

## Contextual Leadership: An Examination of the Leadership Style Preferences of American Police Supervisors Using the Vannsimpco Leadership Survey

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### Abstract

*The leadership style preferences of American police supervisors were investigated. Data were collected from 597 respondents using an adapted version of the Vannsimpco Leadership Survey. ANOVA and post-hoc pairwise comparisons using independent t-tests found statistically significant differences in the preferred leadership styles of police leaders at all rank levels. The democratic-transformational style was the most preferred style, while laissez-faire was the least preferred style. Spearman's  $r_s$  tests produced perfect correlations between the chief executive, senior leader, and middle manager ranks ( $r_s$  [9], 1,  $p < 0.001$ ) and positive correlations between the first-line supervisor rank and all other ranks ( $r_s$  [9], 0.983,  $p < 0.001$ ). The findings indicate that American police leaders are flexible in the leadership styles they choose to employ depending upon the context of the issue or incident they are facing, a paradigm this researcher calls contextual leadership.*

**Keywords:** contextual leadership, law enforcement, police, policing, leadership style preference, Vannsimpco

### 1. Introduction

Clear and consistent leadership is critical to the success of any organization (Gottschalk, 2011; Schafer, 2010), including law enforcement agencies (Schafer, 2009). While police leaders face many of the same day-to-day administrative decisions as leaders in other organizations, whether in the public or private sector, they face more strenuous operational decisions than most. Police leaders regularly make decisions regarding critical issues such as the seizure of a person or property and even decisions regarding life and death. Thus, the law enforcement community needs to understand what shapes the leadership style preferences of leaders at all levels of police supervision.

The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing was formed to determine, among other things, what steps the law enforcement community should take to promote the effective and trustworthy delivery of policing services in the 21st century. Task force member Milwaukee police chief Edward Flynn was quoted in the report as having said, "flexible, dynamic, insightful, ethical leaders are needed to develop the informal social control and social capital required for a civil society to flourish" (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015, p. 54). The task force suggested that "law enforcement agencies should provide leadership training to all personnel throughout their careers" and that "standards and programs need to be established for every level of leadership from the first line to middle management to executive leadership" because agencies with good leadership have officers who are more likely to follow established standards (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015, p. 54).

Further, the task force recommended that the federal government encourage partnerships between the law enforcement community and educational institutions to support cross-discipline leadership education (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). The task force also proposed the creation of a national postgraduate institute designed to prepare senior police leaders to lead their agencies in the 21st century (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015). Finally, the task force suggested the institute "provide ongoing leadership training, education, and research programs which will enhance the quality of law enforcement culture, knowledge, skills, practices and policies" (President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, 2015, p. 55).

Curricula explaining the identified leadership styles can quickly be developed and delivered to police professionals. However, doing so thoughtfully and effectively should rely on an understanding of what leadership styles police leaders are already using. Regardless of whether they have had formalized leadership training, each police leader employs a preferred leadership style daily. Therefore, research designed to identify supervisors' preferred leadership styles without simultaneously identifying or educating them about those styles was needed. Such a research design could avoid the possibility of swaying respondent attitudes and the introduction of bias into respondents' answers.

## 2. Review of the Literature

According to More et al. (2003), “a marginal or inept organization can be transformed into a successful one through effective leadership” (p. 142). Effective police leadership focuses and maximizes organizational efforts toward meeting community expectations and accomplishing departmental goals. American police leadership structures and hierarchies and police leadership are explored below.

### 2.1 Police Leadership Structures

The hierarchical structures of police agencies vary throughout the United States; however, they most often follow a paramilitary structure with clearly defined lines of supervision. Usually, the shape and complexity of the organizational structure are determined primarily by the agency’s size. Smaller police agencies tend to have fewer employees and require less specialization; therefore, they often have flatter organizational structures (Peak, 2015). Conversely, larger police agencies require greater specialization creating a more vertical organizational structure (More et al., 2003; Palmiotto, 2005; Peak, 2015).

As agencies grow, their layers of supervision tend to broaden. The unity of command principle suggests that employees should report to only one clearly identified supervisor (Peak, 2015). According to King (2003), command rank structures in American police agencies have been much maligned by academics and practitioners since the 1970s. King (2003) suggested that police organizations should flatten their rank structures. Notwithstanding that, flattening rank structures can lead to other leadership concerns, such as managing span of control (House & Miner, 1969). The concept of span of control suggests leaders can only effectively supervise a finite number of subordinates at any one time (Stieglitz, 1962). For example, House and Miner (1969) suggested that “under most circumstances the optimal span [of control] is likely to be in the range 5 through 10” (p. 461), while Peak (2015) suggested police supervisors should be assigned no more than three to five subordinates at any given time. Nevertheless, Slovak (1988) found that as an agency’s size increases, so does its supervisory span of control. Consequently, the impact of leadership on organizational performance is a concern at all levels of police supervision.

Rank structures vary from agency to agency, again affected by agency size, but the majority include first-line supervisors, middle managers, senior leaders, and chief executives. Going from top to bottom, the chief executive is generally the chief of police, sheriff, or director. The senior leader ranks include commander, major, colonel, assistant or deputy chief, chief deputy, or undersheriff. They usually act as the conduit between the chief executive and those in the middle-management and first-line supervisory ranks. The middle-manager ranks most often consist of sworn lieutenants and captains, while first-line supervisor ranks usually include sergeants or corporals. Because civilianization has been an emerging trend in policing (Maguire & King, 2004), the role of both sworn and non-sworn supervisors must be examined. Civilianization is defined as when positions traditionally held by sworn (sometimes referred to as commissioned) members are instead held by non-sworn (sometimes referred to as non-commissioned or civilian) members in an effort to reduce costs and improve service (Forst, 2000). Depending on the level of leadership civilianization, police agencies may also have non-sworn leaders in command positions throughout their organizational hierarchy.

