

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

**Police Chiefs and Elected Officials:
Communicating to Establish Effective Working Relationships**

**An Administrative Research Paper
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ABSTRACT

The topic addressed by this administrative research paper will be how police chiefs and elected officials can communicate to establish effective working relationships. The issue of concern is the effects that both negative and positive communication have on a police chief's ability to lead his department effectively. Information was gathered on this issue through review of literature in books, journals, and magazine articles, as well as a questionnaire sent to both police chiefs and elected officials. The research indicates that any police chief can successfully develop and nurture communication techniques that will improve his relationship with the elected city council persons he serves under. A police chief using the information presented in this paper can indeed enhance his job performance and increase the effectiveness of his department through improving his relationships with those he serves under.

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INTRODUCTION

Police chiefs throughout the country are appointed to serve in municipalities where persons are elected to oversee the total city operations. The elected officials serve the same constituents as the chiefs, but often have a somewhat different set of expectations than those of the police chiefs. The relationship between the two can have a profound effect on the quality of service police departments provide.

This research paper will address the direct link between the quality of communication between elected officials, police chiefs, and the level of service police departments are able to provide. Although elected officials normally do not oversee the daily operations of the police function, they sometimes form their own opinions of how those departments should be managed. Establishing positive relationships with them can go a long way in gaining support for the chief and his or her department. On the other hand, a negative relationship with an elected official can detract from many positive accomplishments.

One of the goals of this research project is to identify methods for police chiefs to both establish and maintain positive relationships with elected city officials. The basic question of the research will be, "What effect do relationships with elected officials have on a police chief's ability to lead his or her department effectively?" The paper will also examine the effects of negative relationships.

Several methods of inquiry will be used during this research. Journals, books, other written articles on this subject will be utilized as resources. In addition, written surveys and/or interviews will be obtained from both police chiefs and elected city

council persons. It is believed this will provide valuable feedback to the writer in his quest to obtain a cross-section of opinion from both sides of the issue.

It is anticipated that research will show the expectations of both groups have many similarities, as well as some notable differences. The research should also identify communication practices that have positive or negative impacts on the relationship between a police chief and elected officials. Finally, the research will hopefully identify the most utilized and effective strategies.

Identifying what works and what does not work will be beneficial to police chiefs in managing their departments more effectively. Information will be provided to help police chiefs understand that healthy relationships with elected city council persons can only help improve service to the citizens they all serve. Examples of proven methods will provide tools which can assist police chiefs in gaining positive support from the elected officials in their respective communities.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Research into the subject of communication between police chiefs and elected officials is relatively accessible. One of the basic elements discussed is the fact that police chiefs are usually appointed to serve at the pleasure of elected officials such as city council persons. On the one hand, cities with a strong city manager form of government may provide some level of insulation between the police chief and the city council. On the other hand, the chief in a strong mayor city usually has more interaction with elected officials. (Cordner & Sheehan, 1989). One school of thought is that governing authorities, although elected by the people, actually receive their authority

from God. (Holy Bible, 1982). The fact is that police chiefs do not get to personally choose the elected officials they end up working for. (Souryal, 1977). The job of police chief brings with it many duties. An ever-changing political environment creates demands on both the chief and the elected officials of the city. One responsibility is to work constructively with one another. (Garmire, 1982). Relationships will be established as the two sides begin to interact with one another. The police chief needs to carefully develop his relationship with the city council. On the one hand, the elected official's concerns are important. On the other hand, non-legitimate concerns may eventually interfere with the police chief's ability to do job. Whether the interactions are positive or negative, the police chief must deal with them. (Cordner & Sheehan, 1989).

In the study of communication between police chiefs and city council persons, it should be noted that they share the belief that they both serve the public interest. (Arnold, Becker & Keller, 1983). Communication between the two sides should be viewed as a process involving the exchange of information and feedback. (Swanson & Territo, 1983). Communication can be accomplished in various ways. It can be personal (person to person), written, or in a public setting such as the council meeting. The method should be chosen dependent on the amount, type, and importance of the message to be shared.

When people talk to each other face to face, the communication involves more than just words. They have the opportunity to pick up on non-verbal signals, or body language, for a more complete process. Personal communication also allows for the chance to ask questions and get immediate answers on unclear information or issues. (Holden, 1994). This type of communication can be effective for the police chief with

the proper skills. It can be on a variety of topics such as day to day issues, special topics, and approaching agenda items. Personal communication is a great opportunity to discuss the topic thoroughly. Even so, the chief and the elected city council person may not always agree on issues or solutions. This does not necessarily indicate poor communication. It may simply be a disagreement in philosophy or concept. (McLaren & Wilson, 1977).

