

A Review of Leadership in the LAPD: Walking the Tightrope

By

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Book: *Leadership in the LAPD: Walking the Tightrope*

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The Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) is one of three iconic U.S. law enforcement agencies, along with the New York Police Department (NYPD) and the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). In part because Hollywood is actually within its jurisdiction, the LAPD has gotten more than its share of popular media attention for half a century, beginning with *Dragnet* in the 1950s and continuing with untold TV series and movies. More recently, the LAPD has grabbed news headlines it probably did not want thanks to Rodney King, O.J. Simpson, and the Ramparts scandals.

LAPD chiefs have frequently had national profiles, both because of their positions atop the crime-fighting machinery of the City of Angels and because of the things they said and did. Police historians remember William Parker and Ed Davis as the architects of the professional model LA-style, and Daryl Gates as the tough-talking professional in charge when that model failed the LAPD and its city. They were all LAPD insiders. The outsider Willie Williams, an African-American, came in from Philadelphia in 1992 to implement community policing. He was followed by an insider, Bernard Parks, also an African-American, whose charge was to restore LAPD pride while continuing to improve police-community relations. The current chief is the outsider William Bratton, most recently from New York, who was already the highest-profile police executive in America before taking command in Los Angeles.

Renford Reese tells the story of these chiefs in the new book *Leadership in the LAPD: Walking the Tightrope*. It is a story worth telling because it is about the LAPD, but also because we do not have many books in the police and criminal justice literature that chronicle the natural histories of major institutions. In addition, we do not have many books that apply organization theory to the experiences of real organizations over a period of many years.

The book is organized in eight short chapters. It opens with a history chapter that includes the tenures of Parker and Davis, and then proceeds with separate chapters on Gates, Williams, and Parks. The leadership narrative then pauses for chapters on the Ramparts scandal and the impact of Hollywood, before resuming with a chapter on Bratton and a concluding chapter on "Lessons in Leadership."

This book works best as a readable account of 50 years of LAPD leadership history. The average reader will get a solid picture of the men in charge of the LAPD, the issues they grappled with, and some of their successes and failures. For those of us who do not live in

Southern California and have not read the *Los Angeles Times* regularly over the years, the book is informative and even entertaining. It provides some plausible explanations for the struggles that Williams and Parks experienced during the reform decade (1992-2002) and concludes that Bratton has the potential to be more successful because of charismatic and intellectual qualities, as well as the disposition to strike a balance between competing interests and pressures.

The book works less well as an analysis of the leadership provided by this succession of high-profile police chiefs. One reason is that little effort is made to connect this study of the LAPD to previous research and writing on police leadership, police management, or police organizations. The only citation to the work of James Q. Wilson (1968a, 1968b, 1978) is the broken windows article – no reference to his works on the dilemmas of police administration, the impact of political culture on police institutions, or the difficult juxtaposition of police tasks and police organization are provided. Bill Geller's (1985) anthology *Police Leadership in America* is not cited nor is Michael Scott's (1986) *Police Chief Survival Guide*. Looking farther out on the academic continuum, there is no mention of Manning (1997) or Bittner (1970) or others of that ilk who have written extensively about police organizations and the social organization of police work. The book's approach simply is not informed by the last 40 years of research on policing and police organizations.

The book's approach is rooted in a small part of the public administration literature, particularly the difficulty that public managers face in balancing the interests of their employees (the internal audience) and the public (the external audience). A typology of transactional and transformational leadership is also employed when dissecting the leadership styles of the LAPD chiefs. These tools from the public administration literature prove useful in the book, but not adequate for a full-fledged analysis of leadership behavior in such a complex organizational and political environment.

Another problem is that the book is heavily based on interviews with a rather small set of individuals – 30 members of the LAPD and a few additional public officials. The reader does not get a sense that observations and interpretations were triangulated and double-checked, but rather that the book is largely based on the personal reflections of a small non-random convenience sample of LAPD members. The issues that arise pertain to reliability and validity. Would 30 other interviewees have described the same leadership behaviors and organizational reactions? And would they have explained them the same way?

