

THE NEXT CHIEF OF POLICE SHOULD BE, FIRST AND FOREMOST, A COP

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By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. As the Times recently noted, “over the last 10 years, the LAPD has had three chiefs, all of whom left under fire.” Each time, community leaders winnowed through a pool of candidates, looking for that one charismatic leader who could single-handedly negotiate L.A.'s political and social minefields, boost officer morale and lift a supposedly foundering agency from its quagmire. All without costing an additional cent.

Again, we're playing the same tune. Again, will it hit a sour note?

Forget policing. Can the mess of health care, the shutdown of clinics, the unconscionable overcrowding of hospital emergency rooms be fixed by enlightened leadership alone? At the woefully underfunded LAPD pressures of business are so intense that doing a good job as a patrol officer is measured by how quickly one "clears" calls for service. Many detectives cannot remember the days when "investigation" meant something more than picking up the telephone. After decades of chronic short-staffing, time and attention are luxuries reserved for the most aggravated crimes. Worse, with sergeants tied up on citizen complaints and paperwork, and senior lead officers distracted by other tasks, supervision – a difficult enough thing to accomplish in the decentralized atmosphere of police work – has for all purposes disappeared.

When essential resources are seriously lacking attributing difficulties to poor "morale" or weak leadership is simply ridiculous. Lacking the money or political will to fix the real problem, exasperated officials have turned to an endless stream of remedies. One of the better known is "community policing", an appealing but frustratingly vague strategy that has generated volumes of rhetoric, supported the careers of many academics and created a fat bureaucracy in Washington. Still, as its implementation would require a great deal more police, not less, it is hard to see how this expensive fix could play in cash-strapped L.A.

Reforming "police culture" is another enticing, feel-good fixative. Stripped to its essence, it promises something for nothing: that we can produce the equivalent of more police cars simply by having their present occupants recline on a couch. Who wouldn't want a kindler, gentler force, better attuned to public needs? But occupational "cultures" do not spring up in a vacuum. Police are shaped by their surroundings. Humans might carry PDA's in their pockets, but they are Cro-Magnons

at heart. Want nicer cops? Breed nicer citizens. Naturally, achieving that end calls for a dynamic social and economic agenda, something far beyond the ability of even the most enlightened police leader to implement.

Still, if the money can't happen, morale is important, if for no reason other than to keep the few cops we have left. LAPD officers have always been in demand by smaller agencies, which offer less stress, shorter commutes and the luxury and autonomy of single-officer patrol cars.

So we return to the question: who should be Chief? To earn the respect of the line, it must be someone who is deeply invested in the craft of policing. Moving through the ranks of larger agencies takes so long that ambitious employees often spend little time on the street. Those who rapidly promote to administrative sinecures have sent a clear message – that they are not that interested in the real work of the police.

Microsoft was created and continues to be led by talented engineers with an intimate knowledge of product and place. There is no difference here. A Chief is that one government executive who must know what makes cops tick. To energize a police organization and nudge it in the appropriate direction requires someone who understands the sensibilities of officers and the environment in which they operate. These characteristics are most likely present in candidates with a strong background in patrol and detectives, both as a line officer and first- and second-level supervisor.

Policing is an honorable occupation. Its troubles are fundamentally troubles of the street. We need a Chief attuned to its many nuances, who knows enough to be skeptical of easy solutions, who can make a distinction (as the last Chief apparently could not) between working mistakes and willful misconduct.

LAPD has many experienced Captains and Commanders who could rise to the occasion. Don't look for a big name. Look for a big heart.