Written communication is often essential in the relationship between police chiefs and elected city council persons. One example would be annual reports to the city council. (Lynch, McBride & Thibault, 1985). These annual reports can be on various subjects such as UCR statistics, accident information, and racial profiling. City council agenda items also require written communication. Often times, support data is necessary to clearly explain what is stated briefly in an agenda request. This is an important way of providing the facts necessary for the city council person to make an informed decision. It is of the utmost importance to give the same information to council members in a timely manner. (Arnold, et al., 1983). We are a resource for our elected officials, and we must let them know whether proposals will help or hinder our ability to do our job. (Polisar, 2004).

Finally, another form of communication takes place in the city council meeting. Although it is (in essence) also personal, the chief must be mindful that he is now in the public arena. At this stage, it is appropriate to point out that more communication is not necessarily more effective communication. (McLaren & Wilson, 1977). The bulk of the communication between the chief and the city council should have taken place long before the council meeting. With a public audience, this is a perfect opportunity for the

chief to make his idea that of the city council. (Ahmad, Dowling, Hoover & Jarkanin, 2001). This can have a profound positive effect on the relationship between the two. The chief should also be aware that every word spoken at a public meeting is subject to public scrutiny. (Arnold, et al., 1983).

Politics can change quickly in the public arena. Police chiefs must develop effective coping and communication skills to survive. Their job requires them to regularly find solutions to conflicts and implement changes and sometimes risking their jobs as a result. They commonly list the frustration of working with politicians in a political environment as the most discouraging part of their jobs. (Benson, 2004). As tempting as it might be to a frustrated police chief, he should never try to upstage an elected official. They will only become defensive when embarrassed in public. (Ahmad, et al., 2001). Any previous successes or progress can immediately be forgotten when this happens.

Whether in private or public, communication between a police chief and his elected officials plays a vital role in his effectiveness on the job. According to Mintzberg (1989), "On one hand, politics can undermine healthy processes, infiltrating them to destroy them. But on the other hand, it can also work to strengthen a system, acting like a fever to alert a system to a graver danger, even evoking system's own protective and adaptive mechanisms" (p.236). Most of the literature studied places the burden of developing and maintaining effective communication and a positive relationship on the police chief. When such a problem does exist, seldom does the legislative body initiate a solution. (McLaren & Wilson, 1977). It is apparent that the

authors studied were in agreement that police chiefs are more likely to possess the skills necessary to establish or change the relationship for the better.

METHODOLOGY

The research associated with this project is intended to answer the question, "What effect do relationships with elected officials have on a police chief's ability to lead his department effectively?" The research data will show that the chief's ability to establish and nurture positive relationships with elected officials will greatly improve his effectiveness as the leader of his department. While written publications such as books, journals, and magazines provided supportive documentation, another instrument will also be utilized. A questionnaire will be given to elected city council persons as well as police chiefs in a cross section of cities. All of the questionnaires for city council members will be emailed to contacts in their respective police departments for distribution. Because there are multiple members on most city councils, only four cities will be contacted. Approximately twenty questionnaires will be distributed to city council persons in the four cities. Questionnaires to chiefs will also be emailed. Some surveys will be emailed to contacts in their respective departments, and others will be emailed directly to the chiefs. The questionnaires will cover a wide area and cross section of the state of Texas. For both police chiefs and elected city council persons, cities from near the Louisiana border to the Texas Panhandle were sampled.

FINDINGS

The cities from which city council persons returned the questionnaires ranged in population from 2,400 to 37,000. Three of the cities had strong city manager forms of government, and one had a strong mayor form of government. The cities from which police chiefs returned questionnaires ranged in population from 2,400 to 96,000. Four of the cities had strong city manager forms of government, and one had a strong mayor form of government.

In researching relationships between police chiefs and the elected officials they serve under, many things come to light. The majority of police chiefs in Texas serve under an appointed city manager. Results of questionnaires completed by both chiefs and city council persons indicated that, by-in-large, the chiefs in these cities are not expected to communicate directly with elected officials. It is common for almost all communication between police chiefs and city council to go through the city manager, and, in some cases, policy even dictates it. Written research would also indicate this is a common practice. Communication is, for the most part, channeled through the city manager when requested by either side. On the other hand, police chiefs serving in a strong mayor form of city government do indeed have frequent communication with both the mayor and the council. This form of government requires the chief to develop a different understanding of what is expected of him. He/she does not have the luxury of providing information to one city manager who, in turn, disseminates it to several elected officials. Rather, it is the chief alone who is responsible for communicating to the mayor as well as all of the city council members. Although it can (at times) be more

time consuming, in the long run it is well worth the effort when establishing a good working environment is the goal.

