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How Filtering Affects
Organizational Communication

A Policy Research Project
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ABSTRACT

In order to operate successfully, proper organizational communication is essential to all law enforcement agencies. Filtering is a significant barrier to effective organizational communication. If an agency can reduce or eliminate filtering, effective communication can be more successfully accomplished.

The purpose of the research was to ascertain how successful organizational communication can be accomplished within an agency, to identify some of the barriers that affect organizational communications, with emphasis placed on filtering and how, through using various methods, those barriers can be overcome. A comprehensive survey was conducted of various law enforcement agencies, as well as a review of research, both theoretical and conceptual, of organizational communication and communications in general.

In conclusion, effective organizational communication is essential for any law enforcement agency, no matter the size, to function properly. Barriers to effective communications must be reduced. Filtering is a key barrier. The key to reducing such barriers is proper training. In particular, managerial and supervisory training should include the subject of Organizational Communication, emphasizing the topic of Filtering in the instruction. Law enforcement administrators must be aware of what can happen to their message as it travels through varied layers of bureaucracy and, equally as important, how to counter those obstacles.

INTRODUCTION

Although tremendous technological advances have been made recently and we can now communicate almost instantly with anyone anywhere on earth, we are told by management and communication consultants that more than 10 percent of u.s. business enterprises fail every year primarily due to bad management and ineffective communication (Goldhaber 3). To be effective communicators, police managers should be made aware of barriers that hinder effective communication and the identification of solutions. One such barrier is Filtering.

The communication process has several stages or steps. One such stage is the Fitting Stage. In the fitting stage, filtering or screening behavior occurs. Filtering can be intentional or unintentional. Unintentional filtering often occurs at a low level of consciousness and the individual may not even realize that filtering has occurred or why it occurred. For example, a secretary might tell her boss that a certain letter has been filed away. This is rather unimportant, so the boss unintentionally blots it out. A few hours later the boss must ask the secretary where the letter is, even though the boss was just told that it had been filed away (Level 14,15).

Filters consist of all things that exist in the mind of the sender or receiver of a message. They include knowledge, culture, status, attitudes, emotions, and communications skills (Sneltzer 9).

The issue being addressed is that in any organization, whether it is law enforcement related or it is private industry, a certain amount of information is "filtered out," or lost, when oral communication flows downward through several layers of hierarchy. This can affect any agency, from the largest to the smallest. The probability of the filtering phenomena increases with the organizational distance between the originating source and the message's ultimate receiver. A dramatic example of this effect is the following:

A reporter was present at a hamlet burned down by the U.S. Army's 1st Air Cavalry Division in 1967. Investigation showed that the order from the division headquarters to the brigade was: "On no occasion must hamlets be burned down." The brigade, in turn, radioed the battalion: "Do not bum down any hamlets unless you are absolutely convinced that the Viet Cong are in them." The battalion radioed the infantry company at the scene: "If you think there are any Viet Cong in the Hamlet, bum it down." The company commander ordered his troops: "Bum it down," (Jablin 150).

Law enforcement agencies are paramilitary organizations, and organizational communications are similar in both professions.

The intended audience of this project is police administrators and mid-level managers of law enforcement agencies. Organizational communication, and its barriers, is present in all law enforcement agencies. The primary sources of information include textbooks that deal with organizational communication. Law enforcement journals on the same topic, interviews with experts, and a survey are also sources of information for this research paper. The intended outcome of this project is to assist police agencies to initiate policy and procedure to train and educate police managers on the effects that unintentional filtering may have on organizational communication within their agencies. Several methods that may assist in making organizational communication more effective will be suggested.

HISTORICAL and THEORETICAL CONTEXT

The greatest challenge of modern times is developing relationships based on communication that will inspire individual feelings of self-fulfillment and self actualization in the work environment (Morgan 12).

Organizational communication has been called the *lifeblood* of the organization, the *glue* that binds the organization, the *oil* that smoothes the organization's functions, the *thread* that ties the system together, the *force* that pervades the organization, and the *binding agent* that cements all relationships. It can also be called the organizational *embalming fluid* (Goldhaber 2).

Redding and Sanborn define organizational communication as the sending and receiving of information within a complex organization (Goldhaber 11). Katz and Kahn perceive organizational communication as the flow of information (the exchange of information and the transmission of meaning) within an organization (Goldhaber 11).

Successful communication requires the involvement of two individuals until they both understand each other (Sneltzer 3). The four elements needed to develop an effective communication transaction are: channel, encoding, decoding, and feedback.

Channel: The channel is simply the method used to transport the message from one person to the other. The type of channel used depends on the message and the approach used to send the message.

