



I'm not faking being sick, I'm faking being well: The need for leadership in mental health for policing

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ABSTRACT

The prevalence of mental illness amongst law enforcement officers is increasing despite genuine intent by leaders, policy makers and practitioners to combat this public health epidemic. Significant gaps exist in understanding mental health leadership, governance, education, and training, and the influence police culture has on help-seeking behaviours. This paper argues that introducing constructive and actionable processes to address these gaps will benefit greater productivity, lower levels of absenteeism, lower insurance premiums, reduce risk factors for illnesses, improve quality of life and sense of well-being, elevate cognitive performance, and reduce levels of stress. This will encourage investment in mental health, strengthen police employee–employer relationships, and save many relationships and lives.

Key Words Police Culture; investment in mental health; mindfulness; psychological distress; path analysis.

INTRODUCTION

Good mental health is without a doubt important for everyone, and leaders can play an important role in safeguarding the mental health of people in the workplace. While more leaders and their employees can now talk about mental health without much of the stigma from the past, we still have a ways to go in terms of leaders properly supporting the mental health of their team. The prevalence of mental illness amongst law enforcement officers is increasing despite genuine intent by leaders, policy makers and practitioners to combat this public health epidemic (Kamkar et al., 2019).

The aim of this paper is to address the still too-evident lack of leadership action within the profession. It articulates measures that might help overcome these gaps and identifies practical mechanisms to advance better mental health for police. Finally, this paper will offer leaders a complimentary suite of actionable tools that may help shape, form, and provide a structure for leaders in supporting the development of an all-inclusive approach to implementing better mental health procedures in the policing workplace.

Leadership—It Is Better to Be Supportive than to Be Superior

Leadership has perhaps the biggest influence over the law enforcement workforce and its organization. Any change in

the perceptions of mental healthcare and attitudes towards people with mental illness among the workforce can only take place when the leadership drives the intention for this change throughout the organization. It is leadership that is required to understand the need for this shift in mindset among the entire workforce, both from the perspective of an organization's functioning and its social responsibility.

Many police executives around the world are struggling with how best to develop and implement appropriate mental health programs within their organizations. An extensive literature search has highlighted a noticeable lack of leadership development and training in police mental health. Leadership in policing is an essential element of the profession (Whitley, 2020). To date, much of leadership development and training has failed to focus on police well-being, especially mental health. It is highly likely that a police leader will supervise at least one team member with a mental illness, at some point in their career, whether or not they are aware of it. Many leaders, though, will struggle with identifying, acknowledging, and dealing with staff who might be suffering. This is totally understandable. Having to deal with mental health in the workplace can be highly confrontational and problematic for a leader and, without proper education and training in such matters, could lead to a devastating outcome (Martin et al., 2018).

Police leaders can no longer afford to be passive participants in the declining mental health of those men and

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women who put service before self, and the profession is amid a global mental health crisis. Leaders have a moral and legal obligation to ensure the health and safety of those they supervise, and, consciously or not, they play a pivotal role in creating the type of environment that either promotes or erodes mental and emotional safety (Heyman et al., 2018; Edwards & Kotera, 2021).

It has been well documented that policing is a stressful and hazardous occupation that can impair an officer's physical and mental health (Victoria Police Mental Health Review, 2017; Queirós et al., 2020; Axelrod, 2019; Burke, 2016; Deschamps et al., 2003; Tuckey et al., 2012). The policing community suffers a higher prevalence of stress-related illnesses than the general public (Soomro & Yanos, 2018). Research has shown repeatedly that exposure to occupational stress and trauma is directly related to higher rates of heart disease, divorce, sick days taken, alcohol abuse, and major psychological illnesses such as acute stress disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder, depression, and anxiety disorder (Waters, & Ussery, 2007; Zimmerman, 2012; Violanti et al., 2017; Gilmartin, 2002).

Evidence also exists that routine occupational stressors can be even more stressful to police officers than exposure to danger and critical incidents. Such routine occupational stressors can include an exclusionary or toxic workplace culture, ineffective management practices, real and perceived inequities in promotions and assignments, and moral injuries often resulting from declining internal and public trust. Continuing exposure to such environments can produce conditions that can easily compound those more commonly attributed to the traumatic aspects of police work (Lieberman et al., 2002). General Strain Theory (GST) is used to explain certain general effects upon police populations that may also affect how police might react to a situation in the workplace, at home, or in the field. Such reactions can lead a person to display behaviour associated with alleviating the pressure, such as anger, frustration, depression, isolation, and burnout (Bishopp, 2013; Ontario, 2019).

