furthermore, in an effort to counter crime while ensuring safe and healthy communities, law enforcement officers must contend with diverse populations who are willing to challenge authority and decisions. As a result of this complex and dynamic landscape, modern officers need more than tactical expertise and an old, autocratic style to succeed.¹

Because of the rapid and ever-changing landscape of the profession, law enforcement officers may require more than just task competencies or technical know-how.² Officers possessing a particular blend of skills, competencies, and traits are more likely to be successful. According to psychologist Gary L. Fischler, law enforcement officers need to develop healthy relationships and manage conflict while achieving productive goals.³ To achieve their goals, law enforcement officers need skills to build, maintain, and strengthen alliances and partnerships, both within and outside an organization. Similarly, in his review of Los Angeles, California, Police Department officers, political science professor Renford Reese described effective law enforcement officers as maintaining the respect and support of not only the rank and file but also the community at large.⁴

Emotional Intelligence for the Law Enforcement Profession

The law enforcement community faces daily challenges and stress that few other professions understand. According to a study of police shift work, “Few occupations require the intensity of constant alertness, proper mood and demeanor, short term memory, and physiological stamina that police work requires.”⁵ To be an effective and efficient law enforcement officer in today’s environment requires intelligence about and control of emotions to meet the demands faced on the streets. Today’s officers need to be highly motivated; have well-developed communication skills; and be able to engage leadership, other officers, and community members by managing relationships and making emotional connections to balance the needs of the organization and the community.⁶

Charles Swindoll, the founder of Insight for Living, states, “Life is 10 percent what happens to you and 90 percent how you react to it”—an accurate description of the essence of emotional intelligence.⁷ Every law enforcement officer is aware of the streetwise con; most children are aware of their mother’s instinctive need to protect them; and everyone is aware of the need for common sense to keep out of trouble. These are examples of emotional intelligence at work in the real world. The choices people make—the way they think and act—are stimulated and affected by emotions and feelings.

*As long ago as 1920, the essence of emotional intelligence was captured in a description of people who had “the ability to understand and manage men and women, boys and girls . . . to act wisely in human relations” as possessing a different type of intelligence.⁸ In 1948, “emotional thought” was posited as contributing to intelligence in general and served as a part of “logical thought.”⁹ Much later, in the 1990s, psychologist Howard Gardner, building on his theory of multiple intelligences, described several forms of intelligence, two of which help establish the groundwork for evaluating emotional intelligence: interpersonal, an understanding of people and relationships, and intrapersonal, an understanding of oneself and one’s emotions.¹⁰ Psychologists Peter Salovey and John D. Mayer identified emotional intelligence for the first time as the “ability to monitor one’s own and others’ feelings and emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one’s thinking and action” (*italics in the original*).¹¹*

Using the term emotional quotient to quantify the level of one’s emotional functioning, psychologist Reuven Bar-On has become one of the leading researchers and theorists on the topic of emotional intelligence. He defines emotional intelligence in terms of people’s ability to contend with their surroundings by using an assortment of social and emotional skills and abilities, which he divides into five composite scales and 15 subscales.¹²

Research has highlighted the utility of emotional intelligence in the performance of work duties. Focusing on and developing this form of intelligence has been called “a learned capability . . . that results in outstanding performance at work.”¹³ Literature suggests that promoting the development of emotional intelligence competencies through the use of assessment instruments can help improve self-awareness because it enables respondents to recognize their own emotions and the emotions of others.¹⁴ Therefore, the use of an emotional intelligence instrument to assess competencies holds the possibility of improving the performance of law enforcement officers.¹⁵

Economic Value of Intangibles

Management educators Dave Ulrich and Norm Smallwood stress the bottom line is no longer based solely on financial indicators such as earnings per share or profit margins; rather, 85 percent of the bottom line must now include intangibles such as talent pool, leadership, and culture.¹⁶ Research shows that 80 percent of high-performing companies consistently measure intangibles through such means as strategic talent management to determine the effect on the bottom line. Strategic talent management practice places a high priority on strategic planning and management of organizational talent by identifying, developing, and tracking high-potential leaders.

