



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

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Foreword

Though I come from a background grounded in science and rigor, I approached this project more like a curious journalist than an academic, documenting stories of success, struggle, and hope. What began as an inquiry into Servant Leadership quickly became a deeper exploration of psychological safety, personal growth, and organisational culture change.

The case studies and lived experiences presented in this report aim to normalise the frustrations and challenges of organisational cultural change within complex organisations, often necessitated out of times of crisis, harm and declining workforce wellbeing. When leadership defaults to survival mode, ultimately people suffer. There is truth in the saying: *"People don't leave bad jobs; they leave bad leaders."* As the stories demonstrate, Servant Leadership offers a pathway toward healthier teams, stronger cultures, and more sustainable organisational performance, outcomes that are increasingly critical across emergency services.

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.

What became apparent to me was that the origin of these poor mental health outcomes sat much further upstream. In collaboration with Deakin University, I developed a Team Development program to support unit leaders and teams to address these challenges at their source. That work ultimately led me down the path of 'Servant Leadership'.

During my study for the current research, I came across the work of retired police Chief and career Servant Leader Mac Tristan, who pointed me toward a country that regularly ranks among the "happiest in the world" - Sweden. More specifically, their police force, I remember thinking at the time: *'there must be something in that'*. I contacted the Swedish Police Authority's Human Resources team and booked a plane ticket almost the next day.

Many of the lived experiences captured in this report are connected by *people*. Three of the international case studies were shared with me through Tristan. The interlaced stories are therefore not isolated examples, but part of broader influence defined by mentorship, advocacy, and shared values. One case study, from Tacoma USA, was identified independently and provides an organisational-level comparison point.

In complex organisations, there is no 'silver bullet' for healthy cultures, 'good' leadership is largely dependent on what works in the context. What this paper aims to demonstrate, however, is that the importance of sustained investment in leaders, for the wellbeing of their people, teams, organisations, and community safety. Durable change requires a systems approach, consistency, and humility. The report not intended in any way to be a critique of individuals, but of systems.

Perhaps a practical place to start is with the 'bright spots' of your organisation, where people are leading in ways you want to replicate. Nurture them and 'save the dying, not the dead'. Find your tribe of Servant Leaders and resist being sucked into negative cultural vortexes. Over time, 'IV drip feed' the message into the system. Conversations shift. Norms change. People begin to take notice.

Leadership is a privilege, but it also requires courage. Your team is your mirror: if there is dysfunction, first look inward, then outward to the wider systemic issues that might be shaping behaviour. Ultimately, culture change is a shared responsibility and begins with individual choice: what you focus on, grows.

Most of all, this report is intended to inspire *hope* and possibility. As the case studies illustrate, shifting culture can come at a significant personal cost. Many stars need to align, but persistence and the right strategy make it achievable. It is my hope that this work becomes part of my legacy to the sector.

All case studies are based on interviews undertaken throughout June- September 2025, including an immersive visit to the Swedish Police Authority in Stockholm and Gothenburg. During this time, I met with program architects, facilitators, and participants, and observed a leadership program that has now been 'pressure-tested' over time. Supporting data is presented in the body of the report and appendices.

Executive summary

Emergency service organisations are facing increasing pressure from rising psychological injury, workforce attrition, and declining trust, both internally and within the community. While exposure to traumatic events is an inherent part of emergency response, evidence consistently shows that leadership culture and the workplace environment are primary upstream determinants of responder wellbeing, disengagement, burnout, organisational performance, and public confidence.

This report examines Servant Leadership as a practical and evidence-informed approach to addressing these challenges. Drawing on international research, organisational data, and lived-experience vignettes, it demonstrates that leadership cultures that prioritise psychological safety, trust, accountability, and service create conditions that protect wellbeing, reduce interpersonal conflict, strengthen teams, and improve operational outcomes. These internal conditions also shape how emergency service personnel are engaged with by the public, influencing cooperation and trust at a community level.

Central to this report is a case study of the Swedish Police Authority's leadership development program and strategy, observed and evaluated throughout 2017-18. The program represents a systemically embedded strategy rather than a standalone training course. It operates without rank or hierarchy in the learning environment, is delivered offsite in plain clothes, and is scaled through a train-the-trainer advocacy model. Over time, this approach has been associated with improvements in sick leave, retention, perceived workload, and internal trust. While causation cannot be attributed to the program in isolation, these outcomes align closely with the leadership behaviours and cultural conditions the program seeks to create. Notably, the same period has seen a sustained increase in public confidence in the Swedish Police Authority.

Complementary international case studies and lived-experience accounts illustrate how leadership behaviours are replicated through mentorship, championing, and role modelling across generations of leaders. These examples highlight that culture change is rarely driven by policy alone, but by sustained leadership practice, psychological safety, and systems that reinforce expected behaviours.

The report demonstrates that Servant Leadership is not a 'soft' or subservient model, nor a replacement for command and control in emergency response. Rather, a values-based leadership model that protects individuals and teams before crisis occurs, allowing for post-traumatic growth, resilience, and ethical conduct under pressure. When embedded systemically, it offers an environment for reducing psychological injury risk, improving retention, and expanding trust within emergency services.

The findings and insights have direct implications for leadership development, promotion, recruitment, and governance within emergency service agencies. In particular, younger generations as well as volunteers entering the sector are seeking leaders who listen, mentor, and model service, as opposed to authority. The report concludes with practical recommendations for embedding Servant, or 'trust-based' leadership into complex organisational systems, with a focus on senior leadership commitment, distributed leadership, psychological safety, and sustainability over time.

Table of Contents

FOREWORD	1
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY	3
ABOUT THE AUTHOR	6
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	7
BACKGROUND	8
SERVANT LEADERSHIP AND EMERGENCY SERVICES	9
PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY	11
INTERNAL TRUST & IMPACT ON PUBLIC TRUST & SAFETY	11
THE OPPORTUNITY	11
METHODOLOGY	12
CASE STUDY 1: SWEDISH POLICE AUTHORITY	13
CASE STUDY DATA SOURCES	13
BACKGROUND	13
PROGRAM DESIGN AND DELIVERY	13
<i>Program Goals and Intended Outcomes</i>	13
<i>Program Aims</i>	14
<i>Expected Outcomes</i>	14
THE CHANGE MODEL	14
PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS	15
CHALLENGES AND CRITICISMS	15
LEARNING PHILOSOPHY	15
THE MODULES	16
KEY FINDINGS	19
<i>Pilot Program Participant Feedback – Thematic Insights</i>	19
<i>Recent Participant Feedback</i>	20
<i>Organisational impact</i>	20
POLICE AUTHORITY DEMOGRAPHIC AND CULTURAL INSIGHTS	21
PARTICIPATION STATISTICS	21
CAVEATS	22
AUTHOR OBSERVATIONS & REFLECTIONS	23
LIVED EXPERIENCE SUBJECT A: MATTIAS FORSSTEN	24
LIVED EXPERIENCE SUBJECT B: MAC TRISTAN	26
CASE STUDY 2: SOUTH KING FIRE RESCUE, TACOMA, WA, USA	28
CASE STUDY DATA SOURCES	28
CASE STUDY 3: BEDFORD POLICE DEPARTMENT, TEXAS, USA	30
CASE STUDY 4: MARQUETTE UNIVERSITY POLICE DEPARTMENT, MILWAUKEE, USA	32
RECOMMENDATIONS FOR EMBEDDING ‘SERVANT’ OR SIMILAR LEADERSHIP STRATEGY INTO ORGANISATIONAL CULTURE	34
APPENDICES	36
APPENDIX A	36

APPENDIX B	37
APPENDIX C	39
APPENDIX D	41
APPENDIX E	42
APPENDIX F.....	43
REFERENCES	44

About The Author

Paul Fitzgerald is a Registered Psychologist and AHPRA Board Approved Supervisor, with senior and leadership experience across health, safety, and wellbeing departments within the emergency services sector. He is currently employed at Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV) and now in his seventh year within the sector. Paul's interest in the intersection between leadership and wellbeing, particularly Servant Leadership, is informed by his professional practice as a supervising psychologist, his experience leading teams within emergency services, and his formative values based on service and responsibility to others. This formed the inspiration for his successful 2025 Emergency Services Foundation (ESF) scholarship topic application.

While not an operational first responder, Paul's role is immersed within emergency service culture, having worked closely with both paid and volunteer personnel throughout his career. In addition, growing up in a CFA family has provided direct exposure to the impacts of emergency response on family life. Together, these experiences have shaped Paul's understanding of how leadership practices, organisational change, and workplace culture directly influence responder wellbeing, including the psychological consequences and challenges of leadership and governance issues.

Throughout his career, Paul has led and embedded a range of system-level wellbeing and leadership initiatives, including mental health screening programs and team development initiatives at Victorian State Emergency Service (VicSES), as well as the development of the FRV Psychological Services Leadership Coaching Program. Paul currently provides clinical services to operational firefighters and has led peer training, coaching, and leadership development across individual and group settings. His background also includes work in occupational rehabilitation, workplace injury management, and elite sports settings, which also has fed his fascination with behaviour change.

Paul has supported responders during major interagency disaster deployments, including the 2019–20 Black Summer recovery, the 2021 and 2022 flood responses, and the Grampians fires of 2024–25. He has also contributed to collaborative interagency projects through the ESF, including involvement in the design and governance of the Residential Wellbeing Program pilot initiative.

Paul's interest in leadership and organisational performance is further informed by a background in music performance and education, which has shaped his understanding of continuous improvement, coaching and feedback, and performance under pressure.

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Finally, thank you to you, the reader. I hope this report offers both inspiration and hope, and encourages your continued efforts to build cultures of care in the community, whatever your role. Keep serving.

Background

It has been demonstrated that organisational factors like inadequate leadership support, bullying and harassment are extremely harmful to emergency service personnel's psychological wellbeing, frequently it is not the horrible things they are exposed to, but the horrible environment that exposes them. Beyond Blue, in their 2018 report *Answering the Call* highlighted that “*poor workplace practices and culture were found to be as damaging to mental health as occupational trauma*”¹. Evidence suggests that organisational culture, leadership practices, and bureaucratic processes may have a greater impact on responder wellbeing than exposure to critical incidents alone^{2 3 4 5 6 7}. This is also strongly supported by Rev. Dr. Mark Layson's research into **moral injury** occurring across the sector, whose research demonstrated that these issues can be prevented with improved leadership training, accountability and workplace practices⁸. Additionally, a sort of ‘*organisational betrayal*’ occurs in the context of perceived negative workplace culture and the associated insufficient level of accountability, transparency, and workplace policy and integrity⁹.

