

EBSCO Publishing Citation Format: APA (American Psychological Assoc.):

NOTE: Review the instructions at http://support.ebsco.com/help/?int=eds&lang=&feature_id=APA and make any necessary corrections before using. **Pay special attention to personal names, capitalization, and dates.** Always consult your library resources for the exact formatting and punctuation guidelines.

References

Reiter, M. S. (1999). Empowerment Policing. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, 68(2), 7.

<!--Additional Information:

Persistent link to this record (Permalink): <https://libraryresources.columbiasouthern.edu/login?url=http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=asn&AN=1587253&site=eds-live&scope=site>

End of citation-->

Section:

Point of View

EMPOWERMENT POLICING

The benefit of empowerment in law enforcement organizations has been the topic of many recent discussions among police managers. Most police executives would agree that employees who are trusted, allowed to make their own choices, and take responsibility for their actions will remain committed to their work and feel that they play an important part in their organizations. Community Oriented Policing (COP), today's dominant policing philosophy, is based on Concepts of empowerment and teamwork. Nevertheless, organizational structures and other factors, such as individuals who resist change, stand as barriers to achieving the full benefits of empowerment and the COP movement. However, a change in organizational structure and leadership philosophy can remove these barriers to success.

THE PARAMILITARY ORGANIZATION

Paramilitary organizations have an abundance of rules and a rigid command structure. They use primarily one-way communication from the management to the line function, passing through various levels of hierarchy, with the power and decision making vested at the top. In the past, this organizational model served the law enforcement community well, partially because a large portion of police officers had served in the military and found comfort and order in this approach.

However, in paramilitary or bureaucratic law enforcement organizations, first-line supervisors often have limited authority and a narrow view of the organization. As a result, top-level supervisors become overburdened with too much to do, and other employees just wait for orders.(n1) This system may result in compliant employees, but it proves inefficient and overly demanding of those in upper-level positions.

ORGANIZATIONAL DESIGN

Based on their pyramid-shaped organizational structures, typical paramilitary organizations strictly adhere to the chain of command. They also tend to address problems by growing, becoming more complex, and adding specialized units whenever new problems arise. Those new units typically require additional support personnel and more supervisors--all of which require more sets of rules, more steps

for approval, and checks and counterchecks--commonly referred to as red tape. This approach creates new and more complex places to hide problems and place blame. Also, because power and privilege reside only at the top of the organization, those in the middle become lost and often question their own purpose.(n2)

The need to reduce costs has resulted in a forced flattening of the hierarchy in many paramilitary or bureaucratic organizations. In other words, middle management is shrinking. While removal of organizational layers does not automatically eliminate bureaucracy, this movement to flatten the hierarchy often increases communication by eliminating unnecessary filters of information often found in the middle levels of the organizational pyramid. The flatter a department's hierarchy, the more its leadership must trust and rely on the judgment of line-level officers, who directly provide service to the community and do the bulk of the work.

By inverting the organizational pyramid, law enforcement agencies take a bold and symbolic step toward becoming empowered. In a traditional paramilitary law enforcement hierarchy, the chief executive stands alone at the top of the organizational chart with the police officers found toward the base of the pyramid. Inverting the pyramid and placing the chief at the bottom and the police officers at the top symbolizes that the chief serves the organization and is responsible for its leadership. In this inverted pyramid organizational structure, the officers gain responsibility and the task of leadership becomes responsive to them.(n3) Under such a philosophy, authority comes from within an organization, and its employees become valued because they are a contributing part of the organization, not because of the positions they hold.

THE EMPOWERED ORGANIZATION

Typical leaders of empowered organizations remain unsatisfied with the status quo and never use the phrase "because we have always done it that way." They continually seek to shift authority, control, and decision making to the individuals doing the core work of the organization.(n4) As a result of encouraging innovation and placing trust and belief in employees, a sense of commitment and ownership develops that becomes evident by high performance and a positive outlook. Trust bonds an organization together.(n5) An empowered leader realizes that all else being equal, employees prefer to work in a pleasant environment over an unpleasant one. While a pleasant work environment does not always equal higher performance, employees who view their work as drudgery create a great barrier to sustained performance.

However, in every law enforcement agency, times exist when the paramilitary model is the appropriate leadership style. For example, a civil disturbance may require that a force of police officers act together in controlling a crowd. During such an incident, strict control and immediate obedience to orders would prevail over allowing employees to make their own decisions. Commanders should focus on safety, discourage risk-taking, and provide little room for experimentation in such situations.

An empowered organization allows for this departure from the norm in extreme circumstances, but a paramilitary or bureaucratic organization experiences great difficulty switching to an empowered approach when circumstances dictate.

Autocratic leaders may interpret empowerment as disloyalty to their departments and consider it the abandonment of the core beliefs of the paramilitary model. Whereas empowerment emphasizes flexibility, an autocratic bureaucracy emphasizes rigid structure and adherence to the rules.

