

ABOUT LEADING LAW ENFORCEMENT

Most law enforcement agencies across this great nation (at last count there were over eighteen thousand) are organized with a paramilitary command structure. This type of rank structure is based on ascending ranks beginning at the entry level of patrol officer, corporal, sergeant, lieutenant, captain, major, and deputy chief to chief of police. The ranks of captain and above are generally considered to be the executive officers of the department.

Chain of command is an important concept in this type of leadership structure. Most law enforcement agencies have followed this leadership model for a major portion of the twentieth century. In the 1990s, however, police organizations saw a major philosophical change in how decisions were made. This was during what is often referred to as the community policing era. During this decade, decisions were often pushed down or moved to the lowest levels. The whole idea was to give rank and file officers the flexibility to make important decisions for themselves rather than relying upon the executive staff. This was a drastic deviation from the old chain of command where the chief or commanding officers made just about all the organizational decisions. It took some getting used to but proved to be a very effective change from the past. I believe that it was from this 1990s decade on that the development of leaders and leadership became critical to the successful operation of police organizations. And since police organizations do work that is mission-critical, police leadership became the model and test ground for leadership in the business world as well.

Although the appearance of a chain of command would appear, at first glance, rather rigid or nonproductive, leaders have mitigated that rigidity to meet the twenty-first century demands of leadership by adopting an open-door policy that allows the chiefs or department heads the ability to communicate upward and downward without punishment. Likewise, the lower levels can communicate upward with greater flexibility. This has created some concerns because the rules for following this open communication are nonexistent and loosely written. Lower-level leaders experience angst when they hear that someone who works for them has skipped them and gone straight to the top. Leaders need to establish clearer guidelines on how the open-door policy really works and how it can be successfully executed so that it works to its fullest potential.