### 2.2 Police Leadership

According to More et al. (2012), the law enforcement community’s preferred leadership style has transitioned over time. What was once a strictly militaristic and autocratic leadership environment (Peak, 2015) has evolved into something else. While some larger agencies retain some vestiges of the autocratic style due to their size and span, More et al. (2012) believe most agencies have left that style behind. A new generation of officers is coming into the profession, and it is suggested they prefer a more participative leadership style, seemingly making the democratic and transformational leadership styles more the norm throughout the law enforcement community today.

More et al. (2003) noted that “supervisors serve as a communications link between the line and higher management. They are responsible for turning the concepts and visions of those in higher positions into the ‘nuts and bolts’ reality of police work” (p. 19). Regardless of rank level, each leader has an impact on the success of the organization. First-line supervisors are considered one of the more crucial leadership levels in a police agency. They are given direction from the middle management leaders about agency goals and mission changes. However, they are given significant autonomy to run their shifts or squads (More et al., 2012; Peak, 2015). Middle managers are the prime conduit between the officers and first-line supervisors and the senior and executive leadership of the organization. They are sometimes made a part of the decision-making process and are expected to pass on newly established organizational goals while ensuring they are achieved.

According to Baker (2010), chief executives are “the most important strategy initiator” (p. 43). Chiefs determine organizational priorities and set the leadership example. Police leaders are expected to be competent managers and inspiring leaders who achieve organizational goals (Vito & Higgins, 2010).

Inspiration is neither accidental nor coincidental; it is accomplished through the thoughtful and deliberate practice of leadership. Such inspirational leadership inspires employees to strive to achieve organizational goals and to emulate those leadership traits associated with organizational success. According to Vito and Higgins (2010),

Effective leadership is exercised by police managers in different ways, depending upon their rank in the department. [Chief executives and senior leaders] should spend [their] time developing and sharing the vision for the organisation, charting the journey by establishing strategic objectives and practising collaboration and delegation of tasks. Police middle managers coordinate and plan, mentor and coach, build teams and empower and reward their subordinates. First-line supervisors provide leadership by example, supervising and training teams while evaluating performance (p. 306).

Further, Vito and Higgins cited Girodo (1998), who surveyed high-level police managers from North American, European, and Pacific countries, asking them to characterize their management style. Girodo's (1998) survey results showed that administrators, leaders typically found in chief executive and senior leader law enforcement positions, most often chose the autocratic style. Senior police leaders indicated that the administrative level "of responsibility [was] best handled with strategic interpersonal relations and power or control tactics" (Girodo, 1998, p. 426), like those found in the autocratic style. Conversely, leaders who directly led officers, such as middle managers and first-line supervisors, cited the transformational style as the most desirable approach.

Stamper (1992) described a leadership vacuum, where "leadership ha[s] been 'structured out' of police administration" because police chiefs, all too often, devote "too much attention to management concerns ... [causing them] to lose credibility as leaders of their organisations" (p. 676). Mayo (1985) asserted that police chiefs distrust their subordinate leaders and question their loyalty. Vito and Higgins (2010) discussed more recent studies that found police leaders must have 'been there and done that' to be considered legitimate leaders and that police employees want leaders who follow the platinum rule, which requires leaders to see and treat their subordinates as the subordinates wish to be seen and treated.

According to Northouse (2016), "scholars and practitioners have attempted to define leadership for more than a century without universal consensus" (p. 2). Without a universally accepted definition to work from, a working definition that addresses essential aspects of leadership is needed. In their discussion of police leadership, More et al. (2012) describe leadership as "the traits, behaviors, and/or style of those persons who – either formally or informally – assume responsibility for the activities of a goal-oriented group" (p. 63). With this definition in mind, one can draw some conclusions about leadership. Leadership is inherently a group activity; therefore, to be a leader, one must have followers (Kouzes & Posner, 2005). Leadership involves goal setting, whether by the leader or the group, and working towards goal attainment.

## 2.3 Leadership Styles

According to Schein (2010), "the search for the universally correct leadership style is doomed to failure because of cultural variation by country, by industry, by occupation, by the particular history of a given organization, and, most importantly, by the actual task" (p. 166). Therefore, Schein suggested that different leadership styles may be simultaneously in use at different organizational levels. To probe the leadership style preference of police leaders, one must first understand the differences between the leadership styles that may be in use. Accordingly, the democratic, autocratic, transactional, transformational, and laissez-faire leadership styles were examined.

### 2.3.1 Democratic

Democratic leadership, also known as consultative or participative leadership, is a leadership style in which group members take a more participative role in the decision-making process. A leader who feels "that people are motivated and want to do their job" will choose the democratic leadership style (Schein, 2010, p. 165). In the democratic leadership style, group members (a) are encouraged to share ideas and opinions, even though the leader retains the final say over decisions, (b) feel more engaged in the process, and (c) are encouraged and rewarded for their creativity (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Maitra, 2007; Vann et al., 2014).

The role of followers is particularly important in democratic leadership because followers are included in decision-making. Followers who share a certain amount of power within the democratic style must be swayed by the leader's charisma and have faith in the leader's abilities. Machiavelli (1998) reminded leaders that they must gain the support of followers to have any chance of being successful. If followers fail to believe in the leader's expertise and personal appeal, the leader will need to revert to an autocratic leadership style.

While democratic leadership is an effective leadership style, it does have some negative aspects. In situations where roles are unclear or time is of the essence, democratic leadership can lead to communication failures and uncompleted projects. "In crises requiring a highly structured response, a democratic leadership style might prove to be too time consuming or awkward to be effective" (More et al., 2012, p. 73).

Furthermore, in some cases, group members may not have the necessary knowledge or expertise to make quality contributions to the decision-making process. Thus, the democratic leadership style works best in situations where group members are skilled and eager to share their knowledge.

