

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

**Improving Communication and Encouraging Agency Progression
Through Improved Training Models**

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

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February 2011**

ABSTRACT

Effective communication and an understanding of the generational gap is relevant to modern law enforcement because it directly affects the function of an agency. The position of the researcher is that law enforcement agencies should provide officer training promoting communication skills that will minimize generational differences and encourage agency progression. Research was gathered from academic journals, news agencies, Internet sites, magazine articles, and government documents. Relating to each person as an individual is the key to overcoming generational differences. To a greater degree, minimizing communication roadblocks such as filtering, cognitive dissonance, and a lack of organizational transparency have an impact on overall effectiveness. The long-term vision is to improve the quality of life for the community and develop future leaders. By changing current communication models and implementing a shared leadership structure, law enforcement agencies will be prepared for the future.

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INTRODUCTION

The single most important day-to-day activity that determines how law enforcement officers are perceived in their professional and personal life is how they communicate. Communication is how information, intentions, emotions, and directions are shared. When a failure to communicate in a manner that is easy to understand or the failure to communicate occurs, results can be different than intended. These may include the changing of a policy, an interview at a crime scene, or simply directing traffic. The breakdown may vary in severity, but, many times, it can be attributed to generational differences and a lack of understanding of how to relate to each other. Communication in the purist form can be seen in children. They communicate without bias or social rules, but adults allow complexity and stubbornness to derail the process.

Given time and the continued deterioration of communication, the progression and innovation of a police agency will stagnate. Most people would be more receptive to these changes if they had more information and it was communicated in a different way. Therefore, it is beneficial to understand the importance of communication and how to improve an agency through training and education.

Unintended filtering or screening in stages of the communication process leads to unintended results (Grijalva, 1998). Grijalva (1998) detailed this barrier as a process that simplifies or narrows information as it passes from one person to another. Filters can be anything that a sender or receiver might use to change the original meaning of the message.

Another reason for communication breakdown can be attributed to the lack of training for the position. Promoting to a new position comes with a learning curve that is

sometimes neglected. Schembra (2003) discussed the need for training new employees as well as employees who promote into a new position. Police agencies are no different, as they expect newly promoted officers to perform at the same level as a seasoned officer at the same rank (Schembra, 2003). This can discourage communication if the promoted officer is insecure or feels that they will look incompetent by giving an opinion or view.

A third mitigator of effective communication is the environmental and cultural characteristics that make people unique. These could be influenced by a generation gap, life experience, or even the town a person was raised in. Jonas (2007) determined that just hearing what the generations are saying is not enough; careful listening is required to achieve the required result. Jonas (2007) conducted a survey of three law enforcement agencies and graduates from the 2006 Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT) Module III to determine if communication was affected by the generational gap. She found that a generation gap does have a negative influence on effective communication. Law enforcement agencies should provide officer training that promotes communication skills, which will minimize generational differences and encourage agency progression.

POSITION

To better understand how generational differences affect communication, it is important to discuss if these differences are determined by the person's current age or their date of birth in a predetermined age range. Smola and Sutton (2002) listed factors used to group generations by asserting "A generation is an identifiable group that shares birth years, age location, and significant life events at critical developmental

stages, divided by five-seven years into the first wave, core group, and last wave” (p. 364). Names are given to a generation that describe an important event or perceived behavior present in the group.

It can be argued that differences between generations, as it applies to motivation and group characteristics, are not in agreement with common societal perceptions (Wong, Gardiner, Lang, & Coulon, 2008). Understanding the mechanisms that drive work values and promote critical thinking increases the effectiveness that communication has on the department. The 2008 study by Wong, Gardiner, Lang, and Coulon suggested that the most dominant factor in determining generational differences can be found in the individual's life stage. As an employee approaches the age of retirement, they are less inclined to be motivated by the prospect of a promotion or career advancement. More importantly, each employee is different and has specific environmental conditions that have impacted their perception of the work environment. Simply put, “organizations need to make sure that employees of all generations are heard and feel respected” (Rossi, 2007, p. 11).

The importance of seeing each employee as an individual instead of a part of a group increases the quality of communication. Goldhaber described organizational communication as the lifeblood of the organization (as cited by Grijalva, 1998). The knowledge that is shared among officers prepares them to complete tasks and better understand the vision of the department. The key to this transfer of information lies in a four stage process. The sender selects the vehicle for transporting the information and then encodes the information in a manner that will best express their intended thoughts (Grijalva, 1998). In turn, the receiver must then decode the information by first

acknowledging that information has been sent to them, and this is followed by interpreting what information was received. The last stage in the process requires the receiver to provide feedback to the sender that completes the process (Grijalva, 1998).