The return on investment, or economic value, of emotional intelligence has been documented in several professions by different researchers. The EQ Edge provides just one example of how emotional intelligence is linked to success, through a study of U.S. Air Force recruiters. Every “bad recruiter” hired by the Air Force cost the service \$30,000, so it decided to use the EQ-i (Emotional Quotient Inventory) assessment on its star recruiters. The Air Force then started to use the core cluster of emotional intelligence competencies identified with star recruiters as selection criteria for future recruiters. The authors explain what happened: “In August 1997 the Air Force purchased the computerized EQ-i for less than the cost of putting one recruiter in the field, and concluded that Air Force recruiters are twice as productive as recruiters from other services. . . . [T]he retention rate for this position had increased by 92 percent worldwide, at a cost savings to the Air Force of an estimated \$2.7 million.”¹⁷

Emotional Quotient Inventory

To determine what emotional intelligence looks like in the context of law enforcement culture, Bar-On’s EQ-i will be reviewed. This inventory provides a quantitative assessment of emotional intelligence, permitting a benchmark for which development and change can be monitored. The EQ-i can also provide the data necessary for showing the economic value of emotional intelligence training. To facilitate a conceptual and practical understanding of emotional intelligence, an overview of the five composite scales and their respective subscales is necessary. The five composites—intrapersonal, interpersonal, stress management, adaptability, and general mood—comprise emotional competencies that have been grouped together based on both logical homogeneous and statistical clustering.

So how would a law enforcement officer with low or high emotional intelligence behave? All officers, regardless of their functioning, possess some level of emotional intelligence; however, some are more skilled in these competencies than others.

Intrapersonal: The intrapersonal scale includes the subscales of self-regard, emotional self-awareness, assertiveness, independence, and self-actualization.

Law enforcement officers with low self-regard are unsure of themselves, lack self-respect and self-esteem, and do not garner the respect necessary to be effective officers. Additionally, low self-regard may be displayed by a lack of confidence and poor physical appearance; most training officers watch for these behaviors and target them for improvement. The goal of establishing high self-regard in a law enforcement environment is to increase self-assurance, self-esteem, and confidence—primary goals of every law enforcement academy. Accepting oneself and developing inner strength will be the result of increased self-regard and will generate both self-fulfillment and fulfillment with the law enforcement profession.

Officers with low emotional self-awareness may have a hard time acknowledging and verbalizing their own emotions and thus may experience difficulty in recognizing how their emotions affect interpersonal interactions,

decision making, and overall functioning. Low self-awareness can cause an officer to avoid emotional ownership and instead externalize what are really internal problems, a situation that prevents them from asking for support when needed most. Likewise, low emotional self-awareness may result in inaccurate projections of emotions and the misinterpretation of others' emotions. In either case, judgments and decisions can become compromised.

Too often, officers with low emotional self-awareness take themselves too seriously and add self-induced stress. In the worst-case scenario, low emotional self-awareness can cause denial of personal feelings, thereby jeopardizing well-being. Such circumstances can cause an officer to overreact verbally or physically, causing embarrassment to themselves as well as to their departments.

By contrast, officers with high emotional self-awareness are able to relate their own feelings to appropriate causes, thereby establishing good self-awareness. They are able to differentiate between emotions and are able to understand how and why emotions change; they also have the ability to blend emotions appropriately. These officers have an understanding of how and why others affect them and are able to express these emotions and feelings in a positive way. They know what they are feeling and why and can read other people; similarly, they allow others to read them clearly. They are able to prevent simple incidents from growing out of proportion and to bring calm to a chaotic situation. Law enforcement officers strong in emotional self-awareness are able to withstand and adequately deal with what behavioral scientist Kevin M. Gilmartin calls "emotional survival."¹⁸

Most law enforcement personnel are taught and understand the importance of assertiveness and the significance of taking charge of critical situations. Assertiveness includes the ability of officers to express themselves easily yet defend their rights in a nondestructive or nonabusive manner. Strength in assertiveness allows officers to take control of situations by expressing their beliefs or thoughts openly; to voice opinions; and to disagree and take a stand in a forthright, nonabusive, nonthreatening way. However, at the core of assertiveness lies the potential for an officer to overuse this strength, permitting assertiveness to progress into aggression. On the other hand, a lack of assertiveness can lead to passivity, shyness, and quickness to compromise, which could lead to more aggressive behavior from subjects, suspects, or witnesses, making the officer an easy target for the con.

Another competency taught to most law enforcement recruits is the need for independence in making decisions. Due to shortages of manpower and the large areas covered by most patrols, time and distance required for backup are always causes for concern. A high level of independence enables officers to be self-directed and self-controlled in thinking and taking action while remaining free of emotional dependency. Additionally, independence produces self-reliance in planning and decision making, but it should also allow officers the ability to consult with others. The inner strength and confidence gained from independent decision making provides the ability to function autonomously rather than needlessly depending on the security or support of others. In developmental terms, such officers would be called "able and willing." The inability of officers to develop independence can lead to indecisiveness, uncertainty of their own ideas, and the need for participative support or reinforcement. The greatest concern with officers who lack independence is that they allow others to make final decisions when it is inappropriate to do so, abdicating their primary duty of bringing calm to crises.

