

The Systems Approach: A Model for Organizational Learning

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Abstract

The purpose of this project is to suggest a model which may be used by law enforcement to broaden individual and organizational creativity while providing a more inclusive, holistic view of management within our internal and external organizational structures. This project introduces alternatives to traditional management, leadership styles and problem solving strategies. Law enforcement organizations in the 21st century will face many challenges. Much like community policing impacted the nation in the mid 1980's through the 1990's, the systems thinking approach offers a philosophy for the new millennium.

Introduction

Law Enforcement is typically viewed as a paramilitary organization, operating within a rigid control and command structure which offers little flexibility for change. Over the past two decades, society has made a drastic transformation and is much more diverse than the organizations that provide police services. In order for law enforcement agencies to better prepare for the challenges forth-coming in the next century, we must open our minds, eyes, and hearts and not attempt to resist the obvious need for change.

Traditional law enforcement attitudes deal only with stabilizing immediate problems rather than attempting to analyze each situation as a whole and determine the best course of action so that the problem or any other symptoms that may result from the "quick fix" attitude do not arise again. Alternatively, a systems thinking organization would stabilize the immediate problem and call upon support organizations to aid in the permanent solution to the problem. Systems thinking offers a new philosophy for thinking, acting and doing and can be implemented with any existing community policing program.

Systems thinking emphasizes the importance of cohesiveness and interdependency within organizational structures and communities, even when some individuals are not viewed as allies. When members of a team share common visions and goals, they work together as a part of a process to achieve positive results through commitment rather than compliance. During the course of a process, participants continuously evaluate the effectiveness of a system. This is an example of diversity in action where everyone strives to accomplish a common goal. Often this co-active process can be a difficult transition for individuals adverse to change.

Miller (1994) states that knowing the whole truth demands that we seek the wisdom of a systems perspective, a global view, when we investigate the causes and effects that our thoughts, words and deeds might have on others and the environment. Systems principles offer a more volumetric view, allowing the viewer to see the world as a composite and interdependent with outside resources. Systems thinking encourages us to examine how our actions influence others, and includes learning to recognize the ramifications and tradeoffs of the actions we choose (Senge, 1994).

The discipline of systems thinking is a powerful problem solving tool and can be translated into a universal language as words can be substituted for diagrams that will

illustrate patterns and similarities. The word *system* is derived from the ancient Greek and originally meant "to cause to stand together". In this philosophy we learn to view the big picture, and not to attack a problem by fragmenting or breaking it down into smaller pieces the way many of us have been taught since childhood. The workers of this era cannot be managed the same way in which those of the industrial age were.

New Leadership Styles

The Workplace 2000 leaders will earn the trust of their followers through unconventional means. These leaders will lead by example and actually participate in the process. The new leaders will be self confident, and exhibit a "we" attitude, giving credit to "teamwork." "Empowering" will be the chief motivational tool of the *Workplace 2000*. The leader will coach, not control (Boyett & Conn, 1992). Among the leading attributes cited for future leadership positions are communication skills (including effective listening), the ability to accept change in a positive manner, and understanding of the effects of change on the workers, the ability to empower and build trust and teams, strong motivational skills, and most importantly, vision. Employees will be selected on the basis of ambition, drive, and personal characteristics and not just education and technical ability.

Traditionally the majority of law enforcement supervisors have been categorized as very structured thinkers, and possessing a firm paramilitary leadership style. The new workplace will demand a much more flexible leadership style; the new leaders must possess qualities never before considered to be critical in law enforcement. Some of these new traits will include empathy, compassion, flexibility, and unconditional tolerance and respect for individuals of diverse backgrounds. The new leader will be participatory, co-active with their teams, and assume the role of a coach in effort to foster an environment conducive to ongoing learning and development, instead of the traditional "train and perform" agenda which was primarily designed for a military mind set and which offers little room for flexibility of modification based on the needs of the employee.

