

# THE USE OF THE STATUS CONCEPT IN DEVELOPING EFFECTIVE RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN POLICE CHIEFS AND OFFICERS

Laurie L. Bergner

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## ABSTRACT

The concept of status, so well utilized in clinical applications, can also be a powerful tool in developing the kind of positive, constructive relationships with police officers that lead to higher quality and quantity work. This article presents three such applications of the status concept. First, nine policies for treating the officers as positive status individuals are described. Second, ways in which chiefs can become effective status assigners are described. Finally, how chiefs can train their supervisors to be effective status assigners is discussed.

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The position of police chief, by virtue of being highest in the police department's managerial hierarchy, provides a unique opportunity to influence the officers' work. This paper is designed to look at one of the most effective ways of getting the best from the officers: by conferring positive statuses on them. The meaning of this idea and how it influences officers' work will be described below, along with nine policies for treating the officers as individuals of positive status. Then we will describe how the chiefs can become *eligible* to confer positive statuses and how they can teach other supervisors to be accreditors with their officers.

### WHAT IS STATUS?

The concept of status (Ossorio, 1976, 1982), previously utilized mostly in clinical applications (Bergner, 1981, 1982, 1985; Kirsh, 1982; Ossorio, 1976; Schwartz, 1979), can be a useful and powerful tool in developing the kind of positive, constructive relationships with officers that lead to higher quality and quantity work. The work "status" means "position in relation to . . ." A given individual may have a variety of statuses that reflect his relationships to everything in the world, including himself. Any individual can assign a status to another individual, who can then accept or reject that status assignment. Individuals also assign themselves statuses. Assigning a status to another person involves giving him a place in one's world; it follows that certain behaviors express being in that place. Both the assignment and the acceptance or rejection of said assignment have implications for how these individuals *act*.

For example, if Officer Jones assigns his colleague, Officer Smith, the status of "trustworthy", he may be willing to lend him money or to make him privy to certain confidences. If Officer Smith accepts the status of trustworthy, he will be likely to repay the money and keep the confidences. Furthermore, if Officer Jones finds out that Officer Smith has not repaid the money or has broken the confidence, he will be likely to give him the benefit of the doubt, because he might think, "I find this hard to believe; Officer Smith is not *that* kind of person. Maybe something else can explain this". Only if the evidence is overwhelming so that it is no longer possible to support the status of "trustworthy" will Officer Jones change that status assignment.

#### How Does the Conferring and Acceptance of a Given Status Affect Work Production?

If an individual accepts a given status, he acquires an *eligibility* to act on that status; that is, he will see himself as eligible to act on that

status. If given reason, opportunity and the relevant skills, the officer ordinarily will act on that status. Let us suppose that Officer Jones sees himself as having the positive status of "insider". Officer Jones has a *reason* to get ahead, to get recognition; has an *opportunity* when he sees something that needs improvement; and has the *relevant skills* to know what needs to be done to improve a situation. Given all this, if he also sees himself as *eligible* to act on these because he is an insider, he may then do so by offering ideas for improving the traffic division or for better organizing weapons.

Conversely, if he sees himself as having the status of "outsider", he will see himself as *ineligible* to act in significant ways. Then, even if he has the same reasons, opportunity and skills, he may choose *not* to present his ideas on improving the traffic division or weapons organization because "an outsider just doesn't do something like that". He may question the validity of his ideas or whether others will take them seriously. Note that the difference between the statuses "insider" and "outsider" translates directly into a more or less valuable officer.

### THE POLICE CHIEF AS STATUS CONFERRER

The position of police chief provides an opportunity to affect what statuses are conferred on officers, and therefore on what eligibilities they will be likely to act. Put simply, *conferring positive statuses on the officers increases the likelihood that a chief will get the best out of them.*

To place officers in these categories is to be prepared to treat them in these ways. How does this treatment square with the fact that not *all* police officers are positive-status individuals? The policy might be seen in the following way: Like a jury that acts on the policy that individuals are innocent until proven guilty, a chief might take the policy that he will treat police officers as having positive statuses until and unless he observes them to be otherwise.

