Trust in Police Officer-Sergeant Relationships[1]

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Trust ranks as the most important characteristic of effective supervisor-subordinate relationships. This is said to be even more important in military and paramilitary organizations, specifically police departments. This study measures the perceived trust between police officers and sergeants in a western police department. Sergeants (n = 19) and officers (n = 50) completed 25-item surveys by using a seven-point Likert scale, rating how prevalent each item is in their current situation, how much they would like it to exist, and how important it is to them. The study measured five components of trust: integrity, competence, consistency, loyalty, and openness. Three hypotheses were not supported by the data, suggesting that officers and sergeants perceive mutual levels of overall trust, integrity, and competence in each other. Three hypotheses were supported by the data, suggesting that officers and sergeants perceive differences in consistency, loyalty, and openness. Recommendations include further analysis of the data and incorporation of the supported hypotheses into continuing education of police department personnel.
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Trust is paramount to developing effective supervisor-subordinate relationships (Robbins, 2003). It is reported to be even more important in military and paramilitary organizations (Sweeney, 2007), including police departments. This study investigated perceived trust between police officers and sergeants in a western city. The literature review cites supervisor-subordinate relationships in law enforcement as well as non-law enforcement organizations.

Literature Review

What is trust?

Deutsch (1958) defines trust as follows:

> An individual may be said to have trust in the occurrence of an event if he expects its occurrence and the expectations lead to behavior which he perceives to have greater negative motivational consequences if the expectation is not confirmed than positive motivational consequence if it is confirmed (p. 266).

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Boon and Holmes (1991) simplify that definition and define trust as having a positive expectation that another person won't act opportunistically or take advantage of you.

How do people communicate to gain trust? What behavior leads to the development of trust? Schindler and Thomas (1993) identify five components of trust, which this study uses. They state that for persons to instill a sense of trust in others, they must demonstrate integrity, competence, consistency, loyalty, and openness.

Integrity. Integrity means honesty and truthfulness. It is likely the most important dimension to someone who is deciding whether to trust another (Tan & Tan, 2000). Butler and Cantrell (1984) state, "without a perception of the other's 'moral character' and 'basic honesty,' other dimensions of trust were meaningless" (p. 20). Kouzes and Posner (1993) state, "Honesty is absolutely essential to leadership. If people are going to follow someone willingly, whether it be into battle or into the boardroom, they first want to assure themselves that the person is worthy of their trust" (p. 14).

Competence. Competence refers to a leader's technical and interpersonal knowledge and skills. Hogan and Warrenfeltz (2003) identify four broad categories of leader competencies: intrapersonal skills, interpersonal skills, business skills, and leadership skills. Sweeney (2007) further defines these qualities. Intrapersonal skills include maintaining composure and self-control and managing stress. Interpersonal skills are the ability to build and maintain relationships; make a personal connection with others; and make an effort to learn about others, listen to their concerns, and understand their basic needs. Business skills are planning, budgeting, coordinating, and monitoring abilities. Some might equate business skills with a strong sense of duty, doing the right thing, and getting the job done. Leadership skills include building and guiding a high-performance team, confidence, and physical and moral courage.

Consistency. A trustworthy individual is reliable, is predictable, and uses good judgment in any situation. Such an individual elicits what researchers call knowledge-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996). Blanchard (2007) explains that trust occurs when leaders behave consistently with the values they profess. Leaders communicate their values and the organization's values to their team and then integrate those values into how the team operates. They also recognize and reward those who embody these values.

Loyalty. Loyalty is one's allegiance to others and willingness to protect them from unnecessary danger or undue criticism. If you trust that someone has your best interests in mind, you believe that person is loyal to you. When officers trust their sergeants, they are willing to be vulnerable to the sergeant's actions, believing the sergeant will protect

their rights and interests (Hosmer, 1995). For example, a sergeant who accepts the blame for something an officer did incorrectly because of faulty directions from the sergeant shows loyalty to the officer. Bolman & Deal (2006) state that leaders must defend the group and its way of life. The trust they engender as a result of their defense of the group is identification-based trust (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996).

Openness. Openness is providing someone with the full truth—sharing information openly (Blanchard, 2007). In a study of 12 manufacturing organizations, Stull (1978) found that supervisors and subordinates preferred a communication climate characterized by perceived openness to sending and receiving messages about task and non-task issues.

Schindler and Thomas (1993) created directional hypotheses regarding which components are most important to supervisors, subordinates, and peers. They based their predictions on the work of Schmidt & Posner (1982), which analyzed the qualities most admired in supervisors, subordinates, and peers. Schindler & Thomas' study concluded that whether the relationship was with a supervisor, a subordinate, or a peer, each person identified the order of importance of the components of trust, from most to least, as integrity, competence, loyalty, consistency, and openness.