Preparing for Tomorrow

We are embarking on territory that many of today's current managers and leaders are not prepared to handle effectively because they are not systems thinkers. Traditional linear thinkers of the past were very methodical but are not equipped with the wide-angle lens discussed earlier. This, in part, is what creates resistance to change within an organization during a metamorphosis. Traditional management is resistant to change stating that their strategies worked fifteen or twenty years ago, but we need to be focused on tomorrow, today. Not yesterday, today. That is where our preparation will be of worth. For this reason, we must involve today's lower management in the planning process. They will be tomorrow's leaders, and will be making decisions that will effect our lives during our retirement. The message here is: we better include them, trust them and train them to the best of our ability, but most importantly, not be afraid to learn from their generation.

We all make up a part of the much bigger picture, much like a puzzle. However, even with 999 pieces in place the picture will not be complete if the thousandth piece is missing. Administrators must commit themselves to the belief that there is no human

being within their organization that does not play a critical role, worthy of respect and recognition.

The challenges of integrating multiple cultures will be felt more directly in the American workforce, making communications more difficult between management and employees. Traditional training programs are less likely to be effective. The pool of labor used to be comprised of individuals who graduated from the same schools, with the same educational background. Now the workforce is multicultural, multilingual, multigender, and multifaceted. Employees who come from diverse backgrounds have varying ways of thinking, and functioning within the traditional workforce. Private business, the public sector and government agencies as well as the health care industry have implemented this holistic approach of providing service to internal and external customers.

Implementation of systems thinking must commit from the top. An effective systems thinker, particularly in an organizational setting is someone who can see the following four levels operation simultaneously (Senge 1994):

- Events
- Patterns
- Systems
- Mental Models

Every organization has customers, some are internal (employees) and some are external (stakeholders). Within these structures are events that cause management to react. Traditionally, management would react to their customers needs because they were not properly prepared. Patterns of behavior are not recognized in time to be proactive. Any movement made in attempt to counteract a perceived problem is an **event**.

By mapping out a time line depicting your organizations ups and downs you will be able to better calculate where your next problem will land. This will provide you with **patterns of behavior**, but not necessarily the solution to the problem. It is critical to understand that everything within the organization is interdependent on the other, what affects your employee adversely is likely to cause similar problems when the employee delivers services to stakeholders (citizens). This includes the element of **systemic structure**. It is important to remember that working harder is not necessarily working smarter. Management's response to chaos is counterproductive. **Mental models** is the last level and includes all of the assumptions and beliefs in which we make our decisions and actions. If a supervisor rewards subordinates for quantity and not quality, that is what they are likely to receive. Changing mental models for the good of the organization may require re-shaping managerial structure, which in turn may require a change in culture and attitude.

Lack of Systems Thinking

There is a profound lack of systems thinking in law enforcement. Much of this may have been formed during the early years of training when officers were taught to define the problem and take action on the party (who is) at fault. There are many cases however where "who" or "what" is to blame is not as important as just solving the

problem.

In many organizations, we fragment ourselves based on our assignments. Each division competes against one another for recognition and respect. We compete by justifying our importance to the organization. One of the most common examples of this is the distance the patrol division places on the crime prevention unit. It is commonly stated that crime prevention officers, D.A.R.E officers, and school resource officers are not "real cops." This is the same as saying that the only real doctors are surgeons. There is also the issue of police administrators. Why are command officers not considered *real cops*? Patrol officers tend to think these people are not one of "us," and in reality they are all working equally hard to accomplish a similar job.

One option is for organizations to implement "*shadowing*" programs. This would allow officers in other job functions to mirror an officer, or even a civilian employee in another division. The goal for this would be to encourage a better understanding of all members within the organization. Each position is integral to the other. The first time your building maintenance staff is not there to accommodate your needs, you will be the first to realize their importance. The key is to be aware of each employee's individual value, whether it is someone at your level or rank or a civilian. Every employee is vital and deserves to be respected.