Some symptoms may include (Shim et al., 2015; Hoffart et al., 2022):

- Substance abuse: Consumption of excessive amounts of alcohol and taking legal and illegal drugs.
- Rumination: Extreme and ongoing focus on “depressive symptoms and on the implications of those symptoms.”
- Emotional numbing: Shutting down feelings to provide relief from stress and anxiety.
- Intrusive thoughts: Unwelcome or involuntary ideas and thoughts that may be upsetting and difficult to manage.
- Procrastination: Procrastination, like rumination, can lead to the conscious or unconscious avoidance of difficult issues or tasks that require completion.
- Behavioural disengagement: Under challenging situations, individuals may disengage or reduce the effort in a task or social situation.
- Risk-taking behaviour: Another form of behavioural disengagement used to alleviate the adverse effects of a situation.

To develop police leaders in mental health, several core capabilities ought to be considered, including the following:

Communication

Leaders need to be excellent communicators, and the ability to communicate as a formal leader comes down to mastering several skills (Eades, 2020). They include:

- Learning to listen properly. It is easy for persons in power positions to listen to respond instead of actively listening. If our focus is constantly on developing a response, it is likely that we will miss essential pieces of information.
- Considering body language. Non-verbal communication plays a large role in the way a message can be taken and/or delivered.
- Storytelling. Police love a great “war story.” Good stories engage, provide focus, and stick in the minds of those listening. They help to remember ideas and concepts in a way that a PowerPoint presentation or simply being “spoken at” cannot.
- Remaining calm—breathe and relax. Yes, it is amazing what stress can do to communication. The science behind breathwork has gained importance recently (Dispensa, 2011). By regularly using breathing techniques we can activate our “rest and digest” nervous system, supporting free-flowing communication and calming our thought processes.

Emotional Intelligence

Emotional intelligence is commonly defined as the ability to understand one's emotions and the emotions of others. It is a personal skill set that focuses on interpersonal abilities, helps understand our emotions and develop self-awareness, and improves the ability to relate with others to promote emotional and intellectual growth (Goleman, 1995).

Emotional intelligence (or EQ) can be developed throughout one's lifetime. It is a seemingly simple and attainable attribute one would almost expect most police leaders to possess. Emotional intelligence affects leadership in organizational culture and may come to define the skill set of the most exceptional leaders. Leadership is most effective when conducted through a lens of several emotional intelligence attributes (McCutcheon, 2018; Turner, 2009):

- Intrapersonal (self-regard/emotional self-awareness/assertiveness/independence/self-actualization)
- Interpersonal (empathy/social responsibility/interpersonal relationships)
- Stress management (impulse control)
- Adaptability (reality testing/flexibility/problem solving)
- General mood (happiness/optimism)

Vulnerability

Vulnerability in the workplace means admitting that you can make mistakes and acknowledging that you are, yourself, constantly learning and growing. As a leader, it can feel uncomfortable to do this. However, being honest and vulnerable in front of your staff will make you more relatable, can increase trust within a team, and shows that you are open to new information and creative solutions.

Unfortunately, for those with the most organizational power to exhibit vulnerability has historically been seen as an oxymoron in the policing environment. Police training and culture have resisted showing vulnerability, as it can

be perceived as being weak and lacking intestinal fortitude.

Three core skills that all leaders should possess include (Lofgren, 2019):

- Being open to exploring tough conversations. Embracing vulnerability starts by having open and honest conversations, even when it's uncomfortable.
- Letting go of your ego.
- Acknowledging your own triggers to lead from a courageous place.

Authenticity

Authenticity is the healthy alignment between internal values and beliefs and external behaviour. Authenticity comes from finding your style and your own way of leading—and making life decisions that reflect your ethics, values, and personality. Authentic leaders have the integrity and skills to make the right choices when necessary. Being self-aware will allow you to understand yourself and your relationship to those being supervised. Modesty, humility, and being genuine will foster trust in the workplace. Showing authenticity will provide you with the ability to make necessary decisions with integrity and in a manner that is more consistently supportive of your team (Ackerman, 2021).