### **2.3.2 Autocratic**

Autocratic leadership, also known as authoritarian leadership, is characterized by individual control over all decisions and little input from group members (Eagly & Johannesen-Schmidt, 2001; Maitra, 2007; Vann et al., 2014; Vito et al., 2011). Autocratic leadership has traditionally been the predominant leadership style used in the law enforcement community (Sarver & Miller, 2014). Autocratic leaders typically make choices based on their ideas and judgments and rarely accept advice from followers. According to Schein (2010), a leader who believes “people cannot be trusted would automatically go toward the autocratic management style and stay there” (p. 165). Autocratic leadership concentrates on “obtaining and maintaining power” (Vito et al., 2011, p. 679) and consolidating authoritarian control over a group. According to Schein (2010), “some tasks require autocratic authority as in carrying out a military mission while others should be delegated because the subordinates have all the information” (p. 165).

Police departments have traditionally employed a militaristic and autocratic leadership style “because everyone recognized that [such] a service organization required more discipline if the customers were to get timely and efficient service” (Schein, 2010, p. 276). According to Cowper (2000), many critics of the para-militaristic nature of police agencies in the United States suggest it “fosters aggressive and confrontational behavior by police officers toward the public” (p. 229). Followers in an autocratic atmosphere tend to become dependent upon the direction of leaders, thereby stymieing development and leadership at lower levels in the organization (Knowles, 1973; McClure, 2011). Because of factors such as these, police departments that have been traditionally militaristic and autocratic are moving away from that leadership style (Dean & Gottschalk, 2013; More et al., 2012).

### **2.3.3 Transactional**

In perhaps the simplest terms, transactional leadership “focus[es] on the exchanges that occur between leaders and their followers” (Northouse, 2016, p. 162). According to Densten (2003), “when leaders use transactional leadership behaviors they pursue a cost-benefit or economic exchange to meet the current material and psychic needs of followers in return for expected effort” (p. 402). In transactional leadership, the leader and follower must clarify the requirements of the task and the expected reward outcome (Fields & Herold, 1995). Transactional leaders tend to be passive, believing group members will work towards the agreed-upon goal to attain their desired reward. However, the transactional leader cannot be a true *laissez-faire* leader because the followers’ work must be monitored “to predict or prevent the subordinate from deviating from the agreed upon goals” (Vito et al., 2014, p. 810). Transactional leadership is somewhat hampered in public-sector organizations like police departments. Civil service rules and collective bargaining agreements place strict rules on the rewards a leader may be able to offer or withhold, such as promotions, salary adjustments, and shift and vacation selections.

### **2.3.4 Transformational**

Developed by Burns (1978) and later refined by Bass (1985), “transformational leadership produces greater effects than transactional leadership” because while “transactional leadership results in expected outcomes, transformational leadership results in performance that goes well beyond what is expected” (Northouse, 2016, p. 169). According to Northouse (2016), transformational leaders focus on individual needs, unlike transactional leaders. Transformational leaders are active leaders who are charismatic, engaging, and inspire followers toward common goals. Multiple research studies have found that police officers prefer transformational leadership to transactional leadership (Swid, 2014; Vito et al., 2011, 2014), again preferring active leadership to passive leadership. Officers like to be empowered to address issues, take risks to make things happen, and be respected by their superiors (Vito & Higgins, 2010), all of which relate to transformational leadership.

### **2.3.5 Laissez-Faire**

A lack of decision-making characterizes the *laissez-faire* leadership style. *Laissez-faire* leaders are passive and give little to no direction to subordinates (Deluga, 1990; Densten, 2003; Eagly et al., 2003; More et al., 2012; Northouse, 2016; Swid, 2014; Vito et al., 2011). A *laissez-faire* leader “abdicates responsibility, delays decisions, gives no feedback, and makes little effort to help followers satisfy their needs. There is no exchange with followers or attempt to help them grow” (Northouse, 2016, p. 172). *Laissez-faire* leaders, while hands-off in the decision-making process, do share information with group members (Lewin et al., 1939; More et al., 2012). Research has shown that the *laissez-faire* leadership style is seldom used in the police profession and that officers are not satisfied with that leadership style (Swid, 2014; Vito et al., 2011). That may be due to the traditionally paramilitary structure of police organizations. It is also suggested that police officers prefer active leadership rather than a passive *laissez-faire* leadership style. A review of the literature regarding passive or *laissez-faire* leadership found a general dislike of the *laissez-faire* style across the professional spectrum.

Many researchers and authors have described laissez-faire leadership as the absence of leadership (Abu-Tineh et al., 2009; Lewin et al., 1939; Northouse, 2016). According to More et al. (2012), that absence of leadership has led some theorists to no longer consider laissez-faire a leadership style.

### **3. Purpose of the Study**

In their review of the literature regarding police leadership, Miller, Watkins, and Webb (2009) found little existing research on leadership theory, assessment, or development in the law enforcement community. According to Densten (2003), the leadership “differences between junior and senior levels of police organizations are recognized but sparsely investigated” (p. 401).

The review of the literature found little existing research related to identifying the leadership style preferences of police leaders across rank levels in the United States or elsewhere. Accordingly, research into the leadership style preferences of police leaders at various rank levels was needed because “police organizations consist of multilevel systems and, according to Klein and Kozlowski, this approach gives greater capacity to capture the nested complexity of real organizational life” (Densten, 2003, p. 400).

What little research was found regarding leadership in policing was either concentrated on a) police leadership and organizational performance outcomes (e.g., impacting crime victimization), usually examining only the upper or lower ranks separately, or b) the examination of a single leadership style, with transformational leadership being the most often studied style. That lack of holistic research into the leadership style preferences of today’s police leaders across rank levels demanded additional research. That identified gap in the literature suggests the academy lacks an understanding of what leadership styles are being used by American police leaders today. That gap drove the research design of this study.

