



Assessing the impediments to organizational change A view of community policing

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Abstract

This article identifies and assesses the impediments to implementing one aspect of community-oriented policing (COP): designated patrol assignments. The research was based on 126 interviews with three different levels of police practitioners (top, middle, and street-level) in three different southwest police departments. While this exploratory study examined several factors that could potentially impede or facilitate change, it was found that *individual attitudes* towards COP and *pressure* had the most significant effect on the process of change.

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Introduction

With the advent of reengineering, rightsizing, reorganizing, and reinventing government, one of the greatest challenges facing public organizations is the process of change. Change implies a fundamental difference or a substitution of one thing for another. Organizational change involves, by definition, a transformation of an organization between two points in time (Barnett & Carroll, 1995).

In the context of American policing, change is particularly difficult. Although the structures of most police departments conform to the quasi-military, hierarchical model of organization, police officers are not closely supervised (Blau, 1994; Sewell, 1986). This social arrangement in which the police work results in a highly fragmented, internalized, and isolated environment (Stamper, 1993). As a result, the police tend to band together and exclude outsiders. This tendency to close ranks develops into a police

culture that makes it extremely difficult to make changes within police departments.

This study addressed the issue of impediments to organizational change within police agencies. More specifically, this research identifies and assesses the impediments to implementing community-oriented policing (COP) in three southwestern police departments. Identifying the impediments to change across departments provide a theoretical basis for informing the kinds of management decisions that will inevitably transform police departments into healthy productive organizations.

Background

Resistance to change has been discussed in the current organization development (OD) literature at great length (Damanpour, 1991; Delacroix & Anand, 1991; Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Many models and theoretical frameworks had been used to explore, describe, explain, and predict what will aid in the change process. The literature on organizational change examined several schools of thought about organizations' abilities to change and the character-

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istics that impede or assist in the change process (Halliday, Powell, & Granfors, 1993; Huber, Sutcliffe, Miller, & Glick, 1993; Kelly & Amburgey, 1991). A variety of insightful arguments has been advanced regarding characteristics that produce positive change. Little has been done, however, to compare the implementation of programs across departments and identify the major forms of resistance that remain constant across them. Largely missing are integrative models that have the ability to examine and explain the multidimensional phenomenon of organization change (Klein & Sorra, 1996). Therefore, by examining the underlying dimensions of change and ascertaining, if there are any impediments that remain constant across the various departments, the present study expands the current literature and opens the door for greater knowledge about resistance to change and impediments to program implementation.

COP—designated patrol assignment

The concept of COP began with the community relations programs of the 1950s and 1960s, which developed in order to increase interaction between the community (especially the minority community) and the police, and continued through the 1970s with the team policing concept (Greene, 1987). Team policing was a patrol method from the late 1960s to the early 1970s. Team policing focused on efficient and effective policing, improved police-community relations, assigned patrol of police teams, and enhanced police officer morale (Sherman, 1973). Despite the failure of the team-policing concept in some organizations, the idea of a community context of policing remained strong.

More recently, the proliferation of community policing has been initiated as a result of the increasing evidence that the reactive model and conventional police practices have not been effective (Bayley, 1994; Goldstein, 1990; Greene, 1987; Rohe, Adams & Arcury, 2001; Smith, Novak & Frank, 2001). Therefore, programs that focused on dealing with specific problems faced by communities and reducing community fear of crime continued to develop (Brown & Wycoff, 1987; Eck & Spelman, 1987; Goldstein, 1987; Skolnick & Bayley, 1987). Although community policing is widely believed to be important by those involved with or affected by community policing, the term means different things to different people (Bayley, 1988). For example, under the rubric of community policing, police departments are developing crime prevention seminars, storefront and mini-police stations, newly designed patrol beats, community advisory groups, neighborhood watch programs, increased

foot patrols, patrol-detective teams, and door-to-door visits by police officers (Bayley, 1988; Rohe et al., 2001; Skogan, 1994).

Although the initial idea of COP was to institute programs that allowed the police to become familiar with people in the community, the definition has been expanded to include almost any program that serves as an instrument to improved police service and better community relations. This expansion of the community policing definition, however, has resulted in much confusion concerning what the term community policing actually means and how to implement it. Implementing community policing has many difficulties. As indicated previously, police organizations are inherently reluctant to accept and try new ideas (Scheingold, 1991). Thus, many police organizations resist the notion of community policing because it represents a change from the traditional reactive policing model.

