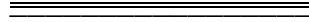


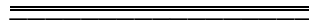
**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**



Implementing a Geographical Command Concept



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



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ABSTRACT

Implementing a geographical command system is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because it allows agencies to push actual problem solving from the management level down to the patrol officer level. It also gives officers more freedom from the traditional patrol shift structure while assigning greater accountability to the geographical commander, who will be the single point of contact for crime information within his area of command. Citizens also feel closer to their officers because barriers are broken down and problem solving is mutually sought out by the agency and the citizens, with line officers building relationships with the very people they serve on a daily basis.

Police departments should adopt the geographical command structure to better meet the community's demands for police services. As law enforcement continues to struggle with how to meet the needs of the citizens, the idea of geographical command is a strong candidate to bridge the gap. Police agencies will see its officers grow as problem solvers, and the community will reap the benefits of a closer working relationship with its police officers.

Some of the information that will be utilized in describing the geographical command structure will be internet articles, periodicals, newspaper editorials, a white paper, and a consultant report. These references will give credibility to the topic as well as assist in proving the position of the paper. Since the geographical command concept is a fairly new idea, the information contained in these references will shed some light on things that have already been done and some things that have yet to be done.

The implementation of a geographical command structure will allow police departments to become more efficient while allowing greater creativity by its officers and maintaining a close, crime fighting relationship with the community. It also allows for specific problems affecting a smaller geographic area to be attacked individually by officers within that geographic area instead of a cookie cutter response for the entire city. If departments communicate their ideas to all personnel and utilize a strategic implementation plan, the geographical command structure can have extremely positive results for the agency as well as the community.

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INTRODUCTION

Police administrators have traditionally utilized the watch commander system when configuring patrol shifts. Officers are assigned to an area or beat for which they are accountable for a set period of time until their shift is over. Officers are supervised by ranking officers who are held accountable for the services given to the citizens during this time period. Geographical command takes the accountability away for a period of time where the commander must be accountable for the entire jurisdiction and places it instead on a smaller geographical area of the jurisdiction for which the commander is accountable for 24 hours a day, seven days a week.

In a geographical command system, a single commanding officer is held accountable for their area of command. This allows the commanding officer to strategically plan his staffing and resources under a single command element and eliminate the multiple-plan implementations that is common among the watch commander system. By affording the geographical commander the freedom to set goals, make plans, and prepare staffing, the commander can base the area's individual needs in conjunction with the types of crime that are taking place. It also allows the commanders to rely on information from those who actually have the greatest impact and interaction with the citizens: patrol officers.

Agencies have begun to take notice of the advantages of a geographical command system. Some of the agencies that will be referred to in further detail are the Roanoke, Virginia police department; the Oakland, California police department; the Arlington, Texas police department; and the California Highway Patrol. These agencies have adopted different variations of the geographical command structure and have

shown improvements in the areas of productivity and community support. Johnson and Staples (2006) stated, "The GPI (geographical policing initiative) has been the police department's single most effective strategy to improve quality of life and fight crime" (para. 1). As the geographical command structure is becoming more widely used, there is more information to support the structure as a true method in lowering crime rates. Since 1991, the City of Arlington, Texas has seen a steady decrease in crime according to Lysakowski (1998). Department personnel agree that due to redeployment of officers and using the basic characteristics of the geographic policing model, their crime rate has dropped (Lysakowski, 1998).

Police departments should adopt the geographical command structure to better meet the community's demands for police services. Greater efficiency along with more cooperative communication between the police department and its citizens can be reached if a geographic command structure is put in place. There are numerous ways to implement this structure system in a positive way that will lead to an improvement in efficiency, but, as always, there are negatives to consider as well.