A third shortcoming of the book's analysis is that it pretends to be value-free in its analysis of leadership, leading to quite a few questionable statements and conclusions. The book deems William Parker to have been "the quintessential public sector leader" (p. 5) despite behavior that "perpetuated a culture of police misconduct" (p. 7), openly racist remarks, and a push toward extreme autonomy for the LAPD that led to many of the agency's later problems. Similarly, Daryl Gates "possessed qualities that made him the ideal LAPD chief during the 1970s and 1980s" (p. 37) despite the fact that crime rates climbed during his reign, he was known for uttering insensitive and racist statements, "he failed in his role as a leader of the community" (p. 26) and "failed to cultivate important external relationships" (p. 26). These kinds of conclusions arise in the book in part because leader effectiveness is largely equated with

survival, hence, leaders who lasted a long time must have been great leaders. Presumably, by this measure, J. Edgar Hoover must have been the greatest U.S. law enforcement leader of them all.

These kinds of conclusions also arise from the book's use of the "walking the tightrope" analogy, which refers to the challenge facing any public leader of balancing "the needs of internal administration and external politics" (p. xiii). Certainly, this challenge is a very real one for police chiefs – it is the rare big-city chief who can claim high marks from both the community and the troops. However, the book seems to lean in the internal direction when making judgments about leader effectiveness – thus, Parker, Davis, and Gates are described as effective leaders, while Williams is not. Yet it was Williams who tended to the external environment and accomplished demonstrable improvements in police-community relations. The book credits Williams with these accomplishments, but for some reason they do not seem to count in the formula that calculates leadership effectiveness. Apparently falling off one side of the tightrope demonstrates more leadership than falling off the other side.

The end result is that the book's viewpoint on leader effectiveness in the LAPD seems to depend more on how the troops evaluated the chief than on how the community evaluated him. More importantly, there is no attempt to apply any objective criteria such as crime rates, citizen complaints, or scandals to assess whether the LAPD was more or less effective under these various chiefs. The book's definition of public sector leadership reveals why these kinds of objective criteria are not employed – leadership is "the capacity to motivate those within an organization to achieve certain objectives *and* the capacity to persuade those outside – including the public – that the actions taken are in their best interest" (p. xi, emphasis in the original). This definition does not question whether the "certain objectives" are the right ones, nor does it require that the organization take the right actions – only that the leader persuade the public that it is being well served. In other words, leadership is mostly about spin, both internally and externally.

This framework is too superficial to be of much benefit in analyzing the impact that police leaders have on their organizations and their communities. It would seem fairly straightforward that the most effective leader is the one who has the most positive impact on organizational effectiveness. Police organizational effectiveness includes reduced crime, offenders held more accountable, safer public places, public reassurance, minimal use of force and authority, and efficient use of resources. Police leadership effectiveness in accomplishing these ends includes both getting the organization and its members pulling in the direction of these ends and working externally to engage the public, politicians, and special interests in pursuing the same ends. So yes, there is a tightrope and some spin involved in police leader effectiveness, but the bottom line is less ephemeral – it is about accomplishing important ends, not survival or popularity.

In the case of Willie Williams, then, the important question should not be whether he developed chemistry with his officers or inspired them, but whether the officers in the LAPD worked more or less effectively under his leadership. The book does not provide this type of evidence. However, if, for example, his work with the community led to more public confidence in the police, or less use of force by the police, or more crimes being solved through public

cooperation, then it should be said that his leadership led to a more effective LAPD. Alternatively, if none of these things happened, then his leadership was not effective.

The point is that these would seem to be examples of relevant and meaningful criteria of leadership effectiveness. Without such criteria, the book falls back on spin – how well did the leaders of the LAPD persuade their internal and external constituencies that they were doing the right things? Leadership is defined in terms of politics and popularity, in other words, with no reference to actual accomplishments, real outcomes, or costs and benefits. It is defined in such a way that William Parker was the quintessential leader and Daryl Gates was ideal, without any regard to the degree of public good or harm that the LAPD caused under their leadership. Ultimately, the book seems too easy on those chiefs who catered to the troops and too hard on those who actually tried to “walk the tightrope” and who were guided more by what was best for the people of Los Angeles than by what was best for the LAPD.

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ENDNOTE

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