This research examined the patrol assignment aspect of community policing. In police organizations where community policing is not the standard philosophy, police officers are assigned to a beat that covers an extensive area of the city. In police organizations that share in the community policing philosophy, police officers are often assigned to a small community area to allow officers to become familiar with the community (citizens) so that they can proactively solve problems together. Patrol assignment includes the selection and placement of officers in newly designed community policing areas, as well as the tasks assigned to them. Much of the success or failure of community policing efforts rests on the actions of the individual officers who translate community-policing philosophy into reality (Brown, 1989; Friedmann, 1992).

The cross-case comparison of the impediments to COP implementation revealed that COP is a complex and complicated philosophy and the methods used to implement COP programs will vary. Focusing on designated patrol assignment, however, has isolated key impediments to COP implementation.

Methodology

The agencies selected for study were three municipal police departments located in a large metropolitan area of Arizona: the Phoenix Police Department (PPD), the Mesa Police Department (MPD), and the Tempe Police Department (TPD). The agencies selected were all self-defined as engaged in designated officer assignments to implement some form or variation of COP.

At the time of this study, the PPD had approximately 2,310 sworn police officers and served a

population of 1,149,417. The MPD had approximately 634 sworn police officers and served a population of 338,117. The TPD had approximately 260 sworn police officers and served a population of 153,821. The three police departments had similar organizational structures in terms of personnel and operating units. Each department had slightly over 90 percent White, non-Hispanic, male officers.

In-depth interviews were conducted with 126 employees of the three municipal police agencies, including three different levels (executive, middle, and street-level) of police practitioners identified as being responsible for or involved with the specific aspects of the change program being studied—community-based patrol assignment. Interviews were conducted at the three different levels in order to collect data from different perspectives. The interviews included ninety street-level officers, twenty-six mid-level officers, and ten executive-level officers. Participants were assured of confidentiality and written permission was received from each agency. The interviews were in a structured, open-ended format and a comprehensive protocol ensured standardization of data collection across sites.

Interviews were conducted over a four-month period. Interviews were approximately one to three hours in length and extensive field notes were taken. The interview time varied depending on interviewees' availability and willingness to give information. The data collected from each interview was recorded with as much detail as possible; interviews were tape-recorded when possible.

Each interview session began with a general set of questions regarding interviewees' length of time in the department, current and past positions, and overall length of time in the field of law enforcement. Police personnel were asked about the role they played in the change effort, major problems of program implementation, ease of implementation, most effective methods of implementing change, organizational attitude toward community policing, and the relationship between management and employees during the change process. In conjunction with the interviews, supporting data were gathered through observations while in the police stations, on patrol ride-alongs, and through police records and official documents.

The study variables

Dependent variable

Resistance to organizational changes—more specifically, resistance to designated officer assignment

for community policing. Resistance to change includes both the overt (obvious) and covert (subtle) actions that affect implementation of the change programs (Recardo, 1995).

Independent variables

Based on the organizational change literature (Allen, 1999; Barnett & Carroll, 1995; Porras & Silvers, 1991), factors that impede or facilitate change fall into two general categories—structure or process. Structural variables deal with division of labor and the arrangements of organizational parts. Process variables relate to the way the transformation occurs—the speed, the planning, the sequence of activities, and the communication systems. Structural variables for this study included complexity, centralization, and formalization. Process variables included pressure, individual attitudes, departmental attitude, and communication.

Complexity referred to the number of structural components (horizontal differentiation, vertical or hierarchical differentiation, and spatial dispersion) that required coordination and control (Hall, 1996). A highly complex organization is characterized by many occupational roles, subunits (division and departments), levels of authority (rank structure, i.e., chiefs, captains, lieutenants, and sergeants), and operating sites. Complexity is perceived as beneficial in the planning stage of change, but a problem for implementation. In short, complexity adds to the difficulty of implementing change.