Encoding: The second element is encoding. People encode when they choose the best symbols that can be used to represent their thoughts.

Decoding: Once encoders have chosen and transmitted the symbols that represent their thoughts, the communication receiver must decode the message. Two steps take place in the decoding process. The person must first perceive the message, and then he or she must interpret what has been perceived.

Feedback: Feedback, the connecting link in the two way communication process, binds the sender and receiver together so they are truly communicating with each other. Consciously attending to feedback is critical for effective communications (Sneltzer 3-7).

A breakdown during any part of the organizational communication process can have tremendous legal ramifications and can cost the organization a great deal of time and money. This is illustrated by the following example:

A young man was put in charge of the FBI's stores and stationary. Eager to make an impact, he decided to save on costs by reducing the size of memo paper. One of the new sheets landed on the desk of J. Edgar Hoover himself. Hoover disliked it on sight; the margins on both sides were too narrow for him. Across the top he wrote, with some irritation, "Watch the borders." His purpose was misinterpreted. For the next six weeks, it became extremely difficult to enter the USA by road from either Canada or Mexico (Young (32).

Because the message was misinterpreted, a substantial amount of time and money was wasted. Clear organizational communication is extremely important.

In theory, there are several things that managers can do to ensure that a message is successfully conveyed during downward communications. Downward communications includes all interaction that flows from superior to subordinate (Downs 26). Managers should be knowledgeable of the fact that people tend to selectively perceive messages and respond to those that are consistent with how they feel. People usually attend to messages that are compatible with how they feel and what they like (Pace 34). To communicate successfully, managers must complete all four steps of the organizational communications process. This is further illustrated by the following statement:

The police manager should be aware that the development of effective organizational communication in any police department requires a combination of exposure and feedback. The manager should understand that in order to develop a climate of mutual exposure, he or she has to emphasize the necessity for honest and realistic feedback, and he or she must be willing to solicit such feedback by encouraging his or her subordinates to expose their information (Lynch 88).

When obtaining feedback, managers must learn to listen.

Listening is not just hearing, the effective manager must learn to differentiate between the two. Hearing is mechanical, an automatic sort of thing often difficult to avoid. Hearing usually requires little special physical or mental effort. In contrast, listening results from a concentrated effort; it requires both physical and mental effort (Sneltzer 188).

Once the feedback session has been completed, it is a good idea for the police manager to briefly summarize what has been said. This gives a final check and opportunity to further clarify misunderstandings (Lynch 94-95).

With the advent of sophisticated telephone networks, overnight express mail, and telecommunications, the question of how the message is to be sent from the manager to the receiver becomes increasingly complicated (Sneltzer 41). Research conducted by Raymond Adamson and Gene Deszca has suggested that there is a tendency for police administration to rely almost exclusively on written communication (Adamson 168).

Management has many channels available for sending information to its employees. Not every message would be equally appropriate for any given channel. For example, personal feedback

should be given through a personal channel, not through a channel that has general distribution. Some of the most common channels available for downward communication are:

Personal Channels

Formal Interviews
Conferences
Telephone
Letter
Memo
Planned floor contacts
Nonverbal interaction

Impersonal Channels

Handbooks and manuals
Bulletin boards
Employee publications
Radio and television
Training programs
Conferences
Reports
Payroll Inserts
Annual financial reports
Films and filmstrips
Speeches (Downs 26)

There is a scale of richness related to various communication media. The lowest form is the impersonal written type; the highest, that of face to face personal interchange. Messages of high complexity need the richest media (Adamson 168), however, the longer the communication, the greater the probability for error (Neil 178). In choosing channels of communication, managers must decide whether feedback or clarity is important. In addition, it may be more difficult to persuade an individual in a written message than in an oral one (Sneltzer 41). Sometimes a multiple step strategy will be required for success (Parkinson 9).

REVIEW OF LITERATURE OR PRACTICE

Dr. Susan B. Fiechtner, Texas A&M University, stated in a recent interview that, according to her research, approximately 22% of all information communicated downward is ultimately filtered out. Just after World War II, Gordon W. Allport and Leo Postman conducted a classic social psychology experiment. The focus of the experiment was how a message can be distorted as it goes through multiple channels.

In several dozen experiments conducted as classroom exercises, Allport and Postman observed the distortions and elimination that occurred when college students, by means of a serial transmission chain, passed a communication from one person to another. The subjects,

presumably in their effort after meaning, showed a tendency to level (eliminate) and sharpen (point up) certain details in the communication. The result was that initial descriptions, which contained approximately 20 distinctive details, shrank to a striking brevity of about 5 details (Rosnow 484).

