

The Law Enforcement Candidate Ride-Along:

A Supplemental Selection Tool

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Almost every significant breakthrough is the result of a courageous break with traditional ways of thinking.

Stephen Covey

Law enforcement agencies vary widely in management philosophy, leadership style, and organizational strategy and in the fundamental nature and character of work to be performed. This is affected, in great part, by local demographics, community standards, political influences, and demands levied by the public.

Regardless of these characteristics, it is incumbent on the police administrator to have articulated those unique features that vary from community to community in the agency's mission, philosophy, and management strategy. In the absence of articulating its role in the community, this lack of clarity will result in an inability to identify police officer candidates whose career patterns will move in the direction of the organizational philosophy, goals, objectives, and mission. In short, is the agency's selection process optimized to better ensure a solid fit for both the police officer candidate and the agency?

The police officer candidate ride-along readily affords qualified applicants an opportunity to observe the agency up close. The ride-along should optimally compel the candidate to genuinely answer a paramount question: do I see myself in this work environment for the long term? It is incumbent upon law enforcement agencies to seek and select candidates looking for a career and not simply a job.

The police officer candidate ride-along should be viewed as a selection component designed to minimize unnecessary and time-wasting mismatches of employees and organizations. Conversely, such an approach to officer selection will more successfully identify those individuals whose personal agendas most closely assimilate and correlate with the organization's mission and goals.

Many police organizations see decision making in the personnel selection process as an exclusive responsibility and inherent right. The traditional role of the candidate has been relegated to merely providing information and reaction to an employer's queries and potential offer of employment. However, in this model the law enforcement employer retains control of the selection process.

For selection decisions to become truly collaborative, police organizations would be required to use resources of both parties in the selection process. It is possible that many of the problems inherent in the traditional, unilateral approach would be substantially reduced.

The ride-along provides a unique opportunity for the agency, selection board, and administrator to see the candidate's potential in a variety of areas. The ride-along is a unique opportunity for the candidate to see firsthand the department's philosophy on a wide array of issues including the use of force, illegal behavior, graft, corruption, receipt and investigation of citizen allegations of misconduct, and other issues affecting law enforcement.

Organizational fit requires law enforcement to dispossess itself of the traditional recruiting model viewing not only agency selection of the employee but also the employee selecting the agency. Too much of the current process emphasizes the agency selecting the most qualified candidate rather than the candidate selecting the organization that most closely matches his or her personal and career goals.

Candidate Ride-Along

The candidate ride-along should be a formally articulated component of the selection process. It is very likely that the ride-along may well serve to weed out job seekers unwilling to expend this level of candidate commitment. Candidates who do not present themselves for scheduled ride-alongs and do not provide a plausible explanation should be eliminated from further hiring consideration.

The purpose of the police officer applicant ride-along program is twofold. The first goal is to utilize a preemployment assessment component conducted by current law enforcement personnel to assist in measuring an applicant's potential for career success. The second goal is to facilitate an opportunity for the prospective employer to present a realistic depiction of police officer duties and responsibilities to the candidate. The candidate ride-along is much like a two-way mirror. It enables the candidate to take a closer and perhaps more realistic view of the jurisdiction while also affording the prospective employer a better picture of the candidate. This creates a legitimate win-win experience for everyone.

Any attempt to implement a mandatory candidate ride-along component should be predicated upon the philosophy that each member in the organization has a vested interest in ensuring selection of competent and qualified candidates. Particularly suitable for this assignment are the field training officers (FTOs) who must make thorough determinations concerning police probationers during the commencement of the on-the-job training and assessment period to the recommendation for solo patrol entrustment.

Each applicant should be assigned to complete a full-tour candidate ride-along with a specially trained FTO prior to the interview process. Agencies that do not have FTOs would be equally well served by utilizing senior personnel who have expressed a willingness to execute this selection component. Agencies may even want to consider a minimum of two tours of duty to afford the candidate an opportunity to see the agency and community during different hours and a range of public safety responsibilities.

This interactive phase should include points of interest in the jurisdiction, service orientation of the department, training and career opportunities, and special concerns such as community-oriented policing philosophies. During this ride-along, the FTO monitors, observes, and ultimately reports on the candidate responses to certain calls, interpersonal skills, aptitude for the job, reactions, call handling options, and so on. The FTO documents the ride-along shift observations in a written report anchored by specific, objective and behaviorally quantifiable observations garnered through the candidate's questions and conversation during the ride-along(s).