Another critical area in which law enforcement agencies are failing to think systematically is internally within their organizations in employee *training and development* programs. Many current training programs are ineffective for today's diverse organizational culture. The training programs that were developed twenty years ago for the predominantly ex-military population will not fit today or tomorrow's broad mixture of employees. Law enforcement agencies have been equated as militaristic and bureaucratic for several decades. This image is being resisted by today's public due to the inflexible and insensitive behavior exhibited by many of the officers trained under this philosophy. Training within these agencies must exhibit a balance of internal and external needs. Many traditional instructors feel that having to address the departments make up of diverse learning styles as a disruption. In order to align the instructors with the students, it will be necessary to evaluate the teaching methods of the instructors and the learning styles of the students. It is critical that the department trainers provide lessons that cover a variety of learning dimensions. Using tactics such as negative re-enforcement, intimidation, humiliation, or placing fear of failure on the student will destroy a learning environment.

With the integration of female officers, and other minorities participating in the same training as the military officers some training as routine as firearms qualification can create a problem. One female officer commented that she was told to "dig a trench" in order to lay in a more prone position during firearms qualification, as the instructor stated. Her chest was "in the way." Many other exercises that were developed when there were few women in the profession are similarly inefficient.

Instructors often criticize and humiliate an individual during training exercises. The instructor resents having to deal with a student who is perceived as different. There are times when female students will experience difficulties due to their physical differences. The problem may be as simple as the way men and women must stand to better their stance and grip while shooting. The difference in physical characteristics and emotional intelligence creates new challenges for both instructors and students. All

it really requires is a paradigm shift in the minds of participants. Most of the officers realize the importance of completing a specific task and are willing to find workable alternatives to accomplish it. The instructor who simply resists any "shift from the norm", becomes the training problem - not the student.

Thinking systematically would allow for better planning and balance for the needs of all students, not just the "normal" ones. The ideology that training means, "I tell you what to do, and if you fail, you are stupid" is ineffective. The training coordinator may want to explore the need for a department learning style assessment survey to better serve members. If a trainer refuses to take into consideration individual needs, and fails to listen to the student, the trainer should be assigned to another area better suited to his or her abilities. Negatives defeat the purpose of training. A positive atmosphere will lead to open minds and students will be motivated and stimulated to learn. Continuously criticizing will lead to negative responses and behaviors. Using the term, "failure," over and over when the intent is to provide a positive training environment is more likely to turn off students who would not have otherwise done poorly. Implementing an instructor evaluation program may also improve instructor deficiencies, by allowing the student to grade the trainer. This information should expose areas where the trainer may need to enhance skills in an effort to more effectively address the students learning styles.

Administrators involved in the recruitment and selection process should evaluate the level of training an applicant has received prior to being hired. This process could assist coordinators in placing recruits with the appropriate training officers. If the individuals charged with designing the work place environment would take these issues into consideration during the planning phase, it is more likely that employee's would view their work product as an investment in their own future. When employees believe they are respected and their contributions are valued, morale and productivity go up and sick leave and turnover rates decrease.

Human Resource specialists, recruiters, and personnel departments must keep in mind, what motivates one employee may not be as important to another. If an individual is worth hiring, they should be worth investing in and retaining. The cost involved in advertising, interviewing, selecting, hiring, training is significant. However, the cost of a high turnover is even greater. Employees should be considered an organization's greatest asset. An employee who feels valued by the organization will be more likely to return the investment.

The old belief that one size fits all no longer works. When height requirements dictated who could be a police officer and vehicles, uniforms weapons and other equipment were purchased in mass quantity, most of it was compatible because the officers were all hired on a "made to order" (size) basis. Society would be much better served if the tools departments use to hire police officers evaluated the candidates emotional quotient, motivational ability, personality style and not just the physical size, education, race or sex of the officer.

Senge's Systems Model - An Appropriate Application

Many organizations are incorporating systems thinking into their organizations. Senge's (1994) model is being widely adapted by diverse organizations. Peter Senge outlined a systems model in The Fifth Discipline that discusses the five disciplines that

should be implemented into a "learning organization." The disciplines include:

- Personal Mastery
- Shared vision
- Team learning
- Mental models
- Systems thinking

Each of these disciplines are unique to the success of any organization and can be used individually or in any combination to design a plan to fit organizational needs. The core of a learning organization is based on the five learning disciplines, and requires a lifetime commitment to study and practice. The five disciplines provide a guideline for any organization to live a healthier and more harmonious existence. Using the five disciplines provide options that may be utilized in order to bring employees together toward a common purpose, we can also align them with the goals and values of their organization.