Methods

This study used the following methodology to measure the perceived trust between sergeants and police officers in the police department of a western city:

Subjects. The subjects in this study were sergeants ($n = 19$) and police officers ($n = 50$).

Variables. The independent variable was position—sergeant or officer. The dependent variable was perceived trust.

Hypotheses. This study tested six hypotheses. Deferring Schindler and Thomas' (1993) hypotheses for future analysis, the researcher created the following *a priori*, non-directional hypotheses for this study:

H_1 There will be differences in the reported mean scores of sergeants and officers regarding how much they trust each other.

H_2 There will be differences in the reported mean scores of sergeants and officers regarding how much integrity they observe in each other.

H_3 There will be differences in the reported mean scores of sergeants and officers regarding the competence level they observe in each other.

H$_4$ There will be differences in the reported mean scores of sergeants and officers regarding how much consistency they observe in each other's performance.

H$_5$ There will be differences in the reported mean scores of sergeants and officers regarding how much loyalty they perceive from each other.

H$_6$ There will be differences in the reported mean scores of sergeants and officers regarding how open they are with each other.

The null hypotheses are that there would be no differences between sergeants' and officers' perceptions.

Research Instruments

Two research instruments were created for this study, one tailored to sergeants and one to officers. Each comprised 25 items rated on a seven-point Likert-type scale along three dimensions: how often that behavior occurred between the sergeant and officer, how often the respondent wished it occurred, and how important the behavior was to the respondent (Porter, 1961). Five items were included to measure each component of trust; four were loaded positively, and one was loaded negatively for each item. The purpose of the negative loading was to determine whether respondents discriminated among items.

A sample openness item from the sergeant survey follows:

I am willing to listen to concerns about personal matters from my officers.

    1. This how it is with my officers.

    2. This is how I wish it were with my officers.

    3. This is very important to me.

A sample loyalty item from the officer survey is:

My sergeant admits if he has done something wrong that has led to an officer making a mistake.

    1. This is how it currently is with my sergeant.

    2. This is how I wish it were with my sergeant.

    3. This is very important to me.

Peers and teachers validated the surveys for content and grammatical correctness. They agreed that the purpose was to measure leadership.

Procedures

This study used 2 x 3 x 5 quasi-experimental research design. The researcher secured the appropriate protocol documents from the university and police department institutional

research boards. Participants were provided with an informed consent document, the appropriate survey, and response sheets; they were asked to complete the survey and return it to the researcher. A convenience sample was accepted in place of a random sample because of the nature of police work and the ability to recruit willing participants.

The data were subjected to SPSS t-tests to determine whether the mean scores between supervisors and subordinates were significantly different. Tests were applied to all six hypotheses, measures of desired trust, and measures of importance. Additional tests were used to compare existing with desired levels of overall trust. The researcher conducted a final test to determine whether participants discriminated between positively and negatively loaded survey items. Hypotheses were considered supported at the .05 level or lower.

Results

Comparisons of means for perceived overall trust, integrity, and competence indicated differences between sergeants and officers (Table 1); however, these data do not support rejecting the null hypotheses that there would not be statistically significant differences in the reported mean scores. The differences between the means on consistency, loyalty, and openness were statistically significant and supported rejecting the null hypotheses.

Table 1. *Mean Scores for Perceptions of Sergeant-Officer Trust*

| | Rank | | | |
Variable	Officers	Sergeants	t	p
All	5.6427	5.4333	1.062	.292
	(48)	(18)		
Integrity	5.6071	5.2632	1.583	.118
	(49)	(19)		
Competence	5.9082	5.8816	.110	.913
	(49)	(19)		
Consistency	5.8571	5.3421	2.856	.005
	(49)	(19)		
Loyalty	5.5000	6.2368	3.142	.003
	(49)	(19)		
Openness	5.4167	4.3750	4.178	.000
	(48)	(18)		

Note. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of subjects (n) who responded to the respective items. Numbers differ within sample groups because some subjects inadvertently did not respond to every item.

Comparisons of means for desired levels of overall trust, integrity, competence, consistency, and openness indicated differences between sergeants and officers (Table 2); however, these differences were not significant. The difference between means on desired loyalty was statistically significant.

