

# Research News You Can Use

Commentary on research findings that have important applications for first responders

With Dr. Pat Lynch



## The High Cost to Public Safety of Laissez-faire Leadership

Does your agency's culture tolerate poor leadership? Are there individuals who have decided to coast through their remaining months or years to retirement, or who otherwise have "checked out," yet continue to remain in their leadership roles?

Researchers have come up with a term to describe such an absence of leadership: *laissez-faire leadership*. It is characterized by dysfunctional behaviors such as avoiding decisions, abdicating responsibility, failing to respond to problems, hesitating to take action, delaying responses, and being absent – literally or figuratively - when needed.<sup>1</sup> Early results indicate that there are substantial negative effects when leaders fail to respond to both good and poor performance. For example, subordinates view laissez-faire leaders as ineffective, and they express strong levels of dissatisfaction with them. Preliminary research suggests that there also may be long-term negative effects on subordinates' performance.

It is impossible to maximize individual or organizational outcomes in an environment where leaders are non-responsive to subordinates' performance, refuse to make decisions, and generally abdicate their own roles. With the safety, health, and economic viability of the community at stake, communities simply cannot afford the high cost of laissez-faire leaders in their public safety agencies.

To minimize the likelihood of laissez-faire leadership, agencies can establish a culture that doesn't tolerate poor leaders; develop effective performance management systems and processes that support employees' success; communicate clear performance expectations; establish and implement accountability mechanisms; and define and communicate organizational values that reinforce desirable leadership behaviors.

Not everyone is cut out for the responsibilities required of leaders. Some grow tired of the leadership role. In the interests of public safety, all leaders must be willing *and* able to carry out their duties effectively. If they are not, the agency is short-changing the community and perhaps endangering its safety. You must either provide the support needed to change the dysfunctional behaviors exhibited by laissez-faire leaders, or find other jobs for them.

<sup>1</sup> Hinkin, T.R. & Schriesheim, C.A. (2008). An examination of "nonleadership:" From laissez-faire leadership to leader reward omission and punishment omission. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 93:6, 1234-1248.

Pat Lynch, Ph.D., is President of Business Alignment Strategies, Inc., a consulting firm that helps first responders maximize their performance by removing or mitigating obstacles to achieving their mission. Pat can show you how to create immediate results in your organization by applying relevant research findings in practical ways. [Contact us](#) today to see how we can help you make a difference!