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# Perspective

## Increasing Officer Resilience Through Servant Leadership

*By Justin K. Badger, Ed.D.*



Law enforcement work remains inherently stressful and at times traumatic. From dangerous pursuits to officer-involved shootings, police professionals experience situations that may cause psychological and physiological disruptions. Left unaddressed, adverse symptoms of stress and trauma can negatively impact the careers and personal lives of these officers.<sup>1</sup>

However, increased resilience—the ability to perform through stressful and traumatic events while retaining one's capacities in the aftermath—may reduce such harmful effects.<sup>2</sup> To this end, leaders can bolster officers' resilience by practicing servant leadership.<sup>3</sup> Strengthening them in such a manner helps prepare personnel for the challenges ahead and may even prove lifesaving.

## What is servant leadership?

The founder of the modern servant leadership movement, Robert Greenleaf, offered a simple description of this approach. “The servant-leader is servant first...it begins with the natural feeling that one wants to serve, to serve *first*. [Servant leaders] make sure that other people’s highest priority needs are being served.”<sup>4</sup>

He measured the effectiveness of servant leaders through the following questions: “Do those served grow as persons? Do they, while being served, become healthier, wiser, freer, more autonomous, more likely themselves to become servants?”<sup>5</sup>



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Many police executives extol servant leadership behaviors as ideal for law enforcement.<sup>6</sup> Servant leaders naturally create environments conducive to increased resilience, augmented through advancements to the holistic self.

Therefore, improving mental, physical, spiritual, and social fitness strengthens resilience.<sup>7</sup>

Leaders can adapt to servant leadership behaviors by gaining self-awareness of their beliefs, values, feelings, and ways of thinking.<sup>8</sup> Through various methods of reflective practice and introspection, leaders may address their physical, mental, spiritual, and social deficiencies. Those who embody resilience will help strengthen their followers' efforts in the same. Resilient individuals are prepared to both face and grow from adversity.

## **How is it Practiced?**

Specifically, leaders align with servant leadership tenets when they create collaborative environments for their teams to thrive in, promote subordinates' autonomy, and lead with ethical and moral decision-making.<sup>9</sup>

### **Collaborative Environments**

Leaders can create collaborative environments through focused listening, empathic understanding, and careful articulation of the group's collective voice. Ideally, they surround themselves with team members who have complementary strengths.

Collaboration entails more than basic teamwork. It occurs when leaders facilitate an environment that allows each individual's voice to be heard.<sup>11</sup> When collaborating, leaders further the collective understanding of the group and champion its agenda. Synergism results due to the use of every member's strengths, which become enhanced through autonomous growth.<sup>12</sup>

Creating collaborative environments involves community building through forging strengthened bonds and relationships. Collaborating leaders create environments where their followers feel safe and free to fail.

### **Subordinate Autonomy**

Leaders promote subordinates' autonomy by providing opportunities for them to learn and grow. This involves asking them not only to go through a door but to design the door itself.<sup>13</sup> After giving employees the necessary resources, leaders allow them to achieve on their own.

Promoting others' autonomy can make personnel feel secure and influence resilience. However, leaders must consider individuals' unique capacities and keep their best interests in mind concerning growth. Sometimes, this means putting employees in uncomfortable—but not impossible—positions. While growth results from adversity, leaders must not stretch personnel beyond their abilities.

Leaders give away power when providing autonomy to subordinates. Those secure in their leadership identity feel comfortable delegating authority to employees and providing them with the flexibility to accomplish tasks their own way.<sup>14</sup> When caring enough to mentor someone and influence growth, leaders will applaud a subordinate's success and share it as their own.

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## **Ethical and Moral Decision-Making**

To lead with ethical and moral decision-making, leaders must be authentic. In this regard, they need to demonstrate consistent behaviors across both personal and professional engagements. Importantly, employees they mentor will adopt like values and make similar ethical and moral decisions in their own leadership practice.