According to WorkSafe Victoria data¹⁰, throughout 2024-25, 15% of all standardised mental injury claims were from Emergency Services (after a peak at 19% in 2021-22). Since 2019-20, ‘*Police Officers*’ have been the top occupation in terms of responder mental injury claims (with 3393 since 2019; as compared to 239 ‘*Fire Fighters*’ and ‘*Senior Fire Fighters*’), and all agencies have generally experienced an upward trend in mental injury claims throughout this time, stabilising throughout 2024/25. The leading mechanism of mental injury in Victorian emergency services is interpersonal and organisational stressors such as: being ignored, persistent criticism, alleged misconduct processes, bullying, interpersonal conflict, workload pressure, and ‘other reactions to chronic stress’. These account for 2,113 claims (totalling approximately \$250 million), placing them significantly ahead of ‘*exposure to traumatic events*’, which ranks second with 838 claims (approximately \$116 million).

One does not have to look far to see the impact on the wider community when agency culture does not adequately protect its people. Australia-wide, Police agencies are experiencing an unprecedented resourcing crisis at present, with data showing that in some jurisdictions, the combined number of police officer vacancies and those on long-term sick leave has approached one in five¹¹. In Victoria Police alone, there are currently 1100 vacancies¹², 747 police officers are on sick leave covered by Work Cover, 612 of them for mental health issues¹³, and according to WorkSafe data have a much lower return to work rate as compared with Ambulance Victoria (AV), Fire Rescue Victoria (FRV), and below scheme average¹⁴. This compounding effect is clearly being felt in the community, whereby low staffing has been met with a 15.7% increase in the number of criminal offences recorded by Victoria Police in the year to 30 June 2025¹⁵: the highest on record¹⁶. As a result, public confidence has also been reported to be at an all-time low at present¹⁷, not to mention the family lives of responders, that are negatively impacted by ‘**compassion fatigue**’¹⁸ and other negative psychological impacts resulting from an increase in job demands and low resources¹⁹.

There is a similar story for AV during recent times, April - June 2024 was their ‘busiest quarter on record’ for high priority, urgent and life-threatening ‘Code 1’ cases²⁰ (i.e. cardiac arrest, severe trauma patients) resulting in over 800 hours of overtime per day²¹. Only 64-65% of Code 1 emergencies have been reached within 15 minutes in recent reporting periods; well below the 85% target and among the weakest results in years, down sharply from the 82.3% achieved in 2019-20²². As a result, the number of paramedics looking at leaving the job in the next year has climbed to one in five²³ in a workforce where over half the paramedics have been in the job for less than five years²⁴, again having a compounding effect on the problem and community safety.

Volunteer emergency services have faced similar retention pressures, with declining participation across several jurisdictions²⁵ despite increasing operational demand²⁶. Research indicates that leadership factors such as micromanagement, lack of alignment with organisational vision, and perceived self-interest among leaders contribute to volunteer disengagement and attrition²⁷, highlighting that despite contextual differences, similar leadership and cultural challenges are evident across many Victorian emergency service agencies.

Workforce survey data across Victorian emergency services demonstrate comparable leadership and culture challenges across agencies. According to FRV's 2025 VPSC People Matter Survey²⁸, only 34% of respondents agreed that senior leaders demonstrate honesty and integrity, contrasting with much higher positive perceptions of direct managers, with 80% agreeing that their manager "treats employees with dignity and respect".

Similarly, in AV's 2024 People Matter results²⁹, 74% of staff agreed that "my manager demonstrates honesty and integrity" compared with only 25% agreeing that senior leaders demonstrate honesty and integrity; and the same proportion agreeing "senior leaders model my organisation's values." This reflects a pattern of perceived disconnect between frontline leadership experience and confidence in senior leadership across the sector.

For comparison, the 2023 People Matter Survey³⁰ indicated that across the wider Victorian public sector, 62% of employees felt supported by senior leaders and that they communicated well. Together, these data indicate that confidence in senior leadership behaviour remains a systemic area of concern across emergency service agencies, with key implications for culture, trust, and upstream wellbeing outcomes.

In December 2025, new legislation regarding 'psychosocial hazards' was introduced in Victoria which outlines the legal requirements for what a healthy workplace must look like. WorkSafe Victoria's guidance on psychosocial hazards and work-related stress outlines these risk factors and employers' duties to manage them^{31 32}. Some psychosocial hazards include:

- Inadequate leadership support,
- Poor role clarity,
- Low recognition and reward,
- Poor change management,
- Lack of employee consultation,
- Unreasonable job demands,
- Low job control,
- Exposure to bullying,
- Harassment or conflict,
- Poor workplace relationships.

These risks are particularly relevant to supportive leadership practices, many of which are directly mitigated through the principles of 'Servant Leadership', which emphasises psychological safety, trust, empathy, participation, and a genuine focus on employee wellbeing and development.

A system must therefore protect its people, provide healthy work conditions and a culture that protects responders and their families from the impact on the responders' unmanaged work-life balance. An opportunity exists to mitigate this well-documented risk factor, sitting with the leadership of these organisations.

Servant Leadership and Emergency Services

A values-based model of 'Servant' Leadership has been identified as the ideal way to lead; the desirable qualities to nurture in current or future leaders^{33 34 35}, and a 'natural fit' for fire and emergency services personnel^{36 37 38 39 40}. Crucially, this culture strengthens responders before an incident occurs by providing a healthy and safe environment for growth and healing⁴¹. Individual responders are then free to experience post traumatic growth^{42 43 44 45}, and wellness; thus allowing them to psychologically navigate traumatic situations in a way that doesn't negatively impact them in the long term⁴⁶. This 'Servant Leadership' culture promotes resiliency by meeting the needs of followers so they can grow and heal⁴⁷. The outcome is improved responder health, wellbeing, and reductions in perceived occupational stress⁴⁸.

Leadership grounded in service and genuine care, rather than bureaucracy, policy, and checklists, offers a constructive pathway for addressing destructive authoritarian work environments commonly

experienced by responders^{49 50}, which are known to directly affect wellbeing^{51 52}. Originally coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970, Greenleaf's vision of building a culture of high-trust 'Servant' leaders is essentially based on ten 'virtuous constructs'⁵³. See **Appendix A** for further detail.

In Greenleaf's influential essay published in 1970, *The Servant as Leader*⁵⁴, Greenleaf wrote, "*The servant-leader is servant first*". Greenleaf opines that people, and specifically leaders, have a desire to serve and see others thrive, and in doing so, leaders must give up the conventional pyramid style, where the leader is at the top and the employees are under their direction. **Figure 1** illustrates this concept.

Not to be mistaken with servitude, but rather, a dynamic where leaders meet the psychological needs of those in their care, so they are intrinsically motivated and empowered to grow, be creative and innovative, and achieve. This in turn benefits not only the follower, but also the leader, and organisation.

Figure 1: 'Servant' Leadership vs 'Traditional' Leadership



Image source: Lighthouse, <https://getlighthouse.com/blog/what-is-servant-leadership/>

Servant Leadership gives employees agency over the leader, challenging leadership to reserve their ego, listen more than talk, value and actively mentor all employees equally. Servant leaders function as supportive resources for their followers. They consistently ask the question, "What can I do to help you?", so their followers in turn can serve others and the organisation. Power and leadership are therefore distributed to empower individuals through shared responsibility and authority.

Keeping responders engaged is vital for the effectiveness, productivity and retention of responder teams; as noted previously, many agencies face low levels of motivation and participation. Various research reveals how this empathetic leadership style can boost responder engagement significantly, giving organisations with Servant Leaders a competitive edge⁵⁵.

Moral authority is a key component within Servant Leadership, where influence is earned through consistent integrity, fairness, and care rather than titles or positional power alone. This form of authority builds **trust**, **psychological safety**, and voluntary followership, which are essential in complex emergency service environments.

Psychological Safety

The concept of '**psychological safety**' is a foundational requirement for trust to develop within teams and organisations. Essentially, when people feel *safe* to speak up, admit mistakes, and challenge ideas without fear of negative consequences, trust improves, and high performance and innovation is unlocked⁵⁶. Landmark findings from Google's Project Aristotle⁵⁷ in 2015 demonstrated that psychological safety is a key predictor of effective collaboration, accountability, and sustained performance. When leaders model Servant Leadership behaviours that are key to psychological safety, trust builds internally at an individual, team and organisational level.

Internal Trust & Impact on Public Trust & Safety

International research shows that internal trust and psychological safety within police organisations strongly shaped how officers engaged with the public. Studies in '*procedural justice*' demonstrated that when leaders model fairness, respect, and accountability inside the organisation, officers are more likely to act in ways that build constructive relations externally. This increases public cooperation, crime reporting and willingness to testify, while also reducing complaints and violence towards officers. It can also support a form of community '**self-policing**', whereby social groups voluntarily uphold shared norms without external enforcement^{58 59 60}.

As show in **Figure 2**, internal trust acts as a critical link between psychological safety and broader organisational and community outcomes. These conditions contribute to a better working environment for officers, greater employee safety and security, and improved operational results. Much of this begins with the standards set by leadership and the behaviours that are encouraged and rewarded internally. **Case Study 1** will also illustrate this relationship in practice.

Figure 2: Impact of internal trust and psychological safety on the wider ecosystem



The Opportunity

As noted above, there is evidence to support the efficacy of Servant Leadership on both prevention and improvement of wellbeing and cultural outcomes for emergency service personnel, as well as benefitting the wider community and families. The question posed is: 'Why then, is Servant Leadership seldom referenced or adopted in leadership training and development programs in wider Victorian emergency services sector?'

There is a need for hierarchy and command and control in times of crisis and life or death⁶¹, however, outside emergency response, rigid top-down approaches have been associated with poorer wellbeing

(i.e. burnout)⁶², lower motivation, and disengagement⁶³, suggesting a poor fit for everyday operations⁶⁴.

The same principles may also apply to personnel who work outside emergency response roles, including support staff and non-operational members. There may be further opportunities to nurture cultures of high-trust Servant Leadership within volunteer agencies, where there is a natural alignment with service, strong community connection, and stewardship without financial reward. Culture tends to be self-perpetuating; people tend to simply lead how they've been lead⁶⁵. Perhaps introducing Servant Leadership may shift this paradigm over time.