POSITION

One of the positive benefits of geographical command is that it increases accountability for each officer that works within each geographical area. Accountability is one of the key elements under a geographical command structure. By having a single point of contact for all police activities within a smaller geographical area, a captain or lieutenant will be thrust forward into the leadership and management roles that were originally intended for their positions. These commanders are now expected to analyze crime trends, adjust staffing to meet those trends, and answer for their

actions to administrators. Typically, these commanders have not had the responsibility for the types and frequency of crime occurring during their shifts. By breaking down the size of the area and placing direct accountability on these commanders, it forces them to take an active role in everything that occurs in their area of command, not just for a shift, but 24 hours a day, seven days a week. According to Lysakowski (1998), "Being responsible for "all" problems in his/her area, lieutenants communicated and worked with all shifts to coordinate activities. Thus, this change increased communication and cooperation among shifts" (p. 2). Action plans are implemented and success and failure are measured at the commander level, not the officer level. As stated by McRoberts (2004), "It gives them a little bit more control and they have some ownership" (para. 16). This gives the commanders a truer sense of leadership by facilitating their officers as the success of the beat officers is directly tied to the success of the commanders. This is a desirable situation for the department because the officers can now feel free to explore any number of solutions to everyday problems while having barriers removed by the commanders. Chief Wayne Tucker of the Oakland, Ca. police department described this new role by stating the commander is "to serve as a community liaison, director of operations, strategic planner and geographical area advocate within the department" (Tucker, Jordan, & Dellums, 2007, p. 3).

Utilizing a geographical command structure will increase the effectiveness of officers in responding to problems within the geographical area. Officers react to crime within their beats by going to a multitude of calls for service. Officers simply do not have the time to spend talking to citizens about more than what has occurred right then and there. Geographical policing allows for the beat officers to become as effective as

they themselves choose to be. Since areas have been broken down into smaller pieces, commanders can now staff certain areas with more or less officers depending on needs within the area. Staffing two different areas with the same amount of officers seems to be the “fair” way of dividing ones staffing but not if one area is being bombarded by a rash of burglaries while the other area remains fairly quiet.

Commanders must be able to create a more effective approach by moving resources at the lowest level without having to get everything approved from administration.

Johnson and Staples (2006) noted that officers in some areas were severely unbalanced in terms of calls for service. Some officers were too busy to provide special attention, while other officers in other areas had more than enough time to deal with issues in a comprehensive and timely manner (Parity of Workload, para. 1).

Geographical command increases the individual officer’s ability to come up with creative solutions at the lowest possible level within the agency. The Matrix Group (2003) acknowledged that by making the lowest level of personnel responsible for smaller areas, it allows focus on the different issues that arise within each area. Officers want to be treated as adults. The current command structures of most departments do not allow for free thinking and tend to treat officers as adolescents who cannot be trusted to make important decisions. Johnson and Staples (2006) stated that geographical policing allows the officer to attend neighborhood watch meetings and other community meetings, which helps them to identify problems occurring within the officer’s area. Creative solutions can only be accomplished if the officer knows what the actual problems are. Sometimes, this is the most difficult part of the process. What it comes down to is communication with the community within each area. Each area can

be so different that a solution that works in one area might actually fail in another. Officers must work with the citizens that they serve in order to truly be effective at problem solving. Tucker, et al. (2007) noted, "This model provides continuity of presence and an opportunity for daily, ongoing contact which ensures that officers are aware and informed of the community's current priorities" (p. 3). Geographical policing allows for the officers to build relationships with the community by placing the officers that will actually be responding to calls from the citizens, into a problem solving model with the community itself.

Geographical command will raise community support to higher levels. Community support is of paramount concern when implementing a geographical structure. By allowing a command level officer to become the single point of contact for an entire geographical area, community issues can be dealt with quicker and with a specific plan related to the conditions that exist within that particular area. According to Johnson and Staples (2006), "Geographic policing allows the department to fulfill the community's request for personalized, tailor-made service" (para. 2). There will no longer be cookie-cutter responses; instead, ideas will move up the chain of command from the beat officers who are actually working in these areas and have the working knowledge to know what will work and what will not in their area. An editorial in the Roanoke Times stated "that effective policing is not passive; it is not done to the public, but with the public" ("People power and the police", 2004, para. 11). Officers as well as their supervisors are expected to attend town hall meetings or other such community forums. Their goals are to listen to the community that they serve and utilize the community's

ever open eyes and ears in order to gain information that cannot be gained any other way.