Also important to a successful law enforcement career is self-actualization, which is the ability to realize potential abilities and establish a career roadmap with a sense of purpose. It is important to note that the main reason most individuals join the profession is not for high salaries or enormous benefit packages but to protect and serve their communities. A high level of self-actualization can lead officers to strive toward maximum development, always trying their best and working to improve themselves. This involves pursuits that lead to a rich and meaningful life. Officers' failure to develop self-actualization can result in a lack of motivation or stagnation, creating uncertainty of where they are going in their profession and their lives. Without self-actualization, officers have difficulty finding fulfillment and satisfaction in their work and will have trouble understanding life's meaning for them.

Interpersonal: The interpersonal scale includes the subscales of empathy, social responsibility, and interpersonal relationships.

The competency tied to emotional intelligence that can have the greatest impact and meaning both within and outside the profession is empathy. Empathy is the ability to be aware of, understand, and appreciate the feelings of others. Officers who demonstrate a high level of empathy can read other people's emotions and pick

up on social cues, which allows them to show concern for others. The importance of this competency is the ability of officers, husbands, fathers, wives, mothers, coworkers, and friends to make and build personal and emotional relationships. Officers lacking in empathy often fail to understand the feelings of others and have difficulties in relating to and with others, resulting in the misinterpretation of social cues and surprise reactions from others. Officers lacking empathy often forget who they are and where they came from.

One cannot underestimate the importance of social responsibility to the law enforcement profession. Social responsibility resides at the core of an officer's mission and purpose and provides guidance and direction with an internal compass. Social responsibility enables officers to be cooperative, contributing, and constructive members of the profession. By upholding rules, regulations, policies, and procedures, officers demonstrate professionalism as well as social responsibility. Additionally, a developed sense of social responsibility allows officers to be accepting of others. The inability to develop social responsibility can cause officers to question their commitments to their profession, their organizations, and their groups. A lack of social responsibility will prevent officers from willingly involving themselves in group or team efforts, even to the point of failing to follow through on group tasks. Selecting socially responsible officers is the key to successful and effective community policing.

With many departments incorporating some form of community policing, the importance of developing emotional intelligence is extremely important. Officers well versed in interpersonal relationships have not only the ability to establish and maintain mutually satisfying relationships but also a positive outlook toward social exchange. Intimacy, giving and receiving affection, and feeling at ease in social relations are some of the benefits of highly developed interpersonal relationships. Officers who have difficulty with interpersonal relationships will not show intimacy, will not be giving, will be seen as uncaring or unable to share feelings, and will be unable to develop and maintain relationships, ultimately leading to social isolation. Enforcing the law is a team effort, and loners are counterproductive to creating a vision and building teams.

Stress Management: The stress management scale includes the subscales of stress tolerance and impulse control.

Important to law enforcement is the competency of stress tolerance and officers' ability to withstand adverse events and stressful situations without falling apart. Officers who tolerate a high level of stress choose the proper course of action for coping with stressful situations and face difficult problems with optimism. Of great importance to law enforcement officers who tolerate stress well is the belief that they can control and influence the situations in which they find themselves. Officers who do not tolerate stress well often lack or are ineffective in using coping mechanisms, are fearful and reactive rather than proactive, and have high levels of anxiety. When it comes to stress management and dealing with the public, officers must remember that emotions are like germs: they are transmissible and contagious. For this reason, officers must take care to receive and pass along the intended ones.

With the media's attention constantly directed at the law enforcement community, impulse control, which is important to self-control and self-management, is especially important to an officer's character and ethical behavior. The emotional competency of impulse control enables officers to resist or delay an impulse, drive, or temptation to act or respond. Officers who exhibit a high level of impulse control stay composed and refrain from aggression, hostility, and irresponsible behavior. Problems with impulse control will be manifested by a low tolerance for frustration, impulsiveness, anger control problems, explosiveness, and unpredictable behavior. Officers lacking impulse control are more likely to make tomorrow's headlines, as a lack of anger control leads easily to abusive behavior and the inappropriate use of force.

Adaptability: The adaptability scale includes the subscales of reality testing, flexibility, and problem solving.

The competency of reality testing, which is the ability to assess the correspondence between what is experienced and what objectively exists, is essential to all law enforcement officers. Officers need to be able to see things objectively, as they are, rather than what they wish or fear. Officers need the ability to concentrate and focus when trying to assess and cope with situations that arise on a regular basis. Officers skilled in reality testing are able to search for objective evidence to confirm, justify, and support feelings, perceptions, and thoughts. Officers who do not possess this skill are "tuned out"—disconnected and unrealistic in their evaluations and assumptions. Officers unskilled in reality testing are threats to themselves and those they are assigned to protect and serve.

