

Whether You're A Police Chief or a Fire Chief Switching From a White Shirt: What's the Big Deal



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Introduction

So what is the big deal about white shirts? Apparently a lot if you read up on the history of white shirts. From its beginning more than a century ago as a sign of status, the white shirt has had a host of important reasons for being. In fact, such is the history of the white shirt that at least one academic has done an entire thesis on the matter. He concludes by arguing that the historical and cultural significance of the formal white shirt, for both women and men, gives it iconic status (Brough, 2013). Today, as Palmer (2012) notes in an article on the history of the white shirt, “the white shirt remains the epitome of style and good taste.”

Those points aside, there is some discussion these days about doing away with the white shirt as part of the uniform worn by fire and police chiefs. Indeed, the switch away has already happened with respect to many police and fire departments in North America. They have made the switch from white to black or dark blue shirts and have extended it to include all officers holding a management rank. The belief here is that chiefs and their fellow managers will be more accepted or respected if they look like the rank and file.

No doubt switching shirt color is a sincere leadership effort by the chiefs to assure the rank and file that management is really part of the team. It could also be part of a strategic maneuver to assist a new leader transitioning from peer to manager. That is, it is a symbolic gesture on the part of chiefs to help break down the “we/they” characterization that sometimes reflects the relationship between the rank and file and the so-called “white shirts” who make up management.

The question, however, is whether the switch away from white shirts a good move, despite the good intentions of the chiefs. It may be that there are even better reasons to stay with white shirts. With that in mind, the purpose of this paper is to visit some reasons why chiefs might want to re-think a move away from tradition.

The Power of the Uniform

There is no question that a uniform sends a powerful message. Uniforms serve as a mental shortcut to people indicating that the individual wearing one belongs to a group with special responsibilities. This is both important and useful because it makes such things as playing and watching team sports easier, it makes businesses and their employees easier to identify, and it helps us to recognize someone’s authority and work responsibility without requiring lengthy explanations. The uniform works because we reflexively associate uniforms with a particular activity or profession. The connection is so strong that, often, we cannot imagine one without the other. Such is the case, for example, with soldiers, airline captains, judges, firefighters, paramedics, and police officers. While there may only be slight differences in uniform style depending on the organization for these individuals work, the long-standing commonality in the uniforms of each profession still causes an instantaneous association. Police officers are a good case in point. Police officers worldwide wear

different uniforms, yet all of us instantly know an officer when we see one. The imagery is very powerful and very helpful.

It is easy to appreciate that uniforms serve the important purpose of providing an instant identity for people who need to be identified instantly. But, uniforms are more than just that. If that were their only purpose, it would not matter what they looked like. Organizations would only have to make sure that they were functional in terms of work demands and that they didn't change too much over time so as not to lose their identity power. Organizations want their uniforms to go beyond making public identification easier. They also want them to serve as a powerful message in other respects. They want them to be distinctive; they want them to be an expression of a brand; they may want them to say something about status. They may also want them to say something about competence, trust, and credibility. Organizations—particularly those responsible for social control— sometimes want uniforms to say something about the wearer's power and authority. They may further want them to be symbolic of justice and honor. They will want the wearer to be instilled with a sense of pride and belonging. All of these concerns are why the look of a uniform matters.

As Professor Richard Johnson, one of the most noted researchers on police uniforms has stated, "The uniform of a police officer has been found to have a profound psychological impact on those who view it. Research has also suggested that even slight alterations to the style of the uniform will change how citizens will perceive the officer" (Johnson, 2005). Marshall (2014) echoes this in his review of the history of American police uniforms and why they matter: "Indeed, the history of police uniforms is an illustrative tale of the history of American policing. What we've asked—and allowed—police officers to wear throughout history has influenced what we've expected of them, how we feel about them, and how they feel about themselves." Some observers go further. For example, in writing about the power of the police officer uniform, De Camargo (2015) states, "The highly recognizable and iconic nature of the police uniform is arguably the most powerful tool of the police trade."

