Impact of Servant Leadership on Emergency Services Wellbeing and Culture

Reference: Fitzgerald, P. 2025, To Lead is to Serve: Impact of Servant Leadership on Emergency Services Wellbeing and Culture: Case Studies & Lived Experiences from Swedish Police Authority, and Various North American Agencies, Emergency Services Foundation

Background

Evidence consistently shows that leadership culture and the workplace environment are key factors of emergency responder wellbeing, disengagement, burnout, organisational performance and also public confidence. Paul Fitgerald from Fire Rescue Victoria explored this area by looking at organisational experience of 'servant leadership' in the U.S.A. as well as the Swedish Police Force, a country that rates high in wellbeing. Servant leadership has the primary goal to *serve* in order to elevate the wellbeing, growth, and autonomy of others, before focusing on their own authority or advancement.

The study was supported by ESF's scholarship program that is funded by Rotary and under supervision by Kevin Smith. The bulk of the final report is a series of case studies and lived experience stories which sheds light on the multiple beneficial impacts of servant leadership.

Purpose and Aims

The purpose for the study was to "document stories of success, struggle, and hope" (p. 1) in order to "offer inspiration...and encourage your continued efforts to build cultures of care in the community, whatever your role" (p. 7). Paul's lived experience shaped the reason for the study:

> My interest in leadership and team development started many years ago while working at VicSES, a predominantly volunteer organisation. At the time, I was seeing a high number of psychological triages linked not to emergency incidents, but to poor team culture at the units. A lack of cohesion often escalated into interpersonal conflict, which is how many responders found their way into my office.

The aims of the study are to:

- Examine how Servant Leadership influences psychological injury risk among responders, drawing on case studies and lived experience from contexts where it is present and absent.
- Strengthen the evidence base for Servant Leadership as an effective approach in fire and emergency services, particularly for psychological safety, trust, wellbeing, and organisational performance.

- Identify how Servant Leadership cultures are built and sustained, focusing on the systemic, governance, and behavioural conditions needed for long-term impact.
- Highlight potential risks, including the personal cost and burnout faced by leaders who consistently prioritise others without adequate organisational support.

Methods

This was largely a qualitative study that used the following methods:

- *Secondary data*: literature review of organisational reports and other public data
- *Observations*: Observations included of a long-standing leadership program at the Swedish Police Authority in Stockholm and Gothenburg.
- *A survey*: a post-program participant survey
- *Interviews*: Semi-structured interviews from June- September 2025 with practitioners, leaders, program designers, facilitators, and participants.

Case study #1: Swedish Police Authority (SPA)

This case study focused on leadership program that has been running at SPA, an organisation with 40,000 employees, since 2017 and is still going strong.

Background / Rationale

- The 2015 SPA reorganisation exposed deep cultural issues such as weak accountability, low motivation, fragmented mission in the context of rising violent crime and declining public trust.
- Instead of tightening control, SPA used the crisis to rebuild trust and reshape leadership around high-trust, service-oriented principles.
- Viewing leaders as 'programmers' of organisational systems, SPA invested in a long-term Servant-Leadership-informed program to drive cultural and operational transformation.

Links to Servant Leadership

- Although not labelled "Servant Leadership," the program draws heavily on Greenleaf's ethos and community focus (see additional information a the end of this digest)
- Adapted to SPA's operational context as 'Trust-Based Leadership', supported by transformational leadership concepts to support service-centred practice.

Program Participants

- Approximately 2,500 of 4,308 managers (≈60%) have completed the program, with strong representation across all leadership levels and highest uptake among first-line managers.
- Participation is highly recommended but not mandated. Uptake encouraged through word-of-mouth, peer advocacy, and visible support from senior leaders.

Program Design & Integration

- There is no rank or hierarchy in the learning environment, and the program is delivered offsite (in plain clothes)
- Is not just a standalone training course or tied to individuals but embedded organisationally, to ensure sustained and systemic culture change. Specifically, the program was built on an existing leadership capability framework that structures performance reviews, manager discussions, KPIs, recruitment, and promotion.
- Is scaled through a train-the-trainer advocacy model. This peer-led delivery model ensures that the more than 200 facilitators are credible role models/change champions.
- The aims and outcomes, and high-level information about the learning philosophy and modules of the program are provided at the end of this digest.

Key Findings

In the beginning there was resistance from senior HR and others, due to an attachment to traditional culture within the SPA. At the time, vulnerability was seen as weakness and the early pilots were interpreted as being critical of the organisation and not aspirational. After initial pushback, the program began to be accepted and facilitators reported strong buy-in, especially after Module 1.

