

# THE IMPORTANCE OF EFFECTIVE SUPERVISION IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

February 2011

Police performance has been in the public eye these past few months: recent press coverage of events in some Ontario police services identified concerns in handling prisoners, use of force and community relations.

Some of these events have caused the public to question the credibility of police, particularly in relation to the rights of accused and the behaviour of officers. These questions pose a challenge to the legitimacy of those who serve and protect our communities. Finding answers is a priority for everyone.

At Froese Forensic Partners Ltd., our team of professionals in our Law Enforcement Assessment and Performance (LEAP) practice believe a common thread that links most of these controversial issues is ineffective supervision. This short commentary talks about the important role that police supervisors play and suggests ways to strengthen their accountability and improve front-line performance.

Police supervisors provide day-to-day direction to sworn officers or civilian employees; they are usually watch commanders, squad or team leaders. They are the first vital step in the chain of command that delivers policing services to a community.

They make sure employees focus on the things that matter, do their jobs properly, and comply with policy and maintain standards. Supervisors ensure that employees' account for the exercise of their responsibility and also for the results obtained from their performance. In performing this role they help to build and maintain the all-important trust relationship between a community and its police.

Because their role touches on so many aspects of police performance, supervisors act like effectiveness multipliers. On good days supervisors are 100% engaged and do their work exceptionally well, perhaps coaching an employee in writing a search warrant, coordinating shift replacements, supporting a troubled employee or making sure that use-of-force policies are understood and adhered to. A lot can happen on a shift and supervisors will influence much of how it goes – their influence is pervasive and can really enhance the delivery of effective policing.

It works the other way as well. When a supervisor's engagement is less than needed, it has a pervasive negative effect on everyone else on the shift, with potential consequences for interactions with the public.

Without engaged and effective supervision the connection between responsibility, performance, and accountability cannot be taken for granted. Good supervision is central to good police work. Simply put, if supervisors are not ensuring that employees do their jobs in ways that maintain and enhance the trust relationship between a community and the police, there is heightened risk of that relationship deteriorating.

It is of course true that most employees want to serve the public in ways that build trust, but this cannot be left to chance. Where the potential use of force is part of the service, there is a more than a moral obligation to ensure that delivery of this service is properly supervised.

So what gets in the way? What prevents supervisors from doing the job well? A good place to start is with the fact that supervision is a difficult job. It has little status, few of the apparent benefits that may come with a management role, and yet it often comes with a lot of conflict, stress and mess. It requires professional and human skills of a high order. Given the nature of police work, it means that supervisors need an “A Game” all day, every day, in all of the roles they play: subject matter expert, coach, problem solver and enforcer of policy. Not everyone has this breadth or depth of skills and there are few ways to get them other than on the job experience. The way learning happens on the job is more often than not through hard lessons learned unpleasantly.

Transition into a supervisory role is often left to chance. New supervisors can easily find themselves in a sink-or-swim situation with little support. Some organizations do not place much value on supervision and in a myopic quest for productivity they define the role, or set performance expectations, in ways that prevent success. Some organizations look at the supervisor as a sort of super-employee, able to do more of what is expected of a seasoned employee while also juggling the difficult demands of supervising peers and enforcing standards.

Few police services make supervisor development a priority. In fact, they often budget more for new gear than to support new people in these key roles.

### ***What can you do to support supervisors?***

At LEAP we think it starts with recognizing the vital role they play — they need to be acknowledged as key players in the way a police force delivers law enforcement services. They need to be seen as part of the management team, included in decisions that influence how services are delivered, and listened to when advice is being sought on methods, priorities and plans. Their unique contribution to employee engagement needs celebration and support.

Police services could extend succession planning and career development to the supervisor level. Front-line employees who are interested in advancing their career should be seen as candidates for training, including coaching and mentoring by existing supervisors. Perhaps they could be replaced for short periods as a stretch assignment, so they can develop a deeper understanding of the subtle but important transition that happens when moving into the supervisor role. In this way an organization can build a pipeline filled with potential supervisors and so manage the risk of not having the human capital needed for these roles.

Formal training is obviously important and many police services offer some form of supervisor development, hopefully before they assume the role. There are also excellent programs available in community colleges and in the private sector. This is better than nothing, but sending someone on an “Introduction to Supervision” course is not nearly enough. It is well known that 80% of personal growth happens on the job and, while a formal course is a good start, what really counts is on-the-job experience. For this reason we advise police services to create a longer New Supervisor Development Program that has at least four components:

- Assessment, and disclosure of a potential new supervisor's interpersonal strengths and areas for growth;
- Some formal classroom learning to acquire new knowledge in, for example, the role of the supervisor in workplace harassment;
- A longer period where the candidate applies learning and insights back home on the job; and
- An evaluation to determine if the candidate has learned and is ready, willing and able to become a supervisor.

LEAP has a successful track record of designing programs around this model and would be happy to support police services considering this investment in their human capital.

When supervisor positions open for competition our advice is to treat the event as an important part of career development. Candidates should be carefully screened using the results of the developmental program. The selection process needs to be rigorous. The successful candidate's transition into a new job should be monitored and mentored so he or she begins on the right foot with every chance of success.

The move into management should be celebrated as an important rite of passage.

On the job, supervisors need to be monitored just as they monitor employees. The supervisor's role in managing different aspects of police work, such as ensuring understanding and compliance with use of force policy, managing exhibits, or handling complaints, needs management oversight and support. Their interpersonal skills need watching and developing and their evolving supervisory style needs monitoring. Where performance barriers emerge they need to be coached and encouraged to make the difficult changes in behaviour and style that will help them help others to be the best they can be.

There is a range of more vigorous compliance tools available such as desk audits and performance reviews that can provide assurance about performance. All of these have a place in ensuring that supervisors perform effectively in their role. Before these come into routine use a police service could look at using performance agreements with supervisors as a way to guide and shape performance as well as ensuring accountability. These agreements would briefly outline the role, constraints and expectations and then set specific targets for the supervisors to accomplish in their relationship with employees and in the delivery of policing services. The agreement should be a living document and perhaps form the agenda for a quarterly performance review with their manager.

Our view is that good supervision is an essential part of an effective, accountable and responsive police service. Good supervision is a difficult job but an important one for police performance. We feel confident that once various enquiries have reported their findings we will see that an absence of effective supervision was found to be a contributory factor to poor performance. We are also certain that remedies are readily available. Most will involve some form of development to grow the talents needed to assure the public that enforcement and other aspects of police performance are effectively supervised.



We believe that a police service wishing to improve its performance and strengthen its relationship with the community it serves would do well to begin the journey by including the development of effective supervisors as a central element of its strategy.

For further information contact:

Froese Forensic Partners Ltd., Suite 1000, 55 University Ave., Toronto, Ontario, M5J 2H7  
[www.froese forensic.com](http://www.froese forensic.com) 416-364-6400