

Organizing for Decision Making at the Lowest Level

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Abstract

The primary theme of management experts in the 1990's appears to be that decision making should be made at the lowest possible organizational level. The question is, how do you accomplish this dramatic feat in the framework of traditional law enforcement agencies? This paper explores: 1) what structural changes will be needed in criminal justice organizations to insure that decisions are made at the lowest level; 2) what cost savings are obtained by eliminating management positions; and 3) whether top and middle criminal justice managers are ready for the changes which must take place to facilitate decision making at the lowest level.

Introduction

Traditional Organizational Structure

Criminal justice agencies traditionally have been organized by line and staff functions. This type of organizational structure is not unique to criminal justice; almost all companies used this type of structure at one time. Hine (1912) described the line and staff model as the preferred structure for all modern managers. Hine believed this model was necessary because the line manager, who has many activities to oversee, doesn't have time to think; staff positions focus on special functions that the line manager doesn't have time to think about.

Most traditional line and staff organizations developed a set of three principles to go along with the hierarchical structure (Wallace, et al., 1975). Unity of command is considered critical in these organizations. A person can only report to one superior, no matter what the situation. This principle restricts communication to an individual and his/her immediate supervisor.

The second basic principle of traditional organizations is the concept of small span of control. Supervisors should only supervise five to eight individuals in order to insure total control of the work place. Although tight control of the work place may have had some meaning during the industrial era in this country, it has lost its value in a modern work force dispersed over wide areas and not confined to a factory shop.

The third basic principle of traditional organizational structures is the concept of the scalar principle. Every task should involve a superior-subordinate relationship. In other words, employees shouldn't be allowed to make decisions, only supervisors should do that. Any review of the typical future worker will reveal that this type of superior-subordinate relationship will not work.

Organization in Government

During the first two years of the 1990's, almost every state in the union was faced with severe budget constraints due primarily to a slow economy and the resulting loss of tax revenue. Many governors proclaimed they were going to downsize state agencies and trim bureaucracy. In reality, fewer than 12,000 positions were lost nationwide in state agencies (Sloane, 1992).

Why is it so hard to change a government organization even though it appears so many people think that it is the right thing to do? All organizations are, by design, enemies of change, and governments are the worst of all. Almost every government agency has a constituency that created and nurtured it, and that would be offended if the agency changed. Wilson (1989) concludes that in reality, most government agencies are the way they are because that is what politicians want.

Chapter 20, Florida Statutes, clearly spells out the required structure for all Florida agencies. The basic structure sets up a hierarchy with many layers of management. If each layer generally has a head and an assistant head, then there are at least ten layers of management in each agency:

- The department is the principal administrative unit of the executive branch.
- The principal unit of the department is the division. Each shall be headed by a "director."
- The principal unit of the division is the bureau. Each bureau shall be headed by a "chief."
- The principal unit of the bureau is the section. Each section shall be headed by an "administrator."
- Sections may be divided into units which shall be known as subsections and headed by a "supervisor."

Agency heads may not establish new bureaus, sections, and so forth without prior approval of the Department of Administration and the Office of the Governor. This leaves Florida's criminal justice administrators with little flexibility to reorganize to meet current demands.

If a decision is made by the agency head to allow decision making at the lowest level, say the lowest four or five layers, then what happens to the people in the top four or five layers and what do they do? This is the chief dilemma faced by managers who try to downsize or rightsize an agency.

Centralization versus Decentralization

Osborne (1990) described state governments in the 1980's in three words: centralization, standardization, and bureaucracy. Osborne pointed out how numerous states actually challenged those three words in several of their programs and were able to make a difference.

The debate, over whether a centralized or decentralized form of government is best for the people that government serves, is as old as our government itself. Our founding fathers met in Philadelphia in the summer of 1787 for the purpose of drafting a constitution. There, the debate centered around the virtues of a strong central government versus a more decentralized decision making process with the majority of power resting with the individual states (Bowen, 1966). Although most of the representatives at the convention agreed that some form of central government was needed, primarily to regulate commerce, there was little agreement on how much power it should have.