Since its implementation, there has been consistent evidence of sustained cultural and behavioural change, not short-term effects.

- Participants reported:
    - Greater self-awareness, humility, and confidence
    - Improved dialogue with employees and stronger alignment with SPA's mission
    - Higher staff motivation and more discussion of democratic/ethical issues
    - Stronger cross-hierarchy collaboration
- Leaders now address performance issues earlier, hold clearer boundaries, and conduct difficult conversations with greater skill—observed across multiple regions.
- Organisational shifts during this period include declining sick leave, record-low turnover, strong post-retirement return interest, reduced injury exposure, and lower workload. This reflects how the leadership development programs influence and interact with multiple system factors.
- Public trust reached its highest level since 1986, aligning with internal improvements in trust, motivation, and participation.

Strengths

- Safe, collaborative learning environments were critical to trust and wellbeing.

- Paul's observations showed a calm, non-hierarchical learning environment with warm, relational interactions and strong reflective practice.

Challenges

- Role plays were challenging but widely viewed as essential for growth and group cohesion.
- Specialist units (e.g., SWAT) were slower to engage due to different operational realities, though acceptance is increasing.

Why National Context Matters

Servant Leadership and shared responsibility represent a smaller cultural shift in Sweden than in more hierarchical or command-and-control environments. Reasons for this include:

- Sweden's egalitarian culture, high education levels, and gender parity support acceptance of collaborative, trust-based leadership.
- Relatively lengthy and professionalised police training fosters expectations of reflective, relational leadership.
- Historically flexible work practices align with autonomy-focused, service-oriented leadership models.
- High national wellbeing and social trust amplify relational leadership impacts.

Case Study #2 Alex Charoni, Battalion Chief (Federal Way, WA, U.S.A)

South King Fire Rescue (SKFR) operates under extreme operational pressure, responding to more than 30,000 calls a year with limited staffing and little capacity for cultural development. Battalion Chief Alex Charoni describes a long-standing pattern of autocratic, ego-driven leadership, nepotism, and instability in SKFR. They had four Chiefs in five years and, most recently, a year without a qualified Fire Chief. These conditions created deep disconnect between command staff and frontline crews, low morale, and high attrition.

Introduced to Servant Leadership during his Executive Fire Officer program, Charoni saw it as an opportunity to correct to the harmful leadership he had experienced because it emphasised care, trust, and empowerment. He attempted to embed the philosophy into SKFR through training, strategic documents, and modelling the ten principles in his own practice. Early momentum stalled when leadership changed; new executives dismantled the framework, and the organisation reverted to self-serving, hierarchical habits.

Despite organisational regression, Charoni continued to practise Servant Leadership within his own shift, focusing on listening, coaching, and genuine care. His team developed strong trust, openness, and psychological safety, with many members excelling in promotions and demonstrating high motivation. Yet leading ethically in a resistant culture came at personal cost: Charoni experienced burnout, moral injury, and frustration as the wider organisation abandoned the approach. Still, he

remains committed to nurturing "little gardens of Servant Leaders," believing that culture change fails when tied to individuals rather than systems.

The case highlights the critical need for senior buy-in, succession planning, and structural embedding; without these, SKFR's culture defaulted to dominant personalities. Even so, Charoni maintains hope: "We're not dead yet; we're still doing compressions and working on it."

Case Study #3 Bobby La Penna, Servant Leadership champion (Texas, U.S.A.)

After a period of instability and self-interest within the Bedford Police Department, Chief Bobby La Penna set out to restore the agency's original Servant Leadership ethos. The departure of key leaders had left the organisation misaligned, with personal agendas overshadowing collective purpose.

In his first year, La Penna launched a Servant Leadership program aimed at giving employees a voice and rebuilding trust, despite predictable resistance from those who viewed the approach as "weak" or unnecessary. The initiative includes a cross-functional cultural committee and quarterly training sessions that combine learning, open discussion, and shared problem-solving. Taking advice from peers, La Penna stepped back from directing the process, empowering staff to shape the culture themselves and helping resolve long-standing tensions between sworn and non-sworn personnel. Early signs of improvement include reduced concerns about micromanagement, stronger empowerment among officers, and a more open, welcoming workplace.

