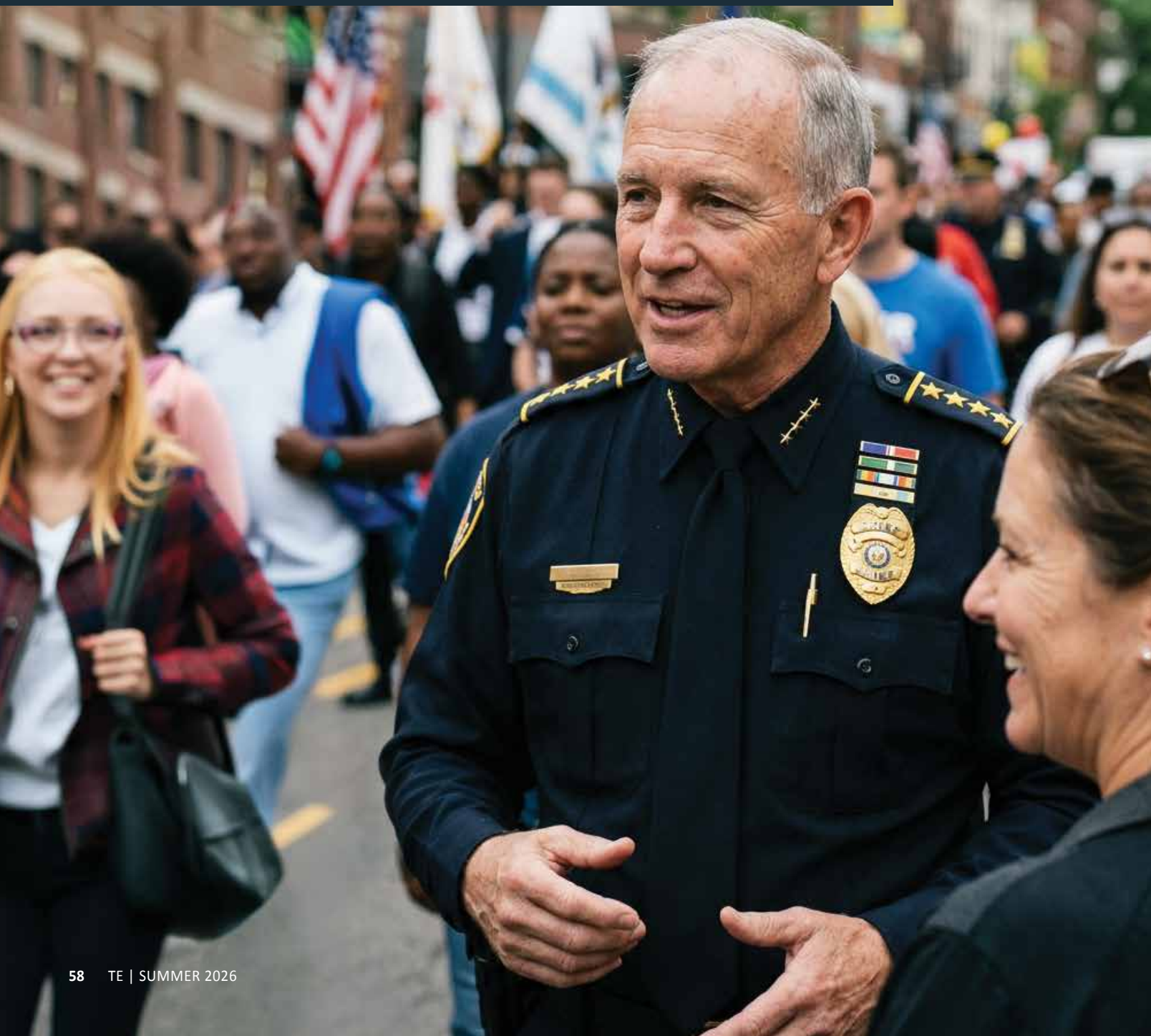


THE TRUE COSTS OF LEADERSHIP

BY BEN RAYMOND



We hear it all the time: “If I were in charge of this agency, I would change x, y, z.” Realistically, once someone is in a leadership role, making changes can be difficult. Until a person is leading a law enforcement agency, it’s easy to criticize those on the front lines. The ideals, skills and principles taught in leadership courses often don’t prepare someone for the true costs of leadership.

I have had the privilege of attending various leadership courses throughout my career, and I have learned a great deal from them. However, having served as the head of a large, mid-sized agency, nothing can prepare a person for the challenges, politics and stress of being in the “hot seat.” Many agency heads leave the job under less-than-ideal circumstances, forced out due to high crime rates, a controversial use-of-force incident, a lack of political acumen, or years of stress and anxiety from managing such incidents. During the daily struggles of holding a leadership position, a person’s moral integrity and principles will be tested time after time. There may even come a point when a person must choose whether to step away from the position, be forced out, or change their values and morals to maintain their role.

Early in my career, three officers were involved in a high-profile use-of-force incident involving a suspect who pointed what appeared to be a handgun at them following a police pursuit. The officers responded using deadly force in what became a nationally debated case. Our chief of police stood behind the officers from early in the investigative process and told the media and others that, based on the investigation, the officers acted appropriately and according to their training. We were proud of our chief for supporting the officers, who responded to what appeared to be a valid lethal threat, well within the guidelines set by *Graham v Connor*. However, in the eyes of some local and national politicians, the chief’s early support implied that he was biased and racist. Ultimately, he was asked by the mayor to resign from his position. This was done even though the officers were vindicated, and the incident has become a case study in use-of-force classes in the state of Louisiana.