TODAY'S ENVIRONMENT

Today's culture brings instability, uncertainty, and change. Information remains paramount, and policing has become an information business. The paramilitary model worked well in a stable environment of performing largely similar tasks repetitively. However, as policing has moved from this largely stable environment to a dynamic and increasingly complex one, the paramilitary organizational model has become dysfunctional.(n6)

In paramilitary organizations, officers often make decisions based on strict compliance with the rules. However, modern law enforcement agencies cannot rely on detailed sets of rules because the changing environment often causes these rules to become obsolete quickly. Thus, officers must make decisions that often conflict with existing rules. Because today's police officers are well trained and highly equipped to meet these challenges, their managers should value their judgments and decision-making abilities. Relying on detailed rules instead of the judgment of individuals may display a lack of confidence and could lower morale.

FACTORS INFLUENCING EMPOWERMENT

Generation X Police Officers

The greatest percentage of new police officers come from a group of 52 million Americans born between 1963 and 1977 referred to as Generation X.(n7) Generation X police officers began their careers amidst organizational reengineering, unprecedented change, and uncertainty within their departments. They grew up in a time when society could not rely on the promises of institutions. Prior to Generation X, individuals usually achieved success by making long-term commitments to one organization and avoiding risk. Many Generation X officers watched their parents spend their careers working for one or two organizations and making great personal sacrifices, only later to become the victims of downsizing or corporate buyouts resulting in unfulfilled promises of security. Generation X police officers realize that the paternalistic organizational philosophy of "pay your dues, be patient, and you will be taken care of" has become obsolete.

Because Generation X police officers grew up in the middle of a firestorm of technology and information, they may prove better suited to the policing of the future. Only an empowered leader who allows employees to participate in decision making can motivate them and keep them from moving to those fields where empowerment has become the standard. When Generation X police officers think that their supervisors do not trust their judgment or do not put their talents to best use, most of their abilities, creativity, and intelligence lie dormant, and policing becomes just a job to them.(n8) As a result, their motivation fades more quickly than any other generation's. Management of paramilitary law enforcement organizations often characterize Generation X police officers as having given up and label them underachievers.

However, Generation X police officers are not inherently lazy, arrogant, or materialistic as popularized by the media--management always should value all employees based on the skills and potential they possess. It remains the organization's responsibility to provide an environment that allows them to reach their potential. The paramilitary model of policing frequently fails in this regard.

Accreditation

The accreditation movement in law enforcement, based on standardizing rules and practices, may contribute to maintaining the paramilitary model. Accreditation efforts usually encourage autocratic leadership and bureaucratic structure and generally require strict compliance to a detailed set of rules.

Rule compliance serves as the basis for awarding accreditation to applicant law enforcement agencies. Accreditation bodies require that agencies have written directives to show compliance with a specific set of standards. Administrators wishing to ensure their organization's accreditation often write detailed and voluminous sets of rules and regulations to provide unquestionable proof of compliance with the standards of the accreditation body. This overreaction further removes decision making from the line officers and sends a clear message that the agency does not trust in the judgment of its officers but rather in sets of very detailed roles and regulations -where strict compliance is expected. The emphasis of a paramilitary organization is not on people but on control, systems, and structure. While the accreditation process has many benefits, the requirement to produce detailed and voluminous sets of written rules is not one of them.

Community Oriented Policing

The COP movement is a profession-specific example of empowerment theory. COP embraces many of the concepts of the empowerment model and values people over most other elements in the organization. Empowerment in COP not only allows line officers to solve problems but also gives them the trust and involvement of the entire community. The police and community partnership found in COP is clearly antibureaucratic and should be the focus of every law enforcement leader.

However, the paramilitary organizational design represents a powerful detriment to the COP philosophy. No sets of written rules exist that can systemize and manage what some police departments have accomplished through COP initiatives. Trust and risk are inherent in most of those successful programs. The best achievements from COP initiatives often happen when an officer does something not covered in any written rules and that has never been done before. Practitioners know that "thinking outside the box," a concept that the paramilitary model punishes, remains critical to COP. Many police leaders today remember the old sergeant who illustrated the embodiment of the paramilitary model and believed officers were not paid to think, just to do what they were told.

EMPOWERED LEADERSHIP PHILOSOPHY

Trust is the essence of leadership in an empowered organization. Empowered leaders push decision making down to the officer level because they have confidence in their officers' abilities and believe that many decisions are best made at that level. Innovation and creativity normally include some level of risk. Leaders automatically do not punish failures because risk remains inherent, and failures provide valuable learning experiences. All learning involves some failure.⁽ⁿ⁹⁾ This does not suggest that leaders should permit failure in all arenas of policing.

