

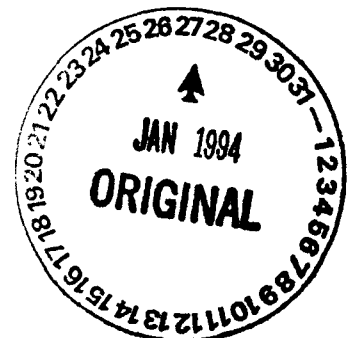
LAW ENFORCEMENT MANAGEMENT INSTITUTE

A STUDY OF FORMAL EMPLOYEE FEEDBACK MECHANISMS

**A RESEARCH PAPER
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT
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INTRODUCTION

Feedback may be described as the expressed thoughts or opinions of a person in regards to an act or omission of another. Regardless of one's relationship, whether it is wife-husband, parent-child, or employer-employee, feedback is the key element to successful communication. For purposes of this paper, feedback is used synonymous with input or upward communication. Feedback is not a new concept. On the contrary, whole philosophies of management are structured around the employee and his input within the management of an organization. This paper will review various type of feedback systems and then show how these systems can be used in the management of a police department.

In the 1960's, Texas Instruments pioneered an idea of participatory problem solving by groups of employees. The Japanese refined this idea into "quality circles", which are groups of employees who identify problems within their work place and make recommendations for solving those problems.¹ These systems can be complex and may not focus on the individual employee as much as the concept of an employee working in conjunction other employees. In an organization that practices "management by objectives", an employee and his supervisor agree on attainable goals for the employee. The opportunity for the employee to give feedback is often limited

in scope. If a manager feels that an individual employee's ideas hold merit, then there should exist a formal or structured mechanism for that employee's voice to be heard on a wide range of topics. Management needs to provide a system in which an employee's input is delivered to management in its original form, as opposed to their input being filtered through a group. Too often a person will alter thoughts to meet the consensus of a group, and as such, thoughts are diluted when they reach management. As a result, an invaluable solution or idea may be lost, or a rough idea with possibilities never enlarged or developed.²

Not only does management need the raw data a formal feedback system would provide, the employee needs the encouragement and protection afforded by a structured system. A new employee in most instances is very careful about what he says and who he says it to, whereas the tenured employee might be perfectly comfortable with dealing directly with the president of the company. Both employees may have equally valuable information, but both do not have equal access by virtue of their length of employment, position, or individual personalities. An established, structured feedback system affords all employees the opportunity to give feedback in a non-threatening environment.

Structure is needed to manage such a program and establish boundaries within which the employee understands the limitations of management. Feedback presented in a structured way insures set channels for the upward and downward flow of

information. If feedback mechanisms are not formally established, there is nothing to guard against haphazard responses by management. When feedback is used in a haphazard manner, production will lag.³ Creating a formal system sends a signal to employees that management is sincere in a desire to promote open communication of ideas.

EXISTING METHODS

A number of major corporations have employed different mechanisms to facilitate employee feedback. The following eight methods have been identified as some of the more successful. They are currently being practiced by Caterpillar Tractor, Northern Electric Co., Bell of Canada, Pitney-Bowes, McCormick, Raytheon Steinberg Ltd., Xerox, and Polaroid.⁴

1. A special telephone number is available for employees to call and ask questions. At certain times top executives might answer the phone and talk to the designated employee. Alternatively, employees may complete a design and performance form which are sent to employees by mail and the employee is answered directly, or the response is printed in the company newsletter.

2. Employees and managers regularly meet to discuss issues. Issues submitted by workers and managers are listed in an agenda for everyone to see what is to be discussed. After the meeting, a listing is posted indicating the disposition of each issue.

3. Meetings similar to those described above are held, but managers do not participate. First line supervisors meet with their employees and then relay information upward to managers.

4. An annual meeting is held with employees by the company's president and other top executives in the same manner as a stockholder meeting. The state of the company is explained and future plans are discussed. These meetings are meant to inform the employee, but limited feedback is sought.

5. A task force of managers and employees identify issues of concern from the work force. Then non-management employees are given company time to research the issues and make a report with recommendations to management. Management must respond within an allotted time with comments made available to the work force.

6. A miniature board of directors is created from employees ranking from entry level to mid-managers. They make policy recommendations to the corporate board. Evidence supporting their recommendations is also presented.

7. A core of counselors is established throughout the work force. Employees can make their comments in an anonymous manner to these counselors who in turn are responsible for forwarding such information to the appropriate person.

8. Allowing for discussion on a whole range of topics within existing committees that traditionally address only single issues. For example, a safety committee might address issues outside the field of safety.

These mechanisms are directed to large corporations and might be impractical for small to mid-size organizations. Some might lend themselves to smaller organizations with a little modification.

Nick Minion is the Human Resource manager for approximately two hundred employees at the American Medical International Bellaire Hospital (AMI Bellaire). He described the following feedback systems used by his organization.

1. Bimonthly employee meetings held between hospital administrators and employees. The meeting date and agenda are posted and all employees are invited to attend. Issues discussed and the disposition of such are printed and distributed in the employee newsletter or by special notice.
2. If an issue can not be readily addressed, a committee of employees is created to review the problem and propose a solution. There are also standing committees, such as a Safety Committee, that deals with specific issues.
3. Opinion surveys are conducted on an annual basis to solicit the views of employees on their job and the organization. Results of the survey

published in a special notice and management attempts to address issues of immediate concern.

4. The employee newsletter is used as a vehicle for reporting back to employees on issues raised and to solicit employee input.