Servant leaders desire to serve first; therefore, they make service-oriented decisions. To make ethical and moral decisions, they exercise foresight by considering the ramifications of their choices, not just for themselves or their organization but for all stakeholders potentially affected. “What is the effect on the least privileged in society; will they benefit, or, at least, not be further deprived?”<sup>15</sup>

Leaders can practice ethical and moral decision-making by critical reflection. They consider how to improve the quality of life for disadvantaged groups and remain committed to self and social betterment through continuous inquiry.<sup>16</sup> Leading with ethical and moral decision-making means making choices with integrity according to an uncompromised value set. Further, an ethical and moral leader leads from a place of authenticity and responds from the same value set, no matter the situation.

## Conclusion

The inherent stress and trauma related to law enforcement work cannot be changed. However, leaders can evaluate how they behave toward subordinates and influence followers.

Adopting the servant leader behaviors of creating collaborative environments, promoting subordinates' autonomy, and leading with ethical and moral decision-making may influence increased resilience among officers, who later can become strong leaders themselves. As law enforcement leaders, our challenge is to commit these principles to our daily individual leadership practice.

**“Servant leaders desire to serve first; therefore, they make service-oriented decisions.”**

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<sup>1</sup> Nicole Nugent, “Early Predictors, Recovery, and Resilience: Efforts to Prevent PTSD in Children,” *The Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter* 28, no. 5 (May 2012): 4-6.

<sup>2</sup> Eileen Grafton, Brigid Gillespie, and Saras Henderson, “Resilience: The Power Within,” abstract, *Oncology Nursing Forum* 37, no. 6 (2010): 698-705, accessed June 28, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1188/10.ONF.698-705>; and Glenn E. Richardson, “The Metatheory of Resilience and Resiliency,” abstract, *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 58, no. 3 (April 2002): 307-321, accessed June 28, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1002/jclp.10020>.

<sup>3</sup> For additional information, see Justin K. Badger, “The Influence of Servant Leadership on Subordinate Resilience in Law Enforcement” (PhD diss., Creighton University, 2017), accessed July 1, 2019, <https://dspace2.creighton.edu/xmlui/handle/10504/111783>.

<sup>4</sup> Robert K. Greenleaf, *The Servant as Leader* (Cambridge, MA: Center for Applied Studies, 1970).

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Gennaro F. Vito, Geetha Suresh, and George E. Richards, “Emphasizing the Service in Public Service: The Opinions of Police Managers,” abstract, *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies and Management* 34, no. 4 (2011): 674-686, accessed July 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1108/13639511111180270>.

<sup>7</sup> Grafton, Gillespie, and Henderson.

<sup>8</sup> Graham Hart and Ruth Donde, “The Way to Great Leadership,” *Human Resources* 19, no. 4 (2014): 22-24, accessed July 3, 2019, <https://nzhrnews.hrinz.org.nz/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/October-November-2014-Magazine.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> For additional information, see Badger.

<sup>10</sup> Tom Rath and Barry Conchie, *Strengths Based Leadership: Great Leaders, Teams, and Why People Follow* (New York, NY: Gallup Press, 2008).

<sup>11</sup> Larry C. Spears, “Practicing Servant-Leadership,” abstract, *Leader to Leader* 34 (Fall 2004): 7-11, accessed July 1, 2019, <https://doi.org/10.1002/ltl.94>.

<sup>12</sup> Rath and Conchie.

<sup>13</sup> Japhet De Oliveira, “A Light Touch: Motivating and Leading Volunteers,” *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* 2, no 2 (2008): 68-73, accessed July 1, 2019, <https://digitalcommons.andrews.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?referer=https://www.google.com/&httpsredir=1&article=1015&context=jacl>.

<sup>14</sup> John C. Maxwell, *The 21 Indispensable Qualities of a Leader: Becoming the Person Others Will Want to Follow* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1999).

<sup>15</sup> Greenleaf.

<sup>16</sup> Linda Valli, “Listening to Other Voices: A Description of Teacher Reflection in the United States,” abstract, *Peabody Journal of Education* 72, no. 1 (1997): 67-88, accessed July 1, 2019, [https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327930pje7201\\_4](https://doi.org/10.1207/s15327930pje7201_4).