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Retention of Quality Employees in a University Police Department

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by
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Abstract

The subject of turnover has been extensively researched in our society. Less so has been research directed specifically at examining police officers. Though it has been relatively ignored it is extremely important for society to understand why police officers leave their respective agencies. The positive results of Community Oriented Policing demonstrates that officers who take the time to become involved in their communities make a difference. If agencies can not retain quality officers entire communities suffer.

The purpose of this research is to examine the causes of turnover in a job environment. Turnover is defined as employees leaving or expressing a desire to leave the workplace. The writer seeks to determine how the causes of turnover versus a willingness to remain in a work environment might relate to the SMU police department.

Sources of information include thesis, journals and books and articles. Surveys were taken of the department's officers to determine current attitudes toward leaving the university. Significant information was gathered from university programs aimed at increasing efficiency and customer service while addressing problems that face each department.

The SMU police department should adopt Price's determinant factors as a model to correcting its turnover problem. Bi-annual surveys of its members will help the department monitor the attitudes of its members toward remaining in the department. Where deficiencies are discovered, corrective measures must be taken. Consistent evaluation and corrective action will help SMU slow the attrition rate to its acceptable goal of fourteen percent per year(BIP).

Introduction

The purpose of this research is to examine the causes of turnover in a job environment. Turnover is defined as employees leaving or expressing a desire to leave the workplace. The writer seeks to determine how the causes of turnover versus a willingness to remain in the work environment might relate to a university police department. Special attention is given to how these factors may relate to the SMU Police Department.

The department has experienced high turnover for the past four years. In 1997 as many as six positions were vacant in the patrol division. Normally this division consists of eighteen members. Eight members have separated to seek employment with the Dallas Area Rapid Transit Police. At least one more is expected to join the same agency at its next hire date. One supervisor accepted an entry level position with a municipality. Another is expected to separate to accept an entry level position with a municipality. All of those who have left cited better pay as the major factor in their decision to leave. Even those supervisors mentioned will receive pay increases upon acceptance as entry level officers with other departments. An additional problem is that applicant pools have been weak. The typical applicant has no field experience or has had problems in a previous police job that make them unattractive to the university. In the current situation, the department acts as a training ground for other departments. This concern is especially important in light of recent and anticipated growth in the metroplex (Dallas Morning News 1). The competition for quality officers is only expected to increase with expected population growth. The SMU police department is visible in the Dallas area and

maintains good communication and reputation amongst other departments. As a result, officers have found that agencies are looking for the kind of people skills and experience campus officers bring to a department.

This paper is written for presentation to the SMU Board of Trustees, President, the Associate Vice President of Human Resources and Business Services and the Director of the Department of Public Safety. It is a guide for directing corrective measures in attempt to lower the turnover rate within the department to an acceptable level of 14%.

Sources of information include thesis, journals, books and articles. Surveys were taken of the department's officers to determine current attitudes toward leaving the university. Significant information was gathered from university programs aimed at increasing efficiency and customer service while addressing problems that face each department. Two of these programs referred to are the SWOT and BIP. The SWOT is an examination of the department's: strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. The BIP is the Business Integration Plan. The BIP involves the Business Services division of which the police department is a part.

The paper serves as an objective study into the causes of employee turnover specifically related to the Southern Methodist University Police Department. Once the likely causes of turnover are discovered similarities may be drawn to the department. This research serves as a basis for change and improvement in employee retention and development. By determining the cause of the problem the university can intelligently address the real issues rather than making ill informed and hasty responses. For example, a raise in pay may address only one of the possible causes of the department's turnover(Price 68; Mobley 63) and would not necessarily solve the problem. As a result

of this study some of the changes proposed have already been instituted as part of the SWOT and BIP.

Historical, Legal and Theoretical Context

There has been a great deal of research on the issue of turnover. Little of this research deals specifically with police personnel. Because of this fact the writer has attempted to take this large body of work and apply it to the department. Much of the research located thus far makes reference to or is the work of Frederick Herzberg. His work, conducted in the 1950's examined the following determinants related to employee dissatisfaction: department policy and administration, supervision, Interpersonal relations, working conditions, salary and status (Holden 153).