5. An "open door" policy is in place where the employees are encouraged to meet with hospital administrators and discuss any issue of concern. If some disposition is not reached during the initial meeting, a follow up session is scheduled. If appropriate, other employees are advised of a course of action to be taken and the reasons. The "open door" policy is touted by many managers, but they use it as a method for employees to vent their feeling and may not follow up on an issue.

6. At the time of an employee's annual performance evaluation, he is given an opportunity to write any comments he might have on the bottom of the evaluation form. The employee is also given a card that solicits how he feels about his job and the organization. The card can be returned to the Human Resource office directly, or returned by mail. If the employee wishes, he may remain anonymous by mailing his card.

Minion went on to explain that although certain methods solicit a greater response from employees overall, it is

important to utilize a variety of methods as this acts as a check and balance system.⁵ Management needs such a check and balance system to avoid over reaction.

DISADVANTAGES

There are two sides to every coin, and the same is true for a formal feedback system. Encouraging systematic feedback in an organization is not a simple task. Advantages and disadvantages must be weighed before committing an organization to a formal feedback program. An organization might have what managers consider "more pressing" problems, but even if it does, a feedback system could effectively aid management in a variety of ways. Those "more pressing" problems might be significantly alleviated through feedback.

It is not uncommon for management to create a program just to say they have one. A feedback system can cause disharmony in an organization if it is created simply for the sake of appearances with managers having no intention of actually using any information that is gathered.

Employees expect one of two things upon providing feedback, information or action. Unless management responds in one of these two ways, employees will feel deceived and develop the view that management does not take their opinions seriously. Employees may then become suspicious of any future program implemented, regardless of its merit.

The initial development of a feedback system is enough to frighten many managers, but trying to determine what type of program meets the needs of an organization and its employees is not a job for management alone. As the whole intent of the program is to solicit employee input, employees should be involved in the process from the very beginning by assisting in the creation of the program. This will also help insure the success of the program as employees will feel they have an investment in it.

Employee involvement is a signal that management is sincere. Often programs of any nature are slow to generate results. The same is true with a feedback program, but as employees are involved with the creation and implementation, they will more likely understand any limitation of management. Too often employees think that management has unlimited resources and associate management's inaction to management disinterest. With a feedback system not only can problems be identified by employees, management can explain why appropriate action may not be immediate.

Information uncovered through feedback may not be what managers want to hear. For example, the president of an organization may not want to hear that his employees believe his policies are considered ineffective, unworkable, or inappropriate. Beyond that, managers may find themselves in a situation where they are legally bound to take some action. Allegations of previously unreported sexual harassment or

racial discrimination in the work force may come to the attention of management. Armed with information of some purported wrong doing, management might be legally bound to make reasonable and prudent inquiries, or face future litigation. Although this might be unpleasant to deal with, if such information did come to light through a feedback system, the system would have proven its worth.

The larger the organization, the more complex feedback systems tend to be. As such, management of the system will consume a certain amount of time which previously was devoted to other matters. It would be overly optimistic to say all feedback will be valuable to an organization. There will be some information provided by employees that management might objectively determine to be valueless. Any time spent on such suggestions might benefit no one.

Management must never forget that final responsibility for a decision rest with management. Managers can not delegate decision making to employees, or over react to information provided through feedback. Employee feedback is a tool which can be used to build a successful organization and create a desirable work environment. Managers and employees should have a clear understanding of each others role in the organization. Employees should never get so accustomed to having their input considered that they become angry or suspicious if management takes an action without collecting employee feedback first. Complete dependence on

feedback in the decision making process can cause an organization to become stagnant. It is the responsibility of management to be aware of which matters concern employees, but at the same time remembering that failure to consult employees in matters directly effecting their job is a primary cause of grievances.⁶

Just as the complexity of a system in a large organization can pose problems, in a small organization the familiarity of persons in the work force can be a draw back. In a smaller organization feedback may be more prone to "step on toes" as comments may focus on individuals rather than departments or the home office.

It is possible that an organization may be accused of "union busting" by installing a formal feedback system. Labor unions usually consider themselves the voice of the employee when actually they may be the collective voice of members filtered through simple majorities. In an union environment management should have union officials involved in the initial development of the system. This should quell anti-union accusations, and give both the union and management clear goals for the system. The same could apply to labor association that are not considered unions but, represent a labor group such as police associations.

ADVANTAGES

It is the opinion of many management authorities that advantages of developing a successful feedback system outweigh the disadvantages. Quality of production, quality of work environment, improved morale and a motivated work force can be the beneficial results of a feedback system.

Different employees are motivated by different things. No single approach or factor will motivate all persons. If you hold a carrot out to a horse it will most likely come to you but have you motivated it? If you hold a pay raise out to an employee his production may increase but, have you motivated him? The answer is probably somewhere between yes and no. The promise of a reward was a momentary incentive but, take the carrot away from the horse and the raise away from the employee will they both continue to perform as when the reward was offered? Management must look for ways to maintain a motivated work force regardless of incentives.

To be truly motivated and reflect high morale, one should perform at a high level with or without the promise of reward. Not all organizations can continue to hold a carrot out to employees. Significant pay increases are not normally possible year to year. In today's business climate of lower pay increase, pay freezes and even pay reductions, management must reexamine the basis of motivation.