This relatively simple process was learned at a very young age. As people get older, roadblocks that corrupt the quality and efficiency of effective communication include filtering, cognitive dissonance, and lack of transparency (Bugg, 2010; as cited by Grijalva, 1998). A common roadblock is the process of filtering. Filtering changes the intended meaning of the information as it passes through a department's chain of command (as cited by Grijalva, 1998). For example, the patrol captain decides to purchase new laptop computers for the patrol cars but does not think to ask for feedback from the patrol officers who most often use them in the field. After several weeks, the patrol captain has a meeting with the shift supervisors and asks for feedback on the new laptops. The shift supervisors have been getting numerous complaints from the patrol officers concerning reliability and ease of use. Not wanting to criticize the captain's project, the officers tell him that there were a few issues but nothing major. The information requested by the captain was not consistent with what was being asked. The captain in the example may have prevented the filtering process by simply asking for feedback from the patrol officers.

A second and equally challenging roadblock is cognitive dissonance. It was described by Dr. David Bugg as a mental process where a person refuses to change their perspective even in the face of clear and factual evidence (2010). This example relates to law enforcement on a day-to-day basis. For example, two detectives are investigating a case where specific evidence implicates a certain suspect. One of the

detectives, despite the evidence, refuses to acknowledge the possible suspect because of conflicting beliefs. One belief could be influenced by having a personal relationship with the suspect. Therefore, he is forced to change one of those beliefs to remove the dissonance. How the critical information is used can have a far-reaching and potentially devastating impact in the future. In the case of the example given, one detective may disregard vital information and fail to understand the importance it has. In turn, the suspect may never be charged with the offense or the prosecuting attorney may lose the case due to dismissed information that was vitally important.

An equally important communication roadblock is governmental transparency. The term transparency has been used to describe the vision of the current presidential administration and a promise to the American people (Obama, 2009). Defining transparency can be difficult, but knowing when to be transparent can be even more challenging. The success or failure of social transparency is determined by the commitment of the organization to share information and the communities' belief in the integrity of the information provided (Holzner & Holzner, 2006). Implementing a transparency model among employees is essential to respond to a continually changing environment. The impact of a similar model can be seen in private companies to improve their products.

Transparency can be a very important tool in a law enforcement agency of any size. Officers are better prepared and gain confidence in their leadership when they are allowed to provide feedback into the decision making process. Communication will suffer between ranks if they lack trust and perceive that information is only provided to select people. Furthermore, citizens of the community expect detailed information

about major events that happen and are more inclined to participate in new programs, like a citizen's police academy, if they have an understanding of the curriculum.

One end result of poor communication is the stagnation or slowing of progression within an organization. Oakdale Police Chief Bill Sullivan (2004) highlighted this common phenomenon, which he attributed to differing perspectives and aging concepts of best practices between young officers' and their supervisors. If the disagreement alone becomes the point of contention, no positive steps can be made to achieve the desired goal. It is crucial that a plan is developed and implemented to accommodate any areas of the agency that suffer from communication roadblocks. There is room for new concepts like transparency and new training models, along with the traditional work standards that include the departmental mission statement.

Most would agree that a high work standard is required for law enforcement with certain procedures set in place to assure that such a high level is maintained. Changing the field training program to reinforce verbal communication skills for the younger generations would better prepare them for the field. Continued training would also apply to seasoned officers and supervisors. Sullivan (2004) combined both training philosophies by suggesting that a department's vision be easily defined with complete transparency. Simplified, this means, "How well a department works towards its goals determines how successful it is in reaching them; the proficiency of its employees is the determining factor of its effectiveness" (Schembra, 2003, p. 39). A law enforcement agency is measured by its effectiveness to reduce crime and improve the quality of life for the community.

COUNTER POSITION

The preferred method of communication in police departments is the chain of command, which follows the levels of rank within the agency and was modeled after the military's ranking structure. All forms of information, including general orders, administrative documents, and assignments travel vertically through these levels. The information is moved by an employee through a selected vehicle up the hierarchy to the next level where a supervisor determines if the information needs to be shared (Simpson, 1959). If the information is shared, the supervisor moves it up or down to the appropriate recipient (Simpson, 1959). Miller and Form (1950) argued that this process ensures that supervisors are aware of operations within the organization (as cited in Simpson, 1959). This process is expected to be efficient and follow the path of least resistance. Knowing who is accountable for any decision that is made can minimize wasted time and effort.

A second argument was given by Friebe and Raith (2004), which stated that "hierarchical communication can also help to prevent conflicts between superiors and their subordinates over hiring and promotion decisions" (p. 225). Minimizing this information reduces the criticism of employees and helps maintain morale. There is a fear that workers will try and persuade management that he or she is the best choice for the promotion, which causes unrest with supervisors (Friebe & Raith, 2004). In turn, supervisors and subordinates are concerned about their future and allow the pressure to affect their work ethic.