Information garnered from the candidate ride-along is passed along to the background investigation component, including the psychological assessment component, for follow-up purposes. No attempt should be made to assign a numerical assessment or pass-fail to the ride-alongs. It is important to note that the ride-alongs are not assessed with standard evaluation guidelines or evaluation designators that are the bedrock of formal field training and evaluation programs. These behaviorally anchored rating scales of the field training and evaluation program meet the strictest standards of criterion-related content and construct validity (such as those outlined in section 1607.5 of the EEOC Uniform Guidelines of Employment Selection).

FTOs and/or other senior patrol personnel should be screened for this assignment through an interview process and receive commensurate specialized training in the evaluation of communicative skills and nonverbal assessment (such as detection of deception) in addition to competency-based interview techniques. Agency personnel selected for the candidate ride-along must be formally briefed by administrative personnel (including the human resource/personnel specialist) with due regard to purpose and philosophy of the candidate ride-alongs. The agency must also provide a standardized format for the submission of the written report from those conducting the ride-alongs. Again, it must be stressed that only specific, objective, and descriptive written reports are of any utility for background investigative follow-up purposes. FTOs are particularly well suited for this assignment as a result of their extensive training and experience in this format when completing probationary officer documentation responsibilities on the daily observation report.

Most police officer candidates have little or no direct experience with the potential employer. As far as the candidate is concerned, the FTOs providing the ride-along tour is the department.

It is imperative that only personnel who have volunteered to serve as candidate tour guides are selected for this assignment. The very last impression an agency wants to leave with a candidate is a ride-along tour guide who handles the assignment as a directed-to-do burden and acts accordingly. A police organization does not get a second opportunity to make a positive first impression upon a prospective member. Likewise, all agency personnel

must be fully aware of the candidate ride-along as a component of the agency's selection process in that the written report of observations, questions asked, and so on, will be forwarded to the background investigation component.

It is incumbent upon the candidate to complete all liability waivers and acknowledge in writing that he or she understands and will comply with candidate ride-along protocols. Candidates are issued body armor and briefed by the FTO and shift supervisor on safety protocols including the necessity for immediate obedience to any instructions. It is strongly recommended that FTOs identify secure, around-the-clock locations (fire stations, for example) that could serve as secure drop locations when the safety-risk of the candidate is in question.

Quality of Fit and Assessment of Personal Agenda

The candidate ride-along serves a purpose of reinforcing existing beliefs and information gathered about a candidate and may reveal important information that may indicate exclusion from consideration for employment.

For example, a candidate who envisions a career characterized by intense, aggressive policing only to discover himself or herself in a primarily service-oriented suburban police department will, in all likelihood, suffer failed personal expectations. This may also translate into tangible personnel problems for the police executive. Therein lies a poor confluence of organizational and personal style. In this environment, the officer who espouses a high degree of aggressive and assertive behavioral and policing styles in a community occupied by suburban professionals may, for example, sabotage a department's attempt to foster a community policing philosophy.

The person who comes to a department only seeking consistent income, a pension plan, and retirement and who has no desire for career advancement may very well represent the potential for future problems. While some administrators view the career officer as problematical, few look for these characteristics during the selection processes. Preemployment must be viewed as selecting an individual for a long-term employment relationship.

The problem of turnover is a major consequence of a department's failure to address these preemployment factors from a broader time perspective. Officers not advised of the goals and objectives of a department are likely to experience some degree of disillusionment on the job. A new officer who is not aware of a department's philosophy is likely to be more vulnerable to the influences of other personnel, some of whom may not always behave in a way that is consistent with department goals and objectives. The period of initial entry into police work is exceptionally demanding in a variety of ways. The anticipatory set of beliefs about the nature of police work is often not verified by the early on-the-job experiences of the new officer.

