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Internal Communication: Overcoming Barriers Within Modern Policing Agencies

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ABSTRACT

Law enforcement in general, is a service industry that relies on quality communication to fulfill its mission. Communication that flows reciprocally between law enforcement and the public is basically straightforward. Unfortunately, law enforcement administrators have failed to see a need to encourage quality communication within their respective agencies. Many opportunities and cost saving solutions are lost due to barriers in communication. Business and other non-law enforcement industries have discovered several strategies that have aided in overcoming these communication barriers.

The research question is simple: Can law enforcement utilize common business strategies for the improvement of communication within the agency? Police administrators and line officers identified many barriers to effective communication that exist within modern policing agencies. This information was acquired by personal interviews and written surveys. Human resource managers in the business community were also interviewed to ascertain the methods of overcoming communication barriers employed in their industry.

The data compilation revealed that law enforcement agency administrators have a different belief of what causes communication breakdown compared to that of their subordinates. Law enforcement would benefit greatly from the application of business tactics and remedies that have proven to increase the quality of communication internally. If employed, the identified strategies will provide employees and the law enforcement agency an increased value and work ethic.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
Abstract	
Introduction.....	1
Review of Literature.....	2
Methodology.....	8
Findings.....	9
Discussion/Conclusions.....	13
References.....	16
Appendices	

INTRODUCTION

Communication is the most basic and vital aspect of the law enforcement community. Whether it is positive or negative, each time an officer responds to a call for service or happens on any situation, communication is the hub, which causes and resolves that contact. Often, officers dealing with the public will accomplish the task they have been assigned with little or no resistance and low misunderstanding. This is due, in part, from an innate sense of respect that citizens have for authority. Officers give advice or instruction and the recipient will often comply with the instruction given and usually offer no debate. Unfortunately, law enforcement agencies seem to have the opposite result when communicating within their own organization.

Many opportunities are thwarted due to a lack of communication within an agency. Suitable ideas are often never explored and simple solutions to complex dilemmas are wasted in red tape or bureaucratic chaos. Administrators of law enforcement agencies must realize this communication obstacle and learn to bring down the barriers that promote such distance.

Primary sources of information for this research will be, organizational behavior textbooks, personal interviews of all law enforcement hierarchy, human resource managers, surveys, and law enforcement journals. Personal interviews will be conducted in an analogous environment to provide balanced responses. Surveys for administration, mid-management, and operational levels of law enforcement will provide a perspective from each area of the entity and their perceived level of communication within the respective agencies.

This research will define several common barriers that plague policing agencies and prevent quality internal communication, while providing assistance and useful techniques to aid in overcoming this tendency. Barriers to communication come in many forms and affect all tiers

of a law enforcement agency. Rank structures, predetermined cliques, race, ethnicity, political agendas, age, and education level all contribute to the most fundamental forms of barriers that affect all law enforcement agencies.

It is proposed that most agency administrators will not detect these barriers as the cause of a lack of communication or miscommunication inside their agencies. By utilizing the information that is reported, agencies should have a better understanding of barriers and how to implement changes to overcome this problem. The research should provide enough evidence to support the hypothesis that police agencies will benefit from the ideas and remedies that many corporations in the mainstream business world have already profited from.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In reviewing literature for the topic of communication barriers in law enforcement, a noticeable void was present. In a local university library, the newest literature relating to this topic was written in 1982. This in itself was valuable to pretext the importance and confirm the need for more research in this area. Several law enforcement journals sporadically have features addressing the need for improved communications within law enforcement agencies. University professors, general trainers, and interestingly, business professionals write the majority of these articles. The articles with a law enforcement application, for the most part, had the communication message merged in with other topics.

Many police agencies have developed an “Us verses Them” mentality between the administration and line employees (Trautman, 2003, p. 52). Trautman (2003) goes on to say that

of the more than 17,000 law enforcement agencies in the United States, most have unambiguous malcontents that often generate anger and hostility based on their belief of disrespectful treatment from the administration. Often, eager and efficient recruits are swept into this cancerous cycle and become pessimistic and cynical, increasing the barriers of filtering and rank division. He believes that many of these common situations are spawned from a very common issue of poor communication (pp. 52-54).

