

The Human Effect of “Police Leadership 3.0”: Beyond Rank and Structure

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Abstract: This article explores the human dimension of police leadership within the European context, arguing that effective leadership in law enforcement must transcend hierarchical and rank-based models to engage deeply with values, ethics, identity and relational trust. It contends that human-centred leadership enhances legitimacy, professionalisation, and the lived experience of officers and communities alike. Drawing on contemporary European scholarship and empirical research, the analysis challenges conventional paradigms of police leadership and demonstrates that its human effect emerges when leaders embody shared identity, ethical integrity and a supportive organisational culture. Emphasising the interconnection between leadership education, organisational culture and human relations, the article concludes that the future of police leadership in Europe depends upon its renewal as “Police Leadership 3.0”, a holistic, human-centred paradigm designed to address the complex ethical and operational challenges of modern European policing.

Keywords: police leadership, human dimension, ethics, organisational culture.

INTRODUCTION

In contemporary European policing, the question of how leaders lead has become increasingly critical. Police organisations across Europe are confronted with a convergence of challenges such as evolving and transnational forms of crime, heightened public expectations of legitimacy and transparency, growing demands for accountability, persistent stress and welfare concerns among officers and profound cultural transformations within the service (Fleming, 2006; Edwards, 2018; Silvestri, 2018). Within this complex environment, leadership can no longer depend solely on formal rank or hierarchical authority. Rather, it must prioritise the human dimension, one that recognises the significance of values, ethics, identity and relational trust as integral components of effective police leadership² (Loftus, 2009).

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2 Ethics defines the moral compass of leadership. In policing, where decisions impact lives and liberties,



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This essay explores how leadership grounded in human-centred principles can strengthen legitimacy, enhance professionalisation and improve both organisational performance and officers' lived experiences. The focus lies on the European context, where police systems, though diverse in structure and tradition, share a collective commitment to democratic accountability and human rights. It should be acknowledged that this study is theoretical and interpretive, relying on the existing literature and does not generate new empirical data or fully capture the variation across European policing systems (Hoggett et al., 2019; Kochel & Skogan, 2021).

METHODS

Methodologically, the essay adopts a theoretical and argumentative approach, drawing upon empirical studies on strategic police leadership (Caless & Tong, 2015) and systematic reviews of recent scholarship on police leadership in Europe (Moura et al., 2023). These sources are complemented by a hermeneutic interpretation of policy, educational and ethical frameworks that inform leadership development within European policing. The hermeneutic approach adopted here involved the critical interpretation of key scholarly and policy texts concerning police leadership, ethics and education (Fortin, 2009). The analysis followed a thematic synthesis rather than empirical coding, with the aim of identifying recurring conceptual patterns, normative assumptions, and gaps in the existing literature that inform a coherent human-centred leadership framework. Although this essay employs a theoretical and interpretive lens, future research should aim to empirically validate these propositions through cross-national studies, longitudinal surveys and qualitative fieldwork examining how ethical and relational leadership practices influence legitimacy, well-being and organisational trust across diverse policing systems. Such empirical triangulation would not only substantiate the "human effect" of leadership but also identify measurable indicators of human-centred transformation in contemporary European policing (Patton, 2002).

The essay is structured as follows: first, it discusses leadership beyond hierarchy and rank; second, it examines the ethical and value foundations of human-centred leadership; third, it analyses the role of police education and organisational culture in fostering such leadership; fourth, it considers the broader implications for European policing; and finally, it concludes by reflecting on the need for a holistic, human-centred paradigm capable of addressing the complex challenges facing present-day police leadership.