La Penna reports that trust built through Servant Leadership is already producing operational benefits, officers follow direction more confidently under pressure because "the trust is already there." Recruitment has also improved, with no officers seeking transfers and new applicants citing the department's culture as a drawcard. He plans to embed Servant Leadership into promotion processes by requiring candidates to articulate how they intend to serve those they supervise. Aware of the emotional demands of high-involvement leadership, La Penna protects his own wellbeing through faith, mentoring, and reflection. The next phase of the program focuses on deepening trust and expanding staff ownership of cultural change. While the strategy currently relies on a small number of committed leaders, La Penna's vision and moral authority provide a strong foundation for embedding Servant Leadership more structurally across the organisation.

Case Study #4 James Hensley, Lieutenant (Milwaukee, U.S.A.)

Lieutenant James Hensley, a law enforcement veteran of 25-years, has played a central role in transforming the Marquette University Police Department's (MUPD) leadership culture under Chief Edith Hudson. Drawing inspiration from Mac Tristan's teachings and pursuing a master's degree in organisational leadership, Hensley helped introduce a Servant Leadership program designed to shift the department away from autocratic habits and toward development, service, and empowerment.

What began as short, tailored presentations for officers, civilian staff, and student employees has, over two and a half years, become embedded in training for all new personnel. The small size of the agency accelerated impact, aligning the approach with Marquette's Jesuit values of *cura personalis*

(care for the whole person) and supporting recruitment and retention efforts. Hensley emphasises listening, empathy, and emotional intelligence as the core tools of effective leadership, noting that Servant Leadership "charges his batteries" even though it requires sustained effort.

Despite early scepticism from some officers who viewed the philosophy as "soft," persistent advocacy from the Chief and command staff led to widespread adoption. The results are striking: MUPD is fully staffed while neighbouring agencies face severe shortages, and internal feedback shows stronger trust, engagement, and communication. The department has also strengthened wellbeing supports through wellness checks, EAP promotion, and peer-support networks. Their success has attracted interest from the Milwaukee Police Department, highlighting the model's credibility. While progress has been rapid, the case underscores that long-term sustainability will require shared ownership and formal integration so that cultural gains endure beyond individual champions.

Lived Experience #1 Mattias Forssten, Swedish Police Authority

Over the past decade, Forssten has both observed and helped lead the SPA's shift from traditional, top-down command structures to a more democratic, trust-based model of leadership. Initially sceptical when he joined one of the first Trust-Based Leadership cohorts in 2017, he found the scenario-based training transformative, particularly its focus on self-reflection, collaboration, and balancing authority with empathy.

The program reshaped his view of influence, highlighting the power of collective intelligence over reliance on a small group of senior officers. He now describes effective policing leadership as the ability to move seamlessly between command in tactical situations and a servant-leadership approach in everyday work, creating conditions where people can grow and contribute.

Since completing the program, Forssten has become a prominent role model for this philosophy, leading organisational change with an emphasis on psychological safety, empowerment, and shared responsibility. He has seen clear benefits: more honest communication, stronger peer support, reduced isolation, and a culture where vulnerability is accepted rather than punished. He notes that younger generations expect authenticity and care, making "alpha-style" leadership increasingly outdated. Forssten likens Servant Leadership to parenting because it involves providing guidance, protection, and firm boundaries while allowing others to learn through experience. This approach has strengthened team cohesion and performance under pressure, reinforcing his belief that trust built before a crisis determines effectiveness during one. Today, he demonstrates how senior leaders can embed service-oriented values into daily practice, showing that real culture change is driven by behaviour, not policy.

Lived Experience #2 Mac Tristan, former Chief of Police (Texas, U.S.A)

Mac is law enforcement veteran of 38-years who has built his career on the belief that leaders "exist to serve" and that organisational culture mirrors the character of its leaders. Early disillusionment with quota-driven policing led him to Greenleaf's Servant Leadership, which validated his instinct that effective leadership requires courage, vulnerability, emotional intelligence, and a commitment

to developing others. As he rose through the ranks, Tristan intentionally applied these principles, rejecting militaristic "warrior" posturing in favour of a guardian mindset grounded in empathy, psychological safety, and human connection. When he took over a dysfunctional department in Coppell, he used vision, over-communication, and shared ownership to rebuild culture, emphasising hiring for character, fostering pride and teamwork, and ensuring command-and-control was reserved for genuine tactical need, not everyday leadership.

Tristan's leadership also centred on healing, which is to say addressing conflict, rebuilding damaged relationships, and modelling the humility he expected from others. He describes helping a deeply resentful officer "reset the clock" through honest, restorative conversations, illustrating his belief that "hurt people hurt people" and that leaders must be agents of reconciliation.

He is candid about the personal cost of constantly caring for others; during a period of intense organisational reform, he experienced burnout and a panic attack that forced him to step back, listen to himself, and rebuild his own wellbeing. This experience became a source of post-traumatic growth, deepening his empathy and shaping the guidance he now offers through mentorship: identify your values, defend them, lead with integrity, and leave every situation better than you found it.