Centralization described the locus of decision making within an organization (Hall, 1996). Centralization was measured by the level and variety of participation in strategic decisions by groups relative to the number of groups in the organization (Hage, 1980). Resistance to change is minimized when organizations involve employees in the decision-making process (Covin & Kilmann, 1990).

Formalization referred to the use of rules in an organization and involved organizational control over individuals (Hall, 1996). Formalization is also related to the number of new programs added in an organization. Formalization has been shown to be negatively associated with the adoption of new programs (Hall, 1996). In the more formalized organizations, there is likely to be less time, support, or incentive for involvement in change and innovation. Measures of formalization included job codification and rule observation.

Pressure described the perceived or real pressure for the change (reasons). The literature notes the concept of pressure as being an important factor in the implementation of change (Guyot, 1991; Slack & Sigelman, 1987).

Individual attitude described the respondents' (top-management, mid-management, and street-level officers) attitudes toward the underlying issues (i.e., the role of the police—COP) of the particular change programs. Attitudes toward COP have been reported as being related to the motives underlying individuals' resistance to change (Skogan, 1994).

Departmental attitude described the departments' (command staff) attitudes toward the underlying issues of the particular change programs. It should be noted that the individual attitude and departmental attitude variables were separated during the initial data collection stage. Respondents made clear distinctions between their individual attitudes and their department's overall attitude toward change.

Communication referred to the exchange of information and the transmission of meaning (Hall, 1996). Communication occurs in three directions: upward, downward, and horizontal; it also includes omission, distortions, and overload of information. Lack of organizational communication or poor communication can result in an unclear purpose of the program and misplacement of program responsibility (Covin & Kilmann, 1990).

Case analysis

Miles and Huberman's (1994) pattern coding and case analysis strategy were used for this study. The names of the variables were used as categories (subject headings) to code and analyze the data collected from the open-ended interviews. This method initially organized data into separate categories that corresponded with the variable names. The coding scheme included complexity, centralization, formalization, pressure, individual attitudes, departmental attitude, and communication. During the course of the field research, however, the coding scheme was revised and subcodes were developed.

Coding was done after each wave of interviews by transcribing and reviewing the collected data and then tagging the most relevant pieces. Coded data were condensed (summarized) and categorized under the previous stated subject headings. The codes were used to retrieve and organize the data. This grouping assisted in identifying and clustering the segments related to the impediments of implementing COP. Clustering then set the stage for the analysis and conclusions.

The analysis was aimed at understanding both individual case dynamics and cross-site comparisons. First, recurring patterns and themes were noted (pattern coding). There was an expectation that patterns involving similarities and differences among categor-

ies and processes involving implementation would surface. The second stage of analysis pulled together the separate pieces of data. Once the data were clustered, they were reviewed to see which pieces of data went together and which did not. Clustering by similar patterns or characteristics assisted in gaining a better understanding of the factors affecting the change process.

Findings

This study revealed that centralization, complexity, and formalization (the structural variables) could be impediments to change. Themes related to the structural variable surfaced in all three police departments. For example, although the command staff of the PPD tried to push discretion and authority down to the street-level officers in an attempt to implement COP, it was met with skepticism and mistrust. This was also true with the MPD and the TPD. Street-level officers, in all three departments, reported being unable to trust that their departments would support their decisions, if and when something went wrong. Therefore, street-level officers did not take full advantage of their new level of authority and discretion. Command staff from each department believed that the many years of working under a quasi-military, bureaucratic structure made officers unable to accept a more decentralized departmental structure. The effects of the structural variables, however, were not strong and varied depending on the stage of implementation and size of the organization. This finding supported earlier literature that examined the effect of structure on organization change (Amburgey, Dawn, & Barnett, 1993; Delacroix & Swaminathan, 1991;).

Although, in many cases, strong themes did not emerge related to the three structural variables, there was enough evidence to show that these factors may influence many of the process variables. For example, in the PPD, complexity affected communication. Within all three of the police departments, formalization affected departmental and individual attitudes. By influencing the process variables, the structural variables had a greater ability to affect organizational change.