There is good reason to proceed in this way. The selection process, coupled with graduation from the police academy, selects out high risk and inappropriate candidates. In the absence of further information, it makes sense to treat all new officers as valued members of the force, especially with the knowledge that this treatment gives them the best head start possible. If the skills are there, they will probably act on them; if they don't, then there is good reason to begin to doubt that they *can* act on them. But at least one knows they won't not act because of perceived ineligibility that the chief conferred. It is better to err in this direction than to select out potentially valuable officers.

We can also think of it the other way: If negative statuses are conferred and accepted, the officer may feel depressed, which leads to

hopelessness and loss of energy, negatively affecting work production. Rejection of negative status may produce hostility. While hostility could result in an attitude of "I'll show them I really am good", it could just as likely result in an attitude of getting even, lying down on the job, or undercutting superiors. None of these results in good police work.

This way of thinking is different from *make it hard and seeing who pulls through*. That policy is likely to lose valuable officers, which is a waste of potentially good officers, and of time and money for the department. It is also different from the idea of "babying" the men. The position of initially conferring positive statuses is that this is the best chance of bringing out the best in the officers. It assumes, however, that with additional knowledge the chief will adjust his assessments, confer different statuses on the officers if called for, and act accordingly. Notice that in the policies presented below, calling a spade a spade and acting on negative statuses are important aspects.

### Treating the Officers as Positive Status Individuals

The chief's position must be communicated to his officers. It might be assumed that this would happen automatically, but that is not necessarily true. It is easy to allow old habits of communication to send other messages to the officers, especially in the cynical, sarcastic atmosphere of many police departments. It is incumbent on police chiefs to develop ways of communicating that they see their officers as individuals with positive statuses.

Communicating to the officers that the chief sees them as positive status individuals involves *treating* them in such a manner. Because actions speak louder than words, this involves more than simply complimenting the officers. There are a variety of ways to treat the officers as positive status individuals. Following are nine policies for such treatment. While more could be mentioned, these are ones that are most likely to come up in police work.

1. Treat new officers as valued members of the force. Even new officers who are still under probation can be treated as valuable. They can be treated as responsible police officers, integral members of the department, proud of their work and responsibilities.

Example: Chief Barlow was a new chief, brought in from outside the department. He determined that he would develop new ways of treating the new officers as valuable. First, he attended their graduation from the police academy. He went out of his way to meet each new officer personally, to learn and call them by their names. He solicited ideas from them on how to improve the department, stating that "new officers

have a unique, fresh perspective". He assigned a "buddy" to each new officer, utilizing his best officers for this assignment.

He then worked to make sure that they had every opportunity to learn relevant skills, so that they could become "one of us" as quickly as possible by becoming skilled officers. He provided close supervision with a great deal of detailed feedback, both positive and negative. This was done not with a sense of "Big Brother is watching you", but rather with a sense that "your work is so important that we want to give you the best head start possible". The focus was on help and direction rather than punishment. He also made the position of training officer a very important one. He made sure that he did not fall into the trap of retaining poor officers after probation, and he provided a little party for each officer as he came off probation. This party was an "accreditation ceremony", that is, a way by which one person acts by virtue of his position to confirm another person in his new position in the community. It publicly demonstrated and celebrated the new officer's full acceptance as a full-fledged police officer.

2. Treat the officers as professionals. To see oneself as a "professional" is to be proud of one's profession, to believe that one is competent in his profession, and to see oneself as a representative of his profession. A police officer who sees himself or herself as a professional might see police work as essential in holding the fabric of society together, might be proud of developing ways of thinking critically and analytically regarding crime, and might find himself feeling furious when police officers are referred to as "animals" in public.

Conversely, an officer who does not see himself as a professional might not care if he is seen drunk in public while still dressed in uniform after work, might not be proud of the role his department played in catching a thief, and might not care about developing his competence in picking up clues in a theft. It is easily seen how the status of "professional" affects police officers' work and conduct.

Example: Officer Harmon was suspicious. A pizza delivery boy claimed he'd been robbed of his pizza, but his story didn't make sense. The officer picked up a teenager coming out of the house where the pizza had been originally ordered and, having some reason to suspect him of complicity, conceived the idea of taking him in for questioning under the pretext that he had been drinking while underage, hoping that he would confess while scared. Just then the chief came by and stopped to find out what was happening. The officer took him aside, described the situation without mentioning his plan, and asked the chief, "Do you want me to bring him in for questioning?" The chief thought a minute, and answered, "No, let him go".

