

# Picking and Keeping Law Enforcement and Corrections Officers in Florida

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## Abstract

*Ability, motivation, and direct contact with the supervisor influence the performance of employees. Ability is related to the mental, physical, and emotional condition of a person to do a certain thing well. Motivation and direct contact with the supervisor have to do with goal setting, training, feedback, and removal of performance barriers. This study also found that there is a correlation between education and the ability to perform successfully as a Florida law enforcement or corrections officer. In addition, it was found that conduct most likely to be problematic to the success of these officers included: lying, stealing, physically abusing others, drugs, absenteeism, and "doing just enough to get by." This information forms the basis for recommended strategies to help criminal justice agencies hire wisely and develop star performers.*

## Introduction

Law enforcement and corrections agencies need to place a high priority on two areas:

1. Picking not only qualified officers but those who also have not developed habits that will likely result in serious discipline problems. This is related to the officer's education and past behavior.
2. Keeping officers who are physically, mentally, and emotionally able to do their jobs. This is a function of supervisor contact, direction, training, and support.

Specific strategies are available to law enforcement and corrections agencies to use in their selection of employees and in the interaction between supervisors and officers. This paper will examine a variety of strategies for selecting the right candidates to be law enforcement and corrections officers and keeping them. The paper is divided into two sections: Selection Strategies and Retention Strategies.

## Selection Strategies

Research shows that the selection process is the first place where future performance can be evaluated. If hiring is done wisely, officers enter their agencies with the mental, physical, and emotional ability to interrelate in a heterogeneous internal and external community.

Wise hiring requires a focused background investigation, which is the most accurate forecaster of success. The hiring process can be used to measure abilities, uncover habits, and gauge motivation. The investigation should cover education, behavior, truthfulness, motivation and self-respect because the best predictor of future

behavior is past behavior under similar circumstances (Dwyer, 1990). A manager shows support for existing officers by bringing in new officers with the ability and motivation to do the job.

All newly hired law enforcement and corrections officers should be required to have completed an associate degree program. This may place a hardship on some law enforcement and corrections agencies. However, the evidence is clear that there is a correlation between misbehavior reported to the Florida Criminal Justice Standards and Training Commission and the level of education completed by both law enforcement and correction officers.

A study of the 1988-1992 Florida Criminal Justice Standards and Training Statistical Reports on Probable Cause and Disciplinary Proceedings revealed that a majority of the law enforcement and corrections officers identified as problem performers did not have an associate degree. A total of 1,622 officers were referred for discipline in Florida between 1988 and 1992, as shown in Tables 1 and 2. Of those, 1,312 had not completed the associate degree program. That was 81% of the officers referred to the commission.

By hiring applicants with an associate degree, serious discipline problems may significantly decrease. This will require many agencies to revise their minimum qualifications. In Florida, legislative revision to §943.13(3), F.S., would be required. It may be possible to allow agencies to hire an officer who is actively working on an associate degree in a trainee class until the degree is awarded. This education requirement has been recommended by numerous law enforcement administrators as well as commissions (Murphy, 1985).

An applicant's truthfulness can be fairly assessed based on the responses in the application and to interview questions. If the applicant is not truthful on every question, regardless of the reason, there is a strong correlation that the value for detail may not be characteristic of the applicant. Untruthfulness, as reported by the Florida Criminal

Table 1 Educational Background of Law Enforcement Officers Referred for Discipline, 1988 - 1992					
	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
Total Referrals	168	123	126	186	264
Without AA/AS degree	117	90	101	133	198
% Without AA/AS degree	76%	73%	80%	72%	75%

Table 2 Educational Background of Corrections Officers Referred for Discipline, 1988 - 1992					
	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992
Total Referrals	152	144	98	154	207
Without AA/AS degree	130	123	91	138	191
% Without AA/AS degree	86%	85%	93%	90%	92%

Table 3 Primary Behavior Problems Experienced by Law Enforcement Officers, 1988 - 1992						
Reason for Referral	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	TOTAL
Untruthfulness	11	2	13	21	40	87
Stealing	10	10	12	21	22	75
Abusing Others	19	10	14	7	66	116
Sex Crimes	17	6	9	6	14	52
Drugs	61	65	24	35	20	205
TOTAL	118	93	72	90	162	535

Table 4 Primary Behavior Problems Experienced by Corrections Officers, 1988 - 1992						
Reason for Referral	1988	1989	1990	1991	1992	TOTAL
Untruthfulness	25	3	29	42	60	159
Stealing	29	20	16	24	31	120
Abusing Others	19	28	24	38	64	123
Sex Crimes	28	16	12	11	25	92
Drugs	56	37	19	32	26	170
TOTAL	157	104	100	147	206	714

Justice Standards and Training Commission, is a growing discipline problem for both law enforcement and corrections officers.