Flexibility is the competency that enables officers to adjust their emotions, thoughts, and behavior to changing situations and conditions and allows them to be open to and tolerant of new ideas. Additionally, flexible officers are mentally agile, synergistic, and capable of reacting to change without rigidity. Necessary to success in the law enforcement profession is the ability to change assumptions and actions when evidence suggests they are mistaken as well as the ability to adapt to unfamiliar, unpredictable, and dynamic circumstances. A failure to develop flexibility results in rigidity, resistance to change, and outdated behavior patterns that are counterproductive to the ever-changing dynamics of public service.

Law enforcement officers are under constant pressure to resolve issues and problems quickly and effectively; therefore, they need to have good problem-solving skills. Competence in problem solving enables officers to identify and define problems while generating and implementing practical solutions. Officers skilled in problem solving use a systematic approach to making decisions, starting with gathering information and then weighing pros and cons. Officers without this skill depend on assumptions and have a tendency to jump to solutions and conclusions, flying by the proverbial seat of their pants and failing to use a structured strategy or process. Too often, officers with minimal competence in problem solving depend on short-term solutions to address symptoms of a problem rather than looking at the big picture to get at the source of the concern.

General Mood: *The general mood scale includes the subscales of happiness and optimism.*

*Important to officers' emotional survival is the element of optimism and what Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great: Why Some Companies Make the Leap... and Others Don't*, calls "confronting the brutal facts."¹⁹ The "brutal fact" for law enforcement agencies and officers is that they cannot continue to think in terms of doing more with less; instead, they must figure out what they can do with what they have. Optimism is the ability to look at the brighter side of life while maintaining a positive attitude, even in the face of adversity. Key to relating with others at the station and in the community is keeping a hopeful approach to life and maintaining a positive approach to daily living. Optimistic officers are able to create and sustain positive change through concentrating on their own circles of influence, as opposed to worrying about the concerns of the world. Pessimism, fear, and uncertainty, the results of low levels of optimism, result in time and energy wasted dealing with self-induced stress.*

The ability to feel satisfied with one's life—to enjoy oneself and others and to have fun—is the definition of the happiness competency. Happiness, a byproduct and/or a barometric indicator of the officer's overall degree of emotional intelligence and functioning, is associated with the general feeling of cheerfulness and enthusiasm. Unhappy officers will be dissatisfied with their jobs, their profession, and their lives and will avoid the company of others. These officers will lack motivation and drive and will have a negative attitude leading to withdrawal from social contact. The worst possible social action law enforcement officers can take is to disconnect from the public, their families, and their peer support group.

Measuring Emotional Intelligence in Law Enforcement Officers

Law enforcement officers are a unique and diverse group of people who experience a wide variety of emotions. For this reason, they face different and unusual challenges. Due to the nature, visibility, and importance of the services the profession provides to society, the occupation is highly scrutinized and held to high public standards. Because of the demands on and expectations of the profession, there is a need to know if emotional intelligence can be used for identifying competent law enforcement officers.

Knowledge of emotional intelligence competencies is important to law enforcement officers; research has demonstrated that managing one's mood and emotions relies on self-awareness and that positive moods tend to heighten perceptions and improve future efficacy and success.²⁰ Other research indicates that sharing of emotions enhances team building; people who model appropriate emotions during times of ambiguity can increase group solidarity, an extremely important fact for the law enforcement community, which faces ambiguity on a daily basis.²¹

Law enforcement culture is dynamic and professional, and divergence from the cultural norm is not always appreciated. This unique context of the law enforcement field might be a limitation in some agencies, but the process of identifying emotional intelligence competencies of exemplary officers will assist in succession planning. The research is clear that although technical skills are important, organizations need to identify, select, promote, and develop people based on emotional intelligence competency.²² A systematic and focused

approach must be undertaken to identify how emotional intelligence affects performance in the field. One potential avenue for future research could focus on comparing officers' perceptions of their own emotional intelligence with how others perceive them, in effect establishing a multirater measurement of emotional intelligence. Additional research could also examine the most effective means of teaching and developing emotional intelligence within the law enforcement culture. Longitudinal research investigating whether personal knowledge and understanding of one's own emotional intelligence competencies leads to leadership development or changed behavior would also prove to be fascinating.

To better serve and protect the public, law enforcement officers must learn to monitor their own and others' feelings and emotions and to use this knowledge to guide their thinking and actions. Today's law enforcement officers must effectively motivate, develop, and communicate with frontline workers and community members by managing relationships and emotional connections to balance the needs of the organization and community.²³ When officers demonstrate essential emotional intelligence competencies, they can become the very best public servants possible. ■

Notes:

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