

# Restructuring for Improved Communications

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## *Abstract*

*Law enforcement agencies have traditionally had a top-down, hierarchical style and structure of management. Such a management style seriously impedes two-way communication and damages effective service delivery. This research presents a model for restructuring traditional law enforcement agencies to a flatter, streamlined model for improved communication and enhanced organizational effectiveness.*

## Introduction

Almost all law enforcement agencies in the United States use top-down driven management. They all have layers of managers (rank structure) which all communications must pass through. With each layer there is a risk of distorted information being sent to the next level. Each level adds to the communication becoming more confused and out of context. Therefore, the more layers, the more risk of distortion and confusion. Communication is also, not just the smooth flow of information created by direct lines, it is the attitude of the people communicating that makes the difference.

In all cases, such distortions cause a lack of productivity, frustration, confusion, and inept management. Conversely, management is receiving feedback from the field that is invalid since the original plans, orders, and ideas were not acted on; the same risk of distortion exists with the return flow.

The end result of this is that customer service suffers. The image and prestige of the agency in the community is damaged. Support for budgets and special considerations wanes. The department begins a downward spiral with lowered morale and turnover of personnel. Ultimately monies from other programs are lost because new officers must be trained and equipped.

## Restructuring the Organization

To restructure an agency, one must decide which positions need to be eliminated. This might be best accomplished by checking current job descriptions. As Johnston (1993) suggests in Busting Bureaucracy, "actual performance of employees in these positions may be quite different from their described role." Redistribution of work assignments may be the key to flattening the organization and identifying those who are no longer effective.

An example is lieutenants that are described as watch commanders. A review of their actual work product reveals that they seldom, if ever, make a decision in a critical situation without consulting the captain. The routine matters are handled by the shift sergeants. Therefore, the lieutenant position could be eliminated.

Another example is the creation of a lieutenant's position using the military model or span of control. A sergeant has been supervising a unit within the agency, but now that unit has grown to six officers. Policy states that since there are more than five officers, a

lieutenant must be put in charge and a new sergeant appointed (supervised by the lieutenant). In fact, the original sergeant because of the real workload of the position could have easily supervised 10 or 15 officers.

The staff assigned to review the job descriptions would have the authority of the CEO to perform job and manpower assessments of the various components of the agency. The elimination of a layer would be based on the majority's performance throughout the agency and not on one individual's performance.

If a situation existed where one person was doing more than his or her job description, then two choices could be made. First, a promotion to the next higher rank could be made, or secondly, a redistribution of work (authority) to lessen the responsibility could be done.

Next would be the combining of layers (ranks). An example is captain and major levels could be consolidated to captain rank, eliminating majors from the structure. Again, this would be based on the assessment study. It would also vary from agency to agency depending on size.

The salary matrix would also have to be studied and caps for positions be placed within that salary scale. Those whose salaries exceed the cap would be red lined until such time as cost of living, merit increases, and other adjustments caught up with their present pay rate. This would be flexible depending on the implementation timetable selected by the CEO. However, it should be fully accomplished in one to three years.

Retirements could be one way of collapsing a position within the layer to be eliminated. In most agencies there are groups of senior staff who reach retirement age at about the same time. The personnel section could advise as to the numbers and identify those individuals. There would be no forced retirements by this plan. However, if the personnel involved objected to the restructuring, they would have the option of retirement. Buy out might be used to expedite the process. No one using this plan would have their salary cut or lose their employment. Responsibility would be redefined and shifted to other members of the agency.

The flattening would also, depending on the size of the agency, lead to the need for fewer administrators. Throughout the process, people and not just the position must be considered. The plan must be systematic and above all, personnel affected would know what to expect and could prepare themselves for the challenge. Management would have the obligation to provide training and educational opportunities to all affected personnel so they can perform and be successful in the new structure.

### Preparation for Restructuring

Once it has been decided which layers need to be eliminated, the next step is to explain the reasons for the restructuring to all personnel. Additionally, what is expected, when it will take place, and exactly what is going to happen should also be detailed. The personnel must become in-focused so that they are stakeholders in the change. They must understand about the exterior threats of privatization, shrinking budgets and above all, the reduction of frustration created by the lack of communication between them and top management.

This will require personal contact from the CEO and management staff on a regular basis. The information must be concise and accurate and not subject to interpretation. The staff must be available to answer any questions that individuals have during this change. People resist change, even good change, and reassurance is necessary for success.

All of this is predicated on the staff having embraced all of the changes and not the private hope that it will become business as usual once the program has started. Such thinking will certainly spell disaster.