What a manager might attempt to do is create an

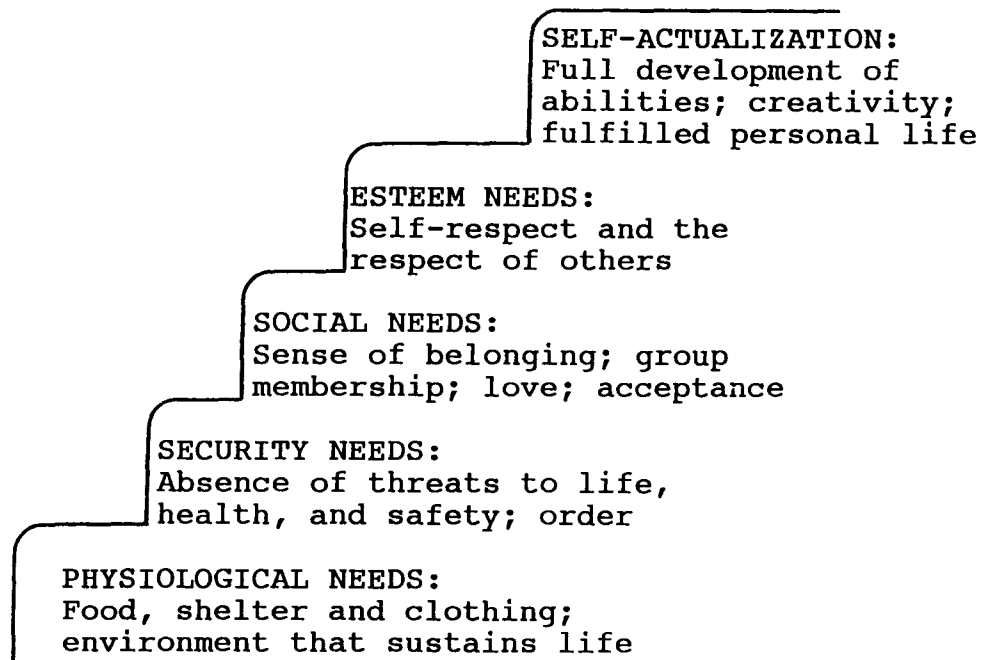
environment that will allow an employee to become self-motivated. A manager should attempt to promote or release higher levels of motivation within employees. Managers can learn through feedback what employees need to increase performance. For the motivated employee, feedback enables the manager to create conditions, or an atmosphere, for even greater performance.

The mere act of soliciting employee input can serve as a motivator. An employee feeling that his opinion is valued will have a sense of self esteem and belonging.

Psychologist Abraham Maslow suggest that there are five levels of need in human motivation.⁷ Maslow suggests that these different level of needs are similar to a stairway, with the more basic needs or motivations at the bottom, advancing upward to the more intrinsic needs. As a person fulfills one set of needs he begins to move upward and is motivated by a new set of needs. This is not always the case though. For example, an artist often go straight from physiological needs to self-actualization.

Often managers do not accept the concept of social and esteem needs as motivating employees. It may be true that employees are concentrating on security needs, but this may be a result of management's failure to stimulate and provide avenues to their other needs.

Table 1.--Maslow's level of needs.



Note: Like a stairway, moves from one level to the next. Data from Abraham Maslow, Motivation and Personality, 2nd. Ed. (New York: Harper & Row 1970)

One study demonstrates how managers often cannot accurately assess what employees want. In this project supervisors and workers were given the same list of job related factors. Supervisors were to mark the items in the order they thought was most important to employees. The employees were to rank the list in order of importance to themselves. Both were told to use one (1) as most important and ten (10) as least important.⁸

On the table below, workers displayed their social need for having a sense of belonging. It's interesting that what was the second most important item to workers, (being in on things) supervisors thought was the least important to workers.

Table 2.--Job-related factors.

JOB RELATED FACTORS	SUPERVISORS	WORKERS
Good working conditions	4	9
Feeling "in" on things	10	2
Tactful disciplining	7	10
Full appreciation for work done	8	1
Management loyalty to workers	6	8
Good wages	1	5
Promotion/growth in the company	3	7
Understanding of personal problems	9	3
Job security	2	4
Interesting work	5	6

Note: Data from Paul Hersey and Kenneth H. Blanchard, Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources, 3rd Ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall 1977), 51.

An organization that doesn't solicit an employee's input is stifling the individual's progress up the ladder of needs. This doesn't create an atmosphere conducive to motivation.

The correlation between an employee's self perceived value to the organization and his production was identified as early as 1924 in Hawthorne, Illinois. At a plant of the Western Electric Company, researcher Elton Mayo experimented with a group of women that assembled telephone relays.⁹

Mayo improved the working conditions of women by instituting scheduled rest periods and reducing the number of hours worked. Continuing the experiment over an eighteen month period, he achieved a steady increase in productivity. Mayo

suddenly returned the working conditions to the original ones prior to the experiment. The expected result was a negative psychological impact on the women and a drop in production. Instead, productivity increased to a record high.

Mayo concluded that as a result of having their working conditions improved, for the first time the women felt they were considered as an important part of the company. Although the improved conditions were removed, the new feeling of belonging caused them to continue working harder. Mayo felt this demonstrated that when employees feel valued, they become motivated. An employer taking the time to ask an employee for input is saying, "Hey, I value you and your thoughts".

LEGAL RAMIFICATIONS

The impact of a structured system could pose legal questions for an organization if management does not research existing contractual obligations with the labor force. In today's overly litigated world, a manager can assume that whatever he does, regardless of how routine, someone might use organizational actions as a basis for a civil suit.

Should an organization have a contract with a labor union, certain types of dialogue between labor and management may be prohibited. For example, a contract might specify that wages, working conditions, health insurance or hours worked can only be discussed with the union representatives. This

might not be a concern, but joint planning could save a lot of problems, insuring that a newly developed system developed did not violate an existing contract with a labor union.