Growth Mindset

Growth mindset is the belief that abilities can be developed. The continuing desire to embrace learning, and to recognize challenges and setbacks as sources of growth, creates and feeds drive and resilience for a leader and for those around them. A growth mindset will play an essential role in successful leadership. Leaders with a growth mindset embrace challenges, understand that long-term effort is a requirement, embrace criticism, and take inspiration from others (Dweck, 2006).

Empathy

Empathy has always been a critical skill for leaders. According to Miller (2011), three specific elements of empathy are critical to good leaders:

- Cognitive empathy—includes understanding an employee's unique experiences and the obligations they have outside of work.
- Emotional empathy—also known as affective empathy, is the ability to respond with an appropriate emotion to another's mental states.
- Empathic concern—is the ability to sense another's needs, and often respond with compassion and tender feelings, and a desire to want to spontaneously help.

Accountability

Accountability is one of the most valuable skills a police leader can master. Leadership accountability lays the foundation for an organization's culture, productivity, and overall success. Accountability is a skill that requires leaders to own up to their actions, decisions, and their mistakes. It's also the ability to follow up on the commitments they have made and not just dismiss them.

Leaders must regard their employees' health as an essential and necessary condition for organizational success (Relojo-

Howell, 2022). Being educated, empathetic, and understanding will help create a compassionate, caring and safe workplace where everyone can succeed while keeping their mental health intact (Davenport et al., 2016).

Understanding Stressors and Trauma in the Workplace—It's Not Stress That Kills Us, It's Our Reaction to It

Life is stressful enough for everyone. However, it can reach new and hazardous levels when we add into the mix the unique stressors associated with being a police officer. The dynamic and often problematic environment, exposure to trauma, and organizational injustices create a potent cocktail of situations leading to poor mental health within the workplace (Rousseau, 2022).

As a leader, understanding the potential organizational, internal, and external stressors that can affect police staff and potentially generate a negative psychological response is important. They include (Subošić, et al., 2018):

- *External stressors*—jurisdictional isolation, seemingly ineffective legal and court systems, adverse media accounts, impact of negative and venomous social media.
- *Internal stressors*—poor supervision and leadership, absence of career development opportunities, inadequate reward system, unpleasant policies, over-reporting, mountains of paperwork and budgetary constraints.
- *Performance stressors*—role ambiguity and conflict, adverse work and roster schedules, inherent fear and danger, sense of uselessness, and absence of closure.
- *Individual stressors*—feeling overcome by fear and danger, pressures to conform, gender disparity, bullying, sexual harassment, ethnicity and cultural differences, lack of unique understanding such as LGBTQII.
- *Life-threatening stressors*—ever present potential for injury or death to the individual, fellow police, or members of the public.
- *Social isolation stressors*—cynicism, isolation, and alienation from the community; prejudice and discrimination.
- *Organizational stressors*—administrative philosophy, changing policies and procedures, morale, job satisfaction, and misdirected performance measures.
- *Functional stressors*—role conflict/confusion, use of discretion, and legal mandates/obligations.
- *Personal stressors*—home life, including person issues, spousal, illness, problems with children and aging parents, marital distress, and financial constraints.
- *Physiological stressors*—fatigue, medical conditions, comorbid health issues, poor sleep, poor nutrition.
- *Psychological stressors*—all the above and the exposure to shocking situations.

The ability to recognize and respond to a range of mental health and stress injuries that regularly confront police, including acute trauma, cumulative trauma, compassion fatigue, vicarious trauma, operational stress, burnout, and moral injury, is an important capability to understand (US Center for Substance Abuse Treatment, 2014). Police leaders need to recognize that trauma cannot be wished away. It needs to be managed, worked through, and monitored by leaders and organizational support elements alike. Trauma does not simply disappear when police finish their shift. It can leave a

residual presence that can contribute to a long-term cumulative reaction if not identified, and if intervention strategies are not properly deployed early on (Louth et al., 2019).

Some police leaders may simply become stuck and immobilized in understanding the problems facing the occupation. Many leaders may be understandably concerned about how to balance compassion for an employee going through a mental health challenge with accountability for that individual's responsibilities and performance within the workplace. Many leaders will struggle with this concept, as they are reluctant to delve into dealing with mental health. After all, the topic can be vague, subjective, and awkward to engage in. It can be uncomfortable, complicated, and highly demanding.

