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POLICE SCIENCE

INTERNAL POLICE COMMUNICATIONS

JOHN P. KENNEY*

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Primary among the ever-recurring and persistent problems in the field of police management is that concerned with developing and maintaining an effective systems of communication. Communication is the primary vehicle for bringing about agreement between all the members of a department as to the police objectives. It is the base for a common and continuing understanding of problems and accomplishments experienced in the day to day pursuits toward the objectives.

Most writers in the field of police management have treated the subject of communication as purely a technical problem, concerned primarily with police teletype, telephone, telegraph, and radio facilities, having to do with communication between headquarters and the field or between departments. This has led to a one sided approach which does not provide an understanding of internal departmental communication so vital to administration.

Internal communication has to do with decision making, a step in the administrative process which is often ignored and poorly performed. Common practice is to order plans into effect without any consideration of the manner in which they can be brought to influence the behavior of individual members of the group. Tendencies are to not follow-up to see if procedures which have been promulgated are used by the individuals to guide their decisions. Failures in communication result whenever it is forgotten that human behavior on the part of the individual is the tool with which organization achieves its purpose.¹

Communication as a process involves a human as well as a technical aspect, and any attempt to develop or perfect a police communication system requires an adequate understanding of both these aspects. In all management situations, communication consists of organizational relationships and mechanics on the one hand, and the human factor on the other, in actuality both existing together.²

* Credit for much of the research in this paper is due Eugene H. Ward, graduate student in the School of Public Administration, University of Southern California and Sergeant in the Los Angeles police department.

¹ HERBERT A. SIMON, *Administrative Behavior*, The Macmillan Co., New York, 1947, p. 108.

² JOHN M. PEIFFNER, *Supervision of Personnel: Human Relations in the Management of Men*, Prentice Hall, N.Y. 1951.

It will be the purpose of this paper, (1) to consider the manner in which the communication process operates, (2) to show some values which result from an effective communication system, (3) to point out some obstacles which police executives must overcome before they develop an effective system of communication, and (4) to consider the role of police executives in the development and maintenance of a communication system.

NATURE OF THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Communication is the process of transmitting cues, mainly written and verbal, in order to modify human behavior.³ It is a process through which interaction between members of a police department is made possible. As such, it is a carrier of a social process by which police executives influence and, in turn, are influenced by subordinate officers. Accordingly, it is grounded in the interchange of ideas, and in this respect it involves the broad field of human interchange of thoughts, ideas, opinions, and attitudes, which are primarily designed to modify human behavior.

With reference to a police department, this process involves three steps, (1) someone in the department must initiate the communication, (2) someone must transmit it from its source to its destination, and (3) the communication must make its impact upon the recipient. In the course of these steps, there are opportunities for misinterpretation and misunderstanding.

The manner in which the communication process occurs between members of a department is rather common knowledge. Most communications follow either the formal lines of authority reflected in the departmental organization chart, or informal channels, which are the unplanned channels of communication operating along side but apart from the formal structure.

Good administration requires that there be clear channels for funneling information, opinions, and attitudes of all members of a department upward, downward and horizontally throughout the organization. This requires that the formal organization of the department be based on sound principles of organization which are religiously adhered to at all times.

VALUES OF AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

A good communication system provides the media for passing information from the chief of police to all levels of the departmental hierarchy with a return of information signifying receipt by subordinates and a carrying out of desired obligations. The chief of police must be assured that his directions are received by subordinates and that the subordinates interpret and effect directives in a manner intended.

Communications cannot occur until information is understood by the receiver, nor is it complete as far as administration is concerned until the receiver is motivated to carry it out.⁴ The benefits which police executives can realize by the free flow of information upward, with respect to subordinates' interpretation and reaction to decisions, policies, and orders, appears to be apparent.

³ JOHN PFIFFNER AND R. V. PRESTHUS, *Public Administration*, Roland Press Co., N.Y., 3rd Ed. 1945, p. 111.

⁴ PFIFFNER AND PRESTHUS, *op. cit.*, p. 128.

Communication is a two-way process. In order to make a proper decision the police executive should have available information and knowledge within the department, some which may be quite removed from him. If decisions are to be effective, unobstructed flow of information to the top of the department must be assured. By providing for the clear flow of needed information or knowledge to the decision point, police executives may be reasonably assured that decisions will be correctly acted upon.

Permitting subordinates the right to communicate freely with top police executives provides a medium for them to release emotional tensions, pressures, and "gripes." It is a means for identifying failures or "sore" spots in the department. If it is denied, subordinates may find other outlets for criticism which may be detrimental to the department.

Effective communication provides police executives with a vital tool for co-ordinating the activities of the department. Since co-ordination is concerned with the interrelationships of separate police activities, it can be no better than the transfer of information about activities to a point or points in the department, where dovetailing takes place.

Fears and suspicions on the part of subordinates usually result from the absence of needed information. By sharing of information with subordinates at all levels of the department, they may be diminished. Information serves to improve morale and the status of individual officers, while helping each officer to understand, accept, and cooperate in the furtherance of departmental objectives.