Several self-check questions are provided for administrators to examine their department for these types of barriers and provide possible strategies for overcoming these paradigms. “Do the employees really have a clear understanding of exactly what is expected of them? How does the department know its regulations are fair, clear, realistic, and communicated? Does the administration openly hold themselves accountable for addressing the obvious problems of the department?”(Trautman, 2003, p. 54) Elaborating on the accountability issue, Trautman (2003), states that when administrators open the communication lines by addressing the problems within the department, they become “role models for self-accountability.” This turns the tables on the officers that lead the cynics and malcontents by showing that there is a positive benefit to hold themselves accountable for their own actions (p. 55).

Numerous sources on communication barriers and strategies for overcoming these barriers are available in the business communication realm. The business community has focused large amounts of resources into identifying communication barriers and how to remedy adverse situations that result from their presence. Fortunately, law enforcement can take many of these ideas and apply them to actual barriers within the agencies.

Improving communication in any organization can be done only if there is a viable

strategy that addresses the needs and goals of the organization. This initiative must address the following issues:

- What is driving the need to communicate more efficiently with the workers?
- What are the key messages that need to be sent?
- To what degree will all levels of management be involved?
- What communication vehicles will be used?
- When should the communication take place?
- How can the feedback collected improve the organization?

Organizations that enter without a strategy will have severe breakdowns in their internal communication process (Biondi, 2002, p.3).

Bondi (2002) goes on to say that administrations need to keep employees informed, even if the news is negative. Employees will start to rely on their co-workers for information that is not reliable and possibly detrimental to the organization. This behavior leads to unproductive periods and takes resources away from the organization (p. 3).

A common barrier discussed by Gibson (1999), is that new employees have, at best, a very brief orientation period. During the orientation period, they are expected to learn their place and function within the organization. A more thorough or intensive orientation process would establish a clearer avenue for information flow, giving the worker a definite channel of communication (p. 8).

In both law enforcement and business communities, the historical tight-lipped philosophy involving the inter-workings of the organization have caused many communication attempts to fail. Some businesses have adopted a “marketing approach” to the operation of the business.

Opening the door to the employees of the business is not always an easy process to implement or maintain. Often administrators offer an “open-door” policy but do not explain the functions or processes that an employee might observe while standing in the open door. This can lead to more rumors and confusion than if the door had remained shut (Grensing-Pophal, 2003, pp. 79-80). Grensing-Pophal (2003) explains that organizations must establish transparency in order for the employee to appreciate the open door policy, illustrating this principle by discussing salary disclosure at a Fortune 500 company that posts all internal salaries at the organization and compares them to outside companies with similar functions. This allows all employees access to all information regarding salaries within their company and the industry (pp. 81-82).

Often, police departments and companies fail to converse with subordinates. Commands or orders are sent down the chain of command, yet reciprocal messages are not allowed to be received. This can lead to a substantial loss of personal and company value within employee circles and the organization as a whole. Overman (2003) states that employees will often hoard information in an effort to make their positions indispensable to the company. Conversing is a tool for managing knowledge. Companies and agencies that engage in conversing with employees actually gain trust and importance with the subordinate, which creates value to the organization as a whole (pp. 29-30).

A major barrier of communication in both business and law enforcement is employee evaluation. Often, evaluations are focused on attacking the recipient of the evaluation instead of searching for ways to correct problem areas. Performance counseling provides a way for evaluators to positively guide subordinates in the direction that suits all parties involved. Williams (2000) explains that counseling outlines the expectations of the supervisor, orients or

reaffirms policies or procedures, verifies goals and objectives for the next rating period, and clearly communicates future career plans (p. 1). Using this plan, managers can have an impact on encouraging quality behavior and intervening before unsatisfactory behavior occurs. Success of counseling relies on organization, active listening, specificity, fairness, and follow up (Williams, 2000, p. 3). Williams (2000) states that counselors must also show the subordinate respect at all times during the encounter, even during an adverse review. He also warns of the severity in which body language can be perceived during a negative encounter (p. 6).

A priceless instrument in effective communication is the exit interview. Frequently, companies do not conduct exit interviews with employees that are leaving the organization. Regrettably, most law enforcement agencies have never conducted exit interviews. Charles Gibson (2002) illustrates that exit interviews are an invaluable tool in spotting existing or potential problems in an organization. Exit interviews can provide an employee who is in fear of retribution from their managers an outlet to inform the management of concerns that need to be addressed. Gibson cautions companies that failing to act on information gained from exit interviews is just as detrimental as not conducting them (pp. 7-8).