Alexander Hamilton, James Madison, and John Jay together authored 85 articles published in New York area newspapers. The Federalist Papers (Hamilton, et. al., 1788) were written to convince the people of New York that a strong central government would not

The Army Corp of Engineers is cited by Wilson as one of the few federal agencies that consistently gets good marks for its efficiency and lack of bureaucracy. The Corps is very project oriented. A project manager is given a specific mission such as building a dam with an exact budget. The project manager is then given the authority to get the job done with little interference from anyone in higher authority.

Many private and public agencies have attempted to decentralize, with varying significantly take away the powers of the state governments. Eventually, a new constitution was adopted, providing for a more powerful centralized government, with the quick adoption thereafter of ten amendments, providing for some form of restraint on the powers of the new central government.

The debate over the viability of a strong central government continues today. Supreme Court Justice Louis Brandeis coined the phrase "laboratories of democracy" when discussing the ability of cities and states to adjust quickly to meet the needs of the people (Osborne, 1990). Brandeis was, no doubt, referring to the ability of a decentralized form of government to respond more quickly.

Wilson (1989) cited several examples of decentralized organizations that have met with success. The German army was largely victorious over the French during World War II because the Germans concentrated on training commanders at the lowest level to make decisions based on what they observed on the battlefield. The French, on the other hand, had a very centralized decision making process that was too slow to respond to the quick-moving German officers. The result was a quick German victory. degrees of success. In reality, the results are usually a mixture of both. Thorne (1991) observed the process in several companies and concluded that many companies are mixing centralization with decentralization in a way that must confuse employees as much as observers. Could the real problem be that those companies did not really change their basic structure?

Genaldi (1992) studied the disbursement function in the Florida Department of Law Enforcement as part of a graduate accounting program. He flowcharted the process from the time a decision is made from purchase until the vendor is paid. The results of his charting could easily confuse anyone. He concluded that too many people have control over various parts of the function for it to be efficient; the process should either be completely centralized or completely decentralized.

How did government agencies get to the point of being strangled with paper, process, and bureaucracy? For the most part, it was with the best of intentions -- to avoid corruption and incompetence in government. Personnel, purchasing, and other administrative functions were centralized to meet the requirements of independent audit/review. The result was that government became so bureaucratic that it could do little else but complete its own internal processes (Wilson, 1989).

The Future

With every political figure talking about downsizing government, empowering workers, and doing more with less, criminal justice administrators will have no choice

but to respond with new and different organizational structures. The question is, what is best and how do we do it?

Much has been said about the Japanese industrial successes and its methods of management. In comparing IBM's proposed corporate restructuring to the Japanese model, Schrage (1991) observed that the key to success is not to grant autonomy to different independent corporate units, but to build interdependence between the individual units. Management influences should come horizontally and diagonally, not primarily from on high. Groups need independence, but should not take direction from high management independent of input from other units.

After studying several private enterprise attempts at downsizing, Heenan (1990) concluded that the new organizational structure would have to be highly decentralized and redefined to place a proper balance between work, family, and the needs of the community. Management's primary thrust must be on reviving employee trust and confidence in the organization.

A similar view was taken by Cross (1990) when attempting to determine the best way to restructure a private organization. Cross surveyed workers and determined that most wanted a "business centre" type of organization with closely integrated self-contained units, with short chains of command, and open communications.

Organizing for Decision Making at the Florida Department of Law Enforcement (FDLE)

FDLE is organized according to the state structure discussed earlier. The department has eight divisions or offices, each headed by a director:

- Office of Executive Investigations
- Office of General Council
- Office of Inspector General
- Division of Criminal Investigations
- Division of Criminal Justice Information Systems
- Division of Criminal Justice Standards and Training
- Division of Local Law Enforcement Assistance
- Division of Staff Services

These directors, along with the Commissioner, Deputy Commissioner and Assistant Commissioner, comprise the department's command staff. The vast majority of top and middle managers in the agency are career FDLE members who have spent the majority of their professional careers with the department. All serve at the pleasure of the Commissioner, who serves at the pleasure of the Governor and Cabinet.