This report aims to address gaps in the existing research and extend understanding of leadership in fire and emergency service contexts. Specifically, it seeks to:

1. Examine the relationship between Servant Leadership and psychological injury risk among responder populations, through case studies and the documentation of lived-experience where Servant Leadership has been present, as well as contexts where it has been absent.
2. Contribute further applied evidence to the case for Servant Leadership as an effective leadership approach within fire and emergency services, particularly in relation to psychological safety, trust, wellbeing, and organisational effectiveness.
3. Explore how Servant Leadership cultures have been developed, embedded, and sustained within responder agencies, with a focus on the systemic, governance, and leadership behaviours required for long term impact.

In addition, the paper provides some insight into the potential risks associated with Servant Leadership, including the personal cost to leaders who constantly prioritise others, and the likelihood of burnout, if not supported by appropriate organisational structures.

Methodology

This report uses a qualitative approach to examine leadership culture, psychological safety, and wellbeing in emergency services, with a particular focus on Servant Leadership in practice, applied across international emergency service contexts.

Findings presented in this report draw on the following sources:

- Semi-structured interviews with senior leaders, practitioners and program developers
- Immersive observation of a leadership development program at the Swedish Police Authority
- Informal field notes and reflective observations
- Review of relevant organisational documents and public data
- Digital correspondence received from agency members
- A short post-program participant survey (**Appendix B**).

Case studies and lived-experiences were selected to illustrate real-world leadership practice across different emergency service contexts, allowing contrast between organisational approaches, program maturity and outcomes.

The author's professional background as a psychologist within emergency services informed interpretation, with reflective practice used to minimise bias. All participants provided written consent, and permission was sought to name individuals and agencies. Findings are illustrative rather than generalisable, intended to highlight transferable principles and practical insights across emergency service settings.

Case Study 1: Swedish Police Authority

Case Study Data Sources

Insights presented in this case study are drawn from multiple sources, including internal leadership program evaluations, organisational Human Resources (HR) and training documentation provided by the Swedish Police Authority (SPA), and semi-structured interviews with the program's lead developers (Johan Nilve and Anita Versterman). These materials were complemented by the author's direct observation of the leadership program and reflective field notes.

Background

In 2015, the Swedish Police Authority underwent a major reorganisation that resulted in a need for significant cultural changes. The Authority migrated from a region-based service to a unified, nation-wide service. This created policing challenges as Sweden's population is mostly concentrated to three cities, with the scarcely populated regional districts having localised needs and governance.

To be expected, this large-scale organisational change exacerbated an existing laissez-faire leadership culture, markedly poor accountability, low output and motivation, high internal conflict, and a lack of shared mission across the newly reformed agency. Throughout this period, Sweden was also experiencing rising levels of gun violence, terrorism, murders, and organised crime. Not surprisingly, public trust in policing was at the lowest level since 2005⁶⁶.

But, where crisis exists, so too does opportunity. This created a 'perfect storm' for political and cultural change. Where many law enforcement organisations might have responded by increasing internal compliance and adopting more authoritarian structures, SPA chose to explore a different path, tactically re-build trust internally, and subsequently with the public. During the reorganisation, it was also identified that leadership had to evolve to match the reform, to be based upon organisational needs and to match operational requirements. This, combined with the onboarding of many new managers, provided an opportunity to set standards early during organisational change: to build a culture of high-trust 'servant' leaders.

The aforementioned crises, though deeply rooted in complex systemic, political, and organisational failures, also highlighted a key point: leaders are the programmers of these systems. Although a leadership framework, and outdated training program existed, there was no clear roadmap to turn expectation into practice. In response, the Authority invested in a long-term leadership program grounded in service: building leaders equipped to drive cultural and organisational transformation; by developing their 'programmers'.

Program Design and Delivery

The following information was gathered via structured interview with program developers (Nilve and Versterman), and various internal HR and training documentation.

Program Goals and Intended Outcomes

The program was designed to strengthen SPA's leadership capability, rather than relying on external control, the model shifted accountability inward by enabling psychological safety and shared purpose, taking a 'bottom-up' approach in decentralising strategic decision making, and increased democracy. This shift had been instrumental in enabling officers and staff to feel valued, engaged and share information. The program did not dogmatically follow Greenleaf's 'ten-principle' model of the Servant Leader (**Appendix A**), nor is the term itself used in course material, however the design was informed by Greenleaf's vision (see **Figure 5**), and community focus. Rather than adopting an *off-the-shelf* leadership model, the program has been intentionally adapted to align with SPA's operational context

and organisational needs. The Authority terms this 'Servant' leadership philosophy '**Trust-based Leadership**'. The program also incorporated complementary '**transformational**' leadership concepts, with the overall aim of developing a distributed leadership model focussing on service:

'For the Police Authority, a healthy organisational culture means that employees should reflect over the mission and role as a police officer. The employees must act together in a way that creates security and builds trust, both in society at large and internally within the authority. Contributing to a healthy organisational culture is the responsibility of all employees.'

(From the Police Authority's ethical policy, PM 2020:47)

Program Aims

- Build a culture of psychological safety, shifting leadership practice from 'control to trust'.
- Improve leaders' capability to act strategically and utilise employees' skills in day-to-day operations.
- Develop leaders' knowledge, insight and self-awareness through reflective and practical learning.
- Strengthen internal trust, legal certainty, democratic participation and accountability within the Authority.
- Support cross-functional collaboration and shared ownership across levels of leadership.
- Establish a foundation for sustainable cultural change, improved performance and long-term organisational effectiveness.
- Enhance engagement, motivation and accountability among employees, contributing to the Authority's ability to attract and retain skilled staff.

Expected Outcomes

- A healthier, psychologically safe and supportive work environment.
- Increased credibility and trust in leadership.
- Improved job satisfaction, wellbeing, and sense of meaning at work.
- A more coherent, adaptive and effective organisational culture.
- Improved communication and alignment between leadership levels.
- More consistent approaches to operational and organisational development.
- Improved organisational performance, including crime prevention outcomes and public trust (see **Figure 2**).

The Change Model

Ensuring that culture change is sustained and therefore systemic, the program is not attached to a person or people, rather embedded within the organisation. The program was initially intended to be mandated; however it was resolved that participation be 'highly recommended', with all leaders endorsed to engage in the initiative. The change strategy is peer-led as opposed to only Chief-driven. There are currently approximately 200 facilitators across the nation-wide agency, all of whom are operational members which "*creates good credibility with the participants*". This role is offered as a growth opportunity for existing leaders to upskill through a 'train-the-trainer' campaign. The position also serves to create 'change champions', effecting culture change from the bottom to the top. The model strives for participants to become appointed as key leaders, functioning as vital role models and 'programmers' of systemic culture change. See **Lived Experience A** for one such example.

As discussed earlier, a pre-existing leadership capability framework guided the content of program and formed an important part of embedding the leadership principles and expectations. These were duplicated at performance appraisals and manager meetings and included as high-level KPI's.

Similarly, selection criteria corresponded to the leadership framework and aligned with the program, ensuring desired qualities were screened for in recruitment and promotional interviews. The popularity of the program largely came from word of mouth due to credibility and trust over time, as well as buy-in from key leaders across regions.

Program Participants

The target group is members across three levels of leadership: senior managers, managers, and middle managers; all of whom attend the training without uniform across various regions and departments. According to Nilve, this enables people share insights unique to each level of leadership and to work towards the same shared mission regardless of rigid hierarchical position. Rank is also not discussed by facilitators nor participants, which aims to further reduce hierarchy and enhance psychological safety.

Challenges and criticisms

The program was initially not well received, Senior HR at the time expressed significant opposition and sustained devil's advocacy. Emergency service workers have an intimate connection with their agency and their personal identity, as well as a strong sense of tradition, and as such anything 'new' is often seen as a threat. The Police Authority was not immune to rhetoric: *'it's always been this way; if it ain't broke don't fix it'*, functioning to resist any potential culture transformation.

Poor psychological safety (a precipitating factor for the program) at the time meant that members viewed any vulnerability as a weakness, and resulted in a competitive culture (as opposed to collaborative). Thus, according to Nilve, the new program pilot was perceived as a major criticism, in that leadership felt 'exposed' as poor leaders, as opposed to a different model to aspire to. Psychological safety therefore was also a barrier to change, ironically a function that the leadership program aimed to establish.

At present however, that *"penny is beginning to drop"*, but Nilve notes the program does not resonate or is less applicable with some particular factions, with some cohorts, such as SWAT, having vastly different needs as compared to everyday police members, who have less of a relationship with public as they are in and out of highly volatile environments rapidly. Nevertheless, Nilve reports this too is also changing.

According to Nilve, Servant Leadership is not 'soft' leadership, but being 'smart'. There was a fear that sharing power leads to losing power, however, Nilve notes that Servant Leadership means to relate to people, as opposed to dictating to them. Not being 'tough' doesn't necessarily mean being 'soft'. Nilve continues, when safety is key, 'command and control' is useful, but it is not useful in everyday situations. Prevention is less 'sexy' and 'less fun' than responding to crime, but it is not so black-and-white. Leaders have to adopt both a person-centred focus, as well as boundaries and abide by governance.

Despite the initial cynicism, facilitators reported that they and the program are usually well-received and careful effort is made to obtain buy-in from participants during the first module, as discussed later.

Learning Philosophy

Training is based on a pedagogical approach outlining that adults learn:

- By doing, through active participation
- Through differing contexts
- Through dialogue and collaboration with others
- By receiving feedback on their performance
- By reflecting on their learnings

Essentially, the facilitation style adopted by the program supervisors aims to not only “*convey knowledge and skills but also have a coaching approach*”, to allow the participants to be the ‘experts’, as opposed to the facilitators. This approach enables an environment whereby all participants are more active in the learning process, benefiting collective learning simultaneously. Role plays and small group work are utilised to build skills, after which participants are required to provide constructive feedback, enabling reflective practice and real-time coaching capability. Group discussions are frequent which also aids in developing diverse thinking and collaboration. All learning elements were integrated with existing material that had previously been developed in the Authority.

The opening quote in **Module One** sets the scene for the program, encapsulating the high-trust ‘bottom-up’ philosophy of Servant Leadership. It appears in the foreword to the Police Authority’s Strategic Operational Plan 2025–2027 by Sweden’s Police Commissioner, Petra Lundh, RPC:

“...The goals in the strategic operational plan set the direction, to leave room for manoeuvre and trust to managers and employees to choose the path to get there”.