### **4. Research Questions**

The following research questions were developed to examine the leadership style preferences of American police leaders:

1. Do law enforcement chief executives have a preferred leadership style?
2. Do law enforcement senior leaders have a preferred leadership style?
3. Do law enforcement middle managers have a preferred leadership style?
4. Do law enforcement first-line supervisors have a preferred leadership style?
5. Is there a correlation between the preferred leadership style of law enforcement chief executives, senior leaders, middle managers, and first-line supervisors?
6. Does career tenure affect law enforcement leaders’ preferred leadership style?
7. Does supervisory tenure affect law enforcement leaders’ preferred leadership style?
8. Does agency type affect law enforcement leaders’ preferred leadership style?
9. Does agency professional accreditation status affect law enforcement leaders’ preferred leadership style?
10. Does academic degree attainment affect law enforcement leaders’ preferred leadership style?
11. Does having attended formal leadership training affect law enforcement leaders’ preferred leadership style?
12. Does having attended an executive management-development course affect law enforcement leaders’ preferred leadership style?
13. Does gender affect law enforcement leaders’ preferred leadership style?
14. Does age affect law enforcement leaders’ preferred leadership style?
15. Does race affect law enforcement leaders’ preferred leadership style?

### **5. Methodology**

The existing research on leadership in the law enforcement community has focused on individual styles of leadership. Focusing on individual leadership styles has left a gap in the academy of research. Accordingly, a more holistic approach to identifying police leadership preferences was desired.

#### **5.1 Research Design**

An adapted version of the Vannsimpco Leadership Survey (VLS) instrument was fielded as a cross-sectional online self-administered instrument. The instrument was considered adapted because 14 additional demographic questions were added. The VLS examined the autocratic, democratic, transformational, transactional, autocratic-transformational, autocratic-transactional, democratic-transformational, democratic-transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles. Respondents rated their level of agreement with 27 statements posed in the instrument using a five-point Likert Scale.

A correlational design was used to examine the relationship between police leadership style preferences and respondent rank. For the purposes of the study, ranks were grouped into four categories; chief executives, senior leaders, middle managers, and first-line supervisors. Responses in each rank category were examined to determine if a significant leadership style preference existed for each rank. Finally, the four rank categories were compared to

determine if their leadership style preferences were correlated.

## 5.2 The Sample Population

The sample population consisted of 597 police supervisors from 44 states and a territory of the United States. A snowball-sampling approach was employed; therefore, a response rate could not be calculated. Of the 597 participants, 20.77 percent (N = 124) self-classified at the rank of chief executive, 23.62 percent (N = 141) self-classified at the rank of senior leader, 32.66 percent (N = 195) self-classified at the rank of middle manager, and 22.95 percent (N = 137) self-classified at the rank of first-line supervisor. Of the 597 respondents, 94.64 percent (N = 565) were sworn (with arrest powers), while 5.36 percent (N = 32) were non-sworn (without arrest powers) leaders. Table 1 shows the count and percentage of respondents' sworn status by rank level.

Instrument validity and reliability were a concern. The VLS instrument used in this study was well-vetted for validity and reliability by its creators, thereby minimizing the threat of construct reliability (Vann et al., 2014). In a further effort to avoid construct validity issues, the demographics questions added to the VLS in this study were pilot tested on a sampling of respondents who met all the parameters for inclusion in the study population. The limited number of respondents, compared to the overall population, presented an issue with external validity. While the survey was open to all members of the population and a snowball-sampling approach was used to inform as many members of the population as possible about the survey, the findings of this study are tempered by the sample size (N = 597).

## 6. Findings

The collected data were analyzed using several inferential statistical tests, including parametric and non-parametric statistical tests. ANOVA tests were applied to examine differences in the preferred leadership style of police leaders as a function of rank category within the leadership strata. ANOVA tests that produced a significant p-value were further examined using post-hoc independent samples t-tests to make pairwise comparisons to validate the existence of differences and to determine where the differences were. Spearman's  $r_s$  tests were employed to look for correlations in leadership style preference between the rank categories.

### 6.1 Research Questions with Significant Findings

#### 6.1.1 Research Question 1 – Chief Executives

An ANOVA was conducted to compare the transactional (M = 4.21), democratic (M = 4.27), autocratic (M = 4.25), autocratic transformational (M = 4.06), autocratic transactional (M = 3.95), democratic transformational (M = 4.44), democratic transactional (M = 3.87), transformational (M = 4.40), and laissez-faire (M = 2.41) leadership style means for the chief executive rank. The results of the ANOVA showed there was a significant difference in leadership style preference for the chief executive rank ( $F [8, 1107] = 127.73, p < 0.001$ ). Because the ANOVA test revealed a significant difference in leadership style preference at the chief executive rank, a series of post-hoc independent samples t-tests were conducted to make pairwise comparisons of the leadership styles to determine which pairs differed significantly. The nine leadership styles produced 36 preference pairs that were compared to identify differences. The t-tests showed there were statistically significant differences in the preferred leadership styles, indicating there were preferred leadership styles at the chief executive rank. A review of the leadership style means for the chief executive rank found the most preferred leadership style was democratic transformational (M = 4.44), followed by transformational (M = 4.40), and democratic (M = 4.27). Of the three most preferred styles, the only significant difference was noted between the democratic transformational (M = 4.44) and democratic (M = 4.27) leadership styles ( $t [246] = -2.54, p < 0.02$ ). No significant difference was noted between democratic transformational (M = 4.44) and transformational (M = 4.40), ( $t [246] = 0.65, p > 0.05$ ), or democratic (M = 4.27) and transformational (M = 4.40), ( $t [246] = -1.93, p > 0.05$ ). The laissez-faire (M = 2.41) leadership style was the least preferred leadership style amongst chief executives and was found to have a statistically significant difference when compared to every other leadership style.