One of the department's fundamental values states that decisions should be made at the lowest level. The department historically has advocated openness among its members and member input into important policy decisions.

A questionnaire was provided to FDLE's Command Staff, plus deputy division directors, bureau chiefs, and other "middle" managers to determine the degree to which decision making occurs at the lowest level. The survey also tried to determine if these managers were prepared to accept any organizational changes necessary to encourage

this kind of decision-making. Twelve of the 35 surveys were returned (34%).

An attempt was made to determine any differences in responses from top managers and middle managers, and from those assigned to departmental headquarters versus those who were not.

1. Many contemporary management theorists teach that government and business organizations should be flattened, thereby eliminating many mid-level management positions. Please list what you think would be the advantages and disadvantages of such restructuring for a criminal justice agency. Almost all of the respondents saw both advantages and disadvantages to the idea of reducing or eliminating middle management. Many saw as positive the ability of line employees to have closer and more direct communications with top managers.

Lack of control over line employees appeared to be the largest concern with reducing middle management. When this question was later asked in a different way, that is, what the effect would be if computers were doing most of the controlling, the disadvantages then became a lack of human interaction with subordinates.

2. How do you think that they will be able to help managers in the decision making process? There was an overwhelming approval of computers as tools that could assist managers in daily decision making. Most managers believe that automation will give them more information by which they can exercise control over the work place. Frequently cited was the ability to gather statistics on work being produced by subordinates. Although most viewed computers as tools to assist them, none noted that computers would be able to do any of their work for them.

3. Many management theorists believe that the primary role of midmanagement in any organization is to facilitate communication between top management and the organization's workers. If so, do you believe that computers and other modern electronic communications devices will be able to effectively replace midmanagement? Again, the overwhelming response was that computers and technology could not replace middle managers. In this question, the need for human touch seemed to be the central theme of every answer, whereas in the previous question, managers were seen to be needed to control the work force. Interestingly, a few responses indicated that managers are actually doing some of the work conducted by the work unit, therefore there is a need to keep the managers. Only a few responses viewed computers as being able to replace some of the current managers.

4. Please state what decision making at the lowest level means to you. Three central themes developed from this question. First, decision-making at the lowest level means at the "appropriate" level. Second, there must be "appropriate" limits on those decisions. And third, decision making at the lowest level really means allowing people at the lowest level to have input into decision making.

The responses from those individuals not assigned to a headquarters function differed markedly in their responses. To them, decision-making at the lowest level means that the person with the responsibility should be given authority to make a decision. Results also appear to be markedly different for those positioned lower in the

hierarchy.

5. *If decision making in an organization is pushed to the lowest level, how does top management ensure quality, productivity, integrity, etc.?* No one theme emerged from this question. The responses ranged from goal setting and guidelines, to allowing employees to hold themselves accountable. This is probably one of the most critical questions that any agency administrator must answer before embarking on a path to empower the work force. As can be seen from the question, most managers are really not sure how to do this.

Another interesting aspect to this question is no one mentioned technology as a method of ensuring quality with fewer managers. Most managers see themselves as fulfilling that role and aren't ready to suggest that there is any other way to do it.

6. *Most criminal justice agencies are organized along a traditional pyramid structure. Florida statutes, with few exceptions, require that state agencies be organized this way. Do you think that this scheme, by its very nature, inhibits decision making at the lowest level? What changes would you make to the structure?* Almost overwhelmingly, the respondents rejected any notion that organizational structure could inhibit decision making at the lowest level. Some of the reasoning behind this response could be that almost all of the respondents grew up in this type of an organization and are not really familiar with any other kind of structure. Again, lack of effective communication was seen as the most inhibiting factor to lower level decision making.