Additionally, citizens living within a certain area will be able to speak directly to “their” area commander and give, as well as receive, feedback into how well certain action plans are going and updates on crime stats. The openness with which information will be shared with the community will go a long way into how effective the police will be in any certain area. Johnson and Staples (2006) cited that the department’s monthly telephone survey of its citizens that had contact with the police reveals that regular communication between the same beat officers and citizens has increased the performance levels of the officers. The survey indicated a 4.2% improvement in overall citizen satisfaction with police services. Geographical command extends a helping hand to the community by allowing line officers to respond with solutions instead of just reporting what has occurred. This, in turn, gives the community a desire to reach back towards the police and extend their helping hand, which is vital to solving the community’s issues. According to Lysakowski (1998), “The Geographic Policing Model appears to have greatly benefited the police in community relations. With more citizens becoming involved in community groups, police/community partnerships should strengthen, and support for the police should increase dramatically” (p. 6)

Once the jump is made to implement a geographical command structure, the next step is to perform a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis. This will allow the commander to know and understand what his areas strengths and weakness are and where opportunities and threats may come from. This

type of strategic planning is vital to the overall geographic command structure. It will allow commanders to take a hard look at the areas under their command and create a profile that can identify challenges, available resources, opportunities, and who will take on specific tasks (Phibbs, 2010). It ensures that all command level personnel are distancing themselves from line duties and focusing on using data and other incoming information to assist them in formulating a strategic plan that fits the area they are commanding. The SWOT analysis will aid the commander by demonstrating what needs to be done, who needs to do it, and what time frame is needed for completion. The fear of some people is that those employees that excel at different levels will gravitate to those areas or commanders that seem to have a full understanding of what is going on. An effective commander understands this fear and works not only within his area of command but ensures that his subordinates are developed in such a way to fill gaps in their skill level so that no one is left behind and that one area does not command all of the top troops.

COUNTER POSITION

The geographical command structure can be criticized because it is difficult to implement. It can be partially implemented or it can be fully implemented throughout the entire agency. The difficulty of implementation is due to the lack of understanding throughout the agency of exactly what the system is. Some agencies simply attempt to implement the system without first studying what changes they want to make, how they should make the changes, and how they inform the agency as a whole about the changes. The agency will be so different that its leaders must take part in advanced

planning in order to transition the agency smoothly (Phibbs, 2010). Employees may feel as if their role has changed or may simply be afraid of what they do not understand.

To ensure full understand and knowing what is expected under the geographical command structure, agencies can compare their current system for positives and negatives. Once these have been identified, communication is imperative in order to alleviate fears and anxiety and to ease resistance of everyone involved. Phibbs (2010) stated that as an agency transitions to this model, officers need to know what to expect both in regards to their new responsibilities and how this new approach will affect them. One way to combat a difficult implementation process would be to start small and utilize a partial implementation process. By only implementing a part of the agency, it allows for flaws to be detected and problem areas to be identified. Most agencies, from which references were taken, have a partial implementation, and use the patrol division as their starting point. According to a Roanoke Times editorial, "It will divide the city into four patrol zones that align roughly with Roanoke's quadrants. One lieutenant, four or five sergeants and 24 officers will be assigned to each quadrant" ("People power and the police", 2004, para. 6). As the process progresses, tensions should ease and if desired, a full implementation can be more easily accomplished.

Another issue can be the perception that there will be a lack of supervision for line officers and an imbalance in how many officers patrol the different areas. As stated earlier, a single area commander will oversee his geographical area 24 hours a day, seven days a week. Many question the removing of the upper management aspect of patrol companies, believing it will cause the line officers to be under supervised. Under geographical policing, the day to day operations are pushed down to the sergeants and

the line officers, while the lieutenants and captains oversee all patrol functions within their area of command. Johnson and Staples (2006) noted that the sergeants handle all day to day supervision of zone personnel. The sergeants should already be handling most of the day to day supervision. To assume that the plan would fail based on the assumption that there would be a lack of supervision just does not make sense.

