

Approaches for Eliminating Internal Communication Problems within the UWPD

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Problem

The UW-Madison Police Department (UWPD) is experiencing frustration among all levels due to communication problems. Officers are independently working on the same projects, causing duplications of effort. Rather than communicating with each other they continue to work alone instead of proactively forming work groups to problem- solve together. Supervisors are not talking to each other when they have questions about how issues were handled. Instead of finding out why something was handled the way it was, they are immediately going to the next level in the chain of command. The lack of communication is resulting in extra work for everyone as well as dissatisfaction among all levels.

Assumptions

- Internal communication problems will continue to cause frustration among all levels and increasing amounts of time will be spent dealing with concerns if the issues are not addressed.
- As assigned and self-initiated Problem Oriented Policing projects continue to grow in number, there will be greater instances of duplication of efforts if no organization or communication method is enlisted.
- The Employee Assistance Program (EAP), used for mediation, will be used more frequently if department members are not able to settle their differences on their own.

Facts

- The UWPD website currently lists twelve active POP projects (Annex A)
- Based on the results from a department wide survey, there are currently at least 17 active POP projects and 13 other projects not specified as POP projects. (Annex B)
- The previous method of telling people to talk to each other to coordinate projects has not been successful (K. Soley, personal communication, April 8, 2009).
- Individuals from two separate work units within the UWPD have had to use EAP this year to mediate their differences because their work relationship had gotten so bad (K. Soley, personal communication).

- Based on the results from a department wide survey, the lack of communication is resulting in extra work for everyone as well as dissatisfaction among all levels of the department. (Annex B)

Discussion

The amount of time currently being spent dealing with internal communication issues at the UWPD is a cause of concern and frustration among all levels of the department. One area of concern is with Problem Oriented Police (POP) projects. Officers who are working on POP projects, both assigned and self-initiated, are at times failing to first determine whether or not others within the department are also working on the same problem. In some instances, when the officer determines that co-workers are indeed working on the project, he or she is not taking the initiative to coordinate efforts. This lack of lateral communication is in turn causing a duplication of work.

The UWPD publicly advertises Problem Oriented Policing projects on its website. There is currently a system in place for approving projects and updating the status of projects. (Annex C) Modifying the current system is one way of possibly assisting with the communication barrier officers are encountering. In a management and efficiency study prepared by Berkshire Advisors, INC. for the Dallas Police Department, one suggestion made was to improve lateral communication through technology. "...the department can certainly facilitate improved communication across the organization by providing the technology to support lateral communication." The Dallas Police Department was encouraged to host on-line chat rooms and bulletin boards in which all members of the department could share what projects they were currently working on as well as solutions they had found. These methods would then be promoted by supervisors as "tools to communicate with each other." (Berkshire Advisors, INC., 2004).

An advantage of employing on-line chat rooms and bulletin boards at the UWPD is the enhanced accessibility of information to all personnel. With varying shifts and multiple buildings it is not always possible to share information with everyone at the same time, and this alternative would help overcome that. However, a disadvantage of an on-line forum is the potential for inappropriate comments and suggestions posted for all to see.

A second method for addressing the communication barrier again looks at lateral communication, albeit in a different manner. In a research study conducted by Valorie McClelland and Dick Wilmot it was found that deadlines were being missed, efforts were being duplicated, quality of work was suffering, and interdepartmental relationships were deteriorating, all due to compromised lateral information sharing. Lateral communication was defined as “the sharing of information across the organization within departments and between departments.” (McClelland, V. . & Wilmot, D., 1990). One result of the research was the suggestion of forming an ad hoc communication group. This could be done at the UWPD by coordinating representatives from each department who would look ahead at planned projects. In doing so they could discuss how to set up stronger lateral communications in an effort to avoid wasted time and duplication of work. An advantage to this method would be the synchronization of multiple departments working together to address an issue affecting all of them. A disadvantage would be coordinating multiple shifts and finding a time that would be most convenient for all.

Another communication issue arises with supervisors at the same level who are unwilling to talk to each other about problems. In these instances supervisors are immediately going to the next level in the chain of command rather than discussing with each other the reason a decision was made.