Before the changes are made, there are some issues that need to be addressed. First, conventional career pathing has created narrow spans of control which lead to excessive layers of management. Over-specialization is one of the reasons for the use of so many supervisors. An example would be a crime scene unit with three officers assigned. One has more experience than the others so he/she is appointed sergeant. The unit is a subsection of the criminal investigations division which has several sergeants but because of the perceived specialty another position is created. Why? To do what a supervisor is supposed to do doesn't require a keen knowledge of forensics. It requires management and leadership skills which the regular CID sergeants have.

To change this, line personnel must be empowered to handle more situations and to do their own problem solving. Line officers would no longer be report takers but would become problem solvers. In many cases this will require training in problem solving and crisis management. Additional training in both written and verbal communications, management, leadership, and criminal law might be required.

They would no longer "kick up" the problem to the sergeants but would decide on a course of action themselves. This requires risk to both the officer and the agency but this can be minimized in the first stages by an oversight program utilizing the sergeants. The officers would feel they are trusted to make decisions and this would lead to job enrichment and satisfaction. With their added responsibility would come a sincere interest in the welfare of the agency and they would become stakeholders in the department. With the layers of management reduced, valuable ideas from these officers could lead to change. As the situation on the street changed, management would be quickly and accurately informed to generate possible solutions. The organization would grow into a healthy and vital group. The sharing of information would become the watchword.

Since there would be fewer career promotions available, the officers would have new programs such as a master officer program. This is not a supervisory position but one where individual officers are tested and based on their record of performance, written examination, a review board, and educational level, they would be given the position of master officer. This would command a higher salary, a higher contribution to retirement, and the appropriate uniform insignia. The Los Angeles Police Department was very successful in their program which has four steps within it allowing the officers to advance within their new classification. Divisions such as criminal investigations would be included in the master officer program. In sheriff's offices, correctional officers would be eligible for a master deputy program. The fact is that very few officers ever get promoted and those joining a department with young staff officers may never get a chance to participate in a promotional process.

Once the line officers have been empowered, the sergeants could be doing what supervisors and managers should do; such things as evaluating performance, coaching their officers, and career pathing them. Additionally, they would be receiving management training and be involved in manpower studies, specialized assignment studies, and recommendations. They would totally replace the lieutenant's position. With the new structure, the lieutenants would be eliminated and sergeants would be empowered to make midmanagement decisions. They would report to captains.

The salary matrix would be adjusted to reflect the new responsibilities. If there was an anomaly of an existing lieutenant doing what was now expected of a captain, then he/she would be promoted to that rank.

The position of captain would remain and become the backbone of the management team. Captains would be trained in all areas of management and leadership and made responsible for the oversight of the day to day operations and future planning. They would do such tasks as prepare the budget instrument for the agency, and oversee all projects as assigned by the CEO. Captains would have the authority to make all changes and to have final approval of all projects, with the exception of those that were specifically exempted by the CEO.

The rank of major would be eliminated, since the captains would have the full authority to act in all assigned situations. They would answer to the deputy chief who would have full authority to make all decisions regarding the operations and direction of the agency. The deputy chief would get his direction from the CEO.

#### Old Management Structure Versus New Management Structure

To compare the two management profiles, the result would look as below. There would be variations depending on the present structure of each agency's management.

##### Old Structure

Chief or Sheriff  
Deputy Chief/Undersheriff  
Major  
Captain  
Lieutenant  
Sergeant  
Patrol person

##### New Structure

Chief or Sheriff  
Deputy Chief/Undersheriff  
Captain  
Sergeant  
Patrol person

Additionally, all other ranks such as lieutenant colonel and corporal would also be eliminated. The elimination of these layers would increase the speed and accuracy of the information flow from top to bottom and the return flow which is often nonexistent.

Some additional benefits would be the additional monies available to fund more patrol personnel for such programs as COP which requires additional officers to be implemented

successfully. With additional personnel on the streets, officers become proactive and can spend time solving problems not just reporting them. Job enrichment is another benefit of the restructure.

### Conclusion

The threats to law enforcement today are real. We are being scrutinized more and more each budget year by citizen tax groups who will be asking hard questions about the operation of agencies. City managers and county commissions will be pressured into considering privatization of any area they believe can be done as well for less money.

Job enrichment leads to less turnover which translates to less money for training and a more stable work environment. Officers know their community and the community knows them. The result is an information network which, because of the undiluted flow of communications, allows the CEO and staff, to know what is really going on in his/her area of responsibility. They can then act accordingly, providing the services required in an expeditious manner.

Mike Cramer worked for 12 years with sheriffs' offices in California and Idaho before joining the St. Lucie County, Florida Sheriff's Office in 1984 where he served as the Director of the Department of Professional Standards at the rank of Captain. His professional interests are in human resource management. Mike left St. Lucie County in 1995, and currently lives in the state of Washington.

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