The majority of discipline cases heard by the commission between 1988 and 1992 related to four general types of behavior:

1. Untruthfulness: false reports; witness tampering; perjury.
2. Stealing: larceny; scheme to defraud; stolen property; extortion; vehicle theft; embezzlement; burglary; robbery; worthless checks.
3. Abusing others: sexual assault; assault; excessive force; battery; homicide; resisting arrest; driving while intoxicated; cruelty; family offense; manslaughter; hit & run; arson; threat to kill; murder; solicit to murder.
4. Sex Crimes: sex offense; obscenity; commercialized sex; relationship with inmate; prostitution; indecent exposure.

Tables 3 and 4 summarize the information in the commission's statistical reports and show the number of officers in Florida referred for discipline in these specific

categories of behavior. The total number of officers disciplined for lying, stealing, abusing others, sex crimes, and drugs was 1,249 or 77% of the total discipline cases referred to the commission. This data, published in 1992, suggests that picking officers should focus on past behavior in those same areas. The tables also show that discipline for untruthfulness and abusive conduct increased between 1986 and 1992 while drug problems decreased. Decreased drug-related discipline problems may have been a result of the state's drug-testing policy for the last several years. Florida's five-year record may be used to support hiring decisions based on education and specific past conduct since it appears to be related to future success in these positions.

Since we know that the untruthful characteristic of an individual has been the third most frequent cause for formal discipline of officers in Florida, it would be wise to eliminate all applicants who are untruthful in the selection process.

The background investigation also should focus on self-respect and respect of others and property. Approximately 30% of discipline cases in Florida involve abusing others and stealing. While the number of stealing cases has remained fairly constant since 1988, cases of abuse have significantly increased in both law enforcement and corrections organizations (Tables 3 and 4). Learning about an applicant's past behavior in these areas requires specific questions dealing with abusing others and stealing. These questions should be developed and added to applications and interview questions for law enforcement and corrections officers.

Self-respect and self-control are two more characteristics that should be checked during a background investigation of an applicant. Screening out applicants who have habits of stealing, untruthfulness, abusing others, and abusing themselves would be wise in order to avoid future discipline problems.

There may be conflicts when an applicant is totally truthful about his/her past behavior and it relates to the likelihood of future problems. While this past behavior is still a predictor of the likelihood of future problems, resolving this conflict will be a judgement call by the hiring authority. Evaluation of applicants should take into consideration the length of time since the behavior, the likelihood it is a habit, the age and maturity of the applicant then and at the time of the evaluation, the recognition of the unacceptable behavior, and any rehabilitation steps taken.

The findings of the background investigation or responses on the application or interview questions about an applicant's self-respect and values regarding life, property, and truthfulness are now shown to be a valid basis for employment decisions in Florida criminal justice agencies. Since the majority of discipline cases referred to the commission relate to dishonesty, theft, abusing others, sex crimes, and drugs, there is a likelihood that this type of behavior was characteristic of those officers before employment. By reporting past behavior the future success or failure of officers can be predicted.

The final step in the hiring process is to determine the applicant's work history and motivation. In 1981 a major study was completed by surveying students who were law enforcement supervisors attending the FBI National Academy. This study, and a 1985 study, of attitudes of law enforcement supervisors revealed that most law enforcement supervisors thought that laziness, attendance, and "just getting by" were the most frequent problems they had with officers. Interestingly, the studies also revealed that keeping officers was the desired result of discipline (Robinette, 1987).

Since laziness, absenteeism, and doing just enough to get by have been identified in two national surveys of law enforcement supervisors, focusing on the work ethic of applicants prior to employment may allow agencies to predict the future behavior.

Absenteeism records are usually kept by previous employers of applicants. Work habits are also remembered by associates and supervisors of applicants. Employees who are hardly ever on time or do not go to work regularly are usually identified and such habits should be reported in the background check. This is another area of questions that should be developed for the employment application and interview process.

Laziness, absenteeism, and doing just enough to get by are characteristics that may be a shared responsibility of the employee and the employee's supervisor or work environment. Interviews can usually determine the reasons an applicant may be referred to as lazy, absent from work frequently, or arriving late and leaving early. Sometimes, employees have the mental, physical, and emotional ability to be a success, but their current work environment has contributed to performance problems.

### **Retention Strategies: Developing Star Performers**

Norman Maier and Victor Vroom (Robinette, 1986) suggest that employee performance is a function of motivation, ability, and contact with the supervisor. Thus, developing officers as performers is the primary job of supervisors, managers, and administrators. How the variables of the work environment are managed in an agency will raise or lower individual and organizational performance. When the hiring decision is made, the officer should have the ability and motivation to do the job. Performance success after employment is improved by: motivating, setting expectations, constantly providing feedback, and training for results. This is the role of the immediate supervisor. If candidates with predictable performance problems have been eliminated in the selection process, the organization is dependent on the immediate supervisor's techniques to improve performance to help develop an officer's sense of value toward his/her work.