I remember being upset, even as a young officer, that a police chief who supported his officers when they responded appropriately and stood his ground against unwarranted calls for the officers’ indictment and removal from the force, was essentially being terminated because of politics. Twenty years later, I experienced a similar fate. Unfortunately, standing on morals and principles can sometimes put one at odds with the political climate, and could result in an abrupt end to a lifelong career of service. Having a good grasp of the political climate within your locality is essential to success, and observing what your predecessors have endured can be indicative of what you can expect during your tenure.

With the exception of those elected to agency head positions, most chiefs lack autonomy in decision-making. Some serve in mayoral-strong governments, and the mayor has the legal authority to influence and even override decisions made by the chief of police. Others may answer to a city manager or a city council form of government, who also have the legal ability to overrule a chief’s authority. Most agency heads in larger municipalities answer to others and, therefore, are not able to make decisions without input and buy-in from people who may not share the same values and most likely do not have experience working in law enforcement. Much like the relationship officers had with their superiors when they rose through the ranks, chiefs can disagree with the mayor, manager or city council, but ultimately may be forced to go along with decisions with which they do not agree. Pick your battles, but always know where to draw the hard line.

Before stepping into the role of agency head, one needs to be comfortable with their beliefs and values and have clear boundaries they refuse to cross. To be successful, if one has a “my way or the highway” mentality, then one may want to reconsider taking on such a role. Similarly, a person needs to be grounded enough in his belief system to be willing to walk away if superiors try to force him into illegal, immoral or unethical decisions. Remember, as chief of police, you will be blamed for those decisions, regardless of whether the mayor, manager or council forced your hand. Politics can be a dirty playing field, and there are “no-win”

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situations in some cases. If you find yourself in a scenario of this magnitude, be willing to tell your boss that you cannot, or will not, go along with their instruction and be willing to step away.

Another unfortunate reality of competitive promotions is that those not selected for the position may become jealous and even feel the process was not “fair.” It is entirely possible the process was not “fair” because appointments to leadership positions can be politically motivated, and in most instances, politics does play a key role. My dad told me years ago, “Life is not fair, get used to it.” It does not make things easier, but it does help to know that when a person is passed over for a leadership position, it does not mean he or she was not qualified or even not the best candidate.

If you have been selected over others for a competitive position, expect to face some resentment. In some instances, leaders may lose “friendships” simply because of their new title. Such resentment may also lead to false rumors and accusations being spread about you. The best way to handle these attacks is to always hold yourself accountable and ensure your professional and personal life are indicative of the morals, values and standards you proclaim to have. Every leader professes to have high moral and ethical standards and to lead with integrity. Unfortunately, not all leaders truly embody these principles, so it is incumbent upon you to practice what you preach.

Many of the stressors leaders face in their professional lives will follow them home at the end of the day. The unfortunate reality of leading an organization is that one is never “off duty.” The emails will still come, the phone will still ring, and the leader will be held responsible for what occurs within his agency 24/7. If one is fortunate enough to have a good command staff, then there may be an opportunity to unplug from time to time. However, the leader still will be responsible for the outcomes.

Remember, one can delegate authority but not responsibility. During my tenure as chief of police, I found a few hours on a Sunday afternoon to do some fishing. Later that evening, I posted a photo of the trip on a personal social media account. During the afternoon fishing trip, there was a shooting that occurred within my municipality. I had several comments that “it must be nice for the chief to have time to go fishing while his officers are out working violent crimes,” or something to that effect. Taking time off to re-energize is important, as is not neglecting family life, but do not expect the public or your bosses to recognize you are off duty, on vacation or otherwise “out of the office” when something needs to be done.

Lastly, a core principle of any leadership course is to appoint good people to key command positions within your organization to help you lead. Realistically, many agencies

are bound by civil service rules or other policies and politics that prevent an agency head from truly hand-picking his or her team. Recognize these shortfalls before accepting the role and know that in many cases a leader may be stuck with those promoted through a tenure-based process, or with those the mayor, council or manager wants — not necessarily a good leader or team player with quality skills, morals and ethics.

In closing, attend as many leadership courses as you can. Additionally, read all the books and articles on the subject you can find, and develop your skills in preparation for future opportunities. Do not limit yourself to the law enforcement field; there are many great leaders in other areas, and it is helpful to be well-rounded. The principles that will be discussed, opportunities to learn more about individual personalities, how to lead different types of people, the development of emotional intelligence, and all the other information one may glean from such courses and books are important for developing effective leaders.

Just remember, we do not live in a perfect world, and until you are thrust into the harsh realities of leadership, you will not truly grasp the difficulties. Additionally, each person’s experience will differ, often due to factors beyond the leader’s control. Some will step away with a sense of accomplishment and gratitude for the opportunity to lead, while others will leave the agency frustrated, stressed and angry. No, life is not “fair,” but that does not excuse a leader from doing their best regardless of the situation. We need quality leadership in law enforcement now more than ever, and I hope this article has helped highlight a few of the “true costs of leadership” without deterring your desire to lead.

About the author

Ben Raymond is a 25-year veteran with the Shreveport (LA) Police Department, currently assigned as an instructor at the Shreveport Police Regional Training Academy, where he instructs cadets

and in-service personnel in areas which include firearms, defensive tactics, use of force and legal updates. He served as the chief of police for the Shreveport Police Department for three years (2018-2021). Prior to that role, his career included assignments to patrol, narcotics investigations, SWAT and as the chief administrative assistant. The bulk of his career (14 years) was spent working narcotics and as an operator, sniper and ultimately a team leader and training coordinator for the Special Response Team.

Raymond is a past-president of the Louisiana Tactical Police Officers’ Association (2016-2018). He has instructor certifications in several disciplines, but his passion lies in shooting and tactics. He has a Bachelor of Arts in Criminal Justice from Northeast Louisiana University, where he graduated summa cum laude in 1999.

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