The longer the tenure of a chief, the more easily this whole idea is for him to understand. It is important to this process to keep everything in context through an orderly discussion of the data received. The information retrieved is discussed chronologically, beginning when the police chief is new to the job and/or when newly elected city council persons come aboard. One universal truth in politics is that both police chiefs and those persons elected to city council share the belief that they are responsible to serve the public interest. The chief serves in a full time position while elected officials serve in addition to their respective work careers. While the chief is involved with issues on a daily basis, the council members will have different degrees of involvement based on several factors. The one thing a police chief should never do is assume a member of city council is uninterested in an issue based on that person's level of involvement. Again, many factors can be at work behind the scenes that affect a council person's availability at certain times. Interaction with all council members should be consistent on a continual basis.

As a police chief begins a new job or newly elected officials come on board, the chief should promptly begin establishing a relationship with them. It is likely that the chief will work with several elected officials throughout his career, depending on his tenure. In most cases elections occur every two years, so the chief will have numerous opportunities to hone his communication skills. It is important to try to get to know as much as possible about the elected officials. The chief will discover that different personalities will require different communication efforts. Communication can come in

the form of written memorandums or letters, emails, telephone conversations, and face-to-face meetings. It is up to the chief to carefully observe the individual council person over a period of time to determine which form of communication works best. Some will be satisfied with any of the aforementioned ways of communicating, while others will show a preference for specific types of communication. The chief should determine what type or types works best with each individual member, then carefully begin working to cultivate the relationship by utilizing what he/she has learned. One goal is to put the city council persons at ease by communicating with them in the way that is best for them. Although this may sound overly simplistic, in the long run it may be of huge benefit in building and maintaining a sound relationship with the elected official. An example would be a council member who is extremely busy in his/her job. He/she may not have time to read lengthy memorandums or letters. He/she may much prefer a quick phone call or email pointing out major details or issues prior to his receiving the memorandum. This would give him/her a chance to ask questions when necessary. At any rate, he/she would know the important points and could always get the smaller details by reading the written communication at his/her convenience.

Regardless of the type of communication used by the police chief, one rule always applies. All council members should always be provided the same information. Even if a council member offers to forward information to his/her colleagues, the chief should politely inform him/her that he/she (the chief) will see to it that the information is given to the entire council. At times the chief will find it necessary to provide information on things such as major cases, personnel issues, statistics, program information, documentation on council agenda items, and community issues. The city council needs

the chief's professional guidance and opinion in order to make informed decisions on issues at hand. It is essential that each council member receive identical information. This is not to be confused with what type of communication to use. For example any written report should be delivered to each member. If one prefers to discuss it, there is nothing wrong with that. The point here is that the information is provided in the exact same format.

The city council meeting is the last arena for communication between the chief and the elected officials. Much of the communication with individual council members regarding agenda issues should have taken place prior to the meeting. In most cases, it is perfectly acceptable to have details worked out or understood before taking the issue into the public setting. The police chief should never use the public meeting to pressure the council into accepting his/her political or personal agenda. Although it could possibly gain a brief victory, the long term result will most likely be resentment and a loss of respect for what could be termed "dirty tactics". Pressuring or embarrassing someone in public almost always backfires in the end. It can take a long time to repair damage caused by such actions, and in some cases the trust can never be restored. The appearance this gives to the public is extremely important as well. Their perception of the political process is often based on what they see in meetings and read in the media. The way both chiefs and city council persons conduct business in public can go a long way in strengthening or weakening the political system as we know it.

CONCLUSIONS

The research herein has addressed the subject of communication between police chiefs and elected officials. Positive communication is essential in establishing effective working relationships. Negative communication has the opposite result – it produces ineffective relationships between police chiefs and city council persons. The question that must be answered is, “What effect do his relationships with elected officials have on a police chief’s ability to lead his department effectively?”

The hypothesis was that the chief’s ability to establish and nurture positive relationships with elected officials would greatly improve his effectiveness as the leader of his department. The findings of the study of written materials overwhelmingly support the idea that chiefs who are effective communicators have a distinct advantage over those that are not. Subsequently, these police chiefs increase their chances of success in the political world in which they exist. On the contrary, chiefs who either possess poor communication skills or fail to put the necessary effort into the process are almost assured of struggling in their professional lives.

While thirty questionnaires were distributed, only seven from city council members and five from police chiefs were returned. This did not provide a very large cross-section for comparison, but it did reveal one obvious point. Chiefs serving under city managers are seldom required or expected to communicate directly with elected officials. The literature studied and the questionnaires returned suggested this was the case. In these cities, communication between the chief and the council almost always goes through the city manager. “Strong city manager” forms of city government include

the vast majority of cities in Texas. Interestingly, the literature studied and the limited questionnaire results showed that chiefs working in “strong mayor” cities are much more likely to communicate with the city council members in their cities. Of the five questionnaires returned by chiefs, the one that worked for a mayor noted he communicated with other elected officials several times a week. In contrast, those working for city managers communicate with their elected officials infrequently.