LEADERSHIP BEYOND HIERARCHY

Traditionally, police leadership has been conceptualised in terms of rank-based authority. Within that closed framework, authority is vested in the commanding officer positioned at the apex of the hierarchy, responsible for issuing orders and exercising control over resources. While such a model retains some relevance, particularly in classic military-style organisations characterised by the sectorial, functional and uncritical execution of tasks,

ethical clarity ensures legitimacy, fairness and public trust. A leader without ethics risks becoming a mere enforcer rather than a guardian of democratic values (Kochel & Skogan, 2021).



it is increasingly insufficient for modern policing contexts where complexity, legal and ethical frames, public scrutiny and organisational change are the norm (Dias & Poiares, 2021). Empirical research across 22 European countries found that strategic police leaders regarded selection, promotion and accountability as key issues, and that their leadership role extended beyond mere command functions (Caless & Tong, 2015). These leaders recognised that interinstitutional cooperation, multinational operations, police diplomacy networks and engagement with diverse communities require collaborative and specialised competencies that foster proximity, trust and exchange (Fernandes, 2024; 2025).

Moreover, a recent systematic review of the literature concluded that “Police Leadership 2.0” requires new characteristics beyond those traditionally associated with rank: adaptability, ethical orientation, relational capacity, trust building and inclusion (Moura et al., 2023). These findings reinforce the argument that leadership in policing must engage the human side, which is to say how leaders connect with those they lead, how they embody the identity of the service, and how they build organisational culture. For example, research in England and Wales showed that when leaders lacked frontline experience, they encountered credibility problems: officers perceived that their leaders did not share a common identity and thus found it harder to follow them (Hoggett et al., 2019). This underlines the point that human factors, like shared experience, identity and trust matter – not just formal authority (Moura et al., 2023).

Thus, leadership that goes “beyond rank and structure” means attending to the human relational dimension of leadership: how leaders communicate, embody values, earn trust, understand their members’ professional realities, and foster engagement rather than obedience. In effect, the human effect of leadership is the quality of the relationships and culture the leader generates, not simply the positional power they hold. This perspective essentially reflects the “new thinking” that 21st-century European police leadership must actively cultivate and consolidate within its ranks (Fernandes, 2024).

ETHICAL AND VALUE FOUNDATIONS OF HUMAN-CENTRED LEADERSHIP

A human-centred approach to police leadership is, fundamentally, ethical in nature, insofar as leaders are responsible not only for achieving operational objectives but also for shaping a culture of accountability, integrity, respect for human rights and responsiveness to community expectations. In the European context, the notion of “good policing” rests upon legitimacy, transparency, and public trust – dimensions that trace back to the values introduced by Sir Robert Peel and that depend on leaders capable of embodying robust ethical standards rather than merely enforcing rules in a mechanical and impersonal manner³ (Hoggett et al., 2019). It is the responsibility of police leaders to introduce and implement strategically grounded ethical frameworks. This means leading by example, with humanism, ethics and integrity. More significantly still, these professionals are encouraged to assume, in metaphorical terms, the role of “warriors” of ethics and integrity, actively engaging in the promotion and safeguarding of moral responsibility within the scope of their professional practice (De Sousa et al., 2012).

³ Ethical education equips officers to act transparently, fairly and responsibly. This builds public confidence and reinforces the idea that police are part of the community, not above it. Legitimacy stems from consent, not coercion (Hoggett et al., 2019).



Ethics and values are part of the human dimension of leadership because they reflect the leader's sense of relational responsibility to colleagues, to the public and to the profession (Arendt, 2003). When leaders act purely from command or bureaucratic logic, they may win compliance, but not commitment. The latter emerges when officers feel seen, respected and guided by someone who shares their professional identity and values. The social identity perspective in policing leadership research shows how shared identity increases trust and followership (Hoggett et al., 2019).

In the European background, where policing systems vary (e.g., Napoleonic vs. Anglo-Saxon models) and where democratic accountability is emphasised, the value dimension of leadership is critical (Fleming, 2006; Caless & Tong, 2015; Edwards, 2018). It is not enough to hold a high rank. Leaders must model the values they expect, which is to say accountability, fairness, respect, professionalism. By doing so they embed a human-centred culture capable of adapting to change, maintaining legitimacy and supporting officers in a complex environment (Loftus, 2009; Kochel & Skogan, 2021; Hoggett et al., 2019).