7. *The Florida Department of Corrections (DOC) is currently organized by geographic regions, with the regional administrator supervising all department activities, operational and administrative, within that region. Program offices in DOC headquarters coordinate the implementation of various programs that the department is responsible for. Do you think that this type of organizational structure is appropriate for a criminal justice agency? Why?* This was the first question that actually suggested a change in the organizational structure. It also got the strongest response. Almost half of the respondents saw some merit in the proposal, but with reservations. Those who saw no merit in the proposition said so in the strongest terms and rejected the proposal outright.

The responses were somewhat surprising given FDLE's continuous commitment to the concept of open discussion and going "outside the dots." Some of the responses were no doubt given out of personal interests. If such changes were implemented, then many of the managers who responded might have to move to different jobs in different localities, thereby creating some personal animosity to the concept.

It also could be that criminal justice managers aren't ready or willing to make significant changes to their work place. The apparent overwhelming need to control, as indicated in earlier questions, could also be coming into play in the response to this question.

8. *If decision making is pushed to the lowest appropriate level of an agency, and electronic devices are facilitating most of the communication between workers and top managers in an agency, what roles would middle management play in a criminal justice agency?* Although some respondents mentioned the continuing need to control the work

place, most saw the continuing need for someone to communicate and motivate. Even if computers are taking care of most of the rote duties of managers, and workers are making decisions for themselves, there is still the need for a human leader to have human interaction with workers. These responses could constitute a new job description for managers in the future, more human oriented while the computers are doing the managing.

9. What do you think is the appropriate ratio of workers to middle management/senior management? Would it be different for different jobs? Would geographic location of workers make a difference? Most of the responses that indicated a ratio of managers to workers cited those ratios that are currently in existence today. However, most appeared to believe that ratios are not very important, and that every job must be viewed differently.

Discussion and Conclusions

If the survey results at FDLE are any indication, today's criminal justice managers are not ready for any sudden change in basic organizational structure. Despite the fact that governmental and private business leaders are all talking about the need for basic change, there appears to be little enthusiasm for it among criminal justice managers.

Dumaine (1991), in an article on bureaucracy busters, quoted Harvard Professor, Paul Lawrence, when speaking of the need to change organizations and their bureaucracies: "...companies in stable, slow-growth industries like oil, paper, and forest products should stay near the hierarchical end of the spectrum." Lawrence goes on to contrast slow moving companies with those in ever-changing markets such as telecommunications, publishing and autos, which he concludes should seek a more adaptive style of organizational structure.

Criminal justice agencies will change. Osborne (1992), in his review of changes needed in governmental organizations, concluded the only public system in worse shape than education and health care is the criminal justice system. Osborne called his book Reinventing Government, and perhaps that is the correct way for criminal justice administrators to look at their current dilemma. If the criminal justice system is considered, by leading researchers, to be in the worst shape of all governmental programs, then it follows that many questions are going to be asked by the public about the way we do business.

Drucker (1989) examined the changing world in The New Realities. Drucker states that government and private businesses will have to change old habits and acquire new ones. Drucker goes on to conclude that decentralization into autonomous units will be even more critical now than in the past. He suggests the adoption of the German model that supports smaller work units with their own top managers. This is very similar to the German military model that was successful in World War II, as previously discussed.

The results of the research clearly indicate that the current culture of today's criminal justice managers is not ready for significant organizational change. In order to accomplish such change, criminal justice administrators will have to meet the challenge of changing that culture, for without the support of current management teams, little real change can occur.

So the question may be whether criminal justice agencies are in the slow moving,

slow growth arena or the fast paced, ever changing world of dealing with the worst of the world's problems. The population that we serve and the top decision makers in our governments are ready for a change.

Perhaps the best way to sum up what will be happening to criminal justice agencies in the 1990's is to quote Florida Department of Law Enforcement Commissioner James T. Moore. When asked his reaction to the ever increasing violent crime problem in the state of Florida by the Tampa Tribune, Moore stated, "We are learning a valuable lesson. Tallahassee can't fix this. Washington can't fix it. It's got to be fixed at the grass-roots level, in the local communities" (1993, p. N/W 11).

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