#### 6.1.2 Research Question 2 – Senior Leaders

An ANOVA test was conducted to compare the transactional (M = 4.13), democratic (M = 4.29), autocratic (M = 4.22), autocratic transformational (M = 4.06), autocratic transactional (M = 3.89), democratic transformational (M = 4.42), democratic transactional (M = 3.72), transformational (M = 4.31), and laissez-faire (M = 2.48) leadership style preference means for the senior leader rank. The results of the ANOVA showed there was a significant difference in leadership style preference for the senior leader rank ( $F [8, 1260] = 129.86, p < 0.001$ ). Because the ANOVA test revealed a significant difference in leadership style preference at the senior leader rank, a series of post-hoc independent samples t-tests were conducted to make pairwise comparisons of the leadership styles to determine which pairs differed significantly. The nine leadership styles produced 36 preference pairs that were compared to identify differences. The t-tests showed there were statistically significant differences in the preferred leadership styles, indicating there were preferred leadership styles at the senior leader rank. A review of the

leadership style means for the senior leader rank found that the most preferred leadership style was democratic transformational ( $M = 4.42$ ), followed by transformational ( $M = 4.31$ ), and democratic ( $M = 4.29$ ). Of the three most preferred styles, the only significant difference was noted between the democratic transformational ( $M = 4.42$ ) and democratic ( $M = 4.29$ ) leadership styles, ( $t [246] = -2.37, p < 0.02$ ). No significant difference was noted between democratic ( $M = 4.29$ ) and transformational ( $M = 4.31$ ), ( $t [246] = 1.03, p > 0.05$ ), or democratic transformational ( $M = 4.42$ ) and transformational ( $M = 4.31$ ), ( $t [246] = -1.32, p > 0.05$ ). The laissez-faire ( $M = 2.48$ ) leadership style was the least preferred leadership style amongst senior leaders and was found to have a significant difference when compared to every other leadership style.

### 6.1.3 Research Question 3 – Middle Managers

An ANOVA test was conducted to compare the transactional ( $M = 4.13$ ), democratic ( $M = 4.25$ ), autocratic ( $M = 4.20$ ), autocratic transformational ( $M = 4.11$ ), autocratic transactional ( $M = 3.97$ ), democratic transformational ( $M = 4.47$ ), democratic transactional ( $M = 3.77$ ), transformational ( $M = 4.39$ ), and laissez-faire ( $M = 2.53$ ) leadership style means for the middle manager rank. The results of the ANOVA showed there was a significant difference in leadership style preference for the middle manager rank ( $F [8, 1746] = 174.45, p < 0.001$ ). Because the ANOVA test revealed a significant difference in leadership style preference for the middle manager rank, a series of post-hoc independent samples t-tests were conducted to make pairwise comparisons of the leadership styles to determine which pairs differed significantly. The nine leadership styles produced 36 preference pairs that were compared to identify differences. The t-tests showed there were statistically significant differences in the preferred leadership styles, indicating there were preferred leadership styles at the middle-manager rank. A review of the leadership style means for the middle manager rank found that the most preferred leadership style was democratic transformational ( $M = 4.47$ ), followed by transformational ( $M = 4.39$ ), and democratic ( $M = 4.25$ ). Of the three most preferred styles, significant differences were noted between the democratic ( $M = 4.25$ ) and democratic transformational ( $M = 4.47$ ), ( $t [246] = -4.19, p < 0.001$ ), and democratic ( $M = 4.25$ ) and transformational ( $M = 4.39$ ), ( $t [246] = -2.50, p < 0.02$ ). No statistically significant difference was noted between the two most preferred leadership styles, democratic transformational ( $M = 4.47$ ) and transformational ( $M = 4.39$ ), ( $t [246] = 1.44, p > 0.05$ ). The laissez-faire ( $M = 2.53$ ) leadership style was the least preferred leadership style amongst middle managers and was found to have a significant difference when compared to every other leadership style.

### 6.1.4 Research Question 4 – First-Line Supervisors

An ANOVA test was conducted to compare the transactional ( $M = 4.25$ ), democratic ( $M = 4.30$ ), autocratic ( $M = 4.17$ ), autocratic transformational ( $M = 4.14$ ), autocratic transactional ( $M = 4.01$ ), democratic transformational ( $M = 4.45$ ), democratic transactional ( $M = 3.85$ ), transformational ( $M = 4.32$ ), and laissez-faire ( $M = 2.60$ ) leadership style means for the first-line supervisor rank. The results of the ANOVA showed there was a significant difference in leadership style preference for the first-line supervisor rank ( $F [8, 1224] = 118.62, p < 0.001$ ). Because the ANOVA test revealed a significant difference in leadership style preference for the first-line supervisor rank, a series of post-hoc independent samples t-tests were conducted to make pairwise comparisons of the leadership styles to determine which pairs differed significantly. The nine leadership styles produced 36 preference pairs that were compared to identify differences. The t-tests showed there were statistically significant differences in the preferred leadership styles, indicating there were preferred leadership styles at the first-line supervisor rank. A review of the leadership style means for the first-line supervisor rank found that the most preferred leadership style was democratic transformational ( $M = 4.45$ ), followed by transformational ( $M = 4.32$ ), and democratic ( $M = 4.30$ ). Of the three most preferred styles, significant differences were noted between democratic ( $M = 4.30$ ) and democratic transformational ( $M = 4.45$ ), ( $t [246] = -2.66, p < 0.01$ ), and democratic transformational ( $M = 4.45$ ) and transformational ( $M = 4.32$ ), ( $t [246] = 2.11, p < 0.05$ ). No significant difference was noted between democratic ( $M = 4.30$ ) and transformational ( $M = 4.32$ ), ( $t [246] = 0.41, p > 0.05$ ).

The laissez-faire ( $M = 2.46$ ) leadership style was the least preferred leadership style amongst first-line supervisors and was found to have a significant difference when compared to every other leadership style.

### 6.1.5 Research Question 5 – Correlation Between the Rank Categories

A review of the statistical findings found that while each rank category had leadership preferences, a review of their means suggested that all four rank categories' leadership style preferences were correlated. Table 2 illustrates the leadership style preference means by rank category.