This study is relevant to the professional police professional in today’s world. Those that already hold chiefs’ positions, as well as those who are preparing for future job opportunities can benefit from the information provided herein. In spite of all the technological advances in recent years, effective communication is still as important for a police chief today as it was in the past. Too many police chiefs have experienced serious problems in their jobs that might have been prevented if only they had honed their communication skills a little more. Effective communication doesn’t mean the two sides always agree. Rather, it involves honest and open discussion that, at times, will leave the parties “agreeing to disagree”. However, the mutual respect established through a history of effective, positive communication allows the chief to survive in the political world in which he works. Again, although most chiefs in Texas work directly for city managers, the same skills and techniques can be applied there also. It is the hope of this writer the evidence found in this study will provide helpful tools for present and future leaders in the police profession.

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APPENDIX/APPENDICES

Appendix 1

Leadership Command College
Administrative Research Paper Questionnaire for Police Chiefs

*Who is your supervisor?

- 1) City manager
- 2) City manager
- 3) City manager
- 4) Mayor
- 5) City manager

*What is the population of your city?

- 1) 4,000
- 2) 96,000
- 3) 13,601
- 4) 2,500
- 5) 35,000

*How long have you been in your position?

- 1) 2 years, 11 months
- 2) 4 years
- 3) 10 years
- 4) 1.5 years
- 5) 3.5 years

*How often do you discuss city business with the city council members?

- 1) 2-3 times a month
- 2) Occasionally
- 3) 2 times a month
- 4) Several times a week
- 5) Not often

*Should you talk more or less frequently?

- 1) Should be more, but city manager has policy against it.
- 2) Same as now
- 3) More in-depth communication would be desirable
- 4) Just right
- 5) Only as necessary

*Is there a city council liaison assigned to your department?

- 1) No
- 2) No

- 3) City manager acts as such
- 4) No
- 5) No

*If applicable, do you communicate to other council members through the liaison?

1-5 All N/A

*What type of information do you provide to council members?

- 1) Answers to any questions they might have
- 2) Crime statistics, ordinance review, new community programs
- 3) Quarterly and annual reports, recommendations on council actions, emergency management issues
- 4) Basic information, not specific unless it is a serious issue
- 5) Information requested is passed on through city manager

*How could the communication improve?

- 1) Change city manager's policy
- 2) City is strict about department heads going city manager
- 3) Strategic planning sessions
- 4) N/A
- 5) It is very effective and efficient

*Who do you believe is responsible for initiating communication?

- 1) Either party who has a question
- 2) No answer
- 3) Communication both ways goes through city manager
- 4) Equally shared
- 5) Communication is through city manager

Appendix 2

Leadership Command College
Administrative Research Paper Questionnaire for Elected Officials

*Who is the police chief's supervisor?

- 1) City manager
- 2) City manager
- 3) City manager
- 4) City manager
- 5) Mayor
- 6) Mayor
- 7) Mayor

*What is the population of your city?

- 1) 37,000
- 2) 13,601

- 3) 13,000
- 4) 12,000
- 5) 2,600
- 6) 2,400
- 7) 2,500

*How long have you been in this position?

- 1) 2 years
- 2) 3 years
- 3) 15 years
- 4) 12 years
- 5) 15 months
- 6) 7 years
- 7) 15 years

*How often do you discuss city business with the chief?

- 1) Not very often
- 2) Seldom
- 3) Frequently
- 4) Every 2 weeks
- 5) Not often
- 6) Twice a week
- 7) When necessary so as not to interfere

*Should you talk more or less frequently?

- 1) More
- 2) Same
- 3) Probably more frequently
- 4) More
- 5) More frequently
- 6) About right
- 7) Neither

*Is there a council liaison assigned to the police department?

- 1) No
- 2) No
- 3) No
- 4) No
- 5) No
- 6) Yes
- 7) Yes

*If applicable, does the chief communicate to other council persons through the liaison?

- 1-5 N/A
- 6) Yes
- 7) No

*What type of information does the chief provide to the council?

- 1) Budget reviews and any other requested items
- 2) Information as requested through the city manager
- 3) Updates, problems and needs of the department, budget, agenda information
- 4) Daily activities, special events, budget information
- 5) Monthly statistical report
- 6) Monthly statistical report
- 7) Monthly statistical report

*Do you have any suggestions for improving communication with the chief?

- 1) No
- 2) None
- 3) Not answered
- 4) Not answered
- 5) Councilman needs to visit more, but does not want to interfere – assumes chief will contact him as needed
- 6) No
- 7) None, communication is good

*Who do you believe is responsible for initiating communication?

- 1) City manager
- 2) City manager
- 3) Equal responsibility
- 4) Both
- 5) Council
- 6) Equal
- 7) Both

*Is the chief responsive to your requests for information?

- 1) Very much
- 2) Always
- 3) Very much so
- 4) Always
- 5) Absolutely
- 6) Yes
- 7) Yes