The Modules

Implementing each module takes three days, requires two facilitators and can include a maximum of up to 12 participants to again, enhance psychological safety. There are 3 modules in total, all of which are informed by evidence and best-practice concepts, and are delivered over 1-1.5 years, allowing time between modules to solidify learnings and apply values-aligned behavioural tasks and skills via assigned ‘homework’ (See **Figure 3**). The participants remain consistent throughout the program which concurrently enhances networking, intraparticipant mentoring and social connection. Broadly, the facilitator begins each module by establishing an atmosphere of psychological safety, allowing for role play, group presentations, reflective practice and the sharing of vital insights throughout the modules

Whilst there is no formal participant coaching in between modules, the Authority offers a small group, 10 session/ year mentoring and reflective practice program which allows all leaders to workshop a topic, challenge, or dilemma they may be faced with. This mentoring program is a separate service to the modules however, mostly run by the same pool of facilitators.

The program has been reviewed and revised several times since the pilot circa-2018. Notably, the revisions were partly due to changes in the governance of the organisation, and partly as an outcome of feedback gathered from the participants in the program. Broadly, the framework has largely remained constant.

Figure 3 - Example of 'Homework' from Module 1

The Mission Compass

DEVELOP AND REFLECT

Encourages and inspires others

Acts according to the law and treats people equally

Reflecting on the mission and my role as a police officer

BUILDING TRUST

Shows trust in the competence and ability of others

Is sincere, consistent and shows consideration

Takes responsibility for the assignment in its entirety

ACT TOGETHER

Building good relationships

Puts the citizen perspective ahead of self-interest

Helping each other based on what is best for the whole

CREATE SECURITY

Acts disrespectfully and listens attentively

Asks for and gives feedback

Shows courage and takes responsibility for own development

- Which three behaviors are most important for you to develop further?
- Why are these behaviors important for you to develop further?
- How are you going to do it?



Polisen

2025-04-09

12

The content across all modules is summarised in **Figure 4** below. Further details are presented in **Appendix C**.

Figure 4: Summary of Course Modules

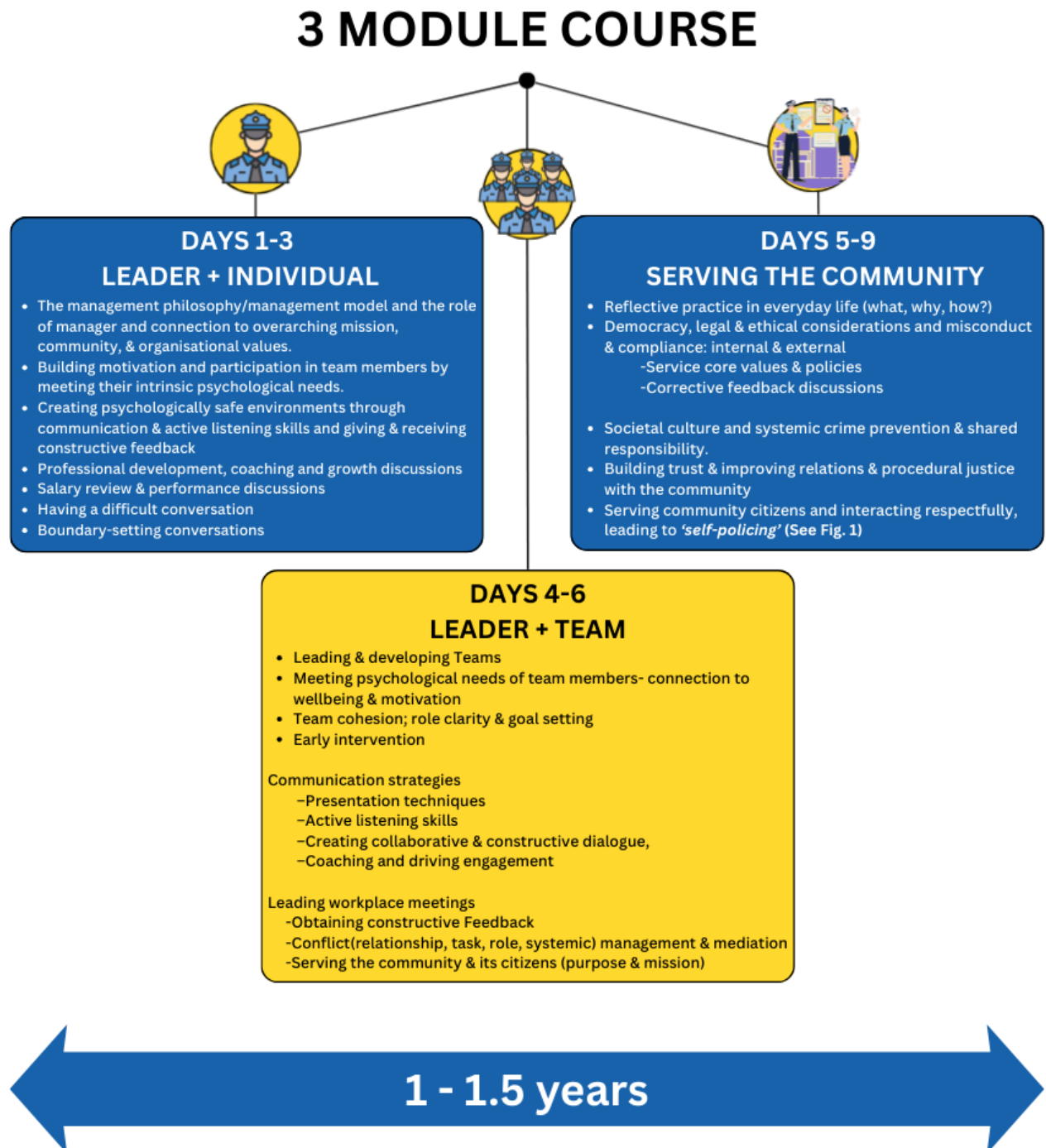


Figure 5: Meeting the Basic Psychological Needs of Employees

Basic psychological needs of individuals

Examples of basic psychological needs are:

- You belong to a group – **togetherness**
- You feel competent – **competence**
- You have the opportunity to influence – **self-determination**
- What you do matters – **meaningfulness**
- You have clear and sustainable conditions – **security**

These are parts that influence our internal driving forces.



See also Leadership training
module 1, Motivation and
participation

21

2025-04-09

Key Findings

Across all data sources, findings were highly consistent. Themes identified through participant surveys, internal program evaluation, semi-structured interviews, and program observations aligned closely across time. This consistency indicates sustained changes associated with the leadership program and broader organisational culture, as opposed to isolated or recency effects.

Pilot Program Participant Feedback – Thematic Insights

A pilot program was conducted throughout 2017-2018 and an internal follow-up by the HR team was conducted after the conclusion of the second module; a total of 119 leaders completed both and provided feedback. Module 3 was evaluated at a later stage and involved feedback from 78 participants.

Feedback across all three modules was encouraging, indicating that the program was positively received, demonstrating strong foundations in psychological safety, reflective practice and concept efficacy, despite initial cynicism towards the training. Additional feedback highlighted difficulty with role-plays which pushed many beyond their comfort zones, however allowed growth and development:

"Active group, listens, offers experiences, both mistakes and successes in a very open way. Everyone has been active in the role-playing games even though it wasn't everyone's favourite sport to begin with. Personally, I hate role-playing games, but since everyone has contributed, it has still been good. The group is the great benefit of this training."

An independent, more formalised evaluation of the leadership program was conducted in 2019 on a smaller group (n=11) of mixed participants from different leadership levels across the Bergslagen and Jämtland police regions. Data was gathered from three sources: participants, their subordinates, and the participants' line manager: a regional police chief. The evaluation indicated positive behavioural

and cultural change among participating managers, reflecting many of the principles that would reinforce SPA's Servant Leadership aspirations.

Participants reported:

- Greater self-awareness and humility in their leadership approach,
- Improved dialogue with employees,
- Stronger sense of alignment between daily operations and the Authority's wider mission
- Increased security and confidence in their leadership roles
- Increased motivation levels and commitment among employees and more discussions regarding democracy and legal/ ethical issues.
- Increased cross-hierarchy collaboration and insight into challenges experienced at different managerial levels.

The evaluation also highlighted the importance of safe, collaborative learning environments that encouraged openness and trust, factors that are vital to ensure wellbeing of team members.

According to Nilve, since the pilot program there has also been an increase in leaders addressing performance issues early, rather than relying solely on HR intervention. Nilve also noted that that leaders are taking greater responsibility for maintaining boundaries and accountability, with difficult conversations occurring more frequently, and with greater skill and confidence. Various regional districts have also experienced this change over time which further provided legitimacy and scalability.

There has been no formal evaluation since the pilot, however feedback is sort at the completion of every program which guides the ongoing continuous improvement of the program and inform content development. Standout themes from ongoing facilitator feedback are summarised in **Appendix D**.

Recent Participant Feedback

Additional participant feedback was gathered by the author following Module 2 in September 2025 (see **Appendix E**).

Organisational impact

Since the pilot, several measurable organisational shifts have occurred within the Police Authority. While these trends **correlate** with the period in which the leadership strategy has been delivered, they are also influenced by a range of broader systemic initiatives. Key movements include:

- A year-on-year **decline in sick leave**, with 2024 recording the lowest level since 2015.
- **High role occupancy** and record-low turnover, well below both state and business-sector averages.
- **Strong retention** among retirees, with 81% expressing interest in returning to the Police Authority (88% among former police officers).
- Reductions in **work-related injury** exposure
- Lower self-reported **workload** among personnel

It is important to note that these improvements reflect multiple concurrent organisational factors, including investment in occupational health, expanded wellness allowances, strengthened cohesion during recent agency growth and maturity, and demographic considerations such as age structure. The leadership development strategy is **one contributing factor** within this broader system.

Most notably, this period also aligns with a sustained rise in **public trust**. According to the 2024 National SOM Survey⁶⁷, public confidence in the Swedish Police Authority reached its highest level since the series began in 1986 (72% reporting 'very' or 'fairly much' confidence in the institution). Again, whilst this cannot be attributed to any single initiative (such as the leadership program in

isolation) the trend is consistent with the intended outcomes of the program: strengthened internal trust, improved motivation, and increased participation and empowerment across the workforce. These internal conditions outlined above may contribute to a wider community of external trust surrounding the Authority as summarised in **Figure 6** below.