In professions such as law enforcement, failure can result in different consequences. For example, an after-school program for at-risk juveniles with low participation can have much different consequences than an unjustified use of deadly force. Creativity, innovation, and experimentation become appropriate in law enforcement only in those areas where the ramifications of failure do not place the safety or welfare of the community or organization at risk. Empowerment philosophy easily adjusts to those narrow areas of policing that require structure and strict rule compliance, providing leaders make the rules and their purpose well known.

Leaders must focus on rewards and not discipline, and they should encourage dissonant information and individual opinions. Additionally, they should consider hiring employees from divergent backgrounds and viewpoints as a strength. Hiring employees with similar backgrounds and experiences encourages organizational inbreeding that hampers creativity and innovation.⁽ⁿ¹⁰⁾ Above all, law enforcement

executives must start by embodying empowerment dynamics in themselves. While empowerment can grow spontaneously, sparked by enlightened leaders at any level of the organization, it must do so covertly if management does not offer full support.(n11) In these circumstances, any substantial failure based upon empowerment likely will result in harsh punishment.

CASUALTIES OF THE TRANSITION

Empowerment can evoke a mixed response in some agencies where autocratic leadership remains at the core of the organizational culture. In such organizations, some police officers may not want increased autonomy and may find comfort in high structure and predictability. Yet, others will test the limits of their authority. Because organizational cultures vary within departments, each transition will present different risks, problems, and successes.

Empowerment may not work for every law enforcement agency. In a government where autocratic leadership remains the norm, empowerment may be a dangerous undertaking that threatens the system and its most basic beliefs. Leaders who consider this transition must differentiate between courage and suicide. Only those who can appreciate the benefits of success and the losses of failure should attempt such a transition. While leaders can apply empowerment techniques in any organization, it becomes an all-or-nothing choice of how an organization views its people; otherwise, empowerment risks being a leadership fad in a cosmetic attempt at appearing progressive.(n12)

Leaders of paramilitary law enforcement agencies considering the change to empowerment should first ask themselves if they are satisfied that paramilitary policing is successful in their agencies. If agencies employ Generation X police officers, who generally experience fewer problems and respond quickly and appropriately to new challenges, then a change to empowerment may not be needed.

CONCLUSION

Trusting today's educated, independent, and innovative police officers to make the best decisions and take responsibility results in higher performance, greater commitment, and a sense of ownership in the organization. This methodology may be the only way to keep police officers of the future stimulated. Police officers do not want to spend the best days of their lives in a career that denies their abilities and talents. They would like to think of themselves as actors in the system rather than being helplessly acted upon. As a result, empowered police officers make real differences in improving communities.

Law enforcement organizations that value conformity, consistency, and compliance to the rules ignore the changing and unpredictable environment found throughout organizations today. By trying to play by rules designed for past problems, the paramilitary model is simply too inflexible to serve the future of policing. One effective way leaders can make decisions for solving new problems is to trust in the judgment of the police officers who can solve them in a way that no set of rules or rigid command structure can attempt.

Leaders face immense challenges relative to the future of policing. Leaders that implement an organizational design and philosophy that encourage trust and enhance officers' judgment and skills will provide an environment conducive to the type of innovation, commitment, and personal satisfaction necessary to address the problems of the future. The empowerment policing model can help achieve greater successes in the next century of policing.

Endnotes

(n1) G. Pinchot, "Creating Organizations with Many Leaders" in *The Leader of the Future*, ed. F. Hesselbein, M. Goldsmith and R. Beckard, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 27.

(n2) P. Block, *The Empowered Manager* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1987), 20-62.

(n3) K. Blanchard, "Turning the Organizational Pyramid Upside Down" in *The Leader of the Future*, ed. F. Hesselbein, M. Goldsmith and R. Beckard, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 85.

(n4) *Supra* note 2, xv.

(n5) W. Bennis and B. Nanus, *Leaders: The Strategies for Taking Charge* (New York: Harper and Row, 1985), 153.

(n6) D. Guyot, *Policing As Though People Matter* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 1991), 67.

(n7) B. Tulgan, *The Manager's Pocket Guide to Generation X* (Amherst, MA: HRD Press, 1997), 3.

(n8) S. Covey, "Three Roles of the Leader in the New Paradigm" in *The Leader of the Future*, ed. F. Hesselbein, M. Goldsmith and R. Beckard (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 153.

(n9) *Supra* note 5, 75.

(n10) *Supra* note 2, xiv.

(n11) P. Senge, "Leading Learning Organizations" in *The Leader of the Future*, ed. F. Hesselbein, M. Goldsmith and R. Beckard, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1996), 42.

(n12) P. Hersey and K. Blanchard, *Management of Organizational Behavior: Utilizing Human Resources* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1993), 176.

PHOTO (BLACK & WHITE): Empowerment policin

~~~~~

By Michael S. Reiter, M.S.

Adapted by M.S.

Assistant Chief Reiter serves with the Palm Beach, Florida, Police Department.

---

Copyright of FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin is the property of Superintendent of Documents and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.