This lack of congruence results in a need to resolve the conflict between candidate expectations and the reality of the job. How this conflict is resolved is critical for two reasons. First, it is the probationary officer's prototype for solving job-related problems. Second, the new officer is most likely to seek out colleagues for conflict resolution. Too often, colleagues looking to assist the new officer are actually looking for others to commiserate with their cynical perceptions of the job. The system of failure and blame setting, if left unchecked, becomes self-perpetuating.¹

Poor fit candidates can create a debilitating, revolving-door impact upon agency staffing requirements. Human resource hemorrhaging occurs when an agency incurs considerable expense in the recruitment, testing, background investigation, field train-

ing and evaluation, mentoring, and assessment components without deriving any long-term return for this investment.

In a perfect process all police officer candidates would reflectively and honestly respond to interview board questions. As opposed to the relatively short contact of a structured interview, the candidate ride-along provides a very different environment under multiple-hour conditions with line-level uniformed personnel asking questions, listening carefully to the candidate's responses, and ultimately reporting those responses. Consider the candidate who exhibits a preoccupation with department weaponry and opportunities for use of deadly force and demonstrates excessive authoritarian tendencies. The FTO has an opportunity to actively listen, respond to any inferences of fact, and ultimately provide the agency's background investigators and psychological assessment professionals with additional information for follow-up purposes.

An attendant component of the ride-along phase is the completion of a brief report by the candidate outlining his or her ride-along experience. This exercise may help administrators assess the candidate's recall and written communication skills, and administrators should consider the candidate's report before making any employment decision. Open-ended candidate questions for written response might include the following:

- Briefly provide an overview of your observations and impressions of the pre-shift roll call.
- What was the most interesting activity handled during your ride-along? Why?
- Has this ride-along provided you with a more accurate view of the agency's responsibilities? If so, how?

The candidate's written response can be scanned and analyzed for content (spelling, grammar, and grade level). This writing sample should not be graded, but the background investiga-

tion should use it as a supplemental tool for evaluating literacy skill proficiency.

Candidate debriefing with a patrol shift supervisor and the FTO after the shift completes the process and affords an opportunity to address any lingering questions or comments. This experience sends poignant, succinct, and early messages to the candidate about the agency, its philosophy, and its culture and even provides the candidate an opportunity to gracefully withdraw from the selection process. Candidate withdrawal from continued consideration permits an organization to better use its human and budgetary resources.

Within the context of the organizational processes, an attempt must be made to closely align personal agendas with organizational agendas in a win-win situation. It is unrealistic to presume that this will occur in every situation or that a candidate who presents themselves as completely flawless, but it is imperative that early stages of the selection process delineate employee expectations.

Ultimately, the police officer candidate who successfully completes the agency's hiring process does not simply contribute to the agency's mission statement. He or she becomes the standard for public safety service delivery. Accordingly, police administrators must execute strategic recruiting to ensure that their agencies do not end up simply selecting from among those who apply. Every effort must be made to ensure that personnel and organization are a great fit. The law enforcement candidate ride-along is a small step in that direction. ♦

¹Anthony R. Moriarty and Mark W. Field, *Police Officer Selection: A Handbook for Law Enforcement Administrators* (Springfield, Ill.: Charles C. Thomas Publishers), 1994.



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Interview with Bruce A. Sokolove

Police Recruitment and Retention Clearinghouse

A RAND CENTER ON QUALITY POLICING RESOURCE

"From the Field Experiences" Feature Interview conducted in October, 2009

Biography

Bruce A. Sokolove (Coach Sok) is a principal of Field Training Associates, a law enforcement consulting firm specializing in public safety human resource administration, training issues, and employment mentoring processes. Coach Sok earned a Bachelor of Arts from the Massachusetts College of Liberal Arts and a Master of Science in Police Administration/Public Safety at Michigan State University in 1970. He is a former Police Officer and Patrol Commander. Coach Sok served as a uniformed/sworn police officer in North Adams, Massachusetts and Ann Arbor, Michigan and as Executive Officer and Undersheriff for the Washtenaw County Sheriff's Department (Ann Arbor, Michigan). Coach Sok is a member of the State of Michigan Commission on Law Enforcement Standards (MCOLES) *Curriculum Advisory Task Force* and serves as the President of the Michigan State University's School of Criminal Justice Alumni Advisory Board. Coach Sok has published in *Police Chief* as well as *Law and Order* magazine and has been a frequent presenter at the International Association of Chiefs of Police annual conference and at the Federal Bureau of Investigation's National Academy at Quantico, Virginia. He served as a commissioned officer in the United States Marine Corps.