More recent research by William Mobley examines: external economy, organizational variables, individual non-work variables and individual work related variables. Mobley's research goes beyond Herzberg's to include individual factors affecting turnover rates that are not directly tied to the work environment. Mobley's research suggests that an employee's decision to leave is much more complex than Herzberg originally considered. He contends that the employee's consideration to stay or quit is the result of weighing all these variables. Of the four cited by Mobley, the employer has the greatest influence on organizational variables. These have to do with company size, reward system, job design and centralization (Mobley 123).

The employer will have a limited ability to affect individual work related variables such as: values, expectations, satisfaction, commitment, abilities and intentions. These variables are subjective; however, actions taken by the employer may affect how the employee perceives the job environment. The combined research will show that

prospective employers must learn to identify and encourage appropriate individual work related values. Careful recruiting and selection methods help to identify employees who are most likely to work well in the job environment. Early training also helps to affect these subjective values for the employers good. The challenge for management is that of measuring these variables and the effects of management's environmental changes in attempt to solve problems.

The most promising research available for this study was conducted by James L. Price. His book published in 1977 is a codification of literature related to organizational turnover. It organizes the available data into compact form seeking to determine similarities in findings(Price). It identifies those findings that are supported most frequently in the available body of research. The codification, its results and relationship to SMU are discussed in detail in the review of literature. Price identified the following determinants of turnover: Pay, Integration, Instrumental Communication, Formal Communication and Centralization (Price 85). Pay as a determinant relates to salary as well as any fringe benefits or other commodities(Price 3). Integration is "the extent of participation in primary and/or quasi primary relationships" (70). Instrumental Communication is information disseminated that is directly related to job duties or performance (73). Formal Communication is information "officially transmitted"(73). In a police department this information may be disseminated in roll calls, newsletters, memorandums and formal meetings. These two types of communication usually occur together since job performance information is most often transmitted formally. Formal communication is usually related to job performance. Centralization is the degree to which an individual has control over his immediate work environment (76). A

dictatorship is an example of high centralization. All power in this case rests with the individual (76).

Price includes Opportunity as an intervening variable affecting turnover. According to his model, an employee will determine his level of satisfaction or dissatisfaction based on how the employer meets the five determinant needs. If the result of this consideration is some level of dissatisfaction, the employee may choose to seek employment elsewhere. Opportunity effects the determinants in several ways. If the opportunities to leave the job are not present, the employee is likely to remain even if he is unhappy. "Opportunity appears to reinforce the impact of the determinants" (84). Where opportunity is readily available an employee may choose to leave even if for example only one of the five determinant needs are not met. The employees perception may be that another employer has the ability to meet all of these needs. Police officers have highly specialized skills and knowledge. The selection process, legal requirements and department hiring regulations exclude the majority of society from qualification. As a result, the demand for officers can be quite high. When demand for police is high and supply is short, officers may be more sensitive in deciding whether or not their needs are being met. In the Price model opportunity is the one determinant the employer has no control over; however the employer may influence the employee's perception of the value of the competing opportunity. The employer may help to compare benefits of other employers versus their own. At times employees may not be aware of all the benefits available to them. They may not have completely investigated the benefits of working elsewhere. For example, in his current status the employee may have a better retirement package, schedule arrangement, greater autonomy or better working conditions. Helping

the employee to see how the employer meets his needs may influence his perception of how his needs are being met. The employee may turn down employment offers for higher pay if he perceives that other important needs are met. Police departments usually do not offer to meet the needs of its employees. Departments are most often para-military in management style and require the individual to sacrifice personal needs for the department's goals.

Departments facing increasing turnover rates have to develop a holistic approach to addressing the problem and working with the officer. In the past agencies have attacked the problem by simply increasing salaries. The idea is to make it cost prohibitive for the officer to leave. While this has been proven to lower turnover rates, it does not weed out officers who are not productive(Teske 62-63). Unhappy officers may simply stay in an unhappy environment and make others unhappy. Clearly what is needed is a well planned approach, based on real information, tailored to each department's needs and designed to target the officer as a whole person (Archambeault and Weirman 420-428).

Review of Literature or Practice

A survey was conducted of the officers of the SMU Police Department based on Price's determinants (Turnover Survey). The desire was to determine current attitudes amongst its members. Questions were phrased to solicit answers as to how Price's determinant needs were being met in the department. The results would provide management real information about employee attitudes instead of having to guess or take the risk of ignoring the problem. Additionally surveying has also been shown to have a "self-fulfilling prophecy effect" (Halloway 89). The fact that the department conducts the

survey shows the officer that management is concerned about the officer. The process itself helps direct management's focus to problem solving as opposed to fault finding. Necessary attitude and perception changes may result for both managers and employees.