An example of how a feedback system could violate a labor contract is its potential to appear as an attempt to circumvent the shop steward. The shop steward is a union member that has been elected by the union membership to represent a group of members to either management or to the union board of directors. This is a chain of communication that is protected by union contracts, and any attempt by management to have direct dialogue with members could be viewed unfavorably and be cause for a grievance.

Information may surface through a feedback system that could cause an employee to be in danger of retaliation from his immediate supervisor. An example might be a police patrolman advising his lieutenant that morale is low and work is down because the shift sergeant sleeps four hours out of an eight hour shift. The lieutenant investigates and finds the sergeant is neglecting his responsibilities and , as a result, the sergeant is disciplined or reassigned.

It would appear that the system has worked and the organization has become more efficient. However, if the sergeant knows which patrolman provided the lieutenant with the information, retaliation against the patrolman could occur. What obligation does the organization have to protect an employee in such a situation?

In most cases there is no law that protects employees in private companies unless the retaliation takes some form of race, sex, religious, disability, or age discrimination. Some states, Texas for example, have passed laws that protect government employees within the state against retaliation for exposing wrong doing.¹⁰ The federal government has a similar law protecting U.S. Government employees. These laws are referred to as "whistle blowing" laws. There are some instances, such as private companies under contract with a government entity, where private sector employees have this protection. For the most part though, private sector employees have no such protection.

An employee might receive his greatest protection from his employee handbook. A company that establishes rules governing itself and its operation might be surprised to learn that it might be forced to obey those rules by a civil court if an action was filed by an employee. In 1978, Richard Wooley was fired after working nine years at Huffman-LaRoche. The reason given was his boss had "lost confidence" in him. The company personnel handbook said an employee could only be fired "with cause". Wooley filed suit against his employer. The New Jersey Supreme court in 1985 decided in favor of Wooley and found against the company.¹¹ Even though some employees may not be protected by statute, they may have protection within the organization itself.

The fear of retaliation and its legal consequences may be one reason companies are slow to adopt any system that solicits employee input. This could be especially true in the law enforcement community. The police mystique of the "code of silence" among officers and the perceived treatment of any officer that "informs" on other officers may lead some police administrators not to solicit any type of feedback.

The nature of police work and the potential for corruption on all levels makes it incumbent on police administrators to have some system in place that allows officers to forward feedback to the administration of a department. The police administrator is obligated to ensure that any feedback system he puts into place is within department policy and directives, in keeping with any agreement with police unions or associations, and is lawful. Any proposed system should be reviewed by an organization's legal counsel before implementation.

FEEDBACK TO DEVELOP MANAGERS AND AS A CATALYST FOR CHANGE

Workers no longer respond to an authoritarian style of management and expect more input into their work and work environment. This is especially true in law enforcement. Police work has long been considered para-military in organizational structure and exercises a centralized style of management.¹² Practically all persons entering law

enforcement prior to the 1970's had served in the military but, with the abolishment of the draft and the end of the Viet Nam war, fewer and fewer people with military experience began entering the police profession. Consequently, old methods of "top-down" management are losing effectiveness. Management needs a tool to assist a manager or supervisor in identifying the need for change within their behavior and a process to implement and monitor that change.

Organizations are beginning to solicit employee feedback on the effectiveness of their supervisor in an effort to improve the quality of management. Managers often have an inflated view of their supervisory and leadership capabilities. As such they might not have a clear grasp of their weaknesses and strengths. It is easy to understand how managers could have a distorted view of their abilities. Managers are evaluated by their bosses who more often rate the manager on results, as opposed to method. Results in an organization is important, but not if the means or the methods weaken or destroy the organization as a whole. Today's manager needs an assessment of his methods and a source of critical feedback. Such feedback is more likely to come from the supervisor's subordinate and not his superior as it is the subordinate being managed. This calls for some structured form of subordinate evaluation of the supervisor.

The subordinate evaluation of a supervisor should take on the form of an opinion survey more than the traditional

performance evaluation. The purpose for this is that in most cases the employee is not trained in the completion of the traditional performance evaluation. It would not be fair to the employee or the supervisor to use a traditional performance evaluation.

The subordinate would complete the evaluation of a supervisor and forward it to a designated third party. This designated third party can be the supervisor's immediate superior, the organizations's human resource manager or an outside consultant. The feedback from an employee, or a group of employees, is reviewed and the results analyzed. The information is reviewed with the critiqued manager and any pertinent issues addressed.

Some managers might feel this is an opportunity for an employee with a grudge to discredit a manager in the eyes of the organization. This is possible, but should not be considered much of a threat as the person analyzing the feedback on a manager is going to be aware that it is likely some employees might use this to vent anger and keep this in mind during the analysis of the data. In this type of upward evaluation, the analyzing manager is going to be looking for trends and negative comments from several different employees on a supervisor's abilities. Such negative evaluations will be a red flag that a manager has a trait that might need to be scrutinized more closely. We all assume and prepare for the negative, but what about positive comments? In general,

employees don't go to their bosses and tell them what good job the boss is doing. This type of feedback allows for just that, encouraging an employee to state the methods and style used by the manager that the employee finds motivating.