HUMAN-CENTRED POLICE EDUCATION, IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Leading human-centred policing requires more than a good leader. It demands a supportive culture and education that develop relational capacities, ethical awareness and human-centred values. In Europe, reforms in police education illustrate this shift. For example, in the Republic of Ireland, reforms in training and education aimed at enhancing professional legitimacy and aligning with community expectations show how education is a vehicle for human-centred policing (Kochel & Skogan, 2021; Thompson & Payne, 2019). Similarly, the politics of higher police education in Norway, Finland and North Rhine-Westphalia revealed that efforts to raise education levels were propelled not only by academic ambition but also by a changing social context and citizen-police relations (Terpstra & Schaap, 2021). An effort is currently underway in Portugal to promote coordinated and comprehensive articulation between the basic training of police constables, the polytechnic education of police sergeants and the higher education of senior police officers, with the aim of harmonising the three professional tiers in the service of public security. The reconfiguration of leadership development, educational frameworks and organisational culture can serve as a central means of fostering character formation, enhancing reflective practice and embedding a human-rights-based *ethos* within professional policing⁴ (Almeida & Pinho, 2020).

The view emerges from the literature that education programmes in policing should not simply impart technical knowledge but cultivate values, ethical reflection, relational skills and leadership identity. A recent paper on integrating sustainable leadership frameworks into police education in Norway emphasises agency theory, epistemic justice and Scandinavian values of inclusivity and reflection (Fagerland & Bergh, 2025). This human-centred approach recognises that the “human effect” of leadership is built through the education and socialisation of officers into a culture where leadership is relational, ethical and contextually responsive.

⁴ Police educators shape not only knowledge but character. Through modelling ethical behaviour, facilitating critical reflection and integrating human rights into training, they cultivate moral reasoning and empathy. By doing so, their influence extends beyond the classroom into the culture of policing.



Organisational culture plays a significant role in enabling or inhibiting human-centred leadership. Leaders must attend not only to their own practices but to the climate they create. Open communication, psychological safety, recognition of human impacts and shared decision-making are mandatory. When culture remains rigid, hierarchical and closed, the human effect suffers. And so, trust erodes, professional morale diminishes and legitimacy suffers⁵ (Kochel & Skogan, 2021). Therefore, human-centred police leadership in Europe is as much about shaping culture and education as it is about an individual leader attributes.

DISCUSSION

The analysis above has brought together three interrelated dimensions: leadership beyond hierarchy, the ethical and value-based foundations of policing, and the central role of education and organisational culture in enabling human-centred leadership. These dimensions converge in shaping what may be termed the human effect of police leadership within the European context (Loftus, 2009). From this synthesis, several key implications emerge.

First, the selection and preparation of leaders in European police organisations must prioritise relational, ethical and human-focused capacities alongside operational and managerial competencies. Empirical evidence indicates that strategic police leaders across Europe identify selection, promotion, and accountability as persistent challenges (Caless & Tong, 2015; Silvestri, 2018). Consequently, recruitment and development processes should integrate value-based criteria, promote identity awareness, and strengthen interpersonal and communicative skills that foster trust and legitimacy (Kochel & Skogan, 2021).

Second, while rank and structure remain organisationally necessary, they are insufficient to ensure effective leadership. Formal authority must be complemented by human-centred practices that reflect empathy, authenticity, and moral integrity (Kant, 1993; Glover, 2001). Leaders who understand the lived experiences of their officers, who listen, engage and build relational trust, are better equipped to manage institutional change, drive innovation and uphold legitimacy within and beyond the organisation⁶ (Bauman & May, 2001; Hoggett et al., 2019).