Police Authority Demographic and Cultural Insights

It is important to note that the Swedish Police Authority operates within a rather anomalous demographic context. The organisation has near gender parity across its workforce and is currently at its highest recorded staffing levels. These factors may also confound organisational culture, leadership dynamics, and workforce wellbeing. Detailed demographic data is provided in **Appendix F**.

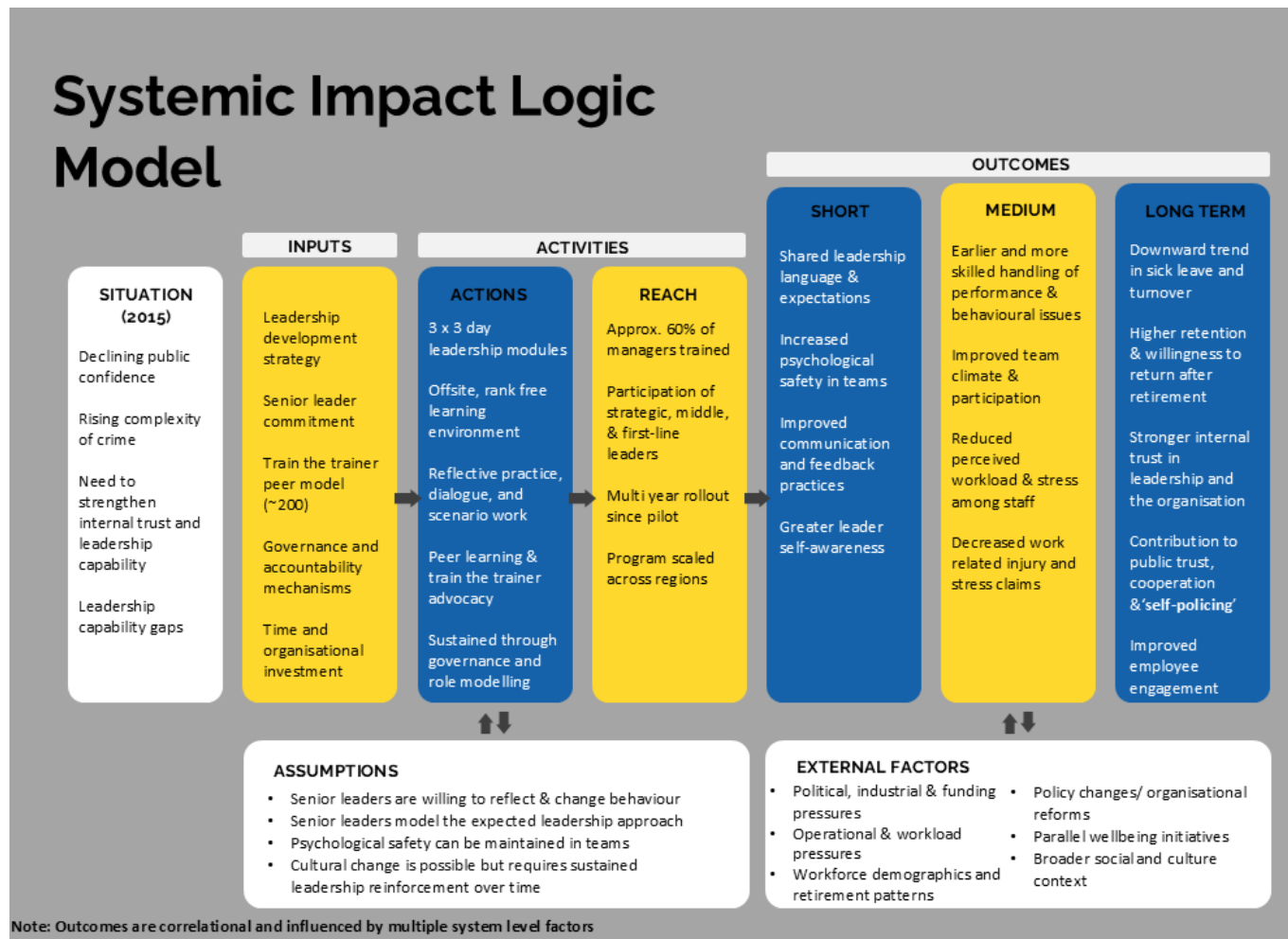
Participation Statistics

According to estimates provided by SPA’s HR Department, approximately 2,500 of the organisation’s 4,308 managers had completed the leadership training program at the time of writing. This represents around 60 percent of all management personnel having participated in the program at some stage since its pilot. While completion rates by management level were not available, representation is understood to be proportional across strategic and middle management levels, with the largest participation occurring among first line managers, reflecting their numbers within the organisation. **Table 1** shows the number of managers at each level within the Swedish Police Authority.

Table 1: Participation numbers

National Head Commissioner	2
Head of Region/ Department	30
Head of Police district/Unit	110
Head of section/ Local Police District	558
First line managers	3608
Total	4308

Figure 6: Systemic Pathway from Leadership Development to Wellbeing, Performance, and Public Trust



Caveats

The public sector in Sweden operates within a broader social and cultural context that differs from many other settings. Sweden has a long-standing culture of egalitarianism, social cohesion, and workforce participation, including comparatively high levels of gender representation and educational levels. Entry requirements to the SPA necessitate tertiary education and police recruits undertake a two-year training pathway prior to operational deployment, reflecting a strong investment in professional development and quality control. For comparison, Victoria Police recruits training is approximately 25 weeks⁶⁸; and FBI special agents is approximately 20 weeks⁶⁹ before deployment.

Workplace flexibility has also historically been more embedded within the Swedish public sector. Until recent years, flexible rostering arrangements were common within the Authority, enabling members to manage work with family and carer responsibilities (i.e. school pickups). These structural and cultural conditions may influence how leadership approaches, including trust and service-based models, are received and role modelled. Participation in the program may also reflect a degree of self-selection, with more motivated or development-focussed leaders more likely to engage. Further, Sweden consistently ranks high in international wellbeing and life satisfaction indices⁷⁰. This reflects broader societal factors such as social trust, welfare systems, and work-life balance. As noted earlier, organisational performance indicators (i.e. sick leave) provide useful insights but do not fully capture the complexity of wellbeing or organisational culture.

As a result, 'progressive' concepts such as Servant Leadership, shared responsibility, and democratic participation may represent less of a cultural shift within the Swedish context than in more hierarchical

or 'command and control' driven environments. This should be considered when interpreting the transferability of the findings to other emergency service environments.

While Greenleaf's Servant Leadership philosophy clearly informs the program, it has been deliberately adapted and integrated alongside other leadership and management frameworks to suit operational demands. Observed outcomes should therefore be understood as emerging from an applied, context-specific, *hybrid* leadership approach rather than a single theoretical model.

Author Observations & Reflections

During observation of the program, the learning environment was markedly calm and non-hierarchical. The author did not observe the rigid power dynamics or cynicism often present in police settings, nor behaviours stemming from vigilance, bravado, or status comparison. Interactions were characterised by warmth, attentiveness, and a relational tone that promoted mutual respect.

The absence of visible rank, combined with plain clothes and mixed background, appeared to contribute to a setting where participants engaged as peers and colleagues. Without organisational insignia, the group could have easily been mistaken for professionals from other sectors. A key highlight was the central role of reflective practice within the curriculum. As psychologists are trained to habitually engage in self-reflection to promote insight and growth, this approach stood out as a key strength in supporting sustained behaviour change.

Although a translator was utilised to comprehend program content, the presence of psychological safety did not rely on verbal communication alone, and was evident through non-verbal cues (i.e. relaxed body language, eye contact, active listening), facilitator behaviour, and group dynamics, and a willingness to engage in discussion.

At the commencement of Module 1, facilitators explicitly gauged participant motivation for attendance and established psychological safety of the group by asking "*Do you want to be here?*" (see **Figure 7**). Early authentic disclosures indicated a level of openness in such an environment. One participant exclaimed, "*I don't want to be here,*" describing feelings of guilt related to time away from family and concern about leaving colleagues short-staffed, demonstrating the necessary learning climate established and maintained by facilitators.

Figure 7: Gauging Participant Motivation

Do you want to be here?

Lived Experience Subject A: Mattias Forssten

Police Head of Södermanland District, Swedish Police Authority, Former SPA Leadership Program Participant

Over the past decade Forssten has witnessed, been instrumental in, and role modelled, the evolution of leadership within the Swedish Police Authority. He was one of the first participants in the 'Trust-Based' leadership program circa 2017, and though he was initially a sceptic, he found the scenario-based training both challenging and insightful, providing him with the tools to balance authority and empathy. The program's focus on self-reflection, collaboration, and trust reshaped his understanding of leadership, *"if we really want to (have impact) maybe we have to start talking and acting in a different way as leaders."* Forssten understands the *"true power"* of democracy and combined intelligence of the *"40,000 employees of the Swedish police"* as opposed to relying on *"the top 50 officers"* to make all the decisions. As Forssten described, *"You need to have the ability to go from one type of leadership in a tactical situation to another one: the servant leadership perspective, when you are in everyday work."* This balance between commanding and supporting others has become central to modern Swedish Police Authority's culture, *"Servant leadership isn't servant like in the way that you are over like a butler for anyone. It's like providing opportunity for growth and an area where you can affect your own situation."*

Since partaking in the program, Forssten has truly *"lead by example"* through periods of organisational reform and cultural change, he noted a clear shift from traditional, top-down structures toward a more modern, democratic, purpose-driven, and service-oriented model of leadership. He explained that historically, *"in Sweden, there's only two things that have been very top-down organised, and it's been the military and it's been the police."* He noted that this style, while efficient, was too rigid and lacked adaptability: *"If we act and we lead like that, we will get what we want exactly when we want, but we will never get anything else."*

After years of applying the learnings outlined in the program, he has seen benefits of integrating Servant Leadership into his everyday practice: supporting his team's growth, empowering decision-making, and increased psychological safety. *"You are the base of the pyramid; you are not the top of the pyramid."* He described Servant Leadership as *"being the provider for your personnel to succeed"*, which is only possible with an environment that allows for greater honesty and tolerance among leaders, explaining, *"Now I see leaders that are fine without saying in some cases, 'I don't know, I have to look that up.' It's a very tolerating environment."* This vulnerability, according to Forssten, has reduced isolation, and increased peer support at senior levels, *"It's not so lonely being the Chief anymore because you have other Chiefs who are not your competitors. They are your teammates."* He also noted that younger generations expect care and authenticity from leaders, vital for engaging and retaining new staff, warning, *"If you don't act like that with them, they will go away... it's super clear."* He notes the *"old school alpha dog"* leadership is an outdated approach: *"(young people) will not tolerate anything else but Servant Leadership; who really cares about them and asks them how they feel and how they react."*

Forssten very aptly compares the 'Servant' philosophy to parenting: guiding, caring, protecting and *"being firm when you have to...setting direction,"* but allowing others to take responsibility for their own development and freedom to take risks: *"you don't directly fix it for a child. You make them aware of what opportunities they have to solve it, and then let them solve it and grow with the situation."* As a result of this approach, he has created environment of open and honest communication within his team, reduced politics, stress, and improved performance under pressure. He believes that proactively building trust and communication before crises occur is what allows teams to perform effectively when they do, *"when I know my personnel, I know who has the talent for (the situation), who is best (suited), I can play my team in the best way because I know them."*

Today, Forssten leads by example, as an authentic 'Senior' role model of Servant Leadership, he demonstrates to the entire organisation that true leadership success lies in *"This feeling of safety, this feeling of (connection), is much better now than it was before"*, he continues *"We are at the crossroads now, If we don't succeed now, generations coming after us will look back and wonder,*

why didn't you do more?... we're moving very fast to that direction, and I've seen a big change."

