Law Enforcement Mentoring Programs: Benefits and Effectiveness

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Abstract

     As things change within the law enforcement profession agencies are continually looking for ways to better assist and retain newly recruited officers. Mentoring has long been an informal way of building loyalty and giving a sense of belonging in the profession. Departments are now creating formal mentoring programs to utilize this tool for all new officers. This paper takes a look at the positive effects of law enforcement mentoring programs and evaluates two programs currently in use.

Introduction

     Law enforcement was once a widely desired profession a calling so to speak. Officers were satisfied with the fulfillment that completing their responsibilities of protecting and serving gave, while still enjoying the guarantee of a steady paycheck and job security. Unfortunately, as time wore on, the profession grew complacent and began to suffer for the rising number of employee turnovers. For numerous and differing reasons, many moved on and their vacancies were filled by the almost endless line of rookie officers.

     Today that long line of possible replacements is gone, and many agencies are struggling to fill positions. This high turnover and low supply has even left many agencies with positions that have gone vacant. This situation has placed such a high importance on retaining the newly recruited, those officers which agencies have invested such an enormous amount of time and money into.

     It is vital that the leadership in law enforcement both recognizes and addresses this critical issue. One program that may serve to bridge the gap between officer retention and declining experience is mentoring programs. Such programs can greatly aid new officers by assisting them with guidance and instruction during those first and very critical months of employment. Mentoring programs can be an invaluable tool building on the successes of the agency's Field Training Program by providing more detailed and comprehensive follow-up in certain areas.

Literature Review

Retention

A new recruit represents a valuable asset to a department. Time and money have been invested into each new officer and retaining that officer will prevent the department from further expenditures in recruitment. While salaries are generally dictated by city budgets there are other avenues to making an employee satisfied with his/her new position, thereby improving the likelihood of their continued retention. Chief Jack McKeever with the Lindenhurst Police Department discussed the important contribution that formal mentoring programs can have to the overall success of an agency. He noted that studies have shown appreciation and recognition as more desired from workers than salary increases (McKeever & Kranda, 2001). Leadership is tasked with making officers feel they are valued to the department. Having a mentor transition them into their new position shows the department values their role within the agency and that they are willing to invest in them to help ensure their success.

Another important aspect to retention is relationship development. Officers who develop quality relationships within the department are more likely to have agency loyalty and a sense of belonging. The mentor/recruit relationship is designed to be non-judgmental. The mentor's supportive role provides encouragement and information in a safe environment outside the chain of command. This can be especially helpful as new officers develop self-confidence and reduce fears of their new profession. In his article "Mentoring Our New Warriors," Neal Rossow addressed the fear experienced by new recruits when he explains the importance of understanding that fear in this profession is normal. "Who better to inform the new officer about performing while frightened than an experienced mentor who admits being frightened during life-threatening situations?" (Rossow, 2008). The confidential relationship between a mentor and new officer gives the recruit someone to talk to about issues he/she may not want to discuss with a supervisor or trainer.

Benefits of Mentoring Programs

New officers can benefit greatly from a mentoring relationship with a more experienced officer. Mentors can help recruits gain the skills they need to succeed while helping them avoid the numerous pitfalls; furthermore, the mentor/mentee relationship can open the door to new experiences and opportunities for professional growth. The veteran can help the new officer develop a desired career path and obtainable goals to work towards. This form of career guidance and the resulting relationship can greatly aid in the building of a much-needed self-confidence, one that is almost paramount to performing well in this field.

Honesty and integrity are core values that must be present for law enforcement personnel to perform their duties successfully. These basic principals should be present in a new recruit but need to be nurtured throughout their career. While serving as a mentor, a veteran officer has the unique opportunity to help the protégé build their career on these values. Neal Rossow states "The challenge of today's law enforcement leader is to ensure that the new recruit maintains a belief system where words like

honor, fairness, integrity, nobility, leadership and character are not just words, but a way of life" (Rossow 2008).

According to Best Practices for Institutionalizing Mentoring into Police Departments, the protégé is not the only one who benefits from the mentoring relationship.   Mentors can take personal pride in helping to develop the future of the department. They are often seen as valuable, respected members of the agency. To be an effective mentor they are required to stay current on department policies, procedures and practices. Staying current on this information helps not only the protégé but also the mentor with career ambitions. New ideas and new perspectives can be discovered from the interaction between mentor and mentee, therefore broadening the mentor's perspective on issues. Fulfilling the role of teacher a mentor's legacy will influence far more new officers than the ones they mentor personally. Their values will continue to be a part of the agency as many protégé's return to the program as mentors after having received positive rewards from their mentoring relationship. (Sprafka & Kranda, 2000)

Effectiveness of Mentoring Programs

Many departments with established mentoring programs are seeing positive results for both new recruits and mentors. According to Chief Wayne McCoy of the Blue Springs Police Department in Missouri their Recruit Peer-Mentoring Program has increased the rate of successful retention of new officers, and made the transition easier for all, from the academy through field training and probationary periods (McCoy, 2008).