These five disciplines have been used widely in both the private and public sector to produce learning organizations practicing a systems thinking philosophy. It is a viable paradigm for law enforcement and is proposed in this research as an implementation model for law enforcement organizations.

Purpose of Research

The purpose of this research is to develop a systems model for law enforcement based on Senge's (1994) disciplines. The model is intended to broaden both individual and organizational creativity for enhanced problem solving and organizational learning.

Methods

The methods for this research consisted of literature review and observation/experience of the author. Literature in leadership, systems theory, and problem solving was reviewed.

Senge's Five Disciplines

To best understand the application of Senge's (1994) model to law enforcement, each of Senge's five disciplines (personal mastery, shared vision, mental models, team learning, and systems thinking) are defined.

Personal Mastery

Personal mastery is learning to expand personal capacity to create the results most desired, and creating an organizational environment which encourages all of its members to develop themselves towards the goals and purposes they may choose. The desire to practice personal mastery is intrinsically motivated. This discipline requires a commitment to learning, self-awareness and flexibility. Managers can encourage workers to practice the discipline of personal mastery by assuming the role of coach. The coach must model this role by personal behavior. Individuals working together to

practice personal mastery will be laying the foundation for *shared vision* for their organization.

Shared Vision

Shared vision is building a sense of commitment in a group, by developing shared images of the future we seek to create, and the principles and guiding practices by which we hope to get there. By enhancing dialogue and communications skills, individuals can work collectively to achieve organizational goals. Cohesiveness is the key to group success, whereas competition can stifle the mission.

Mental Models

Mental models means reflecting upon, continually clarifying, and improving our internal pictures of the world, and seeing how they shape our actions and decisions. Mental models are responsible for our inner prejudices, stereotypes and the assumptions and judgements we prematurely conclude, often based on insufficient or raw data. By broadening our individual views of the community, we enable a healthier and more holistic society to exist around us. Negative mental models contribute to cultural, racial, and gender insensitivity. These types of issues too often lead to lawsuits based on harassment and discrimination and can financially devastate any private or public organization as well as cause emotional distress to the victim.

Team Learning

Team learning is transforming conversational and collective thinking skills, so that groups of people can develop intelligence and ability greater than the sum of an individual member's talents by combining the various intelligences including emotional intelligence, social intelligence, organizational intelligence as well as academic intelligence. The combination of all inner intelligence will provide a balance more conducive for learning, creating and producing.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking is the cornerstone of a learning organization and is a way of thinking about, and a language for describing and understanding the forces and interrelationships that shape the behavior of systems. This discipline helps us to see how to change systems more effectively, and to act more in tune with the larger processes for the natural and economic world (Senge, 1994). Systems thinking fosters an environment which values each member individually and collectively as a team. The absence of fragmentation creates a healthy and solid foundation for mutual respect and trust throughout the organization. Teams work with, not against, one another to achieve the organization's mission and goals based on the values of the organizational culture. This philosophy promotes a win/win attitude.

Three-levels of the five disciplines. Each of the five disciplines can be thought of on three levels:

- **Practices:** What you do; Focus
- **Principles:** Guiding ideas and insights; Theory
- **Essences:** The state of being of those with high levels of mastery in the discipline.

It is important to understand the difference between a discipline and an area of study. A discipline is a technique, a philosophy and a lifelong practice to develop proficiency in these areas.

Practices are activities which practitioners of the discipline focus their time and energy. The **principles** represent the theory of the practices within the discipline, remembering that thinking and doing our part of learning. **Essences** are the state of being created by individuals or groups who have mastered high levels in the discipline.

Law Enforcement Systems Model

The Senge systems model allows for diversity and flexibility. An organization can modify the model at any time to fit their needs, which should be constantly evaluated for effectiveness.

By using the following five dimensions, this model serves as a guide in which law enforcement can implement systems thinking and create the foundation for a learning organization.

