PSO Perspective

Leaders and Leavers: The Impact of Poor Leadership on Police Attrition

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In our research on voluntary resignations of police officers in England and Wales, we found that a sense of 'organisational injustice' was at the heart of officer decisions to end their policing careers. This injustice was felt in relation to promotion and progression opportunities, organisational flexibility, a lack of voice and perceptions of poor leadership. It is this latter factor of poor leadership which we focus on in this *PSO Perspective*.

Rising Numbers

The number of police officers voluntarily resigning from the police service in England and Wales has risen sharply and is continuing to rise - from 1,158 in the year ending March 2012 to 5,058 in the year ending March 2024. Voluntary resignations are now the largest category of leavers (overtaking retirement for the first time) and the 'leaver rate' has risen from 0.8% in 2012 to 3.4% in 2024, precluding this overall rise being explained away by higher officer numbers.

Perceptions of Poor Leadership

Our qualitative research on police attrition and retention has revealed that perceptions of poor leadership in policing strongly dominate the explanations from ex-police officers as to their reasons for leaving. The quotes provided are illustrative of the coded themes and reflect much wider sentiments. This perception of poor leadership and management was directed at all levels of supervision and support, whether immediate line management, middle management or senior management within the organisation. This is hardly surprising given the College of Policing's own acknowledgement in 2023 - referring to leadership across policing - that "investment in police leadership has been neglected and undervalued for too long".

Participants discussed not feeling valued or trusted by management to do the job they were given. Such observations were particularly directed at middle management:

"The honest truth is I never felt very valued or that the police were particularly interested in me".

"Probably one of the biggest things - the level of autonomy and your ability and for people to trust your decision making has been eroded".

For many, this was perceived to be because supervisors and managers were too focused on their own career progression:

"Management were there purely to get something out of you to benefit their own career".

"They are interested in you if you want to get promoted because that reflects on themselves, because if they promote a lot of people, they themselves will get promoted because they've promoted a lot of people".

Many participants felt that their efforts were not acknowledged, not just in relation to progression opportunities but also in terms of the recognition of their day to day work:

"you try really, really hard at a job and you would go above and beyond and then there'd just be no recognition for it".
"all it needs is a, oh, you've done a good job there. But it just didn't materialise".

Support from managers for both welfare and professional situations was identified as a significant problem, exacerbated by the regular movement of managers and supervisors. This was particularly the case with officers who had taken a period of absence, whether that was due to sickness, parental leave and/or career breaks:
"They always talked about support but … they never really understood that it was down to them to try and help support me".
"When I had to go home because of mental health, I didn't get a single phone call from any of my inspectors for four months, nothing. Not a single phone call. And that makes you feel really … feel really sick".

The Absence of 'Voice'
The concerns about poor leadership are exacerbated by an inability for many within policing to have their voices heard. The persistent organisational and cultural focus on hierarchy within policing exacerbates these issues. Our participants reported difficulties in challenging the traditional ways of doing things and if doing so, were viewed as problematic or were met with defensiveness or exclusion. Despite the newly revised 'Code of Ethics' stating that the policing organisation will *"ensure that people feel valued and listened to by giving them opportunities to share their views and taking these views into account",* those of rank were reported as being particularly dismissive of alternative suggestions or feedback. Policing needs to be mindful that organisations where voice is not encouraged can find that a culture of silence permeates and with it a decline in both commitment and satisfaction.

Conclusion
Organisational commitment is an essential component in an employee's psychological attachment to their workplace and can be enhanced by (amongst other things) strong leadership. What *strong* leadership means however needs revising and rethinking within our current police workforces. The challenges of leading a multi-generational workforce with differing expectations and motivators requires a nuanced leadership style. A single approach to all challenges is increasingly inappropriate. Creating a culture in which a multiplicity of voices can be heard, alongside the continued need for a command and control style approach in certain circumstances, requires a certain amount of "organizational ambidexterity". For senior leaders to be able to operate in both a hierarchical environment and in one in which the workforce wants more of a voice, creates the need for a new approach to leadership at all levels.

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About the Michigan State University Police Staffing Observatory
The Police Staffing Observatory (PSO) is a global collaborative of academics, scholars, practitioners, and students working with Michigan State University to promote evidence-based police workforce research, strategy, and operations. It aims to advance police workforce knowledge and its application through research and its dissemination, including practitioner partnerships.