Forssten personifies the idea that culture change starts at the top. His leadership demonstrates that when senior leaders genuinely live by service, these values grow beyond a well-worded policy, and into daily practice.

Lived Experience Subject B: Mac Tristan

Lifetime Servant Leader; Former Chief of Police, Carrollton & Coppel, Texas.

Mac Tristan is a 38-year law enforcement veteran with over 25 years of command experience who has successfully led and transformed the cultures of two police organisations: Carrollton and Coppel, Texas. Tristan has now retired from the policing but reflects on his leadership philosophy: it being a privilege to lead, that leaders only “*exist to serve*” others, and that “*the people are the organisation.*” He believes that in many ways the people under one’s management directly reflect leadership, Tristan quotes Max Dupree, that for better or worse: “*the organisation will never become what the leader is not.*” He has a fundamental sense of vision, and understands the importance of “*overcommunicating*” it to engage with those in his care, “*If my people are successful, that means that I’m successful, and that means the organisation’s successful.*”

Tristan quickly became disillusioned early in his career chasing policing quotas, explaining that he “*didn’t become a police officer to be a ticket writer.*” He grew frustrated with a system that rewarded performance indicators over meaningful community outcomes. Discovering Greenleaf’s concept of Servant Leadership gave him a “*light bulb*” confirmation for what he had intuitively practised for years: that leadership is really about “*strong, vulnerable, courageous, emotionally intelligent leaders*”, leaders who admit when they “*don’t have all the answers*”, and in turn can build great teams by recognising everyone’s talents.

As Tristan progressed to senior roles, including Assistant Chief, he intentionally applied Servant Leadership principles to become a change agent. He challenges the misconception that servant leadership is “*soft*” or “*subservient*”, noting there’s a trend toward militaristic, “*warrior*”-like presentation rather than a “*guardian*” approach. He sees the power of creating psychological safety in vulnerability, “*It’s a strength to say... I’m hurting and I need some help.*” Tristan explained the “*warrior mentality*” is important in life-threatening situations, but for most of the work, “*(we) don’t need to be suited up for war.*” More often the job will require empathy to “*connect with people*”, like delivering death notifications or supporting grieving families in their darkest times. He explains that command-and-control leadership has its place in tactical situations, but doesn’t work for everyday policing, it’s not “*by the book black and white.*”

According to Tristan, successful implementation of Servant Leadership often takes root in organisations that are at their lowest point. When Tristan became Chief at Coppel, the organisation was, in his words, “*mediocre at best, dysfunctional, unethical at worst.*” He explained that this created a readiness for a change into Servant Leadership, driven by “*expressing a vision, over-communicating it, and saying, ‘I want to be part of a great organisation, but I can’t do it myself.’*” Despite the expected attrition and apathy to existing dysfunctional conditions, Tristan stressed that achieving this aspiration depends on continual forward motion and shared vision: “*Once you think ‘we’re good,’ it’ll start to go down.*” Tristan also exclaimed the importance of hiring for “*culture fit, not for need*”. Tristan observes that while you seldom can teach someone character, integrity, or genuine empathy, these qualities are often overlooked in favour of those who can simply manage a project but “*have no perception of how they come across to other people.*” He adds that a healthy culture emerges when there is “*ownership and pride and an eagerness to come to work... that’s the key.*” Tristan is a believer that organisations are bigger than the sum of their parts, “*If I’m the only one making decisions, I’ve dumbed down my organisation to my level of intelligence... let’s all figure it out together as a team.*”

Tristan has exercised the ‘Pillar’ of **healing** in Servant leadership. According to Tristan, conflict and resentment can erode relationships for years, leading to information silos, which tends to be self-perpetuating in culture, “*Hurt people hurt people*”. Tristan adopted reconciliation as a core leadership practice, to quote Greenleaf: “*The healing of relationships is a powerful force for transformation and*

integration', One of the greatest strengths of a servant leader is the potential for healing oneself first and then the relationship with others." Tristan described an officer in his care who came to work every day holding onto great deal of negativity, who *"hated the organisation... and hated (him)"*, affecting the officer's home life also. Eventually, through difficult, **healing** conversations and *"resetting the clock to today"* they were able to "leave that in the past" and focus on moving forward. Through **healing**, Tristan sets a challenge: *"be the leader you wish you had."*

Whilst widely respected for his compassion and integrity, Tristan indicated that *"taking care of everybody else"* relentlessly whilst continuing to respond, can come at great personal cost; there's only *"so many balls we can juggle on the air before they start falling"*. While Tristan was an Assistant Chief and faced the challenge of changing a toxic culture, his marriage began to fail, and it was during this time he experienced his first panic attack during a meeting; realising he *"couldn't walk on water"* like he once believed. Tristan explained he had to refocus, reprioritise and learn to step into what Greenleaf calls *"the classroom of silence"*, withdrawing from the chaos to heal himself. He explained, *"I had to learn to say no"* because the pace was unsustainable, *"A good servant leader responds to any problem by listening first- but one of the important things about listening is listening to oneself."* Tristan now sees this as a sort of 'post traumatic growth', developing an invaluable sense of empathy, having helped countless others who are in similar experiences as he once was.

Through mentorship and leadership development, Tristan now helps others integrate these Servant principles, teaching that authentic leadership involves both strength and humility and that influence stems from integrity,

"Identify your principles, your values and your non-negotiables; and defend them, no matter the cost. Every day... you're going to impact someone's life... the question is how? Always leave the situation better than you found it. Focus on your circle of influence and the things that you can do to make this job, community, life, and the world better."

Case Study 2: South King Fire Rescue, Tacoma, WA, USA

Case study data sources

Insights presented in this case study are drawn from a semi-structured interview with Alex Charoni, alongside supplementary organisational context provided via correspondence with a former senior leader from South King Fire Rescue.

Alex Charoni, Battalion Chief, South King Fire and Rescue

After over 35 years in the fire service, Alex Charoni leads one of four shifts across seven stations and 160,000 residents. South King Fire Rescue (SKFR) is a regional service under severe operational stress, attending over 30,000 emergency calls annually with limited personnel, meaning the whole organisation is perpetually *reacting*. SKFR therefore has reduced capacity to invest in forward-thinking initiatives like cultural development, instead all energy is focussing on tasks, logistics and compliance as opposed to *people*. Charoni reports his department has experienced instability, having had a rotating door of leadership of 4 Chiefs within 5 years. SKFR has been without a qualified Chief now for nearly a year, led instead by corporate staff with no formal fire service credentials. According to Charoni, this follows a deep-rooted, systemic history of autocratic, ego-driven leadership culture and nepotism over merit and desire to serve. He jests, “*Homie Hookup Fire and Rescue*”, which has bred organisational and disconnect between command staff and frontline personnel, and siloed leadership structures that limits collaboration. According to a former senior operational leader, several of the conditions typically required for Servant Leadership to take root, including humility, trust, empowerment, and selfless leadership; were largely absent or, at times, actively discouraged. From this perspective, limited investment in personnel development and mentorship contributed to low staff morale, negative mental health impacts, and subsequent attrition.

Charoni was first introduced to the concept of Servant Leadership through his Fire Chief, who inspired him to explore it further during his Executive Fire Officer program, “*After working for many bad leaders throughout my career, Servant Leadership offered a better approach focused on caring about people and investing in them... fill their need and give them trust and give them permission to make mistakes.*” Charoni also identified early on, the generational relevance of the leadership style, “*younger people are more ascribed to servant leadership*”, he himself becoming energised by their engagement, “*and I just sit there with a big grin, because that’s it; that’s the job.*”

Charoni began by engaging in research, surveying the South King (SKFR) members if they had experienced Servant Leadership in their roles; then committed to applying the ‘*ten principles*’ of Servant Leadership into his own leadership practice and strategic planning, living by his words, “*being a leader is not about you. In fact, it’s about everything but you.*” Under instruction from his Chief to promote a culture of Servant Leadership to the wider organisation, he developed a training video, introduced servant language into the department’s strategic documents, aspiring to embed the empowering philosophy into agency mission, vision, and goals.

Despite early traction, following “*a little bit of a turn toward the Servant Leadership philosophy*”, momentum halted following the Chief’s retirement. Succeeding leaders “*didn’t want to hear about servant leadership*”, dismantled the strategy and abandoned the leadership framework completely. Charoni reported that as a result, cronyism and self-serving leadership practices re-emerged, further eroding trust and morale, extending attrition. Charoni adds, “*Every time we have a change in leadership, somebody else comes in and they take all the stuff they don’t like and just throw it in the dumpster, metaphorically, and move on.*”

Despite the broader organisation regressing, and resisting change, Charoni has continued to role model Servant Leadership within his own team, stating: *“I get called names, and criticised... I just went quiet and decided to just pour into my officers.”* Charoni continues, *“I fell in love with helping other people advance their careers and learn”*. Through his dedication to genuine care, listening, coaching, and empowering his people, he has developed high-performing motivated now-leaders, many of whom topped promotional courses.

