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Death  
Notifications

# Self-directed Work Teams

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In 1829, after 7 years of failed efforts, Robert Peel finally succeeded in creating the London Metropolitan Police.<sup>1</sup> As has often been the case throughout history, individuals of vision who innovate and create what others think has no value must suffer through the birth of that vision. Peel's years of persistence led to a professional police force in which the public and police work together to address the community's public safety and security concerns. Yet, along with Peel's vision of community-based policing came the paramilitary organizational structure that he adopted.

Community Policing and Problem Solving (COPPS) represents today's version of Peel's vision. Although just as Peel's model did, COPPS has its detractors, most law enforcement agencies recognize its value. Unfortunately, many police organizations have become top-heavy and reactionary. The hierarchical, authoritarian management system inherent in most police agencies has become a roadblock on the journey toward innovative, problem-solving policing.

Organizations that discover how to tap their employees' commitment and capacity to learn at all levels can excel in the future.<sup>2</sup> The

current law enforcement climate demands that police agencies become learning organizations; they must be proactive and adopt a holistic, or "systems thinking," approach to problem solving. Yet, when departments become compartmentalized, subcultures can develop along such job functions as management, patrol, and other specialties, limiting communication, problem solving, and learning.<sup>3</sup>

The ability to innovate in both the technical and organizational arenas remains crucial to effectiveness.<sup>4</sup> When law enforcement organizations operate ineffectively, communities suffer. Centralized,

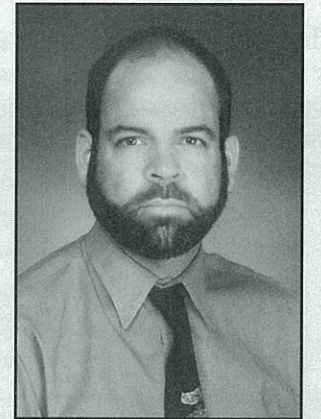
hierarchical management structures do not support fast-paced innovation. Decentralized, nonhierarchical organizations dedicated to the well-being and growth of employees, as well as to success, do support learning and innovation.<sup>5</sup> A study known as the Hawthorne experiment proved that when management pays attention to employees, productivity increases.<sup>6</sup> Thus, when employees have a say in the workplace, motivation and productivity rise. Unfortunately, law enforcement's management structure does not support high employee involvement in workplace decisions. In contrast, self-directed work teams do.

## SELF-DIRECTED WORK TEAMS

A self-directed work team consists of a group of highly trained individuals with the responsibility and authority for completing a well-defined project.<sup>7</sup> Self-directed work teams are not temporary. They represent a new way of doing business in which top management basically leaves the teams alone as long as they meet or exceed established goals. This autonomy takes full advantage of all of the team members' talents, skills, abilities, ideas, and experiences.<sup>8</sup> Executives of team-based organizations retain their authority over strategies, but the teams assume control over tactics.<sup>9</sup>

Self-directed work teams usually are responsible for a work process that delivers a product or service to a customer.<sup>10</sup> Law enforcement's customers include not only the communities they are sworn to serve but also the

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Chief Ramirez leads the St. Mary's University Police Department in San Antonio, Texas.

nation, which suffers from the effects of crime and social decay in communities.

## THE VALUE OF SELF-DIRECTED WORK TEAMS

In today's dynamic environment, self-directed teams possess many advantages. With the freedom to make decisions and act on them, self-directed work teams can identify opportunities, find solutions, and implement actions quickly, thus giving their organizations greater flexibility.<sup>11</sup> Police departments that support effective community policing and problem solving must remain flexible.

Self-directed work teams represent an important part of an organization's overall strategy for a number of reasons. First, those closest to the work know best how to perform and improve their jobs. Second, most employees want to feel "ownership" in their jobs, that they are contributing to the organization in a meaningful way. Finally, the autonomy teams enjoy provides

opportunities for empowerment that individual employees usually do not have.<sup>12</sup> The empowerment employees feel motivates them to perform and increases customer satisfaction.<sup>13</sup> In a law enforcement agency, this translates into identifying and resolving community problems. Ultimately, law enforcement's customers, community residents, feel safe and secure because they are.

## PREPARING FOR SELF-DIRECTED WORK TEAMS

Self-directed work teams are not ends in themselves; instead, they represent the means by which agencies achieve other organizational goals.<sup>14</sup> As such, the implementation of a self-directed team-based management structure should be tied to clear organizational needs. Thus, during the first step in the planning process, senior management must analyze the agency's current and probable organizational needs,<sup>15</sup> attempting to answer the following questions:

1) Is the agency as efficient and effective as it needs to be to succeed over the next decade?