Officer Harmon was furious. He believed that he had not been treated as the professional he liked to think he was. Imagine how much more proud this officer would have been if the chief had asked him what he wanted to do and why and then supported and even praised his picking up small but relevant clues in this case. And imagine also how much more motivated Officer Harmon would have been in the future to continue thinking analytically and acting on his conclusions.

3. Treat the officers as allies in a joint effort. Police officers overlook much disagreement and other dissatisfactions when they believe they are all working together and that the chief is really behind them. Unfortunately, in many departments a confrontational atmosphere builds up in which the chief and his officers see each other as enemies instead of allies. Sometimes this happens because of the position the police chief is in, caught between the city council and the officers, who may want different things. Other times it is simply a cyclical pattern in which initially small events give each the impression that the other is not on their side, and they each begin treating each other accordingly.

Treating the officers as allies can take various forms. The chief might fight for their salary, benefits, and training; support them in the face of attacks from outside the department by giving them a fair hearing; and generally do what he can to make the job stimulating and to relieve stress where possible. It is always important that the chief find ways of letting the officers know that he is doing these things for them. False modesty only works against him. Officers are eager to work for such a chief because they know that he is working for them.

Example: Officer Brown had been on the force twelve years. He was cynical, treating all his supervisors as the enemy, and was sarcastic and baiting with his sergeants at roll call. One day, Officer Brown suddenly felt he could not face the day. Immediately after roll call, he got into his squad car and drove home. When he arrived there and saw his wife's surprised face, he suddenly realized what he had done: He had left without permission. Panicked, he returned to the department. There his two sergeants sat down with him and just talked to him and listened. They could see the stress buildup and gave him no negative consequences, nor did the chief when he learned of it. Officer Brown learned to his surprise that his supervisors and the chief were on his side, friends rather than the enemies he had always thought. This incident led to a change in Officer Brown's attitude that, over time, dramatically increased his productivity and his job satisfaction.

It should be noted that if his kind of behavior were to continue, it would have to be met with negative consequences. One of the factors which made it reasonable not to punish this man was that it was a first-time event for a dedicated officer.

4. Treat the officers with respect for their intelligence and common sense. Too often, decisions are made on the assumption that the officers would not understand and respond to a commonsense decision. This tends to lead to decisions that are not common sense either! Generally speaking, when officers are treated as having good judgement, they will recognize that respect, be proud of it, and want to continue earning it.

Example: The town of Scottsdale was right next door to Rolling Hills. There were other, more distant towns, in the area. The Scottsdale department had a rule that anyone who lived outside the city limits could not go home for dinner. Officer McBean was incensed. He lived just over the town limits, closer to the police department than many officers who lived in Scottsdale itself. Working second shift, he wanted to go home for dinner so that he could see his wife and child. The chief supported the existing rule because he believed that if he opened up the rule to include Rolling Hills, other officers who lived in neighboring towns further away would demand the same privilege.

This example demonstrates a lack of respect for the men in that the chief assumed that they could not understand and accept the concept that they could not go too far away from the department for dinner. He assumed a childish competition and jealousy and a lack of common sense. While it is often true that one or two verbal officers might protest this kind of rule if it were opened up, it is also true that the overwhelming majority will not protest it if it makes clear sense and is presented in such a way that the sense it makes is obvious. It is up to the chief to stand up to those few who unreasonably protest and not let them influence him to be unreasonable with everyone else just so that he will not have to deal with them. Expecting reasonable rules to work conveys a respect for the group that is an important message to them.

5. Treat the officers with trust for their integrity. Treating the officers with trust provides incentive for them to continue meriting that trust. There is nothing more degrading for a subordinate than a clear indication that he is not trusted. Of course, this trust should be initially assumed and continued only as long as there is no significant reason not to trust. If trust is broken by repeated acts, it would be foolish to continue trusting. But unless there is reason to see it differently, the general assumption should be that they are good men and women who want to do a good job and who act with integrity.