The instrument used to collect this feedback is normally a survey containing questions directed towards a manager's human, technical and task oriented skills. J.E. Osborne, an administrative consultant, suggest that any such survey instrument should include the following performance areas:

- DECISION MAKING ABILITY. Employees are asked if their managers have the ability to make well-founded decisions for the group, or organization as a whole.
- SUPERVISING TASKS. How well does the supervisor manage job functions and assigned projects?
- ORGANIZING AND CONTROL. The survey may rate capabilities of planning job functions and controlling results.
- DELEGATION. How well does the manager assign task and appropriateness of those assignments.
- TECHNICAL ABILITY. Does the supervisor demonstrate thorough understanding of principles and procedures.
- DEVELOPMENT. Are members of the staff given the opportunities to acquire new skills and knowledge?
- MOTIVATION. Does the manager stimulate staffers to achieve, and does he or she provide a leadership role?
- COMMUNICATION. Does the manager encourage two way communication? Managements wants evidence that the

supervisor and employee truly talk to each other.¹³

To facilitate the analysis of the data, the instrument should force the rater to make specific and clear ratings for the various dimensions. A form that merely solicits comments on a task will be prone to basic responses such as excellent, good, or bad, and often no response at all. The survey instrument should offer choices that better reflect the differing degrees of performance. The better designed the instrument used to collect data, the more likely honest and accurate feedback will be gathered.

Doug Soat described another method of manager development in which employee feedback is an important part of the process. This is the Management Assessment Profile (MAP). The MAP is a questionnaire in which managers initially rate themselves. Then peers, supervisors and subordinates rate the manager using similar questionnaires. The results of the different questionnaires are compiled and compared. Again, a third party, often a consultant that developed the questionnaires, reviews the results with the rated manager. The manager then develops a plan to deal with any identified weaknesses and reviews same with his supervisor. The rated supervisor is rated again at a later date. Each time the supervisor is rated, the supervisor is able to measure current performance to past performance and realize any improvement in personal skills. This type of feedback forces a supervisor to compare personal views of themselves with

views held by others. It is intended to encourage supervisors to realize their developmental needs.¹⁴

There are some considerations that an organization should keep in mind when developing and implementing this type of feedback system. As in any project, top management support and line management's willingness to participate in the program are crucial to the acceptance of the program by those within an organization. The survey questions should be job-related, and as with performance evaluations, the instrument should be task oriented rather than rating personality characteristics.

Those providing the feedback should be guaranteed anonymity. This is needed to make the feel safe from the retaliation of an angry or embarrassed supervisor. Not only should the feedback provider be guaranteed anonymity, but the critiques manager should be assured confidentiality. Information should pass only from the rating employee, to the person performing the analysis of the information and then to the targeted manager.¹⁵

It might be necessary to refine the feedback process used by employees that evaluate their managers. Upper management should review the existing methods and instruments each time the feedback process takes place to determine if the information they are obtaining is of value to the organization, the manager, and the employee. If upper management feels that the process is not beneficial, the fault

might not be with the process, but rather with the methods used for gathering data or feedback. To avoid, "throwing the baby out with the bath water", the organization must be willing to experiment with data collection methods, and this is where management's commitment to the process will pay off.

There are numerous methods for collecting data, but most of these methods fall into four categories. These four categories are interviews, questionnaires, observation and secondary data. Management should be aware of these methods and be flexible enough to use whichever is most appropriate whether it is for collecting feedback on supervisors, or feedback on the organization's work product. Methods in these categories have both major advantages and potential problems.¹⁶

Methods from each one of these categories are listed in Table 3. The method might be used in a single process. Observation might be followed up with questionnaires. The questionnaire would be developed using data collected during the observation period. After analyzing the feedback from questionnaires, interviews might be conducted to obtain additional information on specific issues. Any system that would incorporate methods from all categories could possibly be expensive and time consuming. There might be problems or issues in an organization that would warrant the efforts, but questionnaire techniques will probably be the most common for managers to develop. As with other systems, having a variety

of methods at managements disposal acts a means of check and balance on data gathered.

Table 3.-Comparison of different methods of data collection.

Methods	Major Advantages	Potential Problem
Interviews	1. Adaptive-allows data collection on a range of possible subjects 2. Rich source of data 3. Empathic 4. Process can build rapport	1. Can be costly 2. Interviewers can be bias 3. Interpretation problems 4. Self-report bias
Questionnaire	1. Response can be quantified and easily summarized 2. Easy to use large samples 3. Inexpensive 4. Can obtain large volume of data	1. Non-empathic 2. Predetermined questions may miss issues 3. Data may be over explained 4. Response bias
Observation	1. Collects data on behavior rather than reports of behavior 2. Real-time, not retrospective 3. Adaptive	1. Interpret and decoding 2. Sampling 3. Observer bias 4. Costly
Secondary Data	1. Nonreactive, no response bias 2. High face validity 3. easily quantified	1. Access & retrieval 2. Potential validation 3. Coding

Note: Data from David A. Nadler, Feedback and Organizational Development: Using Data Based Methods (New York: Columbia University Press 1990), 119.