Law enforcement is not the only profession that encounters barriers to communication. Many businesses have had to improve their communication strategies in order to be successful, and studies have been done to show how these business strategies can also be applied to the policing profession. Findings have shown the importance of keeping employees informed, even when news is negative. When there is no information sharing, “employees will start to rely on their co-workers for information that is not reliable and possibly detrimental to the organization.” (Bowers, 2005). This applies to the above mentioned situation of when a supervisor is unwilling to take the time to communicate with another supervisor about the reason a decision was made. When a supervisor relies purely on an officer’s interpretation of why a decision was made a certain way without speaking with the original supervisor who made the decision, information is bound to be skewed. Information sharing not only needs to take place vertically in an

organization, it must also take place horizontally. While it is not always possible to inform co-workers about each and every decision that is made during the day, it is always possible to go to the source for clarification when an issue arises.

Tied into this is the idea of conflict resolution. Reasons for conflict are multiple, including personal differences, sources of or interpretations of information, and differing objectives. (North Dakota Human Resources Management Services, 2009). Dudley Weeks recommends an eight-step model for conflict resolution in which people are empowered to build mutually beneficial relationships. (Annex D) Applying his model to the UWPD would help not only supervisors, but also line level officers discover new methods for working through problems together instead of immediately going to a supervisor for resolution.

Another factor in conflict resolution lies in interpersonal communication. While it is far from being a new concept, it is one that can be improved in order to enhance successful communication. Modes of communication include face-to-face, telephone, e-mail, and memos. While all modes have the ability to deliver a message, the clarity of the message is best relayed in face-to-face interactions. While this is not always possible at police departments where there are multiple shifts or multiple buildings, it is still preferred when breakdowns in communication occur. Reflective listening is a key component to interpersonal communication and is defined as “a skill intended to help the receiver and communicator clearly and fully understand the message sent” (Nelson, Mathis, & Daft, 2006). Practicing reflective listening can assist both parties in reaching an understanding of why decisions were made and what the reasons were behind the decision.

Training in conflict resolution and interpersonal communication would be one way to enhance positive communication at the UWPD as well as encourage all officers and supervisors to find methods to solving their problems without relying on going up the chain of command. One disadvantage of additional training is the time and cost involved. Also, getting buy-in from members of the department may be a deterrent in an effective training session.

A survey of peer law enforcement agencies (Annex E) found one agency has instituted a “calling out” program where supervisors are encouraged to discuss differences with each other privately without getting personal. The same agency has a group called the Committee for Positive Change that is composed of officers and some supervisors who meet to discuss minor problems and come up with solutions.

Conclusion

While communication breakdowns can occur in multiple areas, examining the specific issues at the UWPD show that the absence of lateral communication is attributing to the majority of the problems. The officers who are not taking the time to coordinate with each other about similar projects are later finding their efforts have been duplicated, resulting in wasted time and energy. Supervisors who are not communicating with each other are ending up frustrated because they do not take the time to determine the reasons behind why decisions were made. They also are going to their supervisors for clarification when many times the issue most likely could have been resolved through practicing conflict resolution and using interpersonal skills.

Having a more structured method of organizing the POP projects at the UWPD would assist in minimizing duplication of work, resulting in less frustration among officers. By providing current data on who is working on what, officers would have the up-to-date information to assist them in communicating with others involved in similar projects. While on-line chat rooms have been successful in some departments it would not be as feasible at the UWPD due to multiple shifts working on similar projects. Having a resource with the current information located in one place would be more effective in tracking progress.

In addition to this, encouraging conflict resolution among all levels including supervisors would also assist in reducing aggravation. If officers and supervisors are able to resolve problems on their own, through enhanced interpersonal communication, a lot of time and frustration could be avoided. Although additional training in these areas may be time consuming and costly, the overall savings would far outweigh initial costs.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the UWPD provide a more structured method for organizing POP projects as well as training for conflict resolution. The training should include information on interpersonal communication and how to successfully resolve problems with each other, rather than going up the chain of command, whenever possible. (Annex F)