Personal Mastery

This dimension is critical to an individual's self-awareness and intrinsic motivation. Organizations should encourage members to seek learning and development in areas which they desire mastery rather than proficiency. This requires an ongoing commitment to learning and growing. Encourage members to reach beyond their comfort zones, step out of the box, without fear of ridicule or humiliation from peers or supervisors. Emphasize the importance of emotional intelligence and personal awareness. Respect a members need to be unique and individual. Cultural diversity and sensitivity training should be conducted on a regular basis.

Recognize and reward contributions made by all employees who go the extra distance.

Personal Mastery will increase self-esteem and reduce personal insecurities. This will allow an individual to concentrate on the positive energy needed to accomplish desired goals.

Reinforcing the discipline of personal mastery in the workplace lays the natural foundation and provides alignment for the successful achievement of the organizations shared vision.

Shared Vision

In order to successfully attain a shared vision, all individuals and teams within the infrastructure must develop a sense of commitment in the areas of increased communication, effective listening , dialogue, and problem solving. This dimension could be facilitated by dialogue sessions that offer respect to all participants and no personal attacks on an individual's view or feelings. Listening, and not talking, is the most important part of dialogue. This practice also allows the speaker to hear what they are truly sharing with the group, rather than just speaking the loudest to be heard. Discuss how individual and organizational values may differ, and how to achieve mutual goals. Conduct employee and community based surveys to gauge the organization's effectiveness to both internal and external customers. Encourage employees to ask "why" and "how", if they do not understand something clearly. Create a personal action

plan or a mental map for individual and group goals and objectives.

Interactive exercises should also be used which allow people to grow together and not apart such as in competitive environments. Workshops which foster teamwork such as the "ropes" confidence building course or the "simulated society" exercises may be effective in bringing groups together towards a common purpose.

Team Learning

Foster an environment conducive to learning. Assess the trainers' methods of instruction for effectiveness. Evaluate the diversity of learning styles within the organization by administering a learning skills assessment instrument. Create a balance of talent and diversity that will provide a positive influence to all participants. Promote a cohesive environment and emphasize that group success depends on interdependency and trust. Understand that everyone does not learn at the same speed or in the same way. Share your skills and talents with others, and learn from those around you. Knowledge is wasted when not re-cycled. Stress the value of diversity, creativity and change.

Mental Models

Many times, individuals will judge or reject another person or group due to a lack of complete understanding. Stereotyping is a common symptom of this behavior. As professionals in a field which is sworn to protect and serve all equally and unconditionally, we must move forward to educate our own about the consequences of "conditional respect". Mental models create barriers within our own learning process. Training in the area of empathy and compassion lend support to creating a better understanding of the individuals and cultures we come in contact with on a daily basis. Negativity is a learned behavior, and can therefore be relearned with the proper information necessary to make more appropriate conclusions. This is the area in which harassment and discrimination cases originate. By adopting a zero tolerance policy for the disrespect of any individual, either internally or externally, this type of problem can be greatly reduced and ultimately prevented.

Systems Thinking

This approach can be used to enhance community policing and other community based programs. The concept is meant to supplement and not replace a specific way of policing. By viewing different situations with a wide-angle lens, problem solvers will be better able to attack the actual problems and not just a symptom of the problem. Ineffective application of this practice may produce additional problems, which were not even initially a part of the original issue. Hence, everything within a process and system is interdependent and interconnected. This system views everyone involved as a "whole", not simply a fragment of the entire operation. Equal values are placed on an individual's mind, body, and soul. All contributions are viewed as significant. A systems thinking organization does not demand that you leave your personal problems at home, the organization would help an employee in seeking assistance in solving the problem, while understanding the negative impact emotional distress can play in workplace productivity, accidents, injuries, sick leave and many other issues. The organization cannot be "systems thinking" if the individuals who occupy the infrastructure do not

practice the philosophy.

Systems thinking requires vision and perseverance. The problems that this practice may eliminate will not disappear overnight, as they have been in formation for many years. What will assist everyone in a more peaceful and holistic existence in the meantime is dedication and commitment to making our world a better place to live.