Example: The Hopedale Police Department had an overtime regulation of one hour. Most of the officers respected the spirit of the regulation and saved up ten minutes here and 15 minutes there, putting in for the hour overtime when the times added up to approximately one hour. A few of the officers took advantage of the regulation and put in for the hour overtime every time they worked ten minutes overtime. Because of

these few officers, the regulation was changed to a 15-minute overtime. The officers were upset. They took this change to mean that the chief did not trust them; this was especially insulting to the vast majority of officers who had never abused the hour overtime regulation. The result was that all the officers began to put in for every five or ten minutes overtime.

Treating the men without trust when most had done nothing to warrant this mistrust was detrimental to relations between the chief and his officers. Being trustworthy is a source of great pride for many officers, and it is essential to treat them as worthy of the trust they have in fact merited.

6. Give the benefit of the doubt. Sometimes a given situation could be interpreted or described in several different ways. All of them fit the facts, but some are more negative than others. In these instances, it is advantageous to choose the description that is most positive. Police officers are familiar with this policy in its opposite form when dealing with suspects in crime, i.e., "once you have good reason to suspect an individual of a crime, it is best to treat evidence in its *least* positive interpretation". But as police officers are not suspects, they should not be treated as individuals already under suspicion.

Example: Officer Norris had to take a six-month leave of absence for emotional stress and drinking. He worked hard during this leave, going regularly to a therapist. He returned to work and did well for the next three months. One day he called in sick. When he returned to work the next morning, he found a note from his chief: "Are you drinking again? If you're having troubles again, come on in. You know you can talk to me."

Although this chief meant this to be supportive, it betrayed his negative thinking about Officer Norris. It gave Officer Norris a clear message that if he took sick days like everyone else in the department, he would be immediately suspect of having further problems. Now he had to go overboard to prove he was as good as everyone else. It meant he was under a constant cloud of suspicion, and it meant he could no longer use his sick day benefits as they were intended to be used.

Notice that in this instance, the chief actually had several options in how he viewed the sick day that Officer Norris took. He could have viewed it as evidence that Officer Norris was drinking again (as he did); or he could have viewed it as indicating that Officer Norris was simply sick that day. Both fit the facts, but there is more advantage in taking the less negative option. If a negative pattern began to appear over time, then it would have been important to recognize that a problem probably existed and to address it. But with three months' good work and good behavior, there is every reason to accept the sick day at face value and



thereby demonstrate trust. Giving the benefit of the doubt would avoid putting that officer under the stress of operating under suspicion.

7. Treat the officers as individuals who deserve to be treated fairly. Even if officers do not like a decision, they are likely to accept it if they believe that it is a fair decision. Fair decisions enhance motivation because the officers know that they will be treated with the same fairness. Conversely, nothing undermines motivation like assuming that we will be treated unfairly. When a chief plays favorites, uses another's ideas without giving him credit, or goes back on promises, his subordinates become resentful and lose motivation. It is far better to be disliked than to be viewed as unfair. While this may sound obvious, it is often less than completely clear what constitutes fairness, as the next example demonstrates.

Example: Officer Allen was a motivated man. In addition to being a good officer, he became fascinated with crime analysis. He requested and received a crime lab kit, and put in much of his own time to becoming somewhat of an expert in that field. At the same time, Officer Smith was getting into trouble on a regular basis for being overly aggressive on the street. A highly desirable job in the crime lab opened up. Feeling the need to get Officer Smith off the street, the chief put him in the crime lab position. Officer Allen was very disappointed. He believed that the job he should have earned for his hard work had been given to Officer Smith for his aggressive, irresponsible behavior.

While one can sympathize with this chief's dilemma regarding the aggressive behavior of Officer Smith, the effect on Officer Allen was very negative. A positive, highly motivated officer became bitter, and his willingness to initiate his own work decreased as he became convinced that he would not be rewarded for his efforts.

8. Treat the officers as individuals whose ideas deserve due consideration. What does it mean to give an officer's ideas "due consideration"? It simply means to give him a fair hearing. It does *not* necessarily mean agreement with him. When an officer knows that what he has to say has been genuinely considered, he will be much more likely to accept the response, even if it is not what he wanted to hear. It makes good sense to give *all* suggestions due consideration, whether they are good ideas or poor ones. Good ideas improve the department and ultimately result in making the chief look better. But even bad ideas ought to be considered and feedback given to the officers about why the ideas were not utilized. This response verifies that the ideas were in fact seriously considered, which demonstrates respect.