Works Cited

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Annex A

University Police Department

Employee	Location	Date Started	Pop Project	Stage of Completion
PO John Deering	Campus	September, 2007	<u>Bicycle Theft Reduction</u>	Response
PO Nielsen	UW-Arboretum	March, 2008	<u>Prostitution in the UW Arboretum with Assistance of Madison Police</u>	Response
Lt Holen, PO Ogren, SO Slater	Campus	July, 2008	<u>10 Most Vulnerable Auditoriums</u>	Analysis
Lt Holen, Sgt Silbernagel, PO Pearce	Campus and Outlying Properties	July, 2008	<u>Scrap Metal Thefts</u>	Response
PO Gruber	Campus		<u>Crosswalk Safety</u>	Scanning
PO Glejf	Park/Langdon Streets	April, 2008	<u>Reduction of Stuck Semis in Park Circle</u>	Analysis
PO Vandenbergart, PO Radtke	Campus	March, 2006	<u>Moped Committee-Behavior & Safety</u>	Response
PO Radtke	Sterling Hall	August, 2008	<u>Malicious Vandalism</u>	Scanning
PO Radtke	Social Work	April, 2008	<u>Basement Utilization for Housing</u>	Completed
Sgt Silbernagel, PO Radtke, PO Pearce, PO Landrie, SO Bablitch, SO Avila, SO Ward	Campus Buildings	June, 2008	<u>Business Hours Posted on Buildings</u>	Response
PO Gruber	UW-Hospital	October, 2008	<u>Worthless Checks</u>	Scanning/Analysis
PO Mars	Park/Observatory St	October, 2008	<u>Vehicles Stopping/Standing/Parking in Roadway</u>	Scanning
PO McCaughtry, SO Bablitch, Sec Supv Gruber, Sec Supv Pasha, Lt Holen	Education Sciences	November 2008	<u>Reduction of False Security Alarms at Education Sciences</u>	Scanning

Annex B

Communication Survey: UWPD

Name _____

1. What barriers do you encounter when trying to coordinate with people working on a similar project, for example laptop thefts?

2. When you are assigned a project, or self-initiate one, do you automatically check to see if others are also working on something similar? Why or why not?

3. If you answered “yes” to question #2, how do you find out if others are working on the same project?

4. Do you believe it is your personal responsibility or that of your supervisors to check to see if others are working on a project assigned to you or self-initiated by you?

5. What do you believe would be the most effective method of determining if others are working on a project you are also working on?

6. Are you currently involved in a POP project or another project? If so, what is it? Please list them all and specify if they are individual or group projects. Please also specify if it is a POP project.

Annex C

E-mail sent to UWPD personnel on August 24, 2008

As you are all aware, our department is very involved with Problem Oriented Policing. Many of you are currently assigned to a POP project or have been in the past. In order to keep the community we serve aware of what we are involved in, the UWPD website will soon have a link to a page that will share this information.

To see an example of what this will look like, go to Port Washington PD's webpage, <http://www.pwpd.org/>, and click on the Problem-Oriented Policing Initiatives link on the left. Each officer at the Port Washington PD is required to complete one POP project per year and to present it to members of the department/community. You will see some projects are more extensive than others, but all are problems that officers themselves have identified. The information shared includes the officer(s) assigned, location, date started, description of project, and stage of completion.

On the S:/ drive in the P.O.P. folder there is sub-folder titled pop project tracking (in Microsoft Excel). If you have completed or are currently involved in a POP project please go to this spreadsheet and fill in the information about your project. All future projects should also be entered into the spreadsheet. As projects progress through the different stages (Scanning, Analysis, Response, Assessment), officers assigned are required to keep the information in the S:/ drive updated as well. Some projects have been added to the spreadsheet already.

If you have any questions please ask.

Sgt. Ewing

E-mail sent to UWPD personnel on October 22, 2008

All,

As explained in my e-mail a month ago, our department is going to be putting descriptions of all POP Projects that officers are involved in onto the UWPD webpage. For those of you who are currently involved in projects please continue to update the status in the Excel spreadsheet found in the S:/ drive under P.O.P. All new projects should be entered onto the spreadsheet as well. The website will be updated quarterly and I will send out reminder e-mails to keep the spreadsheet current.

Please go to <http://hastings/uwpd/pop%20project.html> (copy and paste into the browser) to see the mock version of what will be online. If you currently are involved in a project please make sure the information listed is correct. If there are any errors please notify me by Wed, Oct. 29. For those who have projects listed without descriptions, please e-mail me a description by Oct 29th as well.