Within his own team, Charoni reported a greater level trust, openness, and psychological safety among members. He reflected, *“Servant leaders’ first response when there’s something going on is to listen, not to talk.”* This approach has helped create an environment where people *“sit down with me, and they tell me their struggles, their weaknesses, things that are going on, and I help them- no judgment.”* Over time, this strengthened mutual respect and emotional wellbeing across ranks, as *“people start trusting you. They know you have their best interest at heart.”*

Charoni has not emerged from his unwavering efforts of leading ethically in a toxic culture, describing a sense of **moral injury** resulting from the lack of organisational support for servant leadership, and *“gave up... trying to help this organisation not fly into the side of Mount Rainier.”* Charoni has experienced significant frustration, burnout, and disillusionment as the wider department reverted to often harmful hierarchical habits. Despite this, to this day his credibility rests on **‘moral authority’**, and consistent prioritisation of his crew’s wellbeing, seeing his team as *“little gardens of Servant Leaders and (if) you water them, they will grow.”*

Charoni’s story reflects an all-too-common failure, in that attaching frameworks to individuals, as opposed to systems and governance, is a key reason the strategy did not progress nor sustain. This case also highlights the need for senior buy-in and succession planning to ensure durable cultural change. Unfortunately without succession and adequate buy-in, SKFR’s culture has seemingly reverted to the loudest and most powerful personalities. But hope for Charoni’s and SKR’s Servant Leadership vision is still burning bright, *“We’re not dead yet; we’re still doing compressions and working on it.”*

Case Study 3: Bedford Police Department, Texas, USA

Bobby La Penna, Police Chief, Bedford Police Department

Chief Bobby La Penna aspires to create a culture of servant leaders in his department following a period of instability and self-interest from leadership. La Penna noted that whilst the philosophy of Servant Leadership had long been part of the agency's founding ethos, the departure of key leaders meant a drift away from this approach. After the previous Chief's departure, organisational vision became misaligned, and people began prioritising personal agendas over the collective. Acting within his circle of influence, Chief La Penna recognised the need to rebuild the culture from within, *"We needed to circle the wagons back around the idea of Servant Leadership and how we better this place, through each other, with each other."*

Whilst in its first year of introduction, La Penna is currently dedicating much of his energy towards a Servant Leadership program designed to give employees a voice and make the workplace more satisfying, even if some resistant members see it as *"weakness or kind of fluff"*, which has resulted in some expected attrition. The leadership initiative includes a cross-functional committee that meets monthly to address cultural issues and propose changes, as well as quarterly training sessions run by La Penna combining a short 2-hour presentation, lunch, and open discussion to officers and other staff.

Following advice from Marquette University's Police Chief Hudson (see **Case Study 4**), La Penna deliberately stepped back from leading the process, empowering the employees as opposed to *"relying on someone to set the culture for them."* This approach enabled long-standing grievances between sworn and non-sworn staff, creating the opportunity to heal them collaboratively. Leaders at all levels are encouraged through their professional development plans to be engaging in ongoing training, including external program facilitated by retired Chief Mac Tristan (**Lived-Experience Subject B**).

La Penna notes early cultural improvements, such as decline in talk of micromanagement and a stronger sense of empowerment among officers, giving them input on organisational functions and policies. The outcome is a *"more welcoming environment and a happier workplace"* where improved trust has meant officers now feel comfortable participating in constructive operational debriefings after incidents, unlocking innovation and accountability by removing fear of criticism and blame: *"Showing vulnerability is not weakness. If you cannot communicate, we'll all fail."* La Penna also noted Servant Leadership has produced tangible operational benefits. He notes that in high-stress moments, officers are more likely to follow commands without hesitation because they have faith in the intent behind them, *"the trust is already there"*, due to **moral authority**. He notes that potential hesitance in team members may be more due to individual projection, those who *"don't put forth trust in others, and therefore they just think that others won't trust them."*

La Penna plans that future promotional exams will require candidates to articulate their leadership philosophy and explain how they intend to serve those they supervise. La Penna explains that whilst there has not been enough time to assess impact of this culture change on wellbeing issues such as burnout, he notes recruitment outcomes have already improved: no officers are currently seeking to transfer out, and new applicants cite the department's culture as a reason for wanting to join.

Noting the costs of high-involvement leadership, he protects his wellbeing through his faith community, mentoring both inside and outside law enforcement, and regular reflection, *"not being afraid to show that vulnerability and to say, I can't do this alone... it only makes us stronger"*.

The next phase of the program focuses on deepening trust and continuing to empower staff to shape their workplace, he implores leaders to *“put egos aside and put sceptics in their place. Our industry has enough issues that can cost us our lives. The work and effort you put into being a true Servant Leader may actually save someone’s life.”* As La Penna summarises, *“doesn’t matter if my badge says Chief, your badge says officer or dispatcher or whatever it may be, we are all on the same playing field. We gotta work together.”*

While still early in its conception, La Penna demonstrates clear vision, role modelling and leading through earned moral authority as opposed to positional power. Currently, the strategy relies heavily on a small number of load-bearing leaders rather than being structurally embedded. Further assimilation into governance and wider lateral leadership buy-in will support program durability and scale.

Case Study 4: Marquette University Police Department, Milwaukee, USA

James Hensley, Lieutenant, Marquette University Police Department

Lieutenant James Hensley has served in law enforcement for 25 years, much of that time in homicide investigation. Lt Hensley has become a key figure in designing and implementing Marquette University Police Department's (MUPD) leadership transformation under Chief Edith Hudson, taking inspiration from Mac Tristan's external courses. Lt. Hensley fully is immersed in Servant Leadership; currently undertaking a master's degree in organisational leadership with a focus on the topic.

The Servant Leadership program at MUPD was introduced to shift the organisational mindset away from autocracy, and toward development, service, and inspiring others. The program began as a series of short, tailored presentations adapted to different audiences: sworn officers, civilian employees, and student staff. Over a period of approximately two and a half years, the sessions have become embedded within the training curriculum for all new employees. The design aimed to apply the philosophy to daily policing and encouraged insights and reflection on how leaders could better support, listen to, and empower their people, *"pushing and developing others and giving them all the glory."* The small size of the agency (approximately 60 members) allowed impact to be rapid.

Lt. Hensley adopted servant leadership late in his career after discovering it *"dovetails perfectly"* with policing grounded in service, *"I couldn't understand why we weren't already leading this way."* The initiative was also intended to spearhead retention and recruitment challenges faced by the organisation, as well as to align more deeply with Marquette's Jesuit values of *'cura personalis'* (care for the whole person), based on community, compassion, and personal growth.

According to Lt Hensley, Servant Leadership *"deals more with how we treat people and how we react."* He emphasises that the most important leadership tools are listening and empathy, which build understanding and trust in high-stress situations, quoting Maya Angelou: *"people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel."* Despite this often intensive and highly involved style of leadership, Lt Hensley finds that it *"charges (his) batteries"*, and protects against the associated ill-psychological effects, for not only himself but also his team,

"...being a Servant Leader is hard... But choose your hard, having a team that's really dysfunctional is really hard... having consistent development talks and coaching them and bringing them along on the journey to feel empowered. It is hard, but that is less hard."

Despite some initial scepticism from dogmatic officers and external agencies unfamiliar with the philosophy, the department's leadership team persisted, to some it *"sounded weak or soft."* Continuous advocacy from the Chief and command staff promoted adoption across all levels of the organisation.

Lt Hensley outlined some of the inspiring results: the department is fully staffed (compared to other policing agencies in the district which are down 40%); internal feedback shows stronger trust, greater engagement, and improved communication across ranks. The program has also reportedly created a more positive workplace culture where wellbeing is prioritised through the recent introduction of annual wellness check-ups, active promotion of EAP services, and an integration of a peer-support network. Lt Hensley views the challenges of caring for others as a privilege *"we in emergency services have that opportunity (to change people's lives) almost every single day. And I think that's a very that's a very big responsibility."*

The department's vision of a high-trust culture of Servant Leaders is growing, with their success sparking significant interest from the City of Milwaukee Police Department seeking to replicate the approach, speaking to the credibility of their program.

This case study demonstrates that in a small organisation such as MUPD, leadership behaviours from key individuals can influence culture quickly, enabling early progress. However, without shared responsibility, progress remains highly person-dependent. Further formalisation of the strategy would support sustainability as roles and personnel change.

Recommendations for embedding ‘Servant’ or similar leadership strategy into organisational culture

As illustrated across the data sources presented in this paper, leadership culture and the workplace environment are primary upstream determinants of responder wellbeing. These influences are systemic in nature, extending beyond individual coping or personal resilience. Leaders are one of the most powerful protective factors organisations have, and when they are intentionally developed, consistently model expected behaviours and are held accountable, organisations can thrive.

From the four case studies presented in the current paper, and based on evidence-informed best practice⁷¹, the following findings and recommendations are presented:

1. Develop clarity and alignment about what the ‘ideal leadership’ looks like

- Reach agreement on a shared view of leadership (i.e. capability framework) that values service, trust, accountability, and psychological safety, and use this consistently across the organisation.
- Make it the reference point and common language for promotion, feedback, performance reviews and development curricula.
- Assess leaders on how they lead *people*, as opposed to just technical outcomes.
- Develop a leadership development program based on this shared view to assist in demonstrating ‘ideal’ leadership attributes across the career lifecycle.

2. Senior leaders must visibly buy-in

- If senior leaders do not actively support and model the leadership behaviours expected, change will be impeded.
- Senior leadership (Board, CEO and SLT, Commissioners) must demonstrate alignment and commitment to leadership development as a core strategy of the agency, and needs to be viewed as a must-have rather than expendable or a luxury.
- Senior leaders should champion and participate in development themselves first to demonstrate commitment and learn the concepts and behaviours of Servant Leadership.

3. Make leadership development ‘business as usual’ aligned with organisational purpose and values, and strategy.

- Leadership capability should be built and reinforced throughout career lifecycle, not delivered as a one-off course.
- Embed expectations into recruitment and selection, induction and onboarding, identification and development of leaders, engagement and retention, performance and accountability processes, team connection and succession planning.
- Reinforce leadership behaviours that build trust, safety, and wellbeing over time

4. Scale leadership from within

- Use a train-the-trainer and advocacy model to spread leadership culture throughout the organisation and develop respected internal leaders as facilitators and advocates, 'bottom-up'.
- This builds credibility, ownership, peer influence, shared lived experience and local relevance, and increases the likelihood that leadership practices supporting psychological safety and wellbeing are embedded over time.
- The Swedish Police Authority demonstrates how distributed leadership can sustain culture at scale.

5. Allocate time and resources

- Leadership development will fail if people are expected to engage whilst juggling high workloads and competing demands.
- Provide 'protected time' for learning, reflection, and application
- Without this, programs undermine wellbeing and psychological safety, leading to poor uptake and limited impact.