In the March 2004 issue of The Police Chief, retired Lieutenant April H. Kranda of the Fairfax County Police Department states "As I look back on my career, I realize that whatever success I achieved as a police officer and after my retirement I can attribute to mentoring." She discusses the continued relationship she and her mentor maintain and the impact it had throughout her career (Deck & Juhl, 2004).

Sergeant Bob Morris of the Fontana Police Department in California was instrumental in establishing a formal mentoring program with the agency in 2003. According to Sergeant Morris they have had an "overwhelming positive response" to their program. Exit surveys completed by mentor and protégé alike have shown a benefit to both parties as well as the agency and community that they serve.   This departments program was implemented to help reduce turnover with new officers. They have found that the benefits go beyond simple retention and according to Lieutenant Alan Hostetter who is the programs coordinator they would continue the program even if retention rates did not improve. He states "It just makes good sense to offer assistance to newly hired personnel and make them feel welcome and part of the team from day one" (Morris & Hostetter, 2008).

Methods

The purpose of this research was to measure the effectiveness and benefits of current law enforcement mentoring programs. A total of 65 surveys were sent to current and past participants from two law enforcement agencies with active mentoring programs. The two-page questionnaire utilized closed-ended, multiple choice and open-ended questions to measure frequency and methods of communication with mentors and the participants opinion of the program in which they were involved. A phone interview was also conducted with contacts at each agency to gain information about each programs structure. Of the surveys sent out 36 were returned resulting in a 55% response rate. Both mentoring programs are required by the agency for new recruits but the pairing of mentor/mentee, mentor training and the process in which the programs are managed vary greatly. Due to the differences between the two mentoring programs in question the results are presented separately.

Results

Florida Agency

The participating Florida agency responded with the highest number of returned surveys 28 out of 45. Having a local contact with this agency made survey distribution and return an easier process therefore resulting in a higher percentage of return. The mentoring program has been in place for three years and lasts for the first year of an officer's employment. In this agency mentees are required to participate and mentors participate on a voluntary basis. There is no formal training for the mentors. It is preferred that they have at least five years of experience in a multitude of assignments. New officers are paired with a mentor after review of their application data. Mentors and mentees are then introduced through a formal letter allowing the meeting times to be set by the participants. Meetings between the mentor and protégé are not required.

Participants were asked how often they had communication with their mentors. Of the respondents three had contact with their mentors an average of four times per month, while one had met three times per month, three met and average of two times per month and twelve met a least once per month. Of the remaining responses eight stated they did not have contact with their mentors. Two of the eight had not been assigned a mentor although the mentoring process is required by the agency.

To determine the most used method of communication the participants were asked to rate by percentage the type of contact they had with their mentors. Scoring this section has proved problematic due to types of responses. Not all participants used percentages in their answers. Several simply checked the types of correspondence that had been used. When percentages are assigned evenly by the number of types checked the results are as follows. Phone communication was by far the most common method used at 53%. In person meetings occurred during 31% of contact while email was utilized 14% of the time. The remaining 2% was listed as other means of communication.

Program elements were measured using a numbered rating system. Participants were asked to rate on a scale of 1 to 5 (1 = extremely ineffective, 2 = ineffective, 3 = somewhat effective, 4 = effective, 5 = extremely effective) different aspects of the mentoring program. The elements being rated were overall effectiveness, feedback from mentor, program orientation, length of program, frequency of correspondence/meetings and opportunities to ask questions. The average score for overall effectiveness for the program was 2.5. Among the eight who had not met with their mentors the average score was 1 or extremely ineffective. For those who met an average of once per month the mean score was 3.4. For those who met more frequently three to four times a month the effectiveness rating averaged a 3.

The second element measured, feedback from mentor, also had an average rating of 2.5. This score dropped to 1 for those who did not have mentoring meetings. Mentees receiving input from their mentor once a month rated the feedback 3.3 on average. An average score of 3.25 was given for the group with three or more meetings per month.

Program Orientation rated a 1 among the group with no meetings, a 3 for the group with one meeting per month and a 3.5 for the group with the most meetings per month. Length of Program averaged 1.25 for the first group, a 3.33 for the group with monthly meetings and a 2.25 for the group with numerous meetings per month. Frequency of Correspondence/Meetings averaged a .75 for the group without meetings, 2.86 for those meeting once per month and 2.5 for those meeting three to four times a month. Opportunities to Ask Questions had an average score of 1.5 for the group without meetings, 4.00 for the group with one meeting per month and 3.5 for the group with three or more meetings per month.