One of the most profound barriers to communication is difference in culture or ethnicity. Employers in all industries must realize that the United States is a diverse myriad of race, ethnicity, and culture. A major portion of the “bottom line” in any organization is the quality of its employees. When communication is flowing, companies and agencies cannot afford to let the messages miss their target audiences (Digh, 2002, p. 1). Digh (2002) conveys the importance of knowing all of the cultural differences within an organization, and believes that this will equip the communicator with valuable information on how to prepare and deliver communication

within the company. It is suggested that communicators should evaluate whether different forums or media be utilized in the delivery of information (p. 1). Employers must keep in mind that some employees respond to direct communication and others prefer indirect methods. Knowing the audience is a very important factor for quality communication when minimizing barriers. Messages could also require several different delivery methods depending on the diversity of the audience (Digh, 2002, p. 3).

The last barrier is the “Ivory Tower” status. Many employees feel that they are exempt from communicating with the administration of their organization. Sadly, some administrations want this situation to exist. Quality in communication can be improved by allowing employees access to the head of the agency. Martha Frase-Blunt (2003) believes the bottom level employees in the company should have regular open meetings with the chief executive officer of the organization. These meetings should be without the presence of mid-level management. Such regular open meetings convey that even though mid-level managers and subordinates may have a superb relationship, employees will be more apprehensive about being forthcoming with reciprocal communication (p. 96). Although this is a first-class initiative to clean up communication, do not get caught ill prepared. Frase-Blunt (2003) suggests that the meetings be more of a forum atmosphere without a formal agenda and if at all possible, let the employees lead the topics and the direction of the gathering. The most important aspect of these meetings should be that there is no off-limit topic. This might prove terrifying for the executive in that quagmire. Executives in these types of meetings must be prepared for anything (pp. 96-97).

To successfully overcome any of these communication barriers, organizations must be able to measure the effectiveness of their efforts. Communication is happening all of the time.

The measure is not how much communication is happening; rather, is it having a positive impact on the company or agency? Communication measurement can be as simple as listening to informal feedback or as complex as hiring a company to perform a communication audit (Grensing-Pophal, 2002, p. 2). Organizations must identify what is the best measure for their particular situation and it is very important to steer clear of over-analysis of the data collected (Grensing-Pophal, 2002, p. 3).

METHODOLOGY

Research has shown that the law enforcement community has faltered in studying communication breakdowns within the policing community. Business and other non-law enforcement industries, have studied in great depth, the barriers to communication and how to overcome these problems. The question for law enforcement is; can common business strategies for the improvement of communication work in a modern policing agency? In evaluating current business strategies and researching contemporary practices, it is hypothesized that law enforcement agencies will benefit from the ideas and remedies that many corporations and non-law enforcement industries in the mainstream business world have already profited from.

The methods of inquiry in this research are personal interviews, written surveys, and telephone interviews. Personal interviews were conducted with local chief and mid-level administrators of law enforcement agencies. All of these interviews were conducted in each of the administrator's personal offices. A total of seven chief administrators and six mid-level administrators took part in the interview process.

Written surveys were given to fifty officers that work primarily at the agencies represented by the oral interviews. Forty-three surveys were returned to be included in the data collection. The represented department sizes ranged from 5 to 109 officers. The surveys were designed to be anonymous in nature to facilitate truthful responses.

Two human resource managers were interviewed to provide insight to effective communication strategies that are currently used in mainstream business. One manager is employed by a large convenience store company that employs over 5,000 workers. The second manager is the owner and operator of a single location automotive repair and service center that employs twenty workers.

FINDINGS

Interviewing the agency heads proved interesting when the research questions were answered. Not long into the research, it was revealed that most of the law enforcement administrators had a different rationality for communication breakdown in their agencies than that of the officers working under them. Forty-three percent of the top administrators believed that communication break down in their agency was due to the lack of access to technological advances in communication compounded by the vast area that their rural agencies were required to cover. Rumor was the next barrier causing communication breakdown with twenty-nine percent of the agency heads giving credit. With a tie of fourteen percent each, political agenda and racial cliques, rounded out what the administrators believed to be the main cause for communication breakdown.

All of the administrators were asked what was the primary means of communication their department provided for information sharing. Eighty-five percent stated that the entire department meets usually on a quarterly basis to discuss and share information. Only fifty-seven percent of the administrators conveyed that the departments use some form of electronic mail, with fifty percent of these departments allowing only a select few to access this method of communication. Face-to-face communication of supervisor to subordinate is used by 85 percent of the departments represented. Administrators concede that most of this type of communication is reserved for corrective measures. 100 percent of the department heads interviewed explain that the most common form of communication used is the written memorandum that is passed down to subordinates. This memorandum system is primarily used to issue orders and occasionally employed to send general information. None of the chief executives could give any indication that their department attempts to increase the quality of the communication that is passed up or down within the organization.