Ideas usually come in two forms: (a) suggestions for change and improvement, and (b) complaints. Positive ideas for change are easier to consider because they are not assaultive, as complaints tend to be.

Complaints, on the other hand, are tiresome to hear, and they sometimes seem to focus on areas that are not possible to change. But there are several reasons to treat them seriously. Even if many of the things officers complain about cannot be changed, many of the complaints are, in fact, justified. It conveys respect to concur with justified complaints. Furthermore, complaints, as well as positive suggestions, can provide valuable information about the nature and severity of problems or perceived problems in the department. Sometimes there will be a theme or pattern to them which can tell the alert chief that there is a widely perceived problem about some issue in the department. When complaints are frequent and intense about a matter, it usually behooves the chief to consider that issue carefully.

Frequently the very perception of not being listened to promotes further complaining! Once a man believes he has been heard and taken seriously, that is sometimes enough; he may not need or expect any change to come of it. But when complaints are taken lightly or laughed at as childish, that may provoke an officer to intensify his complaints until he believes he has been taken seriously.

Example: A new police chief hired from outside the department began his job only to be immediately swamped with numerous complaints. It soon became apparent that the men were generally angry because of a history of not being taken seriously by the administration. Over time this had resulted in the current atmosphere of constant complaints and demands for changes. The new chief determined to change this. He took a small but strong demand, that of changing the color of the uniform shirts, and sent a memo to all officers that he would consider this suggestion and get back to them in a few weeks. Three weeks later he had a simplified budget to show the men. The budget showed how much money was allotted to different areas. An explanation pointed out that due to more car accidents than usual, much of the discretionary monies had to be spent on car repair and new cars. The chief noted that he was not willing to give up another item, such as training, for new shirts this year, but that he would consider new shirts next year if the number of accidents decreased. The chief heard no more demands for new shirts, even though there was some grumbling by those few officers who would have preferred new shirts to training.

Notice that although the men did not get what they wanted, they did get a clear response with reasons for how monies were being spent. Rather than feeling dismissed as "complainers", this response demonstrated to them that their demands were being taken seriously. This was the real issue and was more important than receiving new shirts. Tension in the department visibly decreased as the chief continued to use this approach.

9. Support the officers by not supporting unacceptable behavior. Some supervisors believe that support means that you stick up for your officers and protect them from getting into trouble, even if they are clearly wrong. This is not support. In an important sense, it does not treat them with respect because part of respect is holding people responsible for their behavior. It also gives a message to the rest of the department that this behavior is acceptable. This leads to these individuals getting into further trouble down the road because they are not held accountable for this behavior.

Example: Officer Bingham was a hothead. He was likely to dive headfirst into difficult situations, especially if they involved Hispanics. Everyone in the department knew it. One day, he had to be restrained by his sergeant from hitting a Hispanic male without just cause. The sergeant wrote a report on the incident for the chief. When the Chief called Officer Bingham in, his lieutenant went in with him and provided excuses for him. The lieutenant succeeded in getting Officer Bingham off scot free.

Officer Bingham went back out on the street with what was in effect a license to continue his aggressive behavior. He was a menace to citizens, to his fellow officers, and to himself. This incident was not "supportive" to anyone. It increased stress in his fellow officers because they had to face the danger of continuing to work with him, and it caused considerable stress in Officer Bingham because he received no clear messages about how he should change his behavior.

## THE CHIEF AS EFFECTIVE STATUS ASSIGNER

The chief's formal position as highest authority in the department gives him the opportunity to be a significant, effective status assigner for the officers. But this opportunity can be enhanced or lost by the way in which he presents himself to his officers. He must be viewed by his officers in certain ways in order to be accepted by them as eligible to assign them statuses. The most important of the chief's statuses are the following:

1. **Credibility.** The chief must be perceived as believable, an honest and competent status assigner. Such traits as incessant positiveness or negativity, lying, undue tentativeness, or frequently changing decisions lead to a loss of credibility.