Thank you,
Sgt. Ewing

Annex D

Resolving Conflict in the Workplace

- Conflict Resolution Techniques

In an article entitled “The Eight Essential Steps to Conflict Resolution,” written by Dudley Weeks, Ph.D., Dr. Weeks recommends empowering people to build mutually beneficial relationships through eight steps. They are:

Step 1. Create an Effective Atmosphere

Select a location where everyone feels comfortable and at ease. Create an atmosphere that allows the issues to be addressed openly and honestly during a time convenient for all and no one is feeling pressured. Your opening statements should let others know you are ready and willing to approach conflict in a team-like attitude that focuses on positive results.

Step 2. Clarify Perceptions

Find out what the conflict is about while avoiding any side issues. Recognize other’s needs and wants. Listen carefully to help clear up misconceptions.

Step 3. Focus on Individual and Shared Needs

Be concerned about meeting other people’s needs besides your own. Recognize the fact that you need each other to resolve conflict.

Step 4. Build Shared Positive Power

Power is made up of people’s outlooks, ideas, convictions, and actions. Thus, a positive view of power enables people to be most effective. Positive power promotes building together and strengthening partnerships.

Step 5. Look to the Future, then Learn from the Past

Try to understand what happened with past conflicts and avoid repeating the same mistakes over.

Step 6. Generate Options

Get ideas from people having conflict. Look for common threads. Make sure options are workable for all parties

Step 7. Develop “Doables” – Stepping Stones to Action: Select the “doables” that:

- have the best chance of success,
- never promote unfair advantages on any side,
- are found on shared input and information from all parties, and
- add confidence in working together.

Step 8. Make Mutual Benefit Agreements

Focus on developing agreements and finding shared goals.
Pay attention to the needs of the other person.
Recognize the things that can’t be changed.
Clarify what is expected of you in the agreement.

Annex E

Peer Agency Communication Survey

1. Do you have a system for keeping track of current projects at your department in order to avoid duplication of efforts?
2. How do you encourage supervisors to talk to each other if they have a disagreement about how something was handled (or to get clarification on why something was done the way it was), instead of immediately going to the next level in the chain of command?
3. How do you encourage officers to be proactive and form committees to work on projects jointly instead of finding out a lot of officers are working independently on the same thing, even when they know others are already working on the project they are?

Annex F

Implementation Plan

1. Organize a committee to determine the best way to submit and organize POP projects.
2. Notify all UWPD personnel of the committee's decision on how to submit and organize POP projects.
3. Require all personnel to look at the UWPD webpage to determine if a project they have been assigned or are self-initiating is already being worked on.
4. Designate one supervisor to keep track of all POP projects and the status. Have the supervisor oversee any overlap of projects and make sure people working on similar projects are communicating with each other.
5. Provide in-service training on interpersonal communication to assist with the communication problems.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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Problem

The UW-Madison Police Department (UWPD) is experiencing frustration among all levels due to communication problems. Officers are independently working on the same projects, causing duplications of effort. Rather than communicating with each other they continue to work alone instead of proactively forming work groups to problem- solve together. Supervisors are not talking to each other when they have questions about how issues were handled. Instead of finding out why something was handled the way it was, they are immediately going to the next level in the chain of command. The lack of communication is resulting in extra work for everyone as well as dissatisfaction among all levels.

Possible Solutions

- The UWPD could host on-line chat rooms and bulletin boards in which all members of the department could share what projects they are currently working on as well as solutions they have found.
- The UWPD could coordinate representatives from each department who would look ahead at planned projects. In doing so they could discuss how to set up stronger lateral communications in an effort to avoid wasted time and duplication of work.
- The UWPD could apply Dudley Weeks' eight-step model for conflict resolution in which people are empowered to build mutually beneficial relationships. Applying his model to the UWPD could help not only supervisors, but also line level officers discover new methods for working through problems together instead of immediately going to a supervisor for resolution.
- The UWPD could provide additional training in conflict resolution and interpersonal communication to enhance positive communication as well as encourage all officers and supervisors to find methods to solve their problems without relying on going up the chain of command.

Recommendation

It is recommended that the UWPD provide a more structured method for organizing POP projects as well as training for conflict resolution. The training should include information on interpersonal communication and how to successfully resolve problems with each other, rather than going up the chain of command, whenever possible.