Third, education and continuous professional development are essential components of human-centred police leadership. Evidence from European reforms demonstrates that elevating educational standards and embedding ethical and relational content within training curricula contribute directly to the cultivation of reflective and responsible leadership (Terpstra & Schaap, 2021). Leadership education must therefore be regarded not as an

5 The ethical framework underpinning this discussion draws on three complementary philosophical traditions: Aristotle's concept of *phronesis*, which emphasises moral discernment and virtue in context-sensitive decision-making; Kant's categorical imperative, which upholds universal moral law, integrity, and rational duty; and Levinas' ethics of responsibility, which situates morality in the primordial obligation to the Other. Together, these perspectives form a coherent, human-centred paradigm for policing that balances prudence, duty and relational responsibility (Levinas, 1969; Kant, 1993; Aristotle, 2009).

6 Bauman & May (2001) argue that thinking sociologically involves understanding how individual experiences are shaped by broader social structures, relationships and historical contexts. They emphasise the importance of reflexivity, encouraging individuals to see the connection between personal troubles and public issues, thereby fostering critical awareness of society's dynamics. Ultimately, they present sociology as a moral and interpretive practice, aimed at questioning taken-for-granted assumptions and promoting a more humane, responsible understanding of social life.



ancillary element but as a cardinal, continuous and integral aspect of the professional trajectory of police officers.

Table 1. *Six Maxims for Ethical Police Education and Leadership*

Maxim	Core Principle	Key Implication	Practical Focus
1. Leadership is a Moral Practice, not (only) a Managerial Function	Leadership legitimacy derives from ethical presence and relational integrity, not formal authority.	Leadership should be understood as a moral responsibility rather than a bureaucratic function.	Cultivating ethical conduct, empathy and authenticity in leadership training and evaluation.
2. Police Education Must Cultivate Character before Competence	Moral reasoning and civic responsibility precede technical proficiency.	Ethical formation must underpin all aspects of professional education.	Integrating ethics, empathy and moral reflection into police curricula and professional standards.
3. Human Rights Are the Foundation of Police Training	Human rights are central to democratic policing and public legitimacy.	Training must be rooted in the protection of dignity, equality and justice.	Embedding human rights frameworks and case-based reflection into every stage of police education.
4. Transformational Leadership Begins with Ethical Self-Awareness	Ethical leadership is inseparable from self-knowledge, reflection and emotional intelligence.	Leaders must critically examine their values, biases and emotional responses.	Incorporating reflective practice, emotional intelligence development and ethics-based supervision in leadership programmes.
5. The Educator as Moral Architect of Police Legitimacy	Educators shape the ethical culture of policing through example and mentorship.	The educator's influence extends beyond instruction to shaping public trust and legitimacy.	Promoting mentorship, ethical modelling and value-driven curriculum design within police academies and training institutions.
6. Proximity and Transparency as Cornerstones of Public Trust	Ethical policing relies on community connection and institutional openness.	Trust is built through transparency, accountability and democratic engagement.	Fostering community partnerships, participatory policing models and open communication practices.

Source: Author's own elaboration.



Fourth, organisational culture remains a decisive factor in enabling or constraining ethical leadership. Even the most capable leaders will struggle to enact meaningful change if the prevailing culture resists relational, inclusive and human-centred approaches. Leaders must thus act as architects of organisational culture, modelling core values, promoting psychological safety and fostering openness and collaboration across hierarchical boundaries. Nonetheless, it is essential to recognise that human-centred leadership operates within institutional, political and structural constraints that can limit the scope of ethical transformation. European police organisations vary considerably in their legal frameworks, governance models and degrees of autonomy, from centralised gendarmerie systems to community-oriented policing structures. Consequently, leadership innovation must remain context-sensitive, adapting to organisational realities while striving to embed universal ethical principles within diverse institutional environments.

Finally, the human lens of leadership exerts a direct influence on institutional legitimacy. In democratic Western societies, public trust and internal morale depend not only on operational efficiency but also on the perceived humanity, fairness and ethical orientation of policing institutions. Leadership that fully embraces the human dimension can bridge the persistent gap between bureaucratic imperatives and the lived realities of both officers and the communities they serve.