Spearman's  $r_s$  tests were used to make pairwise comparisons of all four rank categories. The Spearman's  $r_s$  tests produced perfect correlations between the chief executive and senior leader ranks ( $r_s [9], 1, p < 0.001$ ), chief executive and middle manager ranks ( $r_s [9], 1, p < 0.001$ ), and senior leader and middle manager ranks ( $r_s [9], 1, p < 0.001$ ). The Spearman's  $r_s$  tests produced positive correlations between the first-line supervisor and chief executive ranks ( $r_s [9], 0.983, p < 0.001$ ), first-line supervisor and senior leader ranks ( $r_s [9], 0.983, p < 0.001$ ), and first-line supervisor and middle-manager ranks ( $r_s [9], 0.983, p < 0.001$ ). These test results indicate that the leadership style preferences of all supervisory ranks are positively correlated.

### 6.1.6 Research Question 13

Does gender affect law enforcement leaders' preferred leadership style? A review of the dispersion of respondents regarding their gender found that 89.28 percent ( $N = 533$ ) of respondents were male, and 10.72 percent ( $N = 64$ ) were female.

Independent samples  $t$ -tests were conducted to identify if there was a significant difference in leadership style preference between genders. While leadership style preference was found to be generally the same for both genders, the independent  $t$ -tests identified a significant difference between male and female respondents regarding the autocratic leadership style ( $t [595] = -3.07, p < 0.01$ ). However, a comparison of means demonstrated that both genders found it a highly rated leadership style.

### 6.1.7 Research Question 15

Does race affect law enforcement leaders' preferred leadership style? A review of the dispersion of respondent race found that 89.95 percent ( $N = 537$ ) of respondents identified themselves as White, 5.86 percent ( $N = 35$ ) as Black or African American, 0.17 percent ( $N = 1$ ) as American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0.84 percent ( $N = 5$ ) as Asian, 3.18 percent ( $N = 19$ ) as two or more races, and no respondents identified as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander.

Because there were not at least 30 respondents who fell into either the American Indian or Alaskan Native ( $N = 1$ ), Asian ( $N = 5$ ), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander ( $N = 0$ ), or two or more races ( $N = 19$ ) racial groups, they were not included in the independent samples  $t$ -tests for this variable. Independent samples  $t$ -tests were conducted to identify if there was a significant difference in leadership style preference between the White and Black or African American racial groups. While leadership style preference was found to be generally the same for both races, the independent  $t$ -tests identified significant differences between White and Black or African-American respondents with regard to democratic leadership ( $t [570] = 2.26, p < 0.05$ ) and autocratic leadership style, ( $t [570] = 2.27, p < 0.05$ ). However, a comparison of means demonstrated both races found them to be highly-rated leadership styles.

## 6.2 Research Questions with No Statistically Significant Findings

Eight of the research questions (i.e., questions 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, and 14) showed no statistically significant differences; therefore, career tenure, supervisory tenure, agency tenure, professional accreditation status, academic degree attainment, formal leadership training, executive management-development course attendance, and age do not appear to affect the leadership style preferences of police leaders.

## 7. Summary, Discussion, and Implications

The data showed that American police leaders, regardless of rank, have similar leadership style preferences, with democratic transformational ( $M = 4.45$ ), transformational ( $M = 4.36$ ), and democratic ( $M = 4.27$ ) being the three most preferred styles. Of the remaining leadership styles examined, autocratic ( $M = 4.21$ ), transactional ( $M = 4.17$ ), autocratic transformational ( $M = 4.10$ ), autocratic transactional ( $M = 3.96$ ), and democratic transactional ( $M = 3.80$ ) received positive ratings from the respondents indicating those styles are also sometimes preferred. What was also clear from the data was that the *laissez-faire* ( $M = 2.51$ ) leadership style was the least preferred leadership style across all the variables examined in the study.

### 7.1 Practical Significance

The findings of this study suggest that the days of the strictly autocratic police agency are over. The democratic-transformational leadership style was found to be the most preferred leadership style across all rank categories, with the *laissez-faire* style being the least preferred style across all rank categories. It appears police leaders, at least those in the United States, do not see *laissez-faire* leadership as the somewhat democratic hands-off approach to leadership it is sometimes described to be. Instead, it seems they simply see it as an absence of leadership, as described by Abu-Tineh et al. (2009), Lewin et al. (1939), More et al. (2012), and Northouse (2016), which is not welcome in the law enforcement community. Regardless of rank, all leadership styles were preferred to some degree, except for the *laissez-faire* style.

All of that suggests that while democratic-transformational leadership is the most preferred style, the transactional, transformational, democratic, autocratic, autocratic transformational, autocratic transactional, and democratic transactional leadership styles are sometimes preferred and employed by police leaders. The findings of this study clearly indicate that American police leaders are flexible in the leadership styles they will choose to employ depending upon the context of the issue or incident they are facing. This paradigm of contextual leadership may be due to the wide variety of situations faced by police professionals in the United States.



This researcher defines the contextual leadership paradigm as the selection of a leadership style appropriate to the context of the incident or issue being addressed by a leader. In contextual leadership, a leader may assess many variables, constants, and/or factors before deciding which leadership style to employ; such variables, constants, and factors may include their own confidence and skill in employing a particular leadership style, the physical operating environment, available resources, the timeline of unfolding events, and legal and/or political concerns regarding the possible outcomes. As police leaders consider future leadership training curricula, such as that called for by the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015), it seems clear that the democratic, autocratic, transformational, transactional, situational, and laissez-faire leadership styles should be included. Since the findings in this study also showed that rank does not impact leadership style selection, a single leadership curriculum can be designed for use across the spectrum of learners in the law enforcement community.