The final portion of the survey asked open-ended questions allowing the participant to express in their own words their opinion about the strengths and weaknesses of the program. This section provided better insight into why some benefited from the program while others did not. In the first group of those who had not met with a mentor concerns expressed included the need for mandatory meetings and more structure for the program. The group who averaged one meeting a month with their mentors listed positive benefits as well as some suggestions for improvement. Several in this group stated the program felt awkward or initiating contact with a stranger was uncomfortable, while others listed scheduling conflicts as an issue with their mentor. On the positive side participants liked having someone they could ask questions to that was not a supervisor and outside of the FTO program. One suggested more meeting opportunities with other mentors to get different perspectives. In the third group who had met more often with mentors it was expressed that mentors helped ease tension and nervousness and provided a neutral point of contact for information. The need for mentor training, mandatory meetings and a follow up process where also listed as concerns.

California Agency

The second agency surveyed was located in California. Twenty surveys were sent out and eight were returned resulting in a 40% response. This agency has had an established mentoring program since 2003. Mentors participate voluntarily and attend a

five-hour training course before they are assigned to the program. Newly hired officers fill out a confidential questionnaire, which includes information about past history, hobbies and other personal interest. The mentoring program committee then takes this information and tries to match the officer with a mentor that has similar interest or background. The program itself is structured to last for a year. During this time either the protégé or mentor can ask for a new mentor to be assigned if the match is not well suited. An exit interview is completed at the end to measure the strengths and weaknesses of the program.

Three respondents met with their mentors once per month, three had an average of two meetings per month and two met three to four times per month. The majority of communication with this group was by phone at 52% with 38% being in person and the remaining 10% was through email.

The overall effectiveness rated an average of 3.75. Among those who met once per month the effectiveness scored a 4, while those who met twice per month gave it a 3. The two mentee's who had met three to four times a month measure its effectiveness 4.5 on average. In regards to the feedback received from their mentor the overall rating averaged 4.25. Broken into groups those with one meeting per month scored it an average of 4.33, two meetings a month 3.6 and those with more frequent meetings gave it a 5.

Program orientation scored an overall 3.5. Those meeting once per month rated orientation a 4 on average while those meeting twice per month rated it a 3. The group with three or more meetings a month rated the program introduction as a 3.5.

Respondents were also asked to rate the length of the program. Overall length of program scored an average of 3.875 with the group. Those who met once per month scored program length an average of 4.33, the group meeting twice per month rated it a 3.33. The final group, which met, more than three times per month gave length of program a 4 on average.

The next topic participants were asked to rate was the frequency of correspondence or meetings. Overall this category scored a 3.875. Broken down those with one meeting gave it a 4, two meetings a 3.33 and those with three or more meetings a 4.5.

Opportunities to ask questions scored an average of 4.375. The group with one meeting per month rated question opportunities a 4.33. Those with two meetings gave it a 4 while those with more frequent meetings rate it a 5.

In the open-ended section participants from this group listed many positive aspects of the program. Those who met with their mentors once per month stated their mentors helped them understand department procedures and that they benefited from the friendships gained during the mentoring process. The only needed improvement listed was the need to meet with mentors more frequently. The second group, which met an average of twice a month, gave positive comments on having someone available to ask questions that were outside the FTO program. In the final group who met with their mentors at least three times per month increased feelings of acceptance and welcoming into the department family were expressed. No negative or needs for improvement were listed with this group.

When comparing the two programs the mentor training, structure and follow up procedures of the program in California had a positive effect on the responses from that

agency. While some of the respondents from the Florida agency did benefit from having a mentor there was several areas of concern expressed that if addressed could make the program even more effective.

Discussion

The first step toward addressing retention issues is to first recognize that the pressures associated with the training process can be huge and the amount of knowledge to be retained can be overwhelming. Adding to the complexity of this matter, the workforce employed by law enforcement agencies has become younger and less experienced, while the demands on officers are higher.

In the traditional law enforcement setting, at the completion of the Field Training Program the responsibility of guiding new officers fell to the shift or squad sergeant. In the absence of a supervisor the task fell to more veteran officers, many of who stepped in and assisted new officers in the learning process. Although the method may not have been the most effective, it was functional when a higher number of veteran officers occupied the ranks of each agency. This scenario has drastically changed in recent years, as today many squads consist of both officers and supervisors with fewer combined years of experience than past veteran officers. It is this area where a mentoring program can help to fill in the gaps making veteran officers available to new recruits even if they are on different squads.

