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Professional Policing and Knowledge Work

Are Officers Prepared for the Demands of the Profession?

IN 1966, THE LEGENDARY MANAGEMENT CONSULTANT AND BUSINESS SCHOLAR PETER F. DRUCKER COINED THE TERM “KNOWLEDGE WORKER” TO DESCRIBE EMPLOYEES WHO APPLY THEORETICAL KNOWLEDGE AND ANALYTICAL EXPERTISE TO SOLVE COMPLEX PROBLEMS AND PROVIDE HIGH-QUALITY SERVICES.¹

Knowledge workers, according to Drucker, include educated professionals such as accountants, attorneys, doctors, engineers, and pharmacists who acquired the necessary foundational knowledge and analytical skills to perform their jobs through higher education and advanced training. He predicted that an organization's most valuable assets would be its knowledge workers and their ability to apply their educational and analytical expertise to provide high-quality products and services.

The profession of policing requires employees to have deep substantive knowledge, analytical capabilities, and critical thinking skills to perform their daily duties and provide high-quality service to the public. For example, officers must know and understand many abstract legal concepts such as “reasonable suspicion,” “probable cause,” “specific intent,” and “malice aforethought” before they can properly abide by and enforce the laws. They must understand the concepts and numerous provisions of their countries’ constitutions, federal, state, and local statutes and recent court opinions that interpret these laws in different ways depending on the specific jurisdiction. They must incorporate and apply concepts such as “de-escalation,” “procedural justice,” and “constitutional policing” into their daily functions. And they must apply the law, agency policies, procedures, and tactics in a fair and just manner, often during very stressful and dangerous circumstances.

Police officers must also be able to think critically and solve complex interpersonal and social problems. They must resolve conflicts between neighbors, disarm suicidal suspects, solve murders, and make very consequential decisions to stop, investigate, arrest, and use force, when necessary, against members of the community. These responsibilities require professionals who have a broad body of knowledge across many disciplines including psychology, criminology, history, and police science. They must have excellent reading, writing, and communication skills to work effectively with prosecutors, judges, juries, coworkers, and community members. Most importantly, police officers must have the ability to take this vast amount of knowledge and information, think critically, and readily apply that information to make consequential decisions that may deprive a person of life, liberty, or property.

Despite the extensive knowledge and skills needed to perform the knowledge work of a police officer, most states and provincial governments do not require potential candidates to have any substantive knowledge in the disciplines of policing before entering the academy. Most agencies accept candidates with only a high school education and without any formal education or training in the law, criminology, criminal justice, psychology, police sciences, or other disciplines that a police officer must use in the performance of their daily

responsibilities. Instead, agencies expect recruits to learn complex legal and social science concepts during a few classroom sessions held during a four- to six-month academy program and during periodic in-service training sessions once they are full-time officers. Officers are therefore thrust into real-world situations, with the full powers and authority of a police officer, but with minimal knowledge or understanding about critical substantive concepts they are obligated to apply and enforce every day. They are often forced to learn through trial and error, by the example of other officers, or through their own independent study, to acquire the essential knowledge necessary to perform the basic functions of the police profession. Not surprisingly, this results in consequential errors that can harm community members and reduce public trust.

California recently took a significant step toward addressing this issue by passing Assembly Bill 89, known as the Peace Officers Education and Age Conditions for Employment Act (PEACE Act), which established a process to raise the educational standards and substantive knowledge requirements of police officers.² The PEACE Act established a process for the state's Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) and California Community Colleges to develop a modern policing degree program that must include courses focused on the law, psychology, communications, history, ethnic studies, and other disciplines that promote the development of emotional intelligence and critical thinking skills. Once the degree program and criteria are

established, POST will require minimum college education standards for police officers in California.

The legislation was the culmination of a series of hearings held by the California Assembly's Select Committee on Police Reform where police leaders, researchers, law enforcement experts, and community members spoke about the importance of improving the educational standards for entry-level police officers.³ The committee heard testimony from leading experts on constitutional policing and police training who cited extensive research on the benefits of college-educated officers in reducing uses of force and citizen complaints. The bill also recognized studies that have found better educated officers perform better in the academy, receive higher supervisor evaluations, have fewer disciplinary problems, are assaulted less often, and miss fewer days of work. Moreover, the committee considered the evidence of how policing has evolved into a profession that requires a broad and deep understanding of complex

subjects and the ability to apply that knowledge using analytical and critical thinking skills on a daily basis.⁴

While the development of the modern policing program and adoption of minimum education requirements will take some time, California has recognized that state legislatures and police agencies have a responsibility to ensure that police officers are well-prepared to perform as professionals with the requisite knowledge, training, and skills expected by the public. The public expects police officers, as knowledge workers, to have the understanding and skills necessary to perform their core responsibilities and functions regardless of whether an officer just graduated from the academy or is one day from retirement. All police organizations and governments should ensure that officers have the substantive knowledge and analytical skills necessary to perform the professional knowledge work required in the complex and challenging profession of policing in the 21st century. ♡

NOTES

¹Peter F. Drucker, *The Effective Executive* (New York: Harper Business Essentials, 2017).

²Peace Officers Education and Age Conditions for Employment Act, California AB 89 (2020–2021) Chapter 405 (Cal. Stat. 2021). The bill also raised the minimum age requirement from 18 to 21 for police officers in California and requires POST and the California Community Colleges to recommend financial assistance for students of historically underserved and disadvantaged communities with barriers to higher education access. POST is required to adopt the recommended education criteria within two years of when the office of the Chancellor of the California Community Colleges submits its report to the California Legislature.

³Assembly Police Reform Committee, October 14, 2020, testimony, www.assembly.ca.gov/media/assembly-police-reform-committee-20201014/video.

⁴The committee also heard testimony and reviewed research that has shown police officers with four-year college degrees were significantly less likely to rely on using force against suspects, have fewer citizen complaints, and are more effective problem solvers than their less educated peers. See Eugene A. Paoline and William Terrill, "Police Education, Experience, and the Use of Force," *Criminal Justice and Behavior* 34, no. 2 (2007): 179–196; Jason Rydberg and William Terrill, "The Effect of Higher Education on Police Behavior," *Police Quarterly* 13, no. 1 (2010): 92–120.

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