Each law enforcement executive was asked what could be done to improve the quality of the communication flow within their respective agencies. Most of the administrators acknowledged that there was obviously a problem within the agency and would consider: Having more department meetings, attempting to acquire more technologically advanced communication equipment, force the interaction of racially diverse officers, utilize suggestion boxes, and conduct more face-to-face encounters with subordinates. One chief executive stated that his agency (fifty-five sworn officers) did not have any problems with communication and that if a problem did occur, it would work itself out with time.

Samples of commonly practiced business tactics such as; town hall gatherings, follow up

sessions, positive feedback, focus groups, and reward programs were explained to each of the administrators. Each one of them expressed that the implementation of these practices within their departments would definitely improve upward and downward communication.

With the exception of the comment by one department head, that the department did not have a communication problem nor need improvement, the mid-managers reported almost identically the same views as their superiors. Incredibly, it seemed as though the answers were rehearsed. This is not true simply for the fact that the mid-managers were interviewed immediately before or after the chief administrators, with no lapse in contact.

Line-level officers had different perceptions and views than that of the administrators and mid-managers. Eighty-seven percent of these officers feel that the communication within their department is ineffective. Eleven percent cited that communication was somewhat effective when it was reciprocated. Only two percent of the officers surveyed felt that communication was effective. Forty-two percent of the line officers reported that the administration tried to promote quality communication within their department by having department meetings, inter-shift meetings, and providing electronic mail.

The line officers were given sixteen samples of business communication strategies and asked to identify the most appealing examples they felt would increase the effectiveness of communication within their agencies. Ninety-three percent of the officers polled identified positive feedback and reward programs to be a top priority. Face-to-face meetings was the second highest with sixty-seven percent and town hall meetings was in third with fifty-one percent.

One-hundred percent of the line officers stated that the largest barrier to communication

was the rank structure itself. Predetermined cliques came in at eighty-eight percent. Third was political agenda showing sixty-seven percent.

Two non-law enforcement human resource managers were interviewed to provide evidence that the business tactics above actually improve communication with all levels of employees. The automotive repair and service center owner says that their business employs positive feedback to train and instruct workers on improving quality output. This can be shown by noting that the turn-around time for customers has increased without a deficiency in quality. The company has also implemented a reward program for innovative methods or ideas that has added value to the overall work ethic of the employees. This reward program reinforces the belief that employees have an increase in job satisfaction. This business competes with approximately twenty-two similar companies and currently, has the largest customer base and boasts the largest sales of the area.

The human resource manager from the convenience store industry explains that the company is one of the top nationwide chains in the industry. Employment in the convenience store industry has an extremely high turnover rate, which is attributed to low wages, long hours, and low job satisfaction. The company employs quality training for all of its employees, e-mail for communicating with the home office and other stores, reward programs, special events to encourage leisure time for the employee, face-to-face meetings, and informative newsletters. The company has reduced its turnover rate and has proved successful economically even in the obvious recession that the retail industry has experienced. The company's success has been positively influenced by the quality of communication that flows within the organization.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSION

As a rule, law enforcement agencies set the bar high on the requirements of their officers. Communication with the public appears to be a higher priority than communicating with employees across the law enforcement agency. Identifying the barriers to effective communication and overcoming these barriers are of great importance to the law enforcement community. Business and other non-law enforcement industries have identified these barriers and implemented strategies to increase the effectiveness of the communication within these organizations. Can common business strategies for the improvement of communication work in a modern policing agency? The hypothesis of the research is that law enforcement agencies can benefit from the ideas and remedies that many corporations and non-law enforcement industries in the mainstream business world have already profited from.

The belief that administrators would not detect the actual barriers that cause communication breakdown is true based on the responses of chief executives, mid-managers and the line officers. The majority of agency administrators believe that limited access of technological communication tools is the main barrier in communication and the line officers unanimously declare that the rank structure itself is the largest barrier. Line officers say that attempts at reciprocal communication are often taken for insubordination or disrespect when the motivation is simply an attempt to clarify a request or make quality suggestions. They feel that if a hint of disagreement or questioning is detected, the ranking individual will retaliate against the subordinate officer.