2) What level of employee involvement does the agency have currently?

3) Would more commitment and involvement from employees improve the agency's effectiveness?

The answers to these questions will help senior management determine whether and how self-directed work teams would help the agency achieve its goals.<sup>16</sup> Perhaps more important, senior leaders must assess honestly their ability to master and apply the hands-off leadership style that self-directed work groups require. Indeed, in order for self-directed teams to succeed, the senior leadership of the agency must commit to and support the concept<sup>17</sup> and make sure that the organization's policies, procedures, and culture do, as well. If self-analysis indicates an organizational need and readiness, then implementation may begin.<sup>18</sup>

#### IMPLEMENTING SELF-DIRECTED WORK TEAMS

The implementation process includes the selection of teams and members, as well as the training of those members. An "environmental scan," which includes surveys, focus groups, and other information-gathering techniques, can identify what the agency's customers expect and help management determine what teams they should create.<sup>19</sup> For example, holding focus groups in the community helped the St. Mary's University Police Department

discover that residents did not fully appreciate or understand what the department does. Deciding the community and the department would benefit from increased communication and interaction, the department established a work team to design and manage a bimonthly newsletter, "Code 3." Containing everything from crime prevention tips to information on new department programs to guest columns by members of the community, the newsletter keeps residents informed and increases interaction between the department and the community.

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#### Designing the Team

Depending on the size of the agency, a steering committee may oversee the design process. The steering committee should include senior managers, police union leaders, functional or human resource managers, and line leaders. Management expert Stephen R. Covey points out that the working system in the United States focuses on individualism, not synergy and team work.<sup>20</sup> The members of the steering committee must overcome this mind-set and break free from myopic thinking.

After deciding what teams the agency requires, the steering committee focuses on determining how the teams will function. This means deciding what management and administrative responsibilities the team will perform;<sup>21</sup> establishing roles and responsibilities for team leaders, members, facilitators, and technical support members; and designing the work-flow process. The work-flow process includes everything from meeting schedules to evaluation procedures. After designing the team and establishing work flow, the committee can begin recruiting and selecting team members.

#### Selecting Team Members

The steering committee can use various instruments to assess and select team members. In a large department, application forms and personal references can yield basic information on candidates but cannot provide enough information on those elements of ability and attitude that represent critical requirements for effective team membership. Thus, the steering committee must devise other methods to determine whether employees possess the ability to make decisions and assume responsibility for the complete work product.

Three methods include targeted interviewing, cognitive ability tests, and technical skills test. Targeted interviews attempt to reveal if candidates have the general skills and personality that match the team requirements. Cognitive ability and technical skills tests use a written examination to pinpoint more specialized skills.

#### Training the New Team

Even the most sophisticated selection instruments cannot guarantee the success of the team, and the management of any organization never should turn over managerial responsibilities to a group unprepared to communicate effectively, resolve conflicts, or solve problems.<sup>22</sup> One survey of self-directed work teams discovered that inadequate training proved the greatest hindrance to effective team performance.<sup>23</sup>

Training should help team members develop technical, administrative, and interpersonal skills.<sup>24</sup> Managers should follow a few key principles when designing and implementing team-based training programs. First, the curriculum should reflect the uniqueness of each team's needs. A modular approach with custom-made units, or modules, can provide the right training at the appropriate time. Modules can be basic and interchangeable or specialized for one team only. Next, during training, the whole team should work together to understand and improve their relationships and processes. Allowing team members to attend separate training sessions would forgo this important interaction. Finally, relatively short, but frequent, training sessions that spread the learning process over time prove more effective than longer sessions that attempt to teach students everything all at once.<sup>25</sup>

#### CONCLUSION

Self-directed work teams take advantage of employees' talents, skills, abilities, ideas, and experi-

ences. As a result, they represent the most advanced form of worker empowerment and can help police agencies more effectively reach their organizational goals.

The implementation of work teams requires a change in organizational philosophy from hierarchical authoritarianism to self-direction. Senior management must support and deliver the directive for

this organizational culture shift. With a strong commitment and adequate planning, police leaders can ensure that the movement to self-direction becomes a harbinger of the future. ♦

#### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> K. Peak and R. Glensor, *Community Policing and Problem Solving: Strategies and Practices* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1996), 2.

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