The Issue of Uniform Shirt Colour

Given the paucity of conclusive research related to police officers' and, especially, firefighters' uniforms overall, it should not be surprising that there is little research on how shirt color fits into the mix. But, this has not stopped some departments from changing shirt colors or, at least, from thinking that there may be value in doing so. For instance, in 1996, the Baltimore County Police, following a trend among other police departments in the United States, tore the white shirt off its officers' uniforms and replaced them with dark blue shirts. This was not based on evidence showing the value of the move, but rather, based on the belief that rank and file officers would be less of a target at night and, hence, safer (Antonelli, 1996). Just prior to that, the New York Police Department also switched the shirt color of its officers' uniforms from light blue to navy blue. The rationale in that case, as articulated by Police Commission Bill Bratton, was that the uniform change would "send a message to the public of authority, competence, and professionalism, while making our officers look trimmer and cleaner" (Krauss, 1994). More recently in 2014, the Elko Police Department in Nevada traded the white shirts of its patrol officers for a navy blue shirt—noting in its annual report that the

new shirt “increased the professional appearance of the officers as well as their morale” (Elko Police Department, 2015).

The switch from white to dark shirts has also occurred in many police departments across the United Kingdom, although not all departments embraced the idea. Lamenting the switch and speaking against the option for the London Metropolitan Police, Commissioner Sir Paul Stephenson stated, “It is one of the reasons why I am very passionate about continuing to make sure Met officers look like Met officers in white shirts, and not awfully keen on the move in other areas of the country towards different sorts of uniforms that look more paramilitary” (Wright, 2011). He was not alone. At the same time a spokesperson for the Association of Police Chiefs Officers was quoted as saying, “I am not in favour of black shirts because the political connotations. It gives the wrong impression, which we should try to avoid where possible” (Wright, 2011).

Again, this movement was not the result of any firm research. Rather, the switches were made on supposition that a change in color would make for a more effective police officer. Likely, any research on shirt color would not have been significant anyway given what we know about the power of the uniform overall. The matter is complicated because, while psychologists have enlightened us on some effects of color, the study of color is still in its infancy (Cherry, 2015). Ultimately, we might have personal leanings on the merit of one shirt color over another, but the paucity of research still leaves us guessing as to the exact impact.

That said, the white shirt as part of a uniform does have some supporting evidence. For example, adopting the tone of the London Metropolitan Police and making reference to supporting research, the Norfolk Constabulary in the UK made a decision in 2012 to switch away from the black shirt to the traditional UK police look. A spokesperson for the department is quoted as saying that, “The white shirt sees the return to the traditional image of British policing . . . independent academic research has identified the public regard for the time-honored image of police officers as more professional, honest, and approachable” (BBC News, 2012). Some research supports the benefit of a light shirt as a part of the uniform. Specifically, Johnson (2005) notes, there is research showing that a police uniform that is half dark (e.g., light colored shirt), rather than all blue or black results in higher ratings of warmth and friendliness and, hence, is better messaging.

White Shirts for Police and Fire Chiefs

Based on what we have noted so far with respect to the literature on police officer uniforms, it might be tempting to simply conclude that without compelling research findings, our best guess is that shirt color is irrelevant. We can also note that other aspects of chiefs’ uniforms provide a distinction from that of the rank and file, such items as braid on their hats and pips, stripes and brass on their shoulders. Perhaps those distinctions are enough.

However, there still may be an argument that white shirts are important since chiefs have day-to-day responsibilities requiring them to interact with others than the rank and file. Chiefs spend much of their time in meetings and with numerous senior government officials, elected officials, and other

stakeholders who are likely to be dressed in business attire. It is more important, therefore, that as senior executives chiefs look more formal and business-like. Chiefs are the lead representatives of their agencies and they are expected to set a tone of professionalism for their rank and file. Furthermore, one could argue that it shows more respect for stakeholders and colleagues if they were dressed appropriately. With this in mind, whatever one thinks about shirt color, it is culturally accepted that a white shirt within a dark blue or black uniform presents a more formal or “dressed up” look than a dark blue or black shirt with the same uniform.