A final argument for use of a vertical path of communication is that it increases the difficulty in selecting the best qualified applicant for the promotion. The less

information the command staff knows about the patrol officer, the harder it will be to determine his qualifications and leadership style for a promotion (Friebel & Raith, 2004). In essence, the lack of direct communication between the upper management and subordinates ensures the playing field for promotion is fair.

The use of a chain of command has a very important place in law enforcement, and, when used correctly, is very efficient. Minor policy infractions or new procedures ordered by the division commander can easily be processed through the chain of command. However, using the vertical chain for all communication between divisions and ranks defeats the concept of critical thinking, giving way to the old paradigm of “managers think; employees do” (Spencer, 1994, p. 448). Not allowing officers to share ideas with each other or supervisors higher up in the hierarchy severely limits any feedback.

In today’s law enforcement environment, the chain of command and open communication should coexist. As an example, a patrol officer has an idea to implement a new form of defensive tactics for the department. He brings the idea to the shift supervisor, who listens and suggests that the officer write a proposal to the division commander. Once completed, the officer has a meeting with the division commander and presents his idea. The officer followed the chain of command by speaking with the shift supervisor first, followed by direct communication with the division commander who has the authority to authorize the new program. The patrol officer was the best choice to present the proposal as he had the most knowledge. The shift supervisor showed his leadership qualities by listening to the officer and demonstrating his confidence in the

officer. Jonas (2007) found that listening and open communication were critical in his study of the generational gap and its effects on law enforcement agencies.

The chain of command affects how the agency budget impacts implementation of training programs. Innovation and progression can be expensive. Currently, budget cuts are expected as the national, state, and local economies suffer from the recession. Times were better in past years, but even then, there was no guarantee of a fiscal surplus. Chief David Dial from Naperville, Illinois has reduced his department by three officers and removed \$60,000 from the training budget (as cited in Bohn, 2008). Training budgets are often times the first areas to trim away money in lieu of equipment. Equipment purchases are not safe either as some require training to properly operate. Any department that fields Taser's are required to certify each officer that will carry the less than lethal weapon by discharging two cartridges per year (Petrie, 2010). Each cartridge costs around \$25. If the agency's budget is reduced and administrators are required to make cuts, it is safe to say that training is an area at the top of the list. From there, decisions will be made on what training areas are less of a priority. The same logic would apply to creating or continuing community-oriented programs. Many law enforcement organizations have some form of a citizen's police academy or program designed to inform the community on police practices.

Each agency has a responsibility to reach its full potential, and each has unique circumstances that will affect how the community and agency leaders choose to best appropriate the budget. When departments are asked to do more with less, priorities have to be set. Many law enforcement agencies have adapted to tighter budgets by inviting other departments to share in training to save money (Petrie, 2010). Another

resource for training opportunities is state and federal grants. A federal grant through the Central Minnesota Sexual Assault Center paid for extensive training to several agencies in central Minnesota, which would normally cost \$675 per officer (Petrie, 2010).

The fear among law enforcement officials is the expected impact budget cuts have on public safety and crime rates. Northeastern University criminology professor James Fox said research indicated that “Long-term, there is a connection between an economic downturn and crime: budget cuts create significant challenges in keeping crime rates low” (as cited in Orr, 2010, p. 2). Community relations and youth programs need continued funding to sustain the downward path of crime rates over the past three years. St. Cloud Police Chief Dennis Ballantine believes failing to fund training has dire consequences and “that’s not good for public safety” (as cited in Petrie, 2010, p. 2).

RECOMMENDATION

The differences between generations are a combination of life stages and the blocks of time in history where the group was born. Those groups are defined by events that had a profound impact on society as a whole. It is important to not focus on the person’s pre-defined characteristics, but approach them as an individual and modify the communication model for the task at hand.

Equally important is minimizing the impact filtering, cognitive dissonance, and lack of transparency have on the communication process. All three provide a different challenge to the organization. Filtering changes the original meaning of the message. Getting the correct information to the intended employee increases overall effectiveness. Likewise, cognitive dissonance increases the opportunity for critical

information to be dismissed and passed over when two beliefs are in conflict. This process usually requires one of the conflicting beliefs to be changed. Making informed decisions can eliminate choosing responses that contradict an expected action. Similarly, lack of organizational transparency can breed mistrust among employees. A person's perception of an environment without understanding the detailed information becomes their reality. It is crucial that organizations share leadership and encourage all employees to participate in the decision-making process. The chain of command structure will give way to a more shared leadership model.

The goal of any agency is to envision the future of the department and develop positive changes. This can be accomplished through reduction of communication roadblocks and closing the generation gap. The process starts with improved quality of communication training and creating an agency leadership strategy. In essence, changing the culture of the organization to meet the needs of modern society through training and knowledge to improve the quality of life in the community is imperative.

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