From the first day of work no officer can be overlooked. Each officer must have constant contact with his/her supervisor to reinforce efforts -- good or bad. Almost no error in behavior of an officer results in a serious consequence initially, therefore, most can be informally corrected without destroying self-esteem. Performance cannot be improved by simply changing inputs of knowledge and information. It is based on a deliberate plan to build self-esteem (Byham and Cox, 1992).

Everyone enjoys power and few enjoy being oppressed. Criminal justice agencies can provide a great deal of energy to their officers or they can drain energy from their officers. Too often officers in the criminal justice system come to work, do what they are told, and at the end of the day carry themselves home. To maintain energy, people need to be moving with a purpose that is personally important to them. One characteristic of a successful supervisor is the ability to create an environment where everyone feels good about his/her work.

The kinds of things that drain energy from employees and techniques to energize people are listed below:

### Drains Energy

- Confusion
- Lacking Trust
- Not being listened to
- Someone solving problems for you
- Not knowing you are succeeding
- A boss taking credit for others' ideas
- Not enough resources to do the job well
- Believing you can't make a difference
- A job simplified to the point it has no meaning
- Treating everyone the same

### Charges Energy

- Direction, clear on key result areas, measurements, goals
- Trust
- Listening
- Solving problems as a team
- Praise
- Recognition
- Resources readily available
- Knowing self importance to organization
  - Expanding responsibility
- Flexible control

Most of these energy drains have to do with a supervisor's lack of trust and confidence in workers and an environment where workers have little self-esteem and little control.

These lists show that more effort is required of supervisors who charge their officers with energy that produces meaningful work and results in high self-esteem. Making an officer feel inferior and inadequate for mistakes takes away from the value of a person. Such supervision does not enhance anyone's self-esteem and should be avoided. All contact between a supervisor and an officer should include talk about job related performance. Praising employees about the way they look or play softball adds little to their self-esteem at work. All contact between officers and their immediate supervisors should include some positive statement about work performance.

Supervisors need to be good listeners. Attentive listening, letting people finish their thoughts, and going over what was said shows officers that they are valued by the organization. One part of communication is listening; the other part is responding with respect to an officer's thoughts and experience.

Another step to energize people is to acknowledge their abilities, skills, and motivation by asking for help in solving problems. This places a great deal of confidence and trust in the officer as well as making the officer feel valuable. Saying to an officer, "We have a problem, I would like your help," or to a group, "We have a big problem, I'd like everyone's help," energizes people and causes movement towards a goal.

Intervening to improve performance means constant feedback to officers: providing a non-stifling work environment; rewarding enterprise; and praising effort, risk taking, responsibility, and a job well done. Officers deserve a performance system that is clearly delineated and removes potential conflicts between them and their supervisors over evaluations. This can only be accomplished through clearly stated goals and expectations of how they will be judged, defining unsuccessful, successful, and exceptional performance. Many performance appraisal systems describe only that behavior which results in successful job performance and do not set specific standards for exceptional work.

Supervisors who over-control or abandon control usually drain energy from officers. However, the use of situational control will provide a charge to energize. People respond negatively to controls when they are inappropriate for the situation. They don't resent controls that add value to the organization, customer, or employee. Supervisors will always have the responsibility to:

- Know what is going on.
- Set the direction for the unit.
- Make the decisions employees can't make.
- Ensure that people are on course.
- Offer guidance.
- Open doors to clear the way.
- Assess performance.
- Be a smart manager and good leader.

## **Conclusion**

After selecting the most likely candidates to succeed as law enforcement and corrections officers, individual behavioral performance problems still may surface. They must be immediately addressed. This is more likely if there is constant contact with some value between the supervisor and officer. Officers who have erred need coaching on how to succeed or improve their performance. The coaching steps include:

1. Explain and discuss the purpose and importance of what is being taught.
2. Explain process to be used.
3. Show how to do it.
4. Observe officers practicing the process.
5. Provide immediate and specific feedback (coach again or reinforce success).
6. Express confidence in the person's ability to be successful.
7. Agree on follow-up actions.
8. People learn faster from successes than failures.
9. Provide more information about the job.

Hurdles in performance and success of officers may involve defensiveness, anger, and mistrust. Officers need direction, knowledge, resources, and support. By far, the most influential person to charge an officer with work energy is the supervisor to whom the employee directly reports. This requires law enforcement and corrections supervisors to have skills required to improve their officers and work teams. For example, they should be able to build self-esteem after selecting those candidates who are least likely to have serious discipline problems. According to a 1988 survey, potential workers ranked their values in job opportunities as follows:

1. Challenging Work
2. Personal Growth
3. Pleasant Working Conditions
4. Good Social Relations
5. Job Authority
6. Service to Society
7. Job Security
8. Professional Recognition
9. Opportunity for Advancement
10. Pay & other Financial Rewards
11. Prestige

Incentives other than money may be just as important to new officers and they are the responsibility of the immediate supervisors. If supervisors have knowledge about the abilities, habits, and motivation of incoming officers and constantly take steps to build self-esteem, there will be higher performance levels and fewer discipline problems among law enforcement and corrections officers.

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