ANOVA tests were conducted on each rank category separately. All four were found to have significant differences in leadership style preference; chief executive ( $F [8, 1107] = 127.73, p < 0.001$ ), senior leader ( $F [8, 1260] = 129.86, p < 0.001$ ), middle manager ( $F [8, 1746] = 174.45, p < 0.001$ ), and first-line supervisor ( $F [8, 1224] = 118.62, p < 0.001$ ). Notwithstanding that, a review of the descriptive statistics for each rank showed their leadership style preference rank orders to be almost identical. The only noted difference was that while the chief executive, senior leader, and middle-management rank categories ranked the autocratic style fourth and the transactional style fifth, the first-line supervisor rank category ranked transactional fourth and autocratic fifth. Table 3 illustrates the rank order of leadership style preference by rank category.

Spearman's  $r_s$  tests were used to make pairwise comparisons of all four rank categories. The Spearman's  $r_s$  tests produced perfect correlations between the chief executive and senior leader, chief executive and middle manager, and senior leader and middle manager ranks ( $r_s [9], 1, p < 0.001$ ). The Spearman's  $r_s$  tests also produced positive correlations between the first-line supervisor and chief executive, senior leader, and middle-manager ranks ( $r_s [9], 0.983, p < 0.001$ ). The Spearman's  $r_s$  tests results indicate that all four supervisory ranks' leadership style preferences are positively correlated. A review of the means for all four rank categories showed they all ranked the democratic transformational ( $M = 4.45$ ) style most preferred, transformational ( $M = 4.36$ ) style as second-most preferred, democratic ( $M = 4.28$ ) style as third-most preferred, and laissez-faire ( $M = 2.54$ ) style the least preferred of all styles. More specifically, the laissez-faire style's mean score was in the disagree to neutral score range of the VLS's Likert Scale, while all other styles were ranked between the neutral to strongly agree score range. Table 4 illustrates the dispersion of leadership style means for all respondents combined.

Girodo (1998) found that administrators, most closely related to the chief executive and senior leader ranks of this study, most often cited the autocratic style as their most preferred leadership style. Additionally, Girodo (1998) found that managers who directly led officers, most closely related to the middle manager and first-line supervisor ranks in this study, most often cited the transformational style as their preferred leadership style. Nearly 20 years have passed since Girodo's study, and the effects of time seem evident. Those who were lower-level leaders in Girodo's study are today's senior and executive leaders. They preferred the transformational leadership style then and appear to prefer it today.

Also discussed in the literature review was Stamper's (1992) assertion that there was a leadership vacuum in the law enforcement community because chief executives spent too much time managing rather than leading. Mayo (1985) asserted that a vacuum existed because chief executives distrust their subordinate leaders. Since this study's findings seem to indicate that police leaders at all levels prefer democratic-transformational leadership techniques, which include concentrating on leading rather than simply managing and requiring leaders to empower their subordinate leaders to act, it seems that Stamper (1992) and Mayo's (1985) assertions may no longer be valid in contemporary police leadership.

## 7.2 Limitations of the Study

This study had multiple identified limitations. Construct validity was avoided by using an existing valid and reliable survey instrument, the Vannsimpco Leadership Survey (VLS), and by conducting a pilot test of the added demographics questions on a sampling of respondents who were reflective of the study population. Not every variable that could possibly affect the leadership style preferences of American police supervisors was included in this study. According to Clarke (2005), social science researchers often improperly include too many variables in their research in an attempt to avoid omitted variable bias. The list of possible variables relevant to this study was vast and too much for a single study to examine effectively (Bachman & Schutt, 2015).

Even though the true population size was unknown, it was assumed to be in the tens of thousands. Consequently, the sample size ( $N = 597$ ) was small compared to the study population (i.e., all American police supervisors). The small sample size of this study could be considered a threat to external validity. The study was open to all members of the population, and a snowball sampling technique was employed in an effort to reach as many eligible respondents as possible. Nevertheless, all variable subgroups included in the statistical analyses conducted as part

of this research exceeded 30 respondents, significantly eliminating random chance, thereby allowing for generalizations to be made about the larger population groups.

Further, the cross-sectional design of the study suggests the findings only provide an understanding of the leadership style preferences of police supervisors at the time the data were collected. Future studies should use a time-series design, if possible, to gather data over time. There was no external funding to provide for a more sophisticated survey or analytical software during the study. Another identified limitation was whether all respondents would have a clear understanding of the terms sworn and non-sworn. Concerted efforts were made to provide respondents with clear descriptions of each term on the survey instrument to aid them in selecting the answer that fit them best. A pilot test of the demographics questions was completed to test respondent understanding of the descriptions used. The pilot test identified no issues with those terms.

A review of the collected data identified additional limitations of the study. Several variables were found to have underrepresented subgroups, those being subgroups without at least 30 respondents. Consequently, those subgroups were not included in the data analysis for this study to avoid issues with content validity. Those variable subgroups are described below. The career tenure variable had two underrepresented subgroups; those were the 1 to 10 years ( $N = 20$ ) and 40 to 51 years ( $N = 16$ ) subgroups which were not included in the data analysis for that variable. It is not surprising to find a limited number of respondents who are supervisors and who have 10 or fewer years of police experience or who have worked 40 or more years in policing without having retired, making them difficult to contact to include in a study.

For the supervisory tenure variable, the 41 to 50 years ( $N = 2$ ) subgroup was not included in the data analysis for that variable. It is believed the population of police supervisors with that many years of supervisory experience is relatively small, making it difficult to gather enough respondents from that subgroup. Nonetheless, future research on leadership style preferences should endeavor to identify and survey enough members of that supervisory tenure group. For the agency type variable, the federal ( $N = 12$ ) and tribal ( $N = 2$ ) subgroups were not included in the data analysis for that variable because they were underrepresented. Since one of the aims of this research was to inform those who will work to create a national leadership training curriculum for the law enforcement community, as suggested by the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, the low number of respondents from federal and tribal agencies is a concern.