Discussion

A systems thinking approach would require a learning organization to commit from the top. As mentioned earlier in this paper, law enforcement organizations are faced with one of the biggest challenges of this century. There is rapidly changing diversity in both the community and within our organizations. This philosophy will change the methods in which our organizations recruit, select, and hire new officers and civilian employees. This shift in organizational thinking will change the criteria for transfers, special assignments and promotions as well. Law enforcement organizations will be charged with recognizing the full value of all individuals and the contributions that their culture and diversity offer the community and the organization as a whole. Many types of organizations are making the shift to systems thinking including healthcare. Physicians are now including systems thinking courses along with their medical training. One course now offered is the medical staff officers program that covers: strategic planning, creative problem solving, team consensus building, leadership and conflict resolution, and many more systems courses. Medical professionals are realizing the need to provide full circle services to their patients in the emerging competitive market (American Medical News, 1996). Law enforcement must also set an example by including these non-traditional services as a resource to the communities we mutually serve.

An organization that is responsible for the welfare of a human being should consider making a transition to a broader based method of *thinking, acting, and doing*. Failing to recognize that all human beings are unique and possess different needs, is the same as failing to respect them. If a particular part of an organization is losing effectiveness, it is critical to look "below the surface to find the *real* problem.

In the future, we can either lead a reactionary existence or respond to the need for developing a more healthy and positive environment. Systems thinking offers a way to enhance law enforcement's learning abilities for both individuals and organizations in an environment that stimulates creativity and rewards risk taking. By using models such as Senge's (1994) systems approach, a broader view and new results can be achieved. And of course, the cycle of systems thinking is never ending and continuous. A collective intelligence is created so that all individuals are contributors. The Law Enforcement Systems Model outlined in this research applies the learning organization principles of Senge's (1994) approach to current law enforcement organizational realities. Through personal mastery, shared vision, team learning, and examining our mental models through systems thinking, we can learn new ways of thinking, acting, and doing, with true meaning and purpose.

Conclusion

The need for further research exists in the area of systems thinking in law

enforcement. The entire role of criminal justice is continuously changing. Many new issues are emerging and creating challenges in this field that have never before been considered. Criminal justice has depended on control, rule and order to maintain the status quo. Many organizations have suffered internal and external damages due to this fragmentation. It is evident, this mindset has not prepared the Chief Executive Officers of our many agencies and organizations for the forthcoming challenges that the new millennium will create.

Traditional police agencies must shift the focus from the rigid and inflexible mentality of "train and perform" and lead the way into a more progressive environment. Transforming existing structures into learning organizations will offer many new opportunities for civilian and sworn members of the organization. Encouraging members to participate in the development of their new environment will be stimulating and rewarding. Pride and commitment will be the intrinsic motivator. Providing an environment of continuous personal development and mastery will prove to be the most valuable investment an organization can make towards unlimited and unconditional success. In order to obtain accurate information on the success of implementing a learning organization systems thinking philosophy, it will be critical to include input from every individual involved in the process.

The key point is that processes and systems are all interconnected and interdependent, as are all human beings within the processes that surround them. This cohesiveness exhibits a form of networking and community building. As role models and resource banks for the communities in which we operate, law enforcement professionals must set a positive example in the implementation of this new age philosophy. Systems thinking combined with the holistic approach of community policing lay the foundation for safer and healthier environments. Failure to recognize any element or individual involved in the process as significant or valuable will insure the breakdown of the system. Doubting the importance or value of another's existence is the same as doubting our own.

Lieutenant Karen Black is currently assigned to the Administrative Services Bureau of the Ocala, Florida Police Department. A law enforcement officer for over 14 years, she joined the Ocala Police Department in 1986. Karen's assignments have included the Drug Task Force, Street Crimes, Criminal Investigations, Patrol and Crime Prevention, all of which embraced a philosophy of community oriented policing. While her professional interests cover a wide range of leadership and management topics, her current challenge is to bring the department to appreciate a total "systems" approach to policing.

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