For a mentoring program to have a positive impact on the retention of new recruits it is important for the department to be fully behind the program. Mentors need to have training and a clear understanding of the impact they have on a protégé. To ease the awkwardness of meeting it would be helpful to have a formal meeting between the mentor and mentee. One idea would be to have the mentor introduce the new recruit to others on staff and to show the new officer around the station. This will make the new officer feel welcome and help break the ice between the two. A structured meeting schedule could also benefit both the protégé and the mentor. Having a minimum number of meetings gives both parties a better feel for how the program should work. The program should also be monitored to ensure that the needs of the new recruit are being met. As with many volunteer programs having an oversight process in place insures participation by those involved. Finally having participants rate the program at the end will give insight into aspects of the program that work and those that do not and need to be changed.

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Appendix A

Mentoring Program Survey

I appreciate you taking a few minutes to complete this survey it will be used to complete my research paper. Your name or agency's name is not required. The surveys are anonymous and will be kept in the utmost confidence.

1.   How many years have you been with this law enforcement agency?   _____

2.   If less than one year, are you participating in the mentoring program available with this agency?
        ___ Yes   ___ No

3.   What was/is your motivation for participation?

        __ Required by Department
        __ Monetary Incentives
        __ Career Development
        __ Promotional Opportunities
        __ Continued Personal Improvement
        __ Other: _____

4.   How long have you been part of the mentoring program?   _____

5.   How many mentors have you been assigned during your time in the program?   _____

6.   Based upon your experiences as a Mentee, would you consider becoming a mentor?   ___Yes   ___No

7.   On average, how often do you communicate with your mentor during an average month? _____

8.   Assign by percentage, the methods you use to communicate with your mentor? **(Answer should total 100%)**

                In Person   _____
                By Phone   _____
                Memorandum   _____
                Email   _____
                Other written   _____
                Other   _____

9.   Please circle the answer that most appropriately reflects your opinion of your agency's mentoring program: (1=extremely ineffective, 2 = ineffective, 3 = somewhat effective, 4 = effective, 5=extremely effective).

      Overall Effectiveness: 1   2   3   4   5

      Feedback from Mentor: 1   2   3   4   5

      Program Orientation: 1   2   3   4   5

      Length of Program: 1   2   3   4   5

      Frequency of Correspondence/Meetings: 1   2   3   4   5

      Opportunities to Ask Questions: 1   2   3   4   5

10.   In what way(s) has being a Mentee been most helpful or beneficial to you?

_____

_____

_____

_____

11.   What aspect did you like most about the Mentoring Program?

_____

_____

_____

_____

12.   What aspect did you like least about the Mentoring Program?

_____

_____

_____

_____

13.   What changes would you make to the Mentoring program?

_____

_____

_____

Appendix B

Mentoring Program Phone Survey

I appreciate you taking a few minutes to complete this survey it will be used to complete my research paper. Your name or agency's name is not required. The surveys are anonymous and will be kept in the utmost confidence.

1.   How many years have you been with this police department? _____

2.   When you were hired was there a mentoring program and did you participate in the process? _____

3.   How long have you been a mentor? _____

4.   On average, how often do you communicate with your protégé? _____

5.   What methods do you use to communicate with your protégés? Give a percentage. **(Answer should total 100%)**

        In Person   ____
        By Phone   ____
        Email   ____
        Memorandum   ____
        Other written   ____
        Other   ____

6.   Please circle the answer that most appropriately reflects your opinion of your agency's mentoring program: (1=extremely ineffective, 5=extremely effective).

        Overall Effectiveness: 1   2   3   4   5

        Feedback from Mentor: 1   2   3   4   5

        Program Orientation: 1   2   3   4   5

        Length of Program: 1   2   3   4   5

        Frequency of Correspondence/Meetings: 1   2   3   4   5

        Opportunities to Ask Questions: 1   2   3   4   5

10.   In what way(s) has being a Mentor been most helpful or beneficial to you?

_____
_____
_____

11.   What aspect did you like most about the Mentoring Program?

_____
_____
_____

12.   What aspect did you like least about the Mentoring Program?

_____
_____
_____

13.   What changes would you make to the Mentoring program?

_____
_____
_____

14.   How is the mentoring program set up? Walk me through it.

_____
_____
_____

15.   Is there a length of time that the protégés are assigned to the program?

_____

16.   Any training required for the mentors?

_____
_____
_____

17.   Qualifications to become a mentor?

_____
_____
_____

18.   How are the Mentors and Protégés paired?

_____

_____

_____