Findings and generalisations

- The positive outcomes of the leadership program come not so much from the program itself but from how it links to other organizational systems and the ongoing support to improve leadership behaviours and cultural conditions.
- Benefits of Servant Leadership ripple out. That is, beyond shaping internal conditions, they influence cooperation with and trust in emergency service personnel at a community/public level.
- Culture change is rarely driven by policy alone, but by sustained leadership practice, psychological safety, and systems that reinforce expected behaviours.
- Younger staff and volunteers especially increasingly expect leaders who listen, mentor, and model service rather than rely on authority.
- Servant Leadership also benefits support staff and non-operational personnel
- Volunteer agencies offer strong potential for high-trust servant leadership due to their service ethos, community connection, and non-financial motivation.
- These findings may not directly transfer to emergency services operating in non-Scandinavian countries which tend to have more rigid or authoritarian cultural contexts.

Recommendations

Drawing on the four case studies and evidence-informed practice, the following recommendations are proposed for embedding Servant (or Similar) Leadership into Organisational Culture:

1. Establish clarity and alignment on 'ideal leadership'

- Agree on a shared leadership model or capability framework grounded in service, trust, accountability, and psychological safety.

- Use this framework consistently across recruitment, promotion, feedback, performance reviews, and development programs.
- Assess leaders on how they lead people, not just technical outputs.
- Build a leadership development pathway that reinforces these expectations across the entire career lifecycle.

2. Secure visible senior-leader commitment

- Culture change stalls without active modelling from senior leaders.
- Boards, CEOs, Commissioners, and executive teams must treat leadership development as core strategy, not a discretionary extra.
- Senior leaders should participate in training first, demonstrating commitment and learning the behaviours they expect others to adopt.

3. Make leadership development 'business as usual'

- Leadership capability must be reinforced continuously, not delivered as a one-off course.
- Embed expectations into recruitment, onboarding, talent identification, development planning, performance management, retention, and succession planning.
- Reinforce behaviours that build trust, safety, and wellbeing over time.

4. Scale leadership from within

- Use train-the-trainer and peer-advocacy models to grow leadership culture from the bottom up.
- Develop respected internal leaders as facilitators to build credibility, ownership, and local relevance.
- Distributed leadership, as demonstrated by the Swedish Police Authority, strengthens sustainability at scale.

5. Allocate time and resources

- Leadership development fails when staff must participate on top of overwhelming workloads.
- Provide protected time for learning, reflection, and practice.
- Without this, programs risk undermining wellbeing and psychological safety, reducing uptake and impact.

6. Make psychological safety the foundation

- Learning environments must allow people to speak openly, experiment, make mistakes, and challenge ideas without fear.

- Set and enforce behavioural norms from the outset.
- Psychological safety is essential for trust, behaviour change, and long-term wellbeing outcomes.

Conclusion

In a nutshell Paul's key takeaway is to invest in those who are receptive and capable of growth; prioritise energy where it will have impact. Build your community of Servant Leaders and stay aligned with them. Avoid being drawn into negative cultural vortexes that drain momentum. Reinforce the message steadily and consistently, an "IV drip feed" into the system. As the message embeds, conversations begin to shift, norms evolve and expectations will reset.

Servant Leadership is not a soft or passive approach, nor a substitute for command-and-control. It is a values-driven model that strengthens people and teams before crises occur. Command-and-control remains essential in critical incidents, but it is not suitable for everyday leadership. When embedded across the system, Servant Leadership can reduce psychological injury risk, improve retention, and build deeper trust within emergency services, and between personnel and communities.

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Additional Information

Servant leadership

Coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970, this people-centred leadership philosophy has ten characteristics:

1. Listening
2. Empathy
3. Healing
4. Awareness
5. Persuasion
6. Conceptualisation
7. Foresight
8. Stewardship
9. Commitment to the growth of people
10. Building community

Swedish Police Authority's Leadership Program

Aims

- Build psychological safety and shift leadership practice from control to trust.
- Strengthen leaders' strategic capability and use of employees' skills in daily operations.
- Develop leaders' insight, self-awareness, and reflective practice.
- Increase internal trust, legal certainty, democratic participation, and accountability.
- Support cross-functional collaboration and shared ownership across leadership levels.
- Lay the groundwork for sustainable cultural change and long-term organisational effectiveness.
- Enhance engagement, motivation, and accountability to support attraction and retention.