Example: Chief Harrington had been hired as a chief from outside a local police department one and a half years ago. When the sergeants examination was held, he had a discretionary ten "chief's points" to give each candidate as part of the total score. Traditionally, these chief's

points were utilized to enable the chief to exercise his knowledge of the candidates regarding who would be a good leader, something difficult to measure on the written and oral test. Chief Harrington gave every candidate five points, stating that he "didn't know the men well enough yet to make such an important decision". The officers were furious. They believed that after one and a half years he did know them well enough, or should know them well enough if he didn't, or should have been able to get that information from their supervisors. They believe that the chief was simply avoiding making a difficult and unpopular decision. He lost credibility with them.

2. Being his "own person". This trait refers to an individual's being free, willing and able to "tell it like it is", whether the information is positive or negative, whether he agrees or disagrees with others, whether he is cooperating or confronting others; and to set self-respecting limits on what the officers will do or not do in relationship to the department and to the chief. Such an individual appears strong, and his positive opinions will be seen as worth considering because he also can give and does give negative opinions.

Example: Chief Brown was hired after a bitter fight for the position of chief. Following his being hired, he leaned heavily on his Assistant Chief, who had also been in contention for the position, for information and opinions about the department. He began to receive information from a variety of sources that the Assistant Chief was publicly undercutting him in front of the officers when he was not present. Chief Brown ignored this information. All the officers knew that the Assistant Chief was undercutting him, and they began to see him as weak for not dealing with the situation.

3. A member in good standing of the community. Only a member in good standing in the community can initiate others into the community. If a chief is not a member in good standing in the department, if he is seen as irrational, unacceptable to the officers, or insignificant, his accreditations will not be effective.

Example: Chief Dearborn was hired from outside a conservative local police department to be their new chief. This chief came in with a bias toward the "social work" aspect of police work, as opposed to the "crime fighting" aspect. To this end, he quickly began to institute a variety of changes and reforms in the department to beef up their work with juvenile delinquents and family disputes, but did nothing about crime. He quickly lost respectability with his officers, who did not agree with or respect his goals.

4. "One who knows the officers". In order for the chief's opinions regarding the officers' statuses to be respected, it must be perceived that

he *knows* the officers. It is obvious that if he does not seem to know them, his opinions regarding them will not be taken as valid. To this end, a chief must make it his business to learn the names and faces of each officer and to have lines of communication in place to give him valid information regarding the work of each. He ought then to comment on this information from time to time, both the good and problematic work performance of the officers, both to show his interest and concern, and to make his knowledge obvious to them.

Example: Chief Butler was hrought in from outside the department. After a year as chief, he still did not know most of the officers by name. He did not know about their family situations or their job specialties. He rarely attended roll call, and never came for the night shift. When he pronounced opinions regarding the officers, they carried little weight.

## TRAINING OTHER SUPERVISORY OFFICERS TO FOLLOW THE POLICIES

The chief is a key status assigner, but the policy of treating officers as positive status individuals can be maximized if it is carried out at all management levels. Supervisory officers at all levels can be significant status assigners, especially because they know so much first-hand about the officers under them. To this end, the chief can encourage his supervisors to do the following:

1. In rating officers for promotion, give high ratings to those who demonstrate the good leadership quality of being accreditors themselves. These are officers who have the qualities mentioned above regarding the chief who is an effective status assigner: credibility, being his own person, being a member in good standing in the community, and knowing other officers. Officers who demonstrate these qualities will have the respect of the other officers and will tend to make good managers.
2. Actively, explicitly encourage and reward the use of these policies.
3. Provide training in the thinking and use of these policies, so that they understand them and how they can be effective in managing officers.
4. Focus part of staff meetings on discussions of significant incidents and events involving the officers. These discussions would focus on analyzing what the problem actually was and whose responsibility it was.
5. Reward good suggestions by supervisors; have them reward good suggestions and good work by officers.

## SUMMARY

This paper was designed to demonstrate how the concepts of status, eligibility, and accreditation can be utilized to help police chiefs develop positive relationships with their subordinates that lead to higher quality and quantity work. To this end, these concepts were defined and applied to police work, with nine policies for treating police officers as positive status individuals. Becoming effective status accreditors and teaching other supervisors how to be accreditors were also discussed.

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