Another argument in favor of encouraging chiefs to wear white shirts is that they should readily be seen by the public as different from the rank and file, because they *are* different. That is, *on behalf of the communities they serve*, they are entrusted with the responsibility of ensuring that rank and file individually and collectively go about their duties in ways that meet the highest ethical and professional standards, ways that facilitates accountability, ways that respect the need to be efficient and effective, and in ways that are in the public interest. In effect chiefs have a primary responsibility to the communities they serve. To that extent, they represent their community as much as the departments they lead and the public needs to see, know, and believe this. When the public cannot perceive a difference between the chief and the rank and file, we would expect citizens to have less trust and confidence in the department to be accountable when concerns are raised. In the fire department, the rank and file work in a team unit, with a team supervisor who also has responsibility for ethics, accountability and professional standards. These supervisors typically have the rank as a captain or lieutenant and are known as fire officers. Like chief officers, fire officers wear a light color shirt (light blue) as part of their uniform in order to distinguish them among their crew of firefighters, who wear dark navy blue shirts, as the team leader. This also allows the public to perceive a difference between the fire officer and firefighter. Thus, indicating to a citizen who is best to approach for answers when a question needs to be asked.

A further matter deserving consideration is why chiefs have chosen to switch from white shirts in the first instance. This brings us to the issue of the switch being a leadership move. What comes to mind in this regard is whether a chief should make such a move if they are already a good leader. While it is commendable that chiefs want the rank and file they lead to feel that they are supportive and respectful of them, there are many more significant and tangible ways for chiefs to do this. Whether a chief is a good leader, respected by his fellow officers, is fundamentally about his or her leadership attributes overall. A change in shirt color does not change one’s leadership ability. This is the case for any chief with any significant tenure. With time, serving rank and file come not to see the chief as just a uniform; they look beyond that to the actions and behavior of the individual wearing it.

We can consider other potential negative effects on leadership due to switching away from white shirts. If the initial goal for switching is to gain acceptance or respect from the rank and file, then the contrary may also manifest itself over time. By viewing the chief as their equal, some in the rank and file may eventually challenge the chief’s leadership or create an environment where informal leaders are seen as the de facto leaders of the department. A chief’s leadership ability must evolve and grow with the role and its responsibilities. Changing the shirt color to assimilate with rank and file, may be

well intentioned, but it has risks over the longer term. Symbols like shirt color that identify the chief as the team leader can instill a sense of ownership with the role. Effective leaders embrace their uniform as a symbol of status that instills pride for the rank and shows an assumption of responsibility.

Summary

There is no question, whether it is a police officer or fire fighter, that the uniform is important. It is laden with many assumptions about what the person wearing it does and represents. It is especially important because the public commonly does not know much else about the person wearing the uniform. We also know that, regardless of color and style, the officer's uniform needs to convey a message of importance, professionalism, authority, trust, and confidence.

What we do not know with any level of certainty is what the ideal color and style of uniform is to send the best message. Furthermore, the issue of color and style is likely to continue to be a noisy one since it is so much influenced by culture, history, and current fashion trends. It will also continue to be noisy because of the color and style of ancillary equipment, such as duty belts, bulletproof vests, holsters, weapons, and so on. But, in the absence of definitive research, we know that there is nothing noticeably at odds with the positive message of a light colored shirt as part of a dark colored uniform. This is a reflection of tradition; it is a reflection of respectful formal and business attire. Similarly, there are reasons to believe that among light shirts, white brings some distinct advantages.

As for the matter of whether police and fire chiefs should switch from white shirts to the dark blue or black shirts typical of the uniforms of line file officers, we have tried to make the point that they should not do so. We have argued that because chiefs spend a considerable amount of their time with stakeholders in formal settings, they should wear a culturally acceptable white shirt with their uniform. We have also argued that their uniform should be distinctly different from that of the line officers because the public needs to recognize them as being different from rank and file officers. Finally, we have argued that chiefs who have moved to wearing the same dark uniform shirt as regular constables and firefighters are overrating the leadership merits of such a switch.

A solution, as one police leader suggested to us, might be for chiefs to wear white shirts as part of their uniform on days when they are in meetings and at functions outside the department, and wear their dark shirts when working inside the department only. This approach might help some chiefs with their leadership concerns. But, that only holds true if one believes that the "white shirt" has come to symbolize negativity in management. For the present, one police department that apparently does not think so is the Indianapolis Police Department. It has just decided to have its command staff switch from the blue shirts worn by regular officers, to white shirts. As the department described it, they made the move as part of their constant effort to ensure "accountability, professionalism, and transparency . . . at the front of our day-to-day activities" (Claire/CNN, 2015).

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