Although the empirical data is different, the two research conclusions do suggest that a significant amount of information is filtered out during the communication process.

Raymond S. Adamson and Gene Deszca conducted a study on organizational communication in 1987.

The study was conducted using six different police departments across Canada. The intended outcome to the study was to conclude whether or not there was a relationship between the various communications subsystems that generate and/or filter communications and perceived outcomes.

Management was basically asked how it attempted to communicate with the rest of the organization, what it considered important in communication and something of its philosophy regarding effective communication in a police force. Middle and non-management respondents were encouraged to reflect on the types of messages and the meaning of the message that came to them through various organizational channels.

The results of the study suggest that the question as to whether quality communication was in fact taking place appears to be clearly related to what messages were being transmitted through the various subsystems of the organization. The results also suggest that police organizations tend to develop and maintain vertical communication systems that rely heavily on authority, hierarchy, and the dominance of written versus verbal communication. It was clear from the study that there was some negative feeling about police force structure and particularly its hierarchical nature. One other strong feature of police force communication that emerged from the study was the tendency for police administration to rely almost exclusively on written communication. In this regard, it appears that one-to-one relations and verbal channels of communication are under-utilized between top management and employees. Particularly when dealing with more complex messages, the difference between management intent and front line translation may not be bridgeable by the traditional mode of written communication. In concluding, more attention could be given to two way vertical flows of information, to one-on-one and other verbal modes of information interchange and discussion. Structured relationships and formalized procedures should be frequently examined to identify the extent to which they are creating communication barriers (Adamson 160-170).

A survey was conducted involving five large police agencies within the State of Texas and one outside of the state. The objective of the survey was threefold:

1. To ascertain if the agencies provided basic supervisory or management training to newly promoted managers or supervisors;

2. If basic training was provided upon promotion, to ascertain whether or not organizational communications was a topic of training;
3. If organizational communication was a topic, was filtering or screening a subset covered by the curriculum.

The departments surveyed included the El Paso Police Department, The Dallas Police Department, the Austin Police Department, the Fort Worth Police Department, the San Antonio Police Department, the Houston Police Department, and the Los Angeles Police Department. The results of the survey are as follows:

Of the departments surveyed, six of the seven offered some form of managerial training for newly promoted managerial level employees. While three of the seven offered training in Organizational Communications, none offered any training whatsoever in the sub-topic of Filtering.

One can conclude from the survey that police administrators do feel that basic managerial training is an important component of their overall training package. It may also be suggested that Organizational Communication is increasing in importance as a topic of managerial training. Although the vast majority of the police agencies surveyed do offer basic managerial or supervisory training to newly promoted managers, relatively little emphasis is placed on how to successfully communicate within an organization. Further, filtering is not even addressed in the formal training that was identified in the survey.

DISCUSSION OF RELEVANT ISSUES

The key issues can be summarized by suggesting that Organizational Communication is defined as the sending and receiving of information within a complex organization (Goldhaber 11). Filtering occurs when messages are changed, shortened,

and lengthened as they are relayed throughout a network (Goldhaber 136).

Organizational communication must successfully complete at least four steps to be effective. Effective organizational communication is vital to the successful operation of any organization. Research and studies have suggested that more attention should be given by organizations to certain stages of the organizational communication process.

The previously mentioned survey indicated that there was very little formal managerial training that prepared newly promoted managers to effectively communicate within their respective agencies.

Effective communication within an organization has been linked to productivity.

Productivity is simultaneously one of the most important and difficult variables for communication researchers to study. It is vital for communication professionals to grapple with the relationship between communication and productivity for two reasons:

1. Improving productivity is of paramount concern to business and service organizations.
2. Communication professionals need to be able to make realistic claims for their interventions and to document those results (Goldhaber, Bamett 173).

One of the first studies that relates to cost analysis was conducted by Paul T.

Rankin. His research brought to light how the average adult communicated during his or her waking time. The results of the study are as follows:

He discovered that 70 percent of an average adult's waking time was spent in some form of communication. The proportion was as follows:

- Writing Activities accounted for 9 percent.
- Reading Activities accounted for 16 percent.
- Speaking Activities accounted for 30 percent.
- Listening Activities accounted for 45 percent (Level 226).

Research by Miller and Longair shows roughly 40 percent of middle managers' time is taken up moving messages through organizational layers (Larkin 20). By using Rankin's empirical information and by also using the average salary of an El Paso Police Officer, \$30,000 per year, one can calculate the importance of communications activities in an

organization (Articles of Agreement 41). Communications activities are vital in any law enforcement agency, and these activities account for \$21,000 per year, while the listening activities account for nearly \$10,000 of the annual total. As an administrator, one can see the importance of effective organizational communications within his or her agency.