Of the process variables, pressure variable surfaced consistently as a major factor in facilitating the implementation of COP. All three levels of police practitioner responded to external pressure and reported that, without it, organizational change may not have occurred. Additionally, respondents from all three police departments and at all three levels did cite that environmental changes (change in crime rates and city demographics) acted as an impetus

for change. This emerging theme was consistent with earlier studies that argued that organizational change occurs mainly through the adaptive responses of existing individual organizations to natural changes in technology and environment (Burt, 1992; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Zucker, 1983). Although the majority of these studies were directed at the private sector, the current study found that this was also true for the police organizations.

Of all the variables studied, individual attitudes were among the most important factors in COP implementation. Proponents of the COP philosophy, in all three departments, had embraced the concept, but reported that it was the opponents of COP who made implementation difficult. Mid-level managers who did not buy into the COP concept always found 'other things' for their officers to do, instead of assignments related to community policing. Street-level officers, who were resistant to the change, went through the motions, but never put forth any real effort of implementing community-based programs. It was mentioned repeatedly by street- and mid-level officers that someone from the command rank must champion the COP concept to facilitate the change process.

As was found in the MPD, proponents still struggle with the initial phases of implementation because of the department's lack of strong support from the command staff. The TPD implemented COP throughout the department, and while no one openly resisted the change, covert resistance was rampant throughout the organization. The lack of overt resistance was reported as being the result of strong COP support from command staff.

Discussion

Police organizations are complex social systems that are grounded in democracy, operate within a "fishbowl," and are funded primarily by tax dollars. To use tax dollars more efficiently and effectively, it is imperative that police organizations understand the change process and the difficulties that they might encounter. This study identified several factors that could potentially impede the change process within complex settings.

To mobilize and motivate employees, trust must be established before managers can transfer the necessary decision-making authority. To establish trust, employees must exhibit competence and prove they are knowledgeable; that is, understand the assigned tasks and can do their job. There must also be managers who support employees and will not punish them if they voice their own opinions. Once trust is attained and authority transferred, employees

must learn how to use their newly acquired power. There were several examples, within this study, where command staff had attempted to empower street-level officers, but officers did not trust or believe that they had discretion to make decisions. As a result, officers refused to accept the decision-making power and followed the standard hierarchy of decision-making. In these instances, command staff never asked why officers did not accept their new authority, nor did street-level officers communicate their concerns to the supervisors.

Clearly, communication must be honest and open. Anything less than sincere conversation will result in a false sense that progress is being made. Without clear understanding through open communication and training, change may not take place. It is, however, extremely important to note that public sector agencies have multiple constituents, thus complicating the process of change and making it more difficult to implement.

In terms of policing, it is important to understand that those who attempt to introduce change programs within police departments often fail to take into account the constant effects of the police setting and culture. That is, new programs are planned and implemented without a sufficient understanding of the effects of the context on the likelihood of successful change.

The police agencies used in this study were well aware of the potential benefits of employee participation in planning, organizing, and decision-making. The police departments understood that a lack of support from line officers, as well as upper- and mid-level managers, could slow down or, worse yet, stop the change process. The police agencies also knew the importance of training and clear communication throughout the organization. When it came time to getting the job done, however, they immediately fell back into their standard operating procedures: (1) command staff makes the decisions, (2) command staff delegates to middle management, (3) middle management orders rank and file to do the job. In sum, police organizations must apply their knowledge to their current practices.

The journey through organizational change is challenging and difficult, yet it is possible to achieve a balance between the goals of the organization and the needs of the employee. The best strategies of successful change are not only in the literature, but are in organizations that have tried and tested many approaches to making their organizations more effective and efficient. The goal is to continue finding successful change organizations in order to collect and disseminate their information that will assist other agencies in making positive change and eliminating the forces of resistance. This information will

contribute to the knowledge and practice regarding organizational change.

Conclusion

The ability to plan for and identify impediments to change is an important issue for law enforcement administrators. In an attempt to use a more integrative model to examine and explain the phenomenon of organizational change, this study identified potential impediments to implementing COP. Results indicated that pressure and individual attitudes toward change were the factors that remained consistent across departments. Individual attitudes were impediments to implementing change, while pressure acted as a facilitator of change. Additionally, communication surfaced as a necessary factor when implementing change and was intertwined with all of the study variables.

By examining the underlying dimensions of change and ascertaining impediments that remained constant across departments, the present study expands the current literature and opens the door for greater knowledge about resistance to change and impediments to program implementation.

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