The survey findings identified weaknesses in the areas of pay and centralization. Not one employee believed the pay was sufficient; However employees indicated satisfaction with the retirement benefits. The university has an employer contributing 401K plan. SMU offers full tuition benefits to its employees and their children and partial benefits to spouses. This benefit was attractive to most employees. Members agreed they had control over their immediate work environment and that their opinions are respected by their immediate supervisors. They expressed however a need to participate in decision making. This response suggest that officers desire more inclusion in administrative issues that effect them. Officers at SMU ride alone and most of the decisions they make within certain limits are not determined by a supervisor. The degree to which they have this freedom does not seem to be an issue. The likely conclusion is that their concern is not with their immediate supervisors but higher ranking decision makers. Archambeault and Weirman (424) suggest that "rigid rules and regulations, unexplained administrative decisions, one-way communications, impersonal and adversary relations with management- all tend to alienate the officer. The survey responses indicate that such may be the case at SMU.

In response to questions regarding integration, members reported good relationships with other employees on the job. Those relationships did not necessarily extend outside the workplace nor did employees strongly indicate that close friendships were formed. The high rate of turnover in the department is clearly one factor that would

hinder the formation of close friendships. The department rotates shift assignments twice a year. Shift rotations could effect integration. To what degree bi-annual rotations effect these relationships is unknown. No discovered research studied the frequency of shift change as a factor in integration. It is assumed that the less people change assignments, the greater the opportunity for relationships to form. Mowday suggests that an employee considering separation will also consider how others whom he has a relationships with will be effected by his leaving(Mowday, Porter, Steers 123).

Responses related to communication indicate that members are confident in the knowledge of their jobs responsibilities. Sufficient feedback on performance is provided and evaluations provide needed feedback on performance. Supervisors communicate with employees when their performance is unsatisfactory; However employees expressed a need for more communication when their performance is satisfactory. A need for improvement was also observed related to the interview process. Respondents were asked if the interview process provided a good idea of what the job would involve. Results were relatively equal in agreement and disagreement indicating that some received the information and others did not. A good interview process that “gives the newcomers accurate and complete information will result in better matching, increased satisfaction and commitment and lower turnover” (Mobley 154).

The intervening variable of opportunity is one that has greatly effected SMU. The department experienced seventy-seven percent turnover in 1996 (BIP). Most SMU officers believed that better opportunities in law enforcement were available to them (Survey). Informal conversations with officers about this response indicated that they had not necessarily made any careful comparison of benefits. Much information officers

obtained through conversations with officers outside the department or employees who had separated. Since officers had not made actual comparisons of benefits their determinations regarding other opportunities were a matter of perception rather than fact. SMU could take advantage of this lack of knowledge to perhaps make a real comparison of benefits. Perhaps the result would show that the university environment is more attractive than officers now perceive. Three officers admitted seeking other employment. Five indicated that they had not sought outside employment. It is important to note that many departments that have attracted the interest of SMU officers require two years police experience. At this time eight officers with the department have less than two years experience.

Interviews with police managers at other campuses in the Dallas area revealed that they too had experienced high turnover. Most of these agencies reported that employees were separating to accept positions with the Dallas Area Rapid Transit Police Department(DART). Employers had not calculated specific turnover rates or formed strategies to reduce turnover. The DART Police have approximately one hundred officers with an expressed goal of two hundred officers in the next year. Clearly SMU and other agencies will continue to face competition from DART. These employers must determine what attracts officers to this agency. In the case of most campus officers a key issue is pay. The DART entry level salary is between \$27,000 to \$29,000 depending on experience. The average salary in the North Texas region for officers in cities with 9,000 to 25,000 citizens is \$29,208 (NCTOG). SMU officers starting pay is \$22,500. Pay is consistently supported as a determinant in turnover research(U. S. Merit Systems Protection Board; U. S. Department of Labor). In Teske's study of municipal agencies,

he found that “the higher the pay at each rank level within the agency, the lower the rate of turnover”.