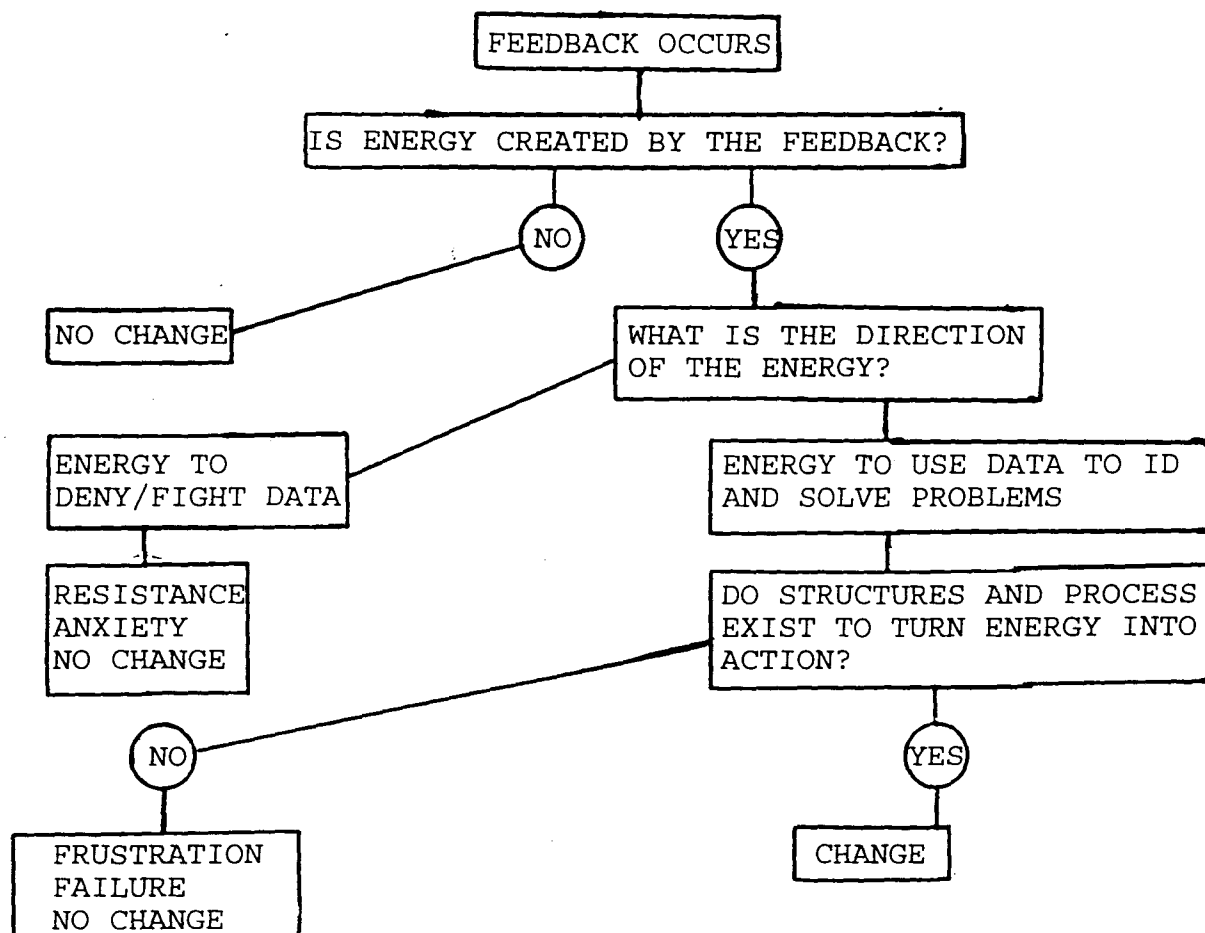
Just as feedback can act to develop or change managers, it can change an organization. Feedback not only is a method of monitoring and recognizing the need for change within an

organization, it can act as a catalyst for that change. Change is brought on by one of two forces.

External forces could be considered the clients, competition, and/or other elements that affect organizational operation beyond the direct control of the organization. External forces in regards to a police organization could be considered the population served, the courts, city government and changes in crime trends. The organization changes its goals and efforts to predict the needs and demands of the external forces.

Internal forces could be considered as the organizational structure and the employees that make up the organization. The organization has more control here and, as stated earlier, should realize the value of the employee and the contribution that employees' feedback can have on the organization. An organization must have a structured feedback system in place to harness this feedback and be able to manage change. The Table on the following page demonstrates how change can occur through feedback. This change occurs in varying degrees whether or not an organization has a structured feedback system. Through the implementation of a structured system an organization has more control on the nature of change. Even if an organization does not have a structured feedback system in place, a manager that understands how feedback acts as a change agent can better predict change and control it in his own environment.

Table 4.--Feedback as a change agent.



Note: Data from David Nadler, Feedback and Organizational Development: (New York: Columbia University Press 1990) 146.

The table shows that once feedback occurs, the deciding factor on whether or not change occurs is if it causes energy. Energy could be considered as the feedback having enough momentum for continued dialogue. If the feedback has no energy, no change is created. Even if it has energy, the direction of that energy determines if change will take place.

If the data provided in the feedback is denied or fought,

this will lead to resistance and in all likelihood no change. If the data provided by the feedback is used to identify and solve problems, the next question would consider if a structure or process is in place to turn this energy into action. If the answer is that a structured system is in place, then change will occur. If there is no structured system in place, then no change will occur.

FEEDBACK IN POLICE MANAGEMENT

Police managers deal with many of the same problems as managers in the private sector and as such, police managers should learn to employ the same techniques whenever possible. A primary responsibility of police managers is the constant review of operations, policies, and organizational structure in order to ensure an accountable and responsive police service. Change is often the result of such review. This type of change can come about in two basic ways. One is a reactive process which generates change due to a problem or crisis that has occurred. The second way change comes about is a proactive process that generates changes due to a predicted future problem or crisis. As in the private sector, a successful police manager will be able to direct and manage change as much as possible.¹⁷

The police manager should not feel that it is incumbent upon him to face change and solve problems alone. If a change

effects rank-and-file police personnel, then they must be involved in the change process themselves.¹⁸ A smart police manager will tap into the talents and expertise of his subordinates through the use of feedback. By developing a feedback system within a police department, the police manager has created an invaluable tool for himself. Not only should he cultivate a formal system within the department, he should cultivate an informal system outside the department with the public.¹⁹

This paper has explained several feedback systems that are used in the private sector. There is nothing so unique about police management that these previously discussed systems could not be used in a Police Department.