Sometimes it is easy to tell that a colleague is going through a rough time, at other times it is not. There are many things to consider. Are they struggling with relationship issues, family issues like sick children or parents, a chronic illness, or having troubles with others in the workplace? Perhaps they have been exposed to a traumatic event or are engaged in units that deal with sexual assault, homicide, or crimes against children? Are there noticeable changes in their demeanour, appearance, or mannerisms, for instance where they have withdrawn and are not keeping in touch with co-workers or friends? Or perhaps, are they looking more dishevelled and tired than usual? These sorts of indicators may reflect an undue exposure to stress and may be an indication that they are simply "not in a good place" (Liu et al., 2022). If so, it is a good idea to check in.

The Impact of Police Culture on Mental Health

Workplace culture is a collection of attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours that make up the regular atmosphere in a work environment. Culture is the character and personality of your organization. It is what makes the profession unique and is the sum of its values, traditions, beliefs, interactions, behaviours, and attitudes (RMIT, 2020).

Within policing, culture can be a major obstacle that impedes psychological health. There is a paucity of literature on professional police culture as it relates to mental health, especially literature examining predictors of officers' attitudes towards help-seeking behaviours for mental health (Lane et al., 2022). Research, education, and training tools are all but non-existent (O'Hagan, 2009), but what is widely acknowledged within police culture is that admitting to possessing a mental health condition is a potential career killer (Subošić et al., 2018).

Police culture values strength, fearlessness, integrity, stoicism, scepticism, distrust, self-reliance, controlled demeanours and emotions, strength of body, and competency in handling complex problems (Olson & Wasilewski, 2016). An unintended consequence of this culture is that it discourages help-seeking behaviour. If these values are held too rigidly, an officer can feel weak, embarrassed, and a failure for seeking help from others. This generates concern for those officers who unconditionally conform to the traditional values of law enforcement culture and who may, as a result, be more likely to avoid seeking help, even when distressed, potentially paying the price of detrimental health effects (Dimoff & Kelloway, 2016). Fearful of being perceived as weak and untrustworthy, those who are suffering in silence may ultimately face even more potential sanctions, loss of professional opportunities,

and discrimination that lead to greater isolation and alienation. (Gutschmidt & Vera, 2020; Afful, 2018; Hitch et al., 2020).

In a recent study of police in the United Kingdom, researchers analyzed responses from 16,857 serving officers and operational staff who took part in "The Job, The Life," a major survey carried out across England, Wales, Scotland, and Northern Ireland. Their work revealed that two-thirds of all respondents said they had a mental health issue directly resulting from police work. Yet almost all of the survey's respondents—some 93%—said they would go to work as usual if suffering from psychological issues such as stress or depression. Many indicated they would do so without seeking treatment because of the associated negative organizational cultural effects (Hargreaves et al., 2018; Brewin et al., 2022).

When leaders fail to influence culture through collaboration, listening and empathizing, honesty, trust, commitment and engagement, an opportunity to shape a more healthy and positive culture is lost. According to Bikos (2021), staff retreat into a "numbness mode" and any actions by police leadership to superficially address issues are considered just "window dressing."

Why Governance Is Vital: We Cannot Be Mere Consumers of Good Governance, We Must Be Active Participants; We Must Be Co-Creators

Governance in the policing sector is concerned with the systems and processes that ensure the overall direction, effectiveness, supervision, and accountability of an organization (Francis & Armstrong, 2022). Governance structures for mental health are essential elements that support police in managing their workforce. Introducing well-defined mental health policies is critical to good governance and leadership for mental health in law enforcement (Lund et al., 2013). Effective governance structures allow organizations to create value through innovation, development, and exploration, and to provide accountability and control systems commensurate with the risks that police face daily (Francis & Armstrong, 2022).

A workplace mental health policy is useful in addressing police cultural impediments such as stigma, scepticism, and distrust. A sound policy framework may encourage help-seeking behaviours and encourage staff buy-in and engagement (Rosenberg, 2012). In establishing a mental health policy across all organizational factors at the strategic, tactical, and operational levels, plans will set out departmental intent. Including such policy across mission statements, operational risk assessments, recruitment and leadership syllabus, anti-discrimination and harassment strategies, and performance management structures (Stanley-Clarke et al., 2016) emphasizes to staff that their organization is serious and committed to embedding mental health in its language and DNA (Kruk, 2012).