Communication may be considered a process which meets an important psychological need. It has been determined by research that morale and productivity go hand in hand. Both are derived to a great degree from individual and group participation.⁵

The above points serve to identify why the development and maintenance of a good communication system in any police department should be of primary concern of all police administrators. If each police administrator were to fully appreciate these values as they relate to sound administration, constructive steps will have been taken toward improved police management.

BARRIERS TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF AN EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SYSTEM

Mere recognition of the many values which result from an effective communication system cannot promote good communication. Police executives must recognize that there are ever present currents of resistance inherent in the temperament and habits of individual officers and in the complexity and structure of most departments which must be overcome before good communication may be developed.

It is the consensus of most writers in the field of management that the use of language presents a serious barrier to good communication. Communication functions through language which is extremely complicated because words are merely symbols or abstractions for some real object or process. Meaning is determined by ideas and experiences evoked in the reader's or hearer's mind, inadequate substitutes for the

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

real things they represent.⁶ Furthermore, words often mean different things to different people and many official communications have a curiously legalistic ring and are not in simple understandable language; sometimes producing awe in the recipient.⁷

The police, as any other group, are prone to develop a specialized language for use of their own particular group. The primary objective of the specialized language is to speed up communication between officers, but may cause consternation for some members of the group and outsiders. For example the term "burn" used by narcotics officers means exposing an informant so that he may no longer be used. The term is completely unfamiliar to most people, and not all policemen will recognize it.

Another barrier to effective communications is that which results from a departmental status system. In the police field, a status system is quite similar to that which is found in the military service. Communications between members at the various levels of the hierarchy often take place through a chain of intermediaries and directly involved is the factor of authority as represented by ranks and their prerequisites. Because of this condition contact between police personnel in different ranks is often inhibited, most police officers being apprehensive of authority expressed in the rank or ranks above them. Accordingly, communications from top police executives to subordinates usually takes place with greater ease while the reverse is true of communications upward.

Differences in background, education, and experiences of individuals in a department creates a communication barrier. All members do not possess the same background as to home-life, religion, political indoctrination, and education leading to wide variation in mental power, attitudes, modes of thought, and ways of viewing things. There is little assurance that all officers will interpret managements' communications in the light that was originally intended requiring development of a common understanding of terms and extreme care in preparation of directives.

A fourth barrier to effective communications results from the attitude and behavior of police executives in listening to and acting upon information from subordinates. The degree of receptiveness by executives to communications from subordinates affects materially the flow of information upward and downward. This is exemplified in numerous ways. For example, when executives appear impatient with subordinates, or annoyed by subjects being discussed, subordinates quickly sense a negative attitude creating a communication barrier. Also, when police executives resent and resist communications which indicate that some action on their part has been less than perfect, many officers, who could be helpful to them, withhold information. The way in which an executive receives and acts upon information, will frequently determine what additional information he receives.

Another way in which police executives may adversely affect the free flow of information is by failing to take action in certain situations brought to their attention. By refusing to act, subordinates may lose faith both in the sincerity of the executive and in the values of a communication system. In many instances, refusal to act serves to communicate disapproval in a manner as effective as words.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 114.

⁷ H. A. SIMON, D. W. SMITHBURG, VICTOR A. THOMPSON, *Public Administration*. Alfred A. Knopf, New York, 1950, p. 231.

Size and structure of a department affects communication. A chief of police is often removed from the rank and file of a department by several levels of authority and in larger departments by distance between field offices and headquarters. Transmission of information from the top of the hierarchy to the operating level and vice versa is difficult. The chief of police is so removed from the work level that it is hard for him to have a comprehensive knowledge of what goes on effecting decisions which he makes.⁸

Additional handicap to free flow of information results from the natural tendency of many persons to hold back information. Information is usually filtered to give the "boss" what those below believe he wants to hear.⁹ Information does not automatically transmit itself from its point of origin to the rest of the organization; the individual who first obtains it must transmit it. In transmitting it, he will naturally be aware of the consequences its transmission will have for him. When he knows that the "boss" may be unhappy with what he hears the news will likely be suppressed. Hence information tends to be transmitted upward in the organization only (1) if its transmission will not have unpleasant consequences for the transmitter, or (2) if the superior will hear of it anyway from other channels, and it is better to tell him first, and (3) if it is information that the superior needs in his dealings with his own superiors, and he will be displeased if he is caught without it. In addition, there is often failure to transmit information upward simply because the subordinate cannot visualize accurately what information his superior needs in order to make decisions.¹⁰

Police communications is affected by the presence of "grapevines." It is commonplace knowledge that there is much communications between officers through a department's informal communication system, the "grapevines." This medium, which in many instances helps police operations, has a tendency to act as a barrier to effective communications, simply because it discourages frankness and often carries inaccurate information. The police chief, alert to the "grapevines," may utilize them to aid departmental communications.