Unfortunately, there are some police managers that do not see any parallels between the operation of a police department and the operation of a business. These police managers may claim police work is so unpredictable that feedback is not a feasible variable in the decision making process. It is true that many critical incidents arise in police work that require immediate decisions, but even these incidents can be predicted and planned for in most cases. It is not being suggested that an opinion survey be taken on what type of chemical agent should be used while engaged in the middle of a hostage situation. Police managers can and should use feedback for long range planning and when time and circumstances allow.

More police literature is beginning to recognize and

explain the importance of feedback in all aspects of the operation in a police department, whether it is in the decision process²⁰ or the process of setting goals and objectives.²¹

Traditionally in police management, communication was viewed as being exclusively downward, with no expectation of feedback. Today's effective police manager realizes the importance of downward, upward and lateral communication and expects feedback at all levels.²² When considering the use of a feedback system, police managers must recognize the value of feedback from all members of a department. There should be no division of the system by rank, unit, or assignment. For example, a patrol officer should have a means of forwarding input to a lieutenant in the Detective Division, the Records Manager, or a communication sergeant.

A structured feedback system should not only facilitate feedback between divisions, but would encourage division managers to be more receptive to feedback. Often division managers are defensive or protective of their units. Feedback is viewed as criticism of their unit and a direct reflection on the manager. Without a feedback system in place to direct this input, resistance and frustration may take place and no change will occur. See Table--4. Feedback as a change agent, to understand how feedback can cause energy or action.

It is the responsibility of the Chief of Police to implement the use of a feedback system within the department.

The Chief must ensure that all levels of management understand the importance of gathering and using feedback in the operation of the department. The view of feedback as criticism must be dispelled by the Chief.

The use of feedback by police officers themselves is common. For example, a good investigator knows how to listen to a victim, suspect or witness and use information obtained to clear a case. This paper is intended to show police managers how the use of feedback in a department can improve operations. Feedback can be used for many purposes, but we will discuss its use as a method of developing line supervisors.

A uniformed patrol division operates on a twenty-four hour a day, seven day a week, basis. One problem faced by the commander of a patrol division is the inability to adequately view the management styles of his subordinate supervisors. As discussed earlier, the commander is more likely to see results and not methods. A system in which subordinates evaluate their immediate supervisor would give a commander a better understanding of the styles and methods used by his subordinate supervisors. Review of this feedback with the evaluated supervisors would give them a greater insight as to how they are perceived by their subordinates.

APPLICATION OF FEEDBACK BY BELLAIRE TEXAS POLICE

In 1990, the Bellaire Texas Police Department started

semi-annual evaluation of patrol supervisors by their subordinates. This was the idea of a patrol officer that wanted a method to commend supervisors that were performing well and complain about supervisors that exercised poor management practices. The administration saw this idea as more of a method for developing line supervisors rather than providing officers with a method of praising or complaining.

Initially patrol supervisors, consisting of sergeants and corporals, opposed the idea of having their performance evaluated by their subordinates. They argued that any such evaluations would be negative and some officers would use this as an opportunity to discredit supervisors.

Another concern of supervisors was what type of format would be for such evaluations. Supervisors stated that they constantly had to receive training and instruction on the proper method of completing performance evaluations on patrol officers. Supervisors also had lengthy and strict guideline to use when rating an officer's performance. The length of time that was required to properly complete a performance evaluation was also discussed.

Supervisors did not think it would be feasible to provide training to all officers in the completion of evaluations on supervisors, devise guidelines to be used or provide the duty time required for completing such. Police administrators saw that the line supervisors were correct in the view that such an evaluation system as used for patrol officers would be too

complex to implement. Actually, administrators did not want patrol officers to complete traditional performance evaluations on supervisors, all that was wanted was feedback on supervisors' performance.

Administrators decided to develop an instrument more along the lines of an opinion survey. This would be adequate for gathering the raw data that was desired. Certain areas of performance that were most often the source of comment by patrol officers were identified. These areas are listed as follows:

1. Attendance and preparation for duty.
2. Decision making, fairness and objectivity.
3. Review of work performed, training, communication and working relations.
4. The completion of performance evaluation on officers.
5. Performance of work and display of the work ethic.

To make the instrument as easy to use as possible it was decided that officers would be able to mark a supervisor as satisfactory, unsatisfactory, or above satisfactory in the listed areas. See example form in Appendix A. The officer was also given space on the instrument to better explain his rating of a supervisor.

It was understood that these responses would be highly subjective and as such the rating forms officers turned in on supervisors would not be reflected on the supervisors' performance evaluations. In doing this, supervisors became less defensive and more receptive to the data that was obtained on their performance.

The officers expressed a concern of possible retaliation

by supervisors for any negative comments an officer might make about his supervisor. This problem was solved in several ways. One way was that officers were allowed to complete the evaluation without identifying themselves. Whether or not the officers put their name on the completed evaluation was completely up to them. At the Bellaire Police Department, patrol supervisors rotate shifts every six months. It was decided that officers would complete the evaluations every six months immediately after the supervisor they were rating rotated to the next shift. Finally, the officer that rated a supervisor did not have to confront the supervisor with the evaluation. After completing such a evaluation, the complete form was forwarded directly to the patrol lieutenant. The patrol lieutenant would then review the information.