For the academic attainment variable, the doctoral ( $N = 7$ ) and high school or GED ( $N = 5$ ) academic degree attainment subgroups were not included in the data analysis for that variable. Police professionals do not typically have doctoral degrees, so this is a small segment of the overall population, making it difficult to survey enough members of this subgroup. On the other hand, particular attention should be paid to recruiting respondents from the high school or GED subgroup in future research as they constitute a larger portion of the overall population within the law enforcement community. This is important, considering only 10 percent of police agencies in the United States require applicants to have a 2-year college degree, and only 1 percent require a 4-year college degree (Reaves, 2015).

For the formal leadership training attendance variable, the None ( $N = 5$ ) subgroup was not included in the data analysis. Going forward, this subgroup will be particularly difficult to survey as its population will continue to shrink as the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing recommendation to provide leadership training to all police professionals, regardless of rank, becomes the norm. For the formal leadership training attendance variable, the Harvard Kennedy School ( $N = 6$ ) subgroup was not included in the data analysis for that variable. While fewer police supervisors attend training at the Harvard Kennedy School than do the Southern Police Institute or FBI National Academy, for example, it is still an important segment of the population, so it should be included in future iterations of this research.

For the age variable, the 70 or more years old ( $N = 4$ ) age subgroup was not included in the data analysis for that variable. This subgroup is also a small segment of the overall police leadership population, making it difficult to survey sufficiently. Finally, for the race variable, the American Indian or Alaskan Native ( $N = 1$ ), Asian ( $N = 5$ ), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander ( $N = 0$ ), or two or more races ( $N = 19$ ) racial subgroups were not included in the data analysis for that variable. This limitation should be specifically addressed in future research, with extraordinary effort made to recruit these racial subgroups into the sample population. With the cultural clashes being experienced within the law enforcement community and with the communities they serve, all research should strive to have the greatest participation rate possible from all racial groups.

### **7.3 Implications for Future Research**

The findings of this study indicate that police leaders are leading within the contextual leadership paradigm, where they select from a number of possible leadership styles depending on the context of the incident or issue being addressed. Consequently, further investigation into contextual leadership is called for. The variables, constants, and factors involved in contextual leadership determinations must be identified and refined. Those suggested in this

study (i.e., environment, resources, timeline, and legal and political concerns) are but a few of the variables, constants, and factors that may be involved in contextual leadership decision-making. Finally, future research into contextual leadership should probe its use in other professions and leadership contexts to determine if contextual leadership extends beyond the police profession.

## 8. Conclusion

According to Enter (2006), “law enforcement managers around the [United States] handle their duties within the agency culture using many common methods” (p. 29). Whether the commonality of those methods extended beyond individual agency cultures into the larger American law enforcement community was unclear, so the aim of this research was to determine if there were commonalities in leadership style preference within the law enforcement community in the United States and into what rank subgroups such commonalities may extend.

The researcher found that supervisors, regardless of rank, preferred all leadership styles to some degree, except for the laissez-faire style, with the democratic-transformational style being the most preferred leadership style. The commonality of preferences suggests that the leadership training called for by the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing (2015) can use a single leadership curriculum with learners from throughout the law enforcement community’s leadership hierarchy. Said curriculum should include material on the democratic, autocratic, transformational, transactional, laissez-faire, situational, and contextual leadership styles because they may be using, or steering away from, certain leadership styles without understanding why they are doing so. The findings of this study show the American law enforcement community has evolved from a strictly para-militaristic profession where autocratic leadership rules supreme in the upper leadership ranks. It has transitioned to a leadership model that is centered on the democratic-transformational style, where leaders pair their leadership style choices to the context of the incident or issue in which they are leading.

## 9. Tables

### 9.1 Table 1

Table 1

*Count and Percentage of Respondent Sworn Status by Rank Category*

	Chief <u>Executive</u>	Senior <u>Leader</u>	Middle <u>Manager</u>	First-Line <u>Supervisor</u>	Total <u>Count</u>	Total <u>Percentage</u>
Non-Sworn	5	7	12	8	32	5.36%
Sworn	119	134	183	129	565	94.64%

### 9.2 Table 2

Table 2

*Leadership Style Preference Means by Rank Category*

	Chief <u>Executive</u>	Senior <u>Leader</u>	Middle <u>Manager</u>	First-Line <u>Supervisor</u>
Democratic Transformational	4.44	4.42	4.47	4.45
Transformational	4.40	4.31	4.39	4.32
Democratic	4.27	4.29	4.25	4.30
Autocratic	4.25	4.22	4.20	4.17
Transactional	4.21	4.13	4.13	4.25
Autocratic Transformational	4.06	4.06	4.11	4.14
Autocratic Transactional	3.95	3.89	3.97	4.01
Democratic Transactional	3.87	3.72	3.77	3.85
Laissez-Faire	2.41	2.48	2.53	2.60

**9.3 Table 3**

Table 3

*Rank Order of Leadership Style Preference by Rank Category*

	<u>Chief Executive</u>	<u>Senior Leader</u>	<u>Middle Manager</u>	<u>First-Line Supervisor</u>
Democratic Transformational	1	1	1	1
Transformational	2	2	2	2
Democratic	3	3	3	3
Autocratic	4	4	4	5
Transactional	5	5	5	4
Autocratic Transformational	6	6	6	6
Autocratic Transactional	7	7	7	7
Democratic Transactional	8	8	8	8
Laissez-Faire	9	9	9	9

**9.4 Table 4**

Table 4

*Dispersion of Leadership Style Means for All Respondents Combined*

	<u>Mean</u>
Democratic Transformational	4.45
Transformational	4.36
Democratic	4.28
Autocratic	4.20
Transactional	4.17
Autocratic Transformational	4.10
Autocratic Transactional	3.96
Democratic Transactional	3.81
Laissez-Faire	2.54

*Note.* Where one to two was strongly disagree, two to three was disagree, three was neutral, three to four was agree, and four to five was strongly agree.

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