Distortion is an important problem in organizations, because modifications to messages cause misdirectives to be transmitted, nondirectives to be issued, incorrect information to be passed on, and a variety of other problems related to both the quantity and quality of information (Fulk 483).

Simply stated, poor organizational communication within an agency is not cost effective.

Gerald Goldhaber and George A. Barnett examined several studies that attempted to measure the link between communications and organizational outcomes. One major constraint in this area is that measurements of progress in the attainment of human objectives are a little more difficult to develop because they tend to focus more on employee attitudes and feelings, instead of specific behaviors (Truell 59).

Organizations exist to accomplish definite outcomes. As one of the most important organizational processes, communication hopefully facilitates the accomplishment of desired outcomes. Yet the exact contribution of the communication process toward the outcomes is often hard to assess, and the connection is more intuitive than demonstrated or empirically proven (Goldhaber,Barnett 171).

In summarizing the studies, Goldhaber and Barnett emphasized the following points:

- ▼ The improvement in the leadership and organization variables can be expected in corresponding improvements in motivation, communication, teamwork, and the functioning of work groups.
- Since communication constitutes a major portion of the activities of managers, it is natural to assume that this activity influences the outcomes of the organization.
- ▼ Organizational performance is directly influenced by employee performance and performance is directly influenced by management communication behaviors.
- ▼ The supervisor is structurally the most important communication link in the organization. Those people who have responsibility for directing the service process must necessarily be responsible for attaining organizational output goals.
- ▼ Personal feedback was perceived by employees to have the most significant impact on productivity of all communications factors studied (Goldhaber,Barnett 171-205).

What can be concluded from this? Communication imparts the end-products of satisfaction and productivity in neither mutually exclusive nor highly correlated ways. The impact may be highly differentiated, depending on the particular communication strategy (Goldhaber,Barnett 205). Police administrators now have an opportunity to focus on effective organizational communications in their agencies, and the key to it is at the managerial/supervisory level.

To ensure improved organizational communication within an agency, supervisors and managers must be properly trained (Truel 53). Another major constraint to this topic is that, according to Goldhaber, we are only now beginning to understand the complexity inherent in the process of communication feedback within organizations (Goldhaber,Barnett 189).

Law enforcement must look to the future and examine and understand more clearly than we do at present the nature of organizational politics, which impacts on organizational communication. We know little about the way in which communication as a medium and as meaning enters into the transformation of power into action. Given a concern about how power is implemented in organizations, these would seem to be important research questions to be answered in the future (Jablin 539).

According to Baehr:

Organizational psychologists have probably not studied communication as intensively as they have studied many other organizational phenomena. Other social scientists, however, have studied communication intensively; in fact, communication may be seen as a separate discipline all by itself. It is largely from this other discipline that we derive information about communication and apply it to organizations (Baehr 162).

Research in this section would suggest that while organizational communication information might not be readily available to a police administrator who may want to initiate a training program; information on the subject of communications in general seems to be accessible. Police administrators can pursue this option through local colleges, universities, or private industry that may offer training in this field.

CONCLUSION/ RECOMMENDATIONS

Organizational communication is extremely important to any modern police agency. Achieving effective organizational communication is possible, even though there are several barriers that must be successfully addressed. Filtering or screening is one of those barriers to effective organizational communication. Police administrators must have confidence that when they issue a directive or message, the message will communicate the same meaning and will be decoded similarly by all ranks as it travels through the chain. Failure to do so can have dire consequences, as illustrated by the examples in this research paper.

Law enforcement officers spend much of their working day engaging in organizational communication. Although it is difficult to measure how exactly organizational communication affects productivity, research suggests that it is a significant percentage. Furthermore, ineffective organizational communication is not cost effective.

If an agency wants effective organizational communication and wants to minimize barriers such as filtering, proper training is the key. Training should be focused on mid level managers and supervisors. Research suggests that information on the topic of organizational communication may not be easily accessible to an agency, however, information on communications is plentiful and usually available through local resources.

Most agencies surveyed do have policy that provides for basic managerial or supervisory training to newly promoted individuals. It is recommended that as part of the policy, the topic of organizational communication, with emphasis on how filtering affects organizational communication, be added to the curriculum. How the message is sent is

just as important as what is in it. This can be accomplished with as little as a two-hour block of instruction. To be effective communicators, and to establish effective organizational communications within an agency, managers must know what can happen to their messages as the message travels through layers of hierarchy.

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