The evaluated supervisor is informed of the input from his subordinates by the patrol lieutenant. The patrol lieutenant gathers all completed forms on a particular supervisor. The lieutenant first looks for any comments that seem to be repetitive. For example, if out of eight evaluations, five say a supervisor is constantly late for duty, then the rated supervisor more than likely has an attendance problem and the lieutenant should address this issue with the supervisor. On the other hand, if out of eight evaluations, one says the supervisor is sometimes late, attendance is probably not such a problem.

When the lieutenant has had time to review all

evaluations on a supervisor, a mutual time and date are agreed upon for the supervisor to meet with the lieutenant to discuss the results of the evaluations. This is done in private, in an informal manner. Strengths or weakness noted by subordinates are discussed with the supervisor. The supervisors do not see the actual forms completed by officers, this helps keep the officer anonymous.

As of this writing the greater majority of these completed reviews have been complimentary of a supervisor's performance. Supervisors have taken the initiative in most cases to use any negative comments to improve their performance. Weaknesses in supervisors have been identified and addressed. Strengths in supervisors have been identified and built upon. Administrators have been able to recognize the onset of poor supervisory practices early enough in most cases to correct them.

After working with this system for almost four years, there are some parts that need to be changed. As each evaluation period passes, fewer and fewer officers participate. Participation has gone from 100% of patrol officers at the beginning of the program, to less than 40% at the time of the last evaluation. Through interview with officers, it appears that there are two basic reasons for the drop in participation. The first and most repeated reason is the form itself. The second reason given by some officers is the lack of results.

Officers suggested that the form would be easier to use if the number of rated dimensions were expanded. The current form lists five broad dimensions. Officers state that because the dimensions are so broad, to give an accurate evaluation of a supervisor, it is necessary to explain each rating in most cases. This requires handwritten comments. Officers advise that when they receive the form, they tend to put it aside until they have time to complete it and eventually they forget about it. To correct this problem, a revision of the form is being reviewed. Expanding the listed dimensions and using a number rating system is being considered.

The complaint that the evaluations do not accomplish result is not so easy to resolve. This appears to be a perception more than anything else. It appears that the best way correct this is to better explain to the officers the use of these evaluations and their limitations on the form itself. It would also be helpful to inform officers that some supervisory behavior has been modified through information provide by the completed forms. Officers need to understand how subjective these ratings are, and as such, can only be used to counsel supervisors on poor performance as perceived by their subordinates.

CONCLUSION

The implementation of a structured feedback system within

an organization can be beneficial to the organization and to the employee. The organization has the pooled knowledge and experience of its work force. The employee is provided with a motivator which is both professionally and personally enriching.

A successful system is measured by how well management uses the data collected, and not by how much data was generated. An example of failing to use feedback is the Challenger space shuttle disaster in which seven lives were lost and millions of tax dollars wasted. Engineers had questioned the integrity of certain O-rings in the fuel boosters. These O-rings were later determined to have been the contributing factor in the spacecraft's explosion.

The President's Commission investigating the Challenger explosion determined that the decision making process used by NASA was flawed. The Commission stated, "Senior management did not listen to engineers." Also, "What appears to be a propensity of management ...to contain potentially serious problems and attempt to resolve them internally rather than communicate them forward."²³

A structured feedback system can be used to identify deficient managers and improve their performance. Police departments can use feedback to facilitate learning and reinforce positive performance.²⁴ Developing a system which allows subordinates to have input on their immediate supervisor's performance is an inexpensive way for management

to learn the impact of methods used by supervisors. Feedback can be used by an organization to forecast change and manage such change through a structured system.

Development of such a system is not easy. Management and labor must both have a part in its development. A good system can only be sustained through the continued support of management. Management must be sincere in its efforts or it will generate more problems than it is attempting to resolve. A manager that fails to effectively use feedback is doomed to failure or at best mediocrity.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-annual Review of Supervisor
Form Used by Bellaire Police

SEMIANNUAL REVIEW OF SUPERVISOR

The purpose of this review is to give you an opportunity to assess the performance of your immediate supervisor(s) and provide your assessment to your supervisor's Administrative officer. The Animal Control Officer and Patrol Officers may complete two reviews, for their Sergeant and SPO. The completion of this review enables your supervisor's Administrative Officer to rectify any problems that he may not be aware of. Completed reviews should be directly forwarded to your supervisor's Administrative Officer by _____. reviews shall be completed on a voluntary basis. The side of this form may be used to elaborate.

PERIOD: _____

NAME OF SUPERVISOR _____

NAME OF SUBORDINATE _____
(voluntary)

1) Attendance/Preparation For Duty.

____unsatisfactory ____satisfactory ____above satisfactory

Comments _____

2) Decision Making/Fairness/Objectivity (consider critical or noncritical situations, response to your request, supervisor's knowledge, delegation of assignments, etc.)

____unsatisfactory ____satisfactory ____above satisfactory

Comments _____

3) Review/Training/Communication/Working Relations (consider review of procedures, critique of your work and paperwork - positive or negative, accepts or encourages your input, review of new or updated information, clarity of communication, permits you to complete tasks, etc.)

____unsatisfactory ____satisfactory ____above satisfactory

Comments _____

4) Performance Evaluations (uses guidelines correctly in interpreting your performance, review of evaluations in privacy, listed suggestions for improvement for your next evaluation, review of your evaluation before the 10th of each month, etc.)

____unsatisfactory ____satisfactory ____above satisfactory

Comments _____

5) Performance/Display of Work Ethics (consider supervisor's assistance provided to you on your work, work completed by your supervisor, example set by supervisor, initiative of supervisor to observe your performance, etc.)

____unsatisfactory ____satisfactory ____above satisfactory

Comments _____

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