However, the ability to establish a mental health program carries costs, whether funding comes from within existing allocated budgets or is supplementally allocated. Police departmental forecasts are the foundation of their budgets. Forecasts are discussed by police executives, and when the most productive and impactful combinations of forecasts are selected, they become budgets. The more sound the forecasts are, the better the results will be in what ultimately comes out of the budgeting.

Most police departments survive on minimal year-over-year budget allocations. The money for policing comes from local governments, state or provincial governments, and federal programs directly, or through grant applications. Figures from the U.S. Census of Governments show, that taken together, state and local governments in that country spent \$123 billion on police in 2019. They spent another \$132 billion on courts and corrections (Mollenkamp, 2022). However, there and across the globe, mental health remains a neglected priority, low on the agenda of many policy makers and funders at the national and international levels (Mahomed, 2020). Investing in police mental health includes financing education, promotion, prevention, early intervention, treatment, and recovery systems (Davenport et al., 2016).

Highlighting the return on investment (ROI) is one way to reduce the reluctance of many police departments to allocate funds. Research has found that workplace mental health initiatives reap many benefits (Friedli & Parsonage, 2007) for individuals, families, leaders, the community, the organization, and the investors (elected officials and governments). A positive ROI reveals that every dollar spent on mental health initiatives will return on average \$2.50 to \$4 in organizational and community benefit. Staff are more likely to be engaged if they have a positive work environment and their performance and work quality have been shown to improve and their productivity increase in the workplace (Deloitte research paper, 2019).

It is one thing to implement a mental health initiative, but it is equally important to show that it is working. Measurement and evaluation (M&E) are critical tools in any ongoing initiative that attracts financial allocation. Without M&E, how do you know if a program or initiative works well? How can you continue to shape and develop a program if it is immeasurable (Gilkerson et al., 2019)?

As the famous Peter Drucker business maxim goes, “If you can’t measure it, you can’t improve it” (Drucker, 2006). Measuring the value of mental health benefits has long been a puzzling notion for employers. Police executives and elected officials will always ask: How do we know if it’s worth it? Leaders who prioritize mental health understand the importance of measuring and tracking improvements in programs. Using metrics can not only guide revisions and adjustments that make initiatives more effective, it can also send a powerful signal to employees that achieving mental health goals is every bit as important as hitting other operational targets (Kilbourne et al., 2017).

The All-Inclusive Approach

Mental health ecosystems research is an emerging discipline which takes a whole-systems approach to mental healthcare, facilitating analysis of the complex environment and context of mental health systems, and translation of this knowledge into policy and practice (Furst et al., 2019; 2020).

The socio-ecological framework can be an ideal tool for addressing these broad issues and implementing new mental health programs through integrating behavioural, leadership, and cultural and environmental changes. Such a model is typically used to explain an approach, program, governance, or policy that will achieve greater acceptance and participation in conceptualizing an implementable and deliverable strategy. A comprehensive strategic framework should identify and

develop agency-specific needs for creating and enhancing a mental health program (Reupert, 2017; Frawley et al., 2018).

All facets of the socio-ecological framework require simultaneous attention. They are symbiotically reliant on each other, such as governments or elected officials’ financial and policy support; governance, capability, and organizational relationship enhancement; social and cultural reform; enhanced leadership understanding and training; social connectedness strategies; and individual knowledge and literacy extension (Kilanowski, 2017).

CONCLUSION

This article has attempted to identify significant gaps in mental health leadership, governance, education, and training, and the dysfunctional influence that police culture can have on help-seeking behaviours. It has attempted to introduce constructive and actionable suggestions to encourage police executives to commit to ensuring the psychological health and well-being of their people. Such a commitment is paramount and must be infused into all facets of the policing environment. Doing so will allow departments to benefit through greater productivity, lower levels of absenteeism, lower insurance premiums, reduced risk factors for illnesses, improved quality of life and sense of well-being, greater staff recruitment and retention, better cognitive performance, and reduced levels of stress. Such an approach will encourage and support stronger employee–employer relationships. It will also, no doubt, save and strengthen many personal relationships inside and outside of work. And it will save lives.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST DISCLOSURES

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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