These are but a few of the many barriers which police administrators must overcome for successful development of an effective system of communications. They serve to identify an area of difficulty which must be faced if a police department is to operate effectively. Fundamentally, each barrier discussed involves a human factor, and to overcome these barriers police leaders must possess an understanding of human problems plus an ability to solve such problems with human tools.

THE EXECUTIVE'S PART IN POLICE COMMUNICATION

For successful police operations, each member of a department must be fully apprised of the department's purpose, functions, and activities, as well as relationships between members. Successful police operations are dependent on efficient planning, organization, and direction. There must be developed a well designed system of communication for assuring effective planning, organizing, and direction. In fact, there can be no organization without communication.¹¹

⁸ PFIFFNER AND PRESTHUS, *op cit.*, pp. 117.

⁹ BURLEIGH B. GARDNER, *Human Relations in Industry*, Irwin Press, Chicago, 1945, p. 5.

¹⁰ SIMON et al., *op. cit.*, p. 136.

¹¹ *Ibid*, p. 137.

This raises the question "Who is responsible for designing an effective system of communications?" It is the opinion of most authorities in the field of management that it is the responsibility of the chief of police and his immediate subordinates. Probably the first executive function is to develop and maintain a system of communication.¹² This requires that the chief of police and his immediate staff assume responsibility for developing effective communications along with the development of other administrative responsibilities, in the sense that communication is directly involved in his four classic duties of planning, organizing, directing, and controlling. But, before he can perform any of these responsibilities, he must know about the fundamentals of each so that he can set realistic goals and evaluate results. It necessarily follows that a chief of police must consider his communication responsibilities in a similar light.

In designing a communication system, the first need is to establish the overall purpose of communication. The purpose is to bring members of a department and police goals into an adjustment which will produce the greatest efficiency of operations, as well as individual satisfaction for members of the department. Moreover, good communications provides each officer with knowledge of what to do and encourages in him a will to do it, thereby insuring coordination and cooperation. Activities and personnel at the level of operations must be attuned to situations and problems through provision of good information.

The system should create an environment conducive to two-way communications. It should provide for unobstructed flow of information vertically and horizontally within the department. There must be assurance that required information will reach appropriate officers for action and that the information will be clear and understandable.

Giving reasons for particular viewpoints, decisions, or action being communicated is important. Generally, there are good reasons for most decisions and actions; not to give them increases chances for personal conflicts. Reasons are a base by which subordinates may view problems, decisions, and actions in a similar manner as intended by the superior. Communications come at the beginning of a course of action, not at the end of it. Plans for any police action should also include plans for communicating it to those who will carry it out and to those who will be affected by it. No plan is really complete unless it also has a plan of communication.

Police executives should realize that the paragon of communications would result when they always say what they mean and mean what they say, and every subordinate officer always understands exactly what is intended. Since the paragon is not easily achieved, police executives should strive for its achievement. This requires cognizance of intent when communicating with subordinates. This means knowing the effect one intends to produce. Communications are usually successful if the one initiating them does not confuse content with intent. Be sure the content of the communication includes the intent.

Executives who are concerned about building an efficient department should recognize that the communication process is a continuous one. The task is never complete; the results are never perfect. Accordingly, the flow of information cannot

¹² CHESTER I. BARNARD, *The Functions of an Executive*, Harvard Univ. Press, 1938, p. 234.

be turned off and on at the convenience of top management. To be effective, the channels of communication must always be open to carry good as well as bad news. Unless this is provided, no police administrator can be assured of efficient police operations.

Police executives should realize that they cannot escape their communication responsibility, because even by silence or inaction they are communicating with members of their department in a manner as effectively as if they were using words. This is obvious but often forgotten.

Finally, police executives must recognize that effective communications cannot be left to chance. Rather, the development of a system must be systematically planned; otherwise top police management will not be provided a comprehensive nor a balanced picture of departmental operations. Only through the medium of planning, can police executives be assured of free and open channels which will permit effective exchange of ideas and information within a department.

SUMMARY

Police executives should be well informed on all aspects of departmental operations if they are to effectively perform responsibilities of planning, directing, coordinating, and controlling the activities and the members of their department. This is basically a task of coordinating departmental activities and members into an efficient purposive unity. The primary means available to accomplish this task, is through a well designed system of communications which will provide for unobstructed flow of information throughout the department.

Although the need is great, the problem of developing and maintaining an effective system of communication is a very difficult task. Communication is an extremely complicated process which is concerned with the interactions of people, individually and in groups, the subject of which is interwoven with semantics, sociology, anthropology, psychology, and administration. Moreover, the problem is further complicated by the ever-present currents of resistance which often inhibit the free flow of information between individuals. Currents of resistance emanate from the use of language, departmental status system, the differences in the background of each individual officer, the attitude and behavior of top police executives, and the size and structure of most police departments. Fundamentally, the need is for executives who possess an understanding of human problems plus an ability to solve such problems with human tools.