Interview

During this recession, dialogue about recruitment is beginning to shift to the deeper problems associated with recruitment, such as generational differences. What is the challenge in getting young people to be attracted to policing as a *career*, now that we know we can get many who want just a *job*?

Every generation is uniquely different from the preceding generation, and people are going to be attracted to policing for different reasons. But, unfortunately, what young people today are seeing is that law enforcement isn't necessarily the stable, guaranteed employment of 30 years ago. We aren't as attractive a career option as compared to other employment sectors, particularly risk-loss/private security. Law enforcement has lost considerable footing in salary and benefits. This used to be a career where a young person with a 2- or 4-year degree could make a solid living with above average benefits, such as medical coverage and a solid, actuarially sound retirement package. Until public safety sector budgets are restored, we're going to have a very difficult time attracting and retaining the brightest and best, not just filling vacancies from the best of those who apply.

What are we doing wrong?

Not so much a question of doing things wrong. I just don't think that we've properly packaged this as a career that is unique and extraordinary in public service. There are myriad skill sets required to provide exceptional police services. I don't think we share enough with young people about the reality of what a difference they can make in the quality of life when all of their skills are challenged to full capacity. We live in the reality-show mindset broadcast non-stop on television and Web sites such as YouTube. The Fox Broadcasting show, *Cops*, is celebrating its 20th anniversary so we have an entire generation that has been raised and exposed to an edited and unrealistic notion of what being a street police officer is all about. It's not all "ninja warrior", not all "shots fired", not all "in progress". It's helping people resolve problems and situations that they are unwilling or unable to do for themselves. We need to start recruiting the brightest and the best that aren't afraid to get out of that car, engage people and provide solid service with a problem-solving mindset.

You wrote an article that stressed the value of mentoring and field training in creating such an officer. What role do you see that playing in recruitment?

Field training officers (FTO) provide a front-row, box seat to the greatest show in town! FTOs are literally the tour guides that facilitate transition from the classroom to the streets. Mentors make all the difference. A great FTO-mentor is going to give the probationer an opportunity to apply his or her skill set, no matter their educational background or academy training. Great street cops are not created in a vacuum. Supervisors and the rest of the force have to be equally engaged. There's an old African proverb that *...it takes a village to raise a child*. I believe it takes an entire department effort to create solid street cops. It is imperative that we select FTOs from the agency's top cops; they must have a voluntary willingness to train. I would describe it as the master police coach concept—by tapping the talents of what our best street cops do exceptionally well, and sharing it with the next generation. And remember, this is a dynamic process—not a conversation across the front seat of a patrol car. What we need to do is take a hard look longitudinally and find out what makes these coaches a little bit different than other officers. What will emerge is a better model of selecting and preparing our FTOs, and ultimately, our probationers.

So you're suggesting that there are people who are good *career* mentors who can sell the career of policing.

Absolutely. FTO-Master Coaches must be involved in the entire hiring process. We can't lose sight of the reality that you can be a phenomenal street cop and not be a successful coach. Not all the best athletes make the best coaches! The *coach* has to have willingness and a passion that is transparent, and the candidate can see there is no hidden agenda. I've observed multiple situations where great street cops without the patience and flexibility to train create an environment that is more analogous to child abuse-neglect when assigned to work with probationers! Coaches have to honestly communicate to the candidate that their goal is to apply the totality of what they learned in the college classroom and academy, and learn how to transition/adapt and embrace the knowledge, and skill sets that work best for them. When you have that openness in mentoring, you're going to develop career-long relationships of uncompromised trust. There can never be a hidden agenda in the field training and evaluation process.

What is taking place at the field training stage to really make or break that future officer's desire to stay in policing as a profession, as opposed to leading to turnover?