All levels of the managers and officers that were interviewed agreed on the actual methods that are currently used to transmit information within their respective departments. The

most common method is the downward memorandum, which does not allow effective upward communication. Other significant barriers of communication that line officers reported were political agenda, predetermined cliques, and race. Political agenda appeared to be more prevalent within the departments where the administrator was elected. Social cliques based on longevity, education level, and rank was a concern with officers of each department. With regard to race as a barrier to communication, officers and administrators both agreed that it is not the bias of race against race; rather it is misunderstanding the perceptions and motivation of individuals within the particular race.

As mentioned earlier, chief administrators could not offer any indication that their departments attempt to increase the communication quality within the organization. Forty-two percent of the line officers believed that their administration did in fact try to improve the quality of communication. This is based on many years of downward-only communication. Departments that have even the most futile attempts of department meetings have increased the belief of promoting quality communication to the line officers.

Identified by the survey, positive feedback and reward programs are the highest on the wish list of the line officers. For so many years, only corrective or punitive communication was sent to line officers. Positive feedback will provide a wealth of added value to the individual employee and the department, which will filter through to the citizens. Traditionally, police officers are motivated by the awards that are present in a para-military organization. Reward programs for internal contributions, as well as external actions, would be considered a job perk.

In interviewing the human resource managers, it is confirmed that several business tactics for improving communication have been successful in their industries. Increases in job

satisfaction, company value, turnaround time, and quality have been attributed to the implemented communication strategies. A majority of the administrators and line officers agreed that the utilization of the suggested business communication strategies would increase the effectiveness of the communication within their respective agencies. Therefore, the facts revealed during the course of this research, are consistent with the hypothesis that law enforcement agencies can benefit from the ideas and remedies that many corporations and non-law enforcement industries in the mainstream business world have already profited from.

After conducting the research, it was revealed that there were several limitations that could have slightly skewed the raw data that was collected. The main limitation was paranoia. Many line officers showed signs of limiting their negative responses based on the belief that their administration would find out how they had answered the nameless surveys. The sample of officers surveyed was limited to the East Texas area due to time and travel abilities. Even considering the limitations, the data would be consistent if the limitations had been relieved.

Law enforcement would increase its effectiveness as an organization, employer, and service provider if it would identify and overcome the barriers of communication. Rank structure and order does not have to be compromised in order to increase value and quality communication within the agency. Many ideas and remedies are lost in the barriers of communication. If an agency would employ even a few of these quality tactics, and invest in the resources of the individual officer's abilities, the improvement would be immeasurable.

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APPENDICIES

Internal Communication: Overcoming Barriers Within Modern Policing Agencies

Officer Survey

(1) Is communication effective in your department? _____

(2) What methods of communication are provided to increase the effectiveness of communication (memorandum, meetings, e-mail, etc)?

(3) What methods of communication are actually used in the department? _____

(4) Does the administration promote quality communication? If yes, explain. _____

(5) Circle three barriers that cause the most substantial break down in the department's communication.

Age

Education Level

Ethnicity

Political Agenda

Predetermined Cliques

Race

Rank

Other _____

(6) What suggestions would you make to increase the effectiveness of communication within the department?

(7) Circle six business communication strategies that could increase the effectiveness of the department's communication with its employees.

- | | |
|---------------------------|-------------------------------|
| HR department involvement | Structured orientation |
| Positive feedback | Face-to-face meetings |
| “Town Hall” gatherings | Intranet forums / “Help Desk” |
| E-mail | Newsletters |
| Questionnaires | Focus groups |
| Suggestion boxes | Reward programs |
| Follow-up sessions | Regular interviews |
| Exit interviews | Other _____ |

(8) Do you feel that communication channels within the department would be more effective if tactics commonly used in the business community were applied? If yes, explain how.

Internal Communication: Overcoming Barriers Within Modern Policing Agencies

Oral Interview Questions

Name _____ Agency _____

Title _____ Date/Time _____ Location _____

(1) What is the main cause for communication break-down within your agency? _____

(2) What methods of communication are provided to increase the effectiveness of communication (memorandum, meetings, e-mail, etc)?

(3) What methods of communication are actually used in the department?

(4) In what ways does the administration promote quality communication? _____

(5) What are three barriers that cause the most substantial break down in the department's communication.

(6) What changes would you make to increase the effectiveness of communication within the department?

(7) Do you feel that communication channels within the department would be more effective if tactics commonly used in the business community were applied? If yes, explain how.