Officers will continue to report to sergeants as they always have, with the only change being that they now control how they interact with the citizens, and they actually plan and dissect the problems in their beats instead of acting in a total reactive manner. The Roanoke Times ("People power and the police", 2004) contributed that success will partially depend on the patrol officer and how often they get out of the car and interact with the public. The patrol officer and sergeants take on the two most important roles in geographical policing.

Other complications to consider are those that have challenged agencies for many years. The main issue is that officers assigned to the same area for too long can be influenced or corrupted by the very citizens they serve. The Roanoke Times ("People power and the police", 2004) commented that geographical policing comes with some old pitfalls. Officers can become corrupted by being too familiar with an area. Training is the key element to help assist agencies in preventing police corruption, and with the focus on accountability, sergeants and area commanders should be noticing any abnormal behaviors in line officers and/or be getting information from citizens expressing concern about officers who are acting in inappropriate manners.

Lastly, one large hurdle to overcome is the perception that performance appraisals or evaluations are completed by sergeants that have not worked with the

officer enough to complete a thorough evaluation. Officers can become bothered by the concept of having a sergeant that they report to, but the sergeant does not typically work the same duty hours or shift that the officer works. The easiest way to correct this perception is to allow all of the sergeants working in a geographical area to have input towards the final evaluation of each officer working within the area. TELESMAF (1998) pointed out that teamwork among all sergeants is the key to reducing concerns over improperly completed evaluations or appraisals (p. 3).

CONCLUSION

There are many positives to implementing a geographical command structure into a police agency. It will give the line officers a sense of autonomy that they desire while accomplishing departmental goals and objectives more efficiently and effectively than the antiquated shift commander systems. By challenging today's police officers with more problem solving efforts at their level in the agency, they are better developed and have a better sense of accomplishment. Trust in the lowest level of the agency is a wonderful thing that many agencies are just now discovering. While citizens have not typically been an ally of the police agencies, geographical command has shown to build these relationships and citizens have responded with an outpouring of support. Johnson and Staples (2006) suggested that citizens are able to receive a more personalized service approach and are eager to help the agency as needed. As results similar to these continue to be reported across the country, only one conclusion can be made: geographical command works.

Some would comment that the system is difficult to implement and that it allows too much on the line officers and not on a supervisory structure. A geographical

command structure is actually easier to implement based on the fact that it is the line officers who are allowed to find solutions that are tailor made for their working area. No more one size fits all solutions means better overall police services and more effective problem solving. It should be noted that there is little, if any, change in the structure of the line officers and their sergeants; only at the command level does the actual structure begin to see a change in the organization. Supervisors will still be on patrol with the line officers, and they will still provide a supervisory oversight of the line officers performance on a daily basis. There have been examples where more supervisors were utilized instead of less based on the span of control guidelines that have been in place for many years. Phibbs (2010) stated, "Optimal span of control for any direct supervisor is five to eight subordinates" (p. 4). If more officers are needed in a particular area due to crime trends or other needs, the sergeants would simply shift with them in order to cover their span of control needs. Leaving each area on an equal manning level will cause some areas to experience increases in morale issues as perceived unfairness in call load assignments become apparent. Phibbs (2010) noted that assigning the same numbers to each area can create unbalanced call loads and understaffing. These types of issues will be the cause of low morale and less than optimal policing (Phibbs, 2010).

Allowing a geographical command structure to be implemented would alleviate these issues and create more effectiveness, with better overall efficiency for the entire agency while building lasting and strong community relationships. Lu (2004) commented "So far, the city's 2 month old 'geographic policing' system is doing exactly what police officials hoped it would for Roanoke schools" (para. 1). Communities

around the country want their police agencies to work with them, and the community deserves a more responsive police agency to specialize in problem solving that involves the community. Geographical command is the tool to get agencies back to the grass roots of police service and that is “to serve those they protect.”

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