6. Make psychological safety the basis

- Leadership learning must occur in environments where people feel safe to speak honestly, experiment, make mistakes, and challenge ideas.
- Set clear behavioural norms at the start and enforce them.
- Psychological safety is essential for learning, trust, and behaviour change and downstream wellbeing outcomes.

Appendices

Appendix A

Originally coined by Robert K. Greenleaf in 1970, Greenleaf's vision of building a culture of high-trust 'Servant' leaders is essentially based on ten virtuous constructs⁷²:

- **Listening:** Actively listening to understand team members' perspectives, needs & therefore motivations.
- **Empathy:** Demonstrating a deep understanding and care for the welfare of others.
- **Healing:** Helping team members to resolving conflicts & support personal growth.
- **Awareness:** Having insight and understanding how one's actions impact others.
- **Persuasion:** Guiding and influencing others through persuasion and consensus as opposed to *coercion*, or relying on authority and power differentials.
- **Conceptualisation:** Being able to see the bigger picture and conceive a compelling vision for the future.
- **Foresight:** Anticipating future needs and challenges to make proactive, long-term decisions.
- **Stewardship:** Being a custodian for the wellbeing of the team and the organisation as a whole. Power is held temporarily, and leaders are accountable for how it is used.
- **Commitment to the growth of others:** Passionate dedication to helping every team member grow professionally and personally.
- **Building community:** Fostering a sense of community and collaboration within the organisation.

Appendix B

Evaluation Survey Form

Thank you for taking part in this survey. Your feedback will help evaluate the Servant Leadership program and contribute to research supported by the Emergency Services Foundation.

- Participation is voluntary.
- Your responses are anonymous and confidential.
- You may skip any question.
- Findings will be used in a report and presentation.

By clicking Next, you consent to take part in this survey.

For each of the session objectives listed below, please rate the progress you have made as a result of this session:

To what extent has the program influenced how you think about leadership?

1 2 3 4 5

None at all

Very much

How confident do you feel about applying 'Trust-based' Leadership principles in your future leadership?

1 2 3 4 5

No Confidence

Exceptional Confidence

I feel more aware of the impact of leadership on the psychological health and wellbeing of my colleagues.

1 2 3 4 5

No Awareness

Exceptional Awareness

Participation in the program has positively influenced my own wellbeing or stress management at work

1 2 3 4 5

No Influence

Exceptional Influence

Have you already applied any 'Trust-based' Leadership concepts in your role?

How have you applied these concepts?

1

Has the course changed how you support & listen to others in your team?

How so?

Which parts of the program have been most useful or impactful?

Which parts have been least useful or difficult to apply?

In your view, could 'Trust-Based' Leadership contribute to reducing burnout or psychological injury in emergency services?

Thank you for sharing your reflections.

Your feedback is greatly appreciated and will help strengthen Servant Leadership approaches in emergency services.

Appendix C

Module 1:

The overall focus of the first module is on building a relationship of support between the leader and the individual employee. All preceding learning concepts are applied through role plays between members.

The content of the first module is summarised in **Figure 4**

Module 2:

The second module focuses on the role between the leader and team. Learning was solidified through role play & simulated group work, reflection and mock presentations.

The content of the second module is summarised in **Figure 4**

Screenshots from the module are displayed below

Module 3:

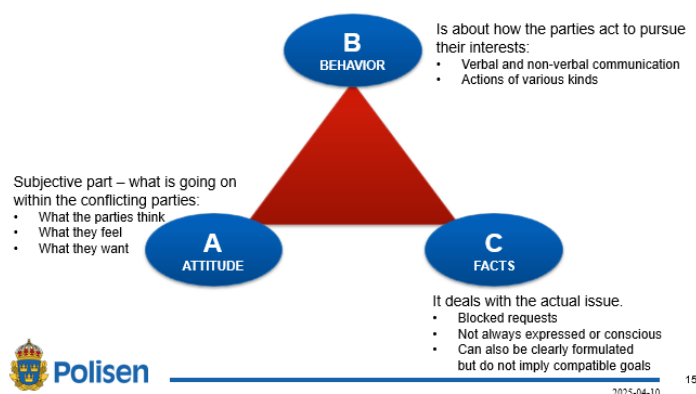
The Final module focuses on the connection to wider purpose and organisational mission, and primarily the trusting relationship between Police Authority and wider community and citizenship. This is strategically placed last as to make the whole “greater than the sum of the individual parts”. (Evaluation document, 2019)

The content of the third and final module is summarised in **Figure 4**

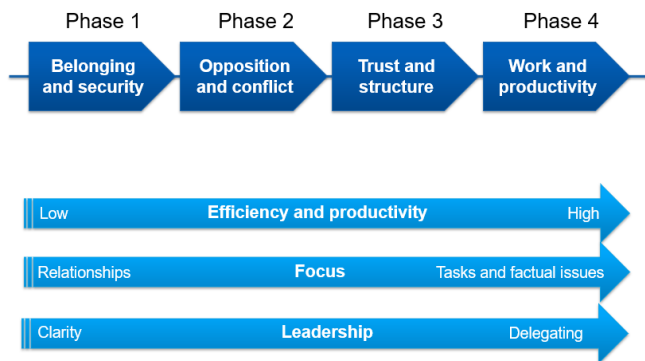
Screenshots from the module are displayed below

Conflict triangle, Module 2

The ABC model “The conflict triangle”



Team development slide, Module 2

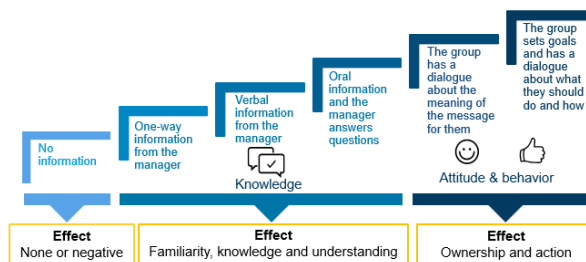


2025-04-09

32

Communication slide, Module 2

What is the goal of your communication?



Read more in Leading group discussions on Intrapolis's [management tools for communication](#)

2020-08-20

49

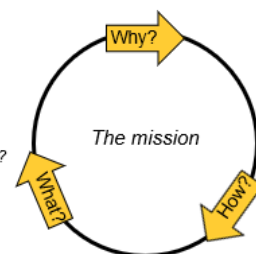
Reflective practice, Module 3

RIV as a method

- Adapted to conditions and purpose.
- Creates a common situational picture and goal.
- Uses the questions **what, why and how** systematically and repeatedly to achieve the purpose and goals of reflection. Takes advantage of new experiences but also functioning routines and thought patterns.

Planning

What should we do?
Why should we do it this way?
How do we translate this into action?



Follow-up

What have we done?
Why did we do what we did?
How do we move forward?



2025-03-26

15

Appendix D

Thematic Summaries of Leadership Program, Police Authority HR Team

Theme	Participant Feedback
Increased organisational awareness	<i>"New insights in the overall governance in relation to my daily operational work, and a broader knowledge of the Police Authority."</i>
Increase in leadership confidence	<i>"I now feel more safe and secure in my leadership."</i> <i>"If I had not had the opportunity to participate, I would probably have stepped back from my managerial position."</i>
Improved communication & listening skills	<i>"I have improved my ability and motivation to have both formal and informal conversations with my employees."</i> <i>"I have become a better listener, and better in giving and receiving feedback."</i> <i>"The importance of reflection and dialogue has become obvious."</i>
Personal & professional growth	<i>"Leadership training has affected me both as a person and a leader."</i> <i>"I was negative to start with, but this has contributed to a completely new attitude to the assignment and the role of a manager."</i> <i>"I have been challenged and have grown in my role."</i> <i>"I have got concrete tools and understanding to motivate myself to change."</i>
Program design	<i>"Three modules over the time of a year are perfect to consolidate a good and long-term learning."</i> <i>"The mix of managerial levels has contributed to a broader understanding of our different challenges."</i> <i>"The training was demanding, with more dialogue and reflection than I was used to."</i>
Psychologically safe learning environment	<i>"A good and secure climate within the group of participants; supportive and eager to exchange experiences and tips, helping each other out."</i> <i>"To reflect together on different subjects and situations creates a collective learning."</i> <i>"To practice in a safe and convenient environment."</i> <i>"Building networks."</i>
Collective mission	<i>"Leadership training has contributed to better conditions in creating consensus according to our mission, and what is expected from me as a leader in the Police Authority."</i> <i>"Leadership training has contributed to a collectively increased ability in my region."</i>

Appendix E

Indicative feedback was also gathered from by the author following the completion of the second module in September 2025 through a short questionnaire (**Appendix C**). Three of the eight participants provided self-rated responses and brief written comments.

On a Likert scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (very much), the participants rated the following:

- 100% of participants believed that 'Trust-Based' Leadership can contribute to reducing burnout &/or psychological injury in emergency services.
- 100% of participants reported that the program influenced how they thought about leadership (scoring 4 or 5).
- 100% reported an increase in confidence about applying 'Trust-based' Leadership principles in their future leadership (scoring 4 or 5).
- 100% felt more aware of the impact of leadership on the psychological health and wellbeing of their colleagues (scoring 4 or 5).
- Two-thirds had already applied 'Trust-based' Leadership concepts in their role.
- Two-thirds reported that the course changed how they supported & listened to others in their team

Thematic Trends

Increases in:

- Active listening skills;
- Team trust;
- Skills to develop and grow team members;
- Confidence in engaging in challenging conversations with team members;
- Team member engagement, accountability, morale, autonomy, self-efficacy;
- Inclusion in decision making and collaboration;
- Support to teams;
- Understanding of team healthy dynamics.

Quotes:

"I always ask for their opinion on issues that concern their business... their voice and opinion are important. They are the ones that know our work the best. I'm only the leader."

"I believe that encouraging participation in different situations and decisions develops everyone in both their role at work as well as a human being."

"...More tools in shaping your group to a more healthy and productive one. By listening you validate your team and this will lead even more opportunities. The benefits to active listening is huge."

Appendix F

Swedish Police Authority demographics

Indicator	Data
Total workforce	39,255 employees
Police officers	Approx. 24,000
Female employees	18,667 (48 %)
Male employees	20,588 (52 %)
Female part time employees	1,487
Male part time employees	932
Workforce trend	Highest staffing level in the organisation's history

Source: Statistics Sweden (SCB⁷³, 2025); Sweden Herald⁷⁴ (2025)

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