Table 2. *Mean Scores for Perceptions of Sergeant-Officer Desired Levels of Trust*

| | Rank | | | |
Variable	Officers	Sergeants	*t*	*p*
All	5.3052	5.2474	.852	.188
	(48)	(19)		
Integrity	5.2245	5.2763	.873	.161
	(49)	(19)		
Competence	5.4949	5.6974	.586	.547
	(49)	(19)		
Consistency	5.3469	4.8816	.177	1.365
	(49)	(19)		
Loyalty	4.6429	5.6974	3.780	.000
	(49)	(19)		
Openness	4.9479	4.6842	.896	.374
	(48)	(19)		

Note. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of subjects (*n*) who responded to the respective items. Numbers differ within sample groups because some subjects inadvertently did not respond to every item.

Comparisons of scores on the importance of overall trust, integrity, competence, consistency, loyalty, and openness indicated differences between sergeants and officers (Table 3); however, the means were not statistically significant.

A further analysis confirmed that respondents discriminated among positively and negatively loaded items on the surveys ($p < .001$).

Discussion

This study provided no statistically significant support for three hypotheses related to trust between leaders and followers: perceptions of overall trust, integrity, and competence; however, it did provide statistically significant support related to three hypotheses: perceptions of consistency, loyalty, and openness.

Table 3. *Mean Scores for Perceptions of Importance of Sergeant-Officer Trust*

| | Rank | | | |
Variable	Officers	Sergeants	*t*	*p*
All	5.9010	5.9030	.015	.988
	(49)	(19)		
Integrity	5.6633	5.9342	1.462	.149
	(49)	(19)		
Competence	6.1888	6.3158	.775	.441
	(49)	(19)		
Consistency	6.0561	5.7237	1.686	.097
	(49)	(19)		
Loyalty	6.3112	6.4211	.726	.471
	(49)	(19)		
Openness	5.2857	5.3158	.145	.885
	(49)	(19)		

Note. The numbers in parentheses indicate the number of subjects (n) who responded to the respective items. Numbers differ within sample groups because some subjects inadvertently did not respond to every item.

Officers perceived sergeants as more consistent than sergeants perceived officers (*p* < .01). Sergeants perceived officers as more loyal than officers perceived sergeants (*p* < .01). Sergeants also expressed the wish that their officers were more loyal more often than officers expressed the same wish about their sergeants (*p* < .001). Officers perceived sergeants as more open than sergeants perceived officers (*p* < .001).

Schindler and Thomas (1993) found no differences between supervisor-subordinate pairs on the importance of integrity, competence, loyalty, consistency, or openness; this study found similar results. However, while this study used different measurement instruments, the outcome did not match Schindler and Thomas' study in terms of order of importance of the components of trust. Schindler and Thomas found that all groups ranked the components, in order of most important to least important, as integrity, competence, loyalty, consistency, and openness. In this study, the order was loyalty, competence, integrity, consistency, and openness for sergeants; for officers, it was loyalty, competence, consistency, integrity, and openness. These differences could be due to the nature of police versus business responsibilities. It can also be attributed to the different methodologies these studies employed. This study also came to different conclusions regarding the order of importance of components than studies by Butler & Cantrell (1984) and Schmidt & Posner (1982). Butler and Cantrell argue that loyalty is

more important for trust in supervisors than for trust in subordinates. Schmidt and Posner argue that loyalty is most important for trust in subordinates and less important for trust in supervisors. This study ranked loyalty as most important for both groups.

Applications of the Study

The results of this and similar studies can be applied to training programs, emphasizing the importance of establishing trust between officers and sergeants and providing suggestions for how to develop such trust. Consultants might help to uncover reasons for differences in perceptions of trust and ways to deal with them. Some of the findings may merely emphasize what might be expected behavior in organizational culture.

Consistency. From leader-member exchange theory, we are reminded that, inadvertently, leaders often create in-groups and out-groups. This leads to a lack of consistency in how people are treated. Leadership training should highlight this tendency and caution leaders about the consequences of this occurrence. Sergeants actually scored lower on the consistency measure than officers, suggesting they see officers as less consistent. While most of the items' mean scores were in the 5 and 6 ranges, one item's mean score was 4.1579: item 28 asked sergeants whether officers follow the book when handling situations. This particular item may have received this lower score not so much because sergeant don't trust their officers to follow the book, but because sergeants realize from their own experience that different situations may lead to different interpretations of "the book." Another possible reason for this lower mean score could be that sergeants oversee numerous officers, and they may take into account isolated incidents of inconsistent behavior. One sergeant actually reported to the researcher, "I trust my officers until they [screw] up, then I don't trust them anymore." This statement offers an example of deterrence-based trust, where one violation or inconsistency can destroy the relationship (Lewicki & Bunker, 1996).

