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Strategic Management in Policing: The Role of the Strategic Manager

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Strategic management is a process by which managers choose a set of actions that will allow their organization to attain one or more of its long-term goals and achieve superior performance.

Successful police executives are driving organizational change through strategic management—an ongoing process that seeks opportunities to enhance operational efficiencies by identifying internal issues and external influences that hinder organizational sustainability. It focuses on management's responsibility for implementation to create a customer-focused, high-performance learning organization. Strategic managers integrate strategic planning with other management systems.

Executives know that community policing, external and internal environments, political influences, homeland security, and new technologies are molding the profession into a more engaging system. Today, policing has evolved into a highly complex structure that requires dynamic leadership paradigms and an organization that is adaptable to a fast-paced world.

To be successful in today's law enforcement environment, police executives must set the course with strategic management. Known as the "institutional brain" of a modern public organization, strategic management takes into account systems-thinking approaches while tapping into human emotions that drive organizational change.¹

Strategic management is a systems management approach that uses active leaders in the organization to move change across organizational boundaries. A small team of personnel is assembled to analyze operational functions, identify inefficiencies, review systems integration, and detect gaps in management communications that hinder performance. In identifying organizational barriers, whether they are operational or caused by human dynamics, strategic managers are able to recommend strategies to the police executive to improve operations and quicken transitions, while working with managers to soften human resistance to change.

Although the police executive has the vision, the role of guiding the agency toward organizational renewal and change is the responsibility of all managers. Major transformation in an organization cannot rest with one