

Analyzing Leadership and Management Styles:

An Interview with Honolulu Police Chief Susan Ballard

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After joining the Honolulu Police Department (HPD) in 1985, Susan Ballard rose through the ranks, serving in several divisions at all levels from officer to major before being appointed as 11th Chief of Police in November of 2017. Her leadership definition, “getting things done through others versus doing them yourself,”¹ is the type of influence-based description that Northouse (2018) explains was typical in the 1980s.

Chief Ballard sees a distinction between management and leadership, explaining the difference much as Kotter (2013) did with his comparison between “processes” and “vision”. Ballard describes management and leadership as, “Two totally different terms. Management to me is much easier. It’s basically just getting things done that are given to you. [...] Leadership is more of the big picture. You’re looking down the road to see where you want to go, and you need to figure out what’s the best way to get there using the resources you have, guiding them to help you get to the place you need to go.”

In the early months of her nearly 4-year tenure, the community praised Ballard as being positive and influential. Headlines such as “Honolulu Police Commission Hands High Marks To Chief in 2018 Evaluation” (Hawaii Public Radio, 2019) were typical. Ballard set out to reform a department rocked by scandal after its previous chief was indicted (and later convicted) of federal conspiracy charges.

Above all, Ballard details the importance of ‘authenticity in her leadership style, saying, “You’ve got to be yourself. If you try to be someone that you’re not, it just won’t

¹ Unless otherwise noted, the quotations attributed to Chief Ballard throughout are from an interview I conducted with her on May 20, 2021, in her office at the HPD Headquarters.

work.” However, she is careful to distinguish her own needs as coming “last” after “the mission of the police department [and] what is good for the officers.”

Gardner (1990) puts significant value on trust in an organization. Likewise, Ballard lists “trust” near the top of the list of leadership attributes that she sees in herself and values in mid- and command-level supervisors. “One of the big things is also trust. You have to be able to trust people to do the right things because, in our job, it’s very independent.” She recognizes the lack of trust as a “problem [that] needs to be addressed.”

Chief Ballard stresses being “direct” with supervisors, subordinates, and the community, especially when giving instructions and guidance to the department. “You have to say what you mean because if you beat around the bush, they may not be interpreting what it is that you’re trying to get across.” This description bears some similarity to the leadership principle, “Develop a Sense of Responsibility Among your Subordinates,” as described by the United States Marine Corps (2021).

Ballard describes having worked for “a lot of different people” throughout her career, and is clear that she believes leadership is not necessarily tied to rank structure. She also emphasized that people can gain experience and insight from each encounter, developing their leadership abilities. “There’s nothing wrong with having a bad supervisor because you learn. [...] You take all these things, whether it’s a good supervisor or a bad supervisor, and you adopt your style based on what works for you.”

Despite her lofty goals and early successes, this past year has been an incredibly challenging one for Ballard. The news media and Honolulu Police

Commission (HPC) have become increasingly critical. Public pressure over federally-funded expenditures has led to investigative audits by the United States Treasury and the City and County of Honolulu (Kawano, 2021). Headlines have screamed, “Police Commission Slams Chief For Leadership Failures, Puts Her on Improvement Plan” (Jedra, 2021). Facing mounting criticism, Ballard announced her retirement, effective June 1, 2021, citing a lack of trust and support from the HPC (Star Advertiser, 2021).

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March, coupled with the increase in racial tensions following the death of George Floyd in May 2020, threw law enforcement around the nation off-script. Ballard lost track of her stated leadership ideals of authenticity, trust, directness, and growth in the months that followed. Instead, she focused on managing one crisis after another, ultimately leading to her retirement. Perhaps Ballard could have weathered the storm and kept the HPD on track towards transparency and collaboration if she remained faithful to the leadership traits and values she described.

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