Loyalty. How do sergeants show the same loyalty to their officers that they show to their own superiors? How do officers react when they know their sergeants' loyalty is directed upward in the organization? Sergeants actually scored officers as more loyal than officers scored sergeants. Officers' mean scores for every positively loaded item were in the 5 range; the lowest was 5.2041 for an item that read "My supervisor motivates me to achieve and grow within the department." While this result is still positive, perhaps this is an area on which leadership training for sergeants could focus. Transformational leadership might work best in this situation, with sergeants inspiring officers to maximize their potential and improve, and superiors promoting within the department. Leadership training

should also emphasize the need for sergeants to demonstrate loyalty to officers and, perhaps, camouflage their loyalty to superiors.

Openness. Does a supervisor really expect officers to be completely open when filing reports of criminal incidents, particularly if the supervisor served on the streets for some time? Do officers expect sergeants to be completely open with them about everything? Some information is confidential, and some is personal. Some sergeants might not want to talk about personal issues with their officers. In fact, this was the lowest scoring item from officers about their sergeants. Item 7—"My supervisor talks openly with me about his personal matters"—had a mean score of 3.8400. Sergeants showed a mean score of 2.5263 on item 4—"I feel free to talk only about task-related matters with my officers." This item's wording was overlooked during preparation of the survey. The word "only" should not have been included and actually loads the question negatively. Sergeants showed a mean score of 2.7638 on item 22—"I feel free to talk with my officers about my own personal matters." The general literature on openness encourages disclosure of information, but full disclosure may not be appropriate or comfortable for everyone. The professional work environment of a specific department may not encourage true openness between sergeants and officers due to the paramilitary hierarchy. However, training on how to handle various situations might arm officers and sergeants with appropriate responses when personal matters arise that still can lead to creating understanding and a supportive climate for openness.

Raising these topics during training would promote discussion and awareness among both officers and sergeants regarding issues of trust. For example, asking officers to define concepts such as consistency, loyalty, and openness during their in-service workshops then passing this information along to sergeants in leadership training would be a first step to improving officer-sergeant relationships. Another step would be to clarify expectations sergeants and officers have of each other and to define how to meet those expectations. Implementing positive change based on this feedback would be the ultimate goal in improving trust between sergeants and officers. Ongoing monitoring and feedback on the effectiveness of these efforts would be essential to this process.

Future Research

This study asked sergeants and officers to share their perceptions of each other regarding trust. Future studies might take on different characteristics. Greguras & Ford (2006) suggest developing separate measurement criteria for supervisors and subordinates

because each group may have differing perceptions of relationships and what is important in terms of integrity, competence, consistency, loyalty, and openness.

Lewicki, Tomlinson, and Gillespie (2006) point out that most studies measure trust at a given point in time. During this study, this researcher received comments from several officers suggesting a negative relationship with their sergeants. A recurring comment was along the lines of, "You want me to take this survey now? My sergeant is a [jerk]." These kinds of reactions are frequently temporary until an issue is resolved. Lewicki et al. suggest longitudinal studies might focus on measuring the *development* of trust over a period of time.

Data collection could include open-ended, in-depth responses that might reveal more than just interval data. Emotions and actual behavior might emerge through this technique. Interviews and observational studies might lead to more profound results.

An item-by-item analysis could be performed on the frequency distribution, standard deviations, and variations this study captured. Each item has meaning and could lead to valuable information. For example, a mean of 5.00 on an item might be the result of most answers hovering between 4 and 6, or it may be the result of answers scattered all over the scale. What can be attributed to the reason for a minimum score of 6 and a maximum score of 7 on supervisor's item 19—"I always have the best interest of my subordinates in mind?" Why do subordinates score a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 7 on item 4—"My supervisor admits when he has done something wrong that has led to a subordinate making a mistake"? The differences may tell a story.

More discrete items could be created to measure each component of trust. The instruments could be validated more thoroughly. During the validation process, raters could assign each item to one of the components of trust and an inter-rater reliability coefficient calculated to strengthen the integrity of the instruments.

The methodology could be tighter, perhaps executed in concert with other researchers with more experience and expertise in research methods.

Finally, a broader sample could be studied that includes more officers and sergeants from a variety of organizations and departments.

The department in this study appears to be healthy in terms of the amount of trust officers and sergeants report. All the means were on the positive side of the scale, except, of course, for the negatively loaded ones. Even the differences between means on consistency, loyalty, and openness were on the positive side.

Trust between sergeants and officers is necessary. The level of trust depends on personalities, stress levels of the job, organizational politics, and other factors. Expecting total trust might be too idealistic. However, for teams to perform well, people need to be able to count on each other. It is particularly important for police officials to work on

developing trust between sergeants and officers in their departments, where the difference is not measured in profits (as in business organizations) but in people's lives and public safety.

Note

1. This article is based on a master's thesis the researcher completed at Kaplan University under the supervision of Dr. Cliff Roberson.

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