Discussion of Relevant Issues

Of particular concern is the agency’s ability to provide necessary services to the community. Agencies typically operate with a minimal number of full time positions. Vacancies tend to have a ripple effect on the performance of the rest of the department. The department has a standard related to the minimum number of officers required to operate. For example, policy requires that at least two officers and a supervisor are on duty at all times. Given the nature of emergency response work, it is not acceptable for the agency to operate on less than minimum standards. The result of maintaining minimum staffing in these situations is added stress on the officers who remain in the job. These officers must provide for the coverage by sacrificing their discretionary time. Supervisors are charged with the responsibility of keeping overtime costs to a minimum. To meet these challenges they must limit each officer’s time away from the department. Extended vacation of more than a few days is usually not an option. To further keep down costs supervisors who are paid a salary will fill vacancies with their personal time. It is easy to see how this situation affects every employees’ quality of life. As a result, the attitudes of officer and supervisor are negatively effected (Mobley 21).

The cost of training and equipping a new officer of great concern. The department spends more than one thousand dollars equipping a new officer. The mandatory field training program lasts 7 weeks. During this time a new officer is constantly monitored. A Field Trainer is required to remain with the new officer at all

times. Until the officer has successfully completed the training period, he may not operate unsupervised. The training period is an additional but necessary drain on staff resources. After completing the program, it takes approximately 6 months of close supervision before the officer is able to handle calls on his own. With each new hire the department is required to duplicate these expenses.

Other costs that result from turnover are not easily quantified but should not be excluded. There are recruitment costs in advertising, interviewing and performing time intensive background checks. Lost productivity is a factor since the new officer does not completely learn the job until one year in the position. Group cohesiveness and integration are effected and members see their teams breaking down. Morale is amongst those who remain is negatively effected. Turnover may stimulate more separation as it brings attention to the fact that opportunities are available. Some employees do not begin to seek employment until a team member has left the job. There may be "strategic opportunity costs"(Mobley 22) as the department may have to postpone projects that require a full complement of staff (Mobley 16-39).

The long term and perhaps the most damaging effect of turnover is the loss of experience base in the agency. Experienced officers leave for perceived better employment. The quality of service is diminished as they are often replaced by inexperienced officers who are beginning their careers. We know from research that employees under 25 and those starting a new career have the highest rate of turnover(Monthly Labor Review 1;). A U. S. Department of Labor study revealed that the slightly higher turnover rate observed in 1981 (10.5 versus 8.8) was almost entirely a result of the increased proportion of young persons in the work force. The agency must

be able to keep valued and experienced employees. By doing so it can maintain a level of quality service and provide future leadership by developing its officers to fill future supervisor positions. Campus policing is a specialized field and SMU enjoys a reputation for quality. It cannot afford to allow the delivery of quality of police services to deteriorate. Maintaining experienced staff is a key ingredient to providing that service.

Some turnover is indeed good and necessary for a healthy work environment. Employees who do not perform to standard should be encouraged to seek employment elsewhere. Employees who are unhappy should be able to find acceptable work elsewhere; but considering all of the above mentioned consequences it is not cost effective to allow the current rate of turnover to continue. Equipment and training costs alone make it too expensive to accept high turnover at SMU.

Conclusion/Recommendations

The writer has attempted to identify the causes of turnover as supported by available research. Once those determinants were identified, the SMU police department was surveyed to determine how its situation related to the research. The following factors were investigated in the survey measurement: pay, integration, instrumental and formal communication and centralization.

Determining the causal factors of turnover at SMU and correcting the problem is necessary for the well being of the campus community. The university maintains a reputation of service and excellence. The environment is conducive to instruction and learning. The police department is a key ingredient in maintaining this environment.

In 1996 the department experienced a seventy-seven percent turnover rate. Eight officers separated to join the DART police department. At least one more is expected to

join the same agency. One supervisor accepted an entry level position with a municipality. Another is expected to separate to accept an entry level position with a municipality. All of those who have left cited better pay as the major factor in their decision to leave.

The SMU police department should adopt Price's determinant factors as a model to correcting its turnover problem. Bi-annual surveys of its members will help the department monitor the attitudes of its members toward remaining in the department. Where deficiencies are discovered, corrective measures must be taken. Consistent evaluation and corrective action will help SMU slow the attrition rate to its acceptable goal of fourteen percent per year(BIP).

By addressing the needs expressed by its officers, SMU will reduce the attrition rate and promote a healthier work environment. Officers will no longer see themselves as separate from management but as a part of a team. The university will demonstrate that it cares for the welfare of it's officers. The employee will see how the university helps him to meet all of his needs to some degree. The university will truly have an environment that most other agencies will be unable to compete with.

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