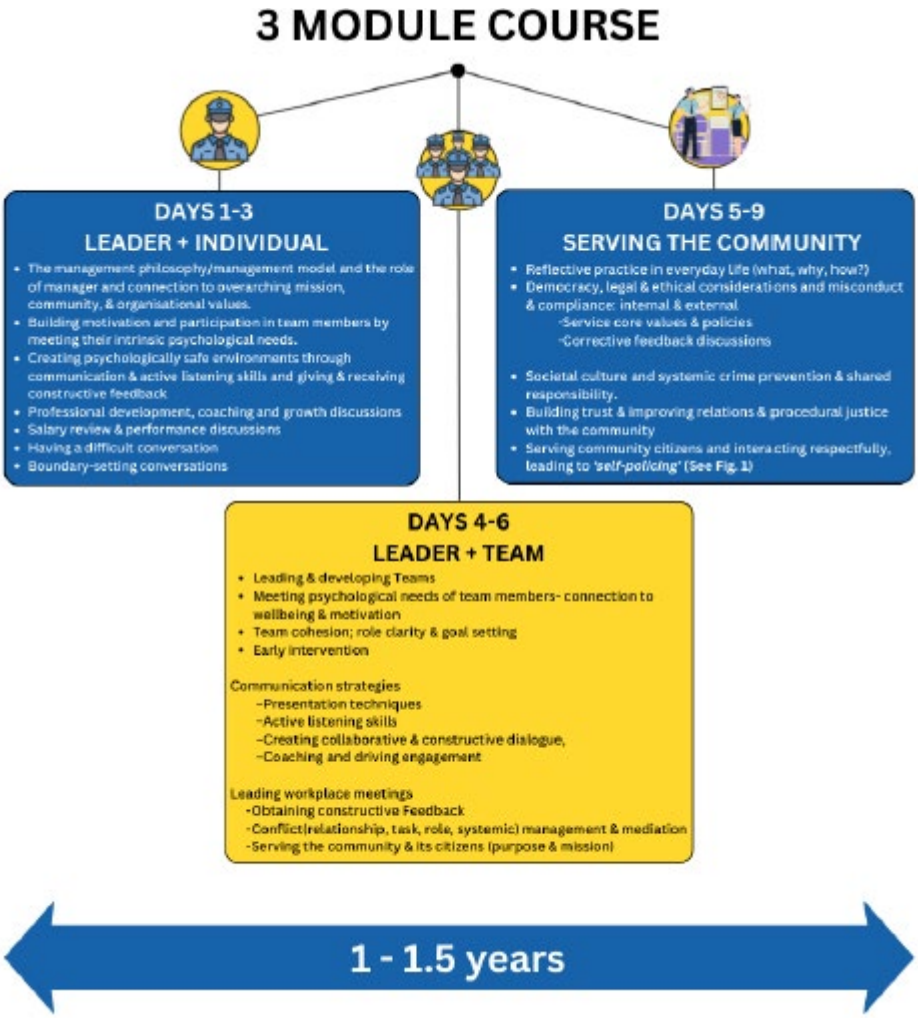
Expected Outcomes

- A healthier, more psychologically safe and supportive work environment.
- Greater credibility and trust in leadership.
- Improved job satisfaction, wellbeing, and sense of purpose.
- A more coherent, adaptive, and effective organisational culture.
- Stronger communication and alignment across leadership levels.
- More consistent operational and organisational development practices.
- Improved organisational performance, including crime prevention outcomes and public trust.

Learning Philosophy
The program emphasises learning by doing, applying skills across contexts, collaborating with others, receiving feedback, and reflecting on experience. Facilitators use a coaching-oriented style that positions participants (and not instructors) as the experts. This creates an active, shared learning environment. Role plays, small-group work, constructive feedback, and frequent discussions build practical skills, reflective capacity, and diverse thinking, with all content integrated into existing Authority materials.

The Modules
Each module runs for three days, is co-facilitated by two trainers, and includes up to 12 participants (lower numbers help to maintain psychological safety).

The three modules are delivered over 12–18 months, giving participants time to apply learning through values-aligned behavioural tasks between sessions. Cohorts remain consistent throughout, strengthening networks, peer mentoring, and social connection. Facilitators open each module by

establishing psychological safety, enabling role play, group presentations, reflective practice, and shared insights.

Although there is no formal coaching between modules, the Authority offers a separate small-group mentoring and reflective practice program (10 sessions per year) for leaders to workshop challenges, often delivered by the same facilitator pool. Since its 2018 pilot, the program has been refined in response to governance changes and participant feedback, while the core framework has remained stable.