The preceding analyses have also made it possible to identify and articulate six maxims for ethical police education and leadership, as presented in Table 1. These axioms encapsulate the normative and practical foundations of human-centred leadership by aligning moral responsibility, educational purpose and organisational ethics (Kant, 1993; Glover, 2001; Arendt, 2003). Together, they provide a coherent framework for strengthening leadership development within the broader landscape of contemporary European policing.

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this essay has argued that the future of police leadership in democratic Europe requires a shift beyond narrowly hierarchical understandings of authority towards approaches that place greater emphasis on relational, ethical and human-centred capacities. While such principles cannot replace the need for clear operational command, they offer an essential counterbalance to traditional models by grounding leadership in shared identity, trust and moral integrity (Kant, 1993; Glover, 2001; Arendt, 2003). The diversity of European policing systems and the varied pressures under which they operate mean that human-centred leadership cannot be applied uniformly; nevertheless, it provides a coherent framework for strengthening professionalism, legitimacy and officer well-being where conditions permit⁷ (Loftus, 2009; Kochel & Skogan, 2021).

Reforms in leadership development, education, and organisational culture can contribute to these aims, although their effectiveness depends on wider structural, political and institutional factors that shape what leaders are able to do in practice. Prioritising ethical

⁷ The Portuguese policing model integrates human rights, emotional intelligence and community proximity as core principles for enhancing public security. Exemplified by the “PSP + Happier”, initiative under the Happiness Development Plan (HDP), this approach promotes officer well-being and the human dimension of policing. By embedding emotional intelligence, stress management and reflective practice within police education, it also supports resilience, mitigates burnout and sustains ethical behaviour and leadership.



integrity, relational competence and trust-building should therefore be understood not as a panacea but as a strategically valuable transformational orientation that complements operational competencies⁸ (Burns, 1978; Bass & Riggio, 2006; Bass & Bass, 2008).

As Sinek (2014) and Kouzes & Posner (2017) reminded us, leadership carries profound ethical responsibilities, yet its enactment also depends on context, constraints and organisational realities. A balanced, human-centred conception of leadership, attentive both to moral purpose and to institutional complexity, should thus guide the continuing evolution of policing in Europe.

Ultimately, the future of European policing will depend not only on embracing human-centred principles but also on immediate strategic action: selecting and promoting leaders for ethical integrity and relational competence; embedding reflective practice and human-rights frameworks into education; auditing and adapting organisational culture to foster openness and psychological safety; strengthening feedback and accountability mechanisms; and aligning all leadership messaging with the values of trust, transparency and professional legitimacy (Fleming, 2006; Edwards, 2018; Kochel & Skogan, 2021). Only by translating these principles into concrete and sustained practice can policing move beyond rhetorical commitment and genuinely place humanity at the heart of professional leadership.

This renovation represents the emergence of “Police Leadership 3.0”, a model characterised by ethical integrity, relational intelligence and a truly human-centred *ethos* in the service of democratic security. While the proposed model challenges traditional command-and-control paradigms, it should also be examined in dialogue with alternative frameworks from critical and post-structural leadership studies, which interrogate the dynamics of power, institutional authority and performativity in organisational life (Grint, 2010; Alvesson & Spicer, 2012; Silvestri, 2018). Such engagement enriches the theoretical robustness of “Police Leadership 3.0”, situating it within broader academic debates on leadership, governance and ethical responsibility within complex democratic and bureaucratic systems.

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⁸ In short, the transformational leadership process in policing involves inspiring officers to serve with integrity, fostering a shared vision of justice and prioritising human dignity. It moves beyond command to connection, encouraging personal growth and ethical accountability (Burns, 1978; Bass & Riggio, 2006). According to Bass & Bass (2008), leadership is a multifaceted process that integrates individual traits, behaviours and organisational contexts, being influenced by both situational factors and personal characteristics. The authors emphasise the transformational leadership model, which inspires and motivates followers to transcend personal interests in pursuit of collective goals, in contrast to transactional approaches grounded in rewards and control.



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