What is crucial is whether or not that future officer fits the organization, because many of these recruits are simply looking for a job and not a career. Let's say there are pre-service candidates who have taken all the risks and responsibilities to get certified, and they have invested money to get through the academy. Frankly, they need to find a job. Very often what they will do is end up in an organization that may simply be hiring, but that might not be where they want to be long-term. So sometimes people chase where the jobs are as opposed to where the *career* might be. Organizations have an absolute requirement to make sure that when any person comes in, they provide that candidate with an up-front impression of who they are and what that organization is all about. *Green-light candidates*, those who meet the requisites for hiring, need to be scheduled for at least two mandatory ride-alongs, with a senior field-training officer who is also a background investigator. You need to integrate your hiring process to include the FTOs working with the background investigation team. Police officer candidates need to see the organization from the roll call to shift's end to fully absorb the agency's culture and the interaction between employees. It is imperative that the candidate can honestly answer the questions: *Do I see myself in this organization for the next 25 years? And, do I see this as my career, not simply as an interim job?* It's about minimizing the potential for a bad fit for both parties. Agencies must get a return for the phenomenal investment of recruiting, selecting and training probationers. Nobody can afford the revolving door syndrome of a bad fit.

How would this ride-along process work?

First and foremost, it has to be a mandatory part of the overall candidate screening process. Candidates need to observe different tours of duty to experience shift and calls for service diversity. One shift should be the craziest, non-stop, highest call-volume shift, so they are seeing the organization at full speed. The second ride-along should be the exact opposite, to show candidates the extreme. This is typically accomplished with the second ride-along on a Sunday day watch. Shame on an organization if all they show is "ninja warriors" when recruiting!

Are agencies really interested in showing these cold, hard realities?

Agencies better be. The reality is that unless the police officer candidate grew up around a kitchen table where there were family members on the job, their views of American policing are generally formed by television and movies, which are generally edited to entertain. They don't show the mundane calls, such as the barking dog, loud-party complaints, retail frauds and property damage crashes. Candidates may be young, but they're not dumb. If we give them an opportunity to see the whole perspective, they're in a better position to make a quality career decision. That decision may come down to concluding that a certain organization's calls for service pace are *too slow* for example. I'd rather somebody make that decision at the selection stage, than if they are hired and we invest a lot in that candidate, and after a few years they decide that they're bored. What generally follows is a giant sucking sound from the revolving door because there wasn't a really good fit with that candidate at the front end. A patrol shift supervisor should be available at the close of each mandatory ride-along to clarify questions and formally debrief candidates. The candidate should have to provide a narrative of their observations and impressions (without spelling and grammar check software) before they leave. This is an outstanding mechanism to screen and flag potential literacy issues that may impede the successful completion of the field training and evaluation process.

What is your impression of law-enforcement magnet schools that may serve to both attract and screen candidates early?

Attract, yes. Screen, no. In the late 1960s there weren't so-called track/magnet programs where the law enforcement candidate could complete their college studies and law enforcement basic training in one fell swoop. In my years of policing, we were pretty much limited to police internships that served two purposes: the student could be earning a degree and they were being subsidized as community-service officers or cadets. They were doing things for the agency that didn't require sworn officer powers. At the same time, we had police Explorer programs and junior police academies which got youth of all ages involved, as well as summer programs that gave young people an opportunity to take a closer look at the profession. I can't say undeniably that these things are good or not, but what is important is that we're looking for the best qualified people out there, and these candidates can be revealed at any stage. We also have to proactively look for individuals who bring life experiences to the front end of recruiting. These folks bring us something that we need as well. You can't solely focus on police recruiting from a single market of 2- to 4-year college graduates. What's going to happen when there are reductions in our military forces, and we have returning military personnel that can bring exceptional skills, life experiences and maturity? Hopefully some of these returning military personnel will think police work is something they want to do.

With respect to what our recruiting efforts are giving us so far, where are we headed?

Let's hope that the economy rebounds, and I'm hopefully optimistic. But regardless, we are heading into an era when law enforcement leadership needs to be smart enough to understand that the old "if we build it, they will come" philosophy of recruiting is not going to work. We don't need people who are simply looking for a job—we need law enforcement *career-focused individuals* that will make the commitment to serve. So we need to look at the larger issue of how we strategically recruit, not simply post job openings. And, I can't underscore the need to bridge the gap between the candidate and the organization. We must be committed to looking at much stronger recruiting, testing, background investigation, selection, and field training components that are intertwined. It requires an organizational commitment to minimize unsound expenditures of the community's human resource and capital assets. It is imperative that we do everything possible to ensure that our expenditures aren't going into a bottomless pit to recruit people who aren't going to stay. We need to be focused more on how we're going to get a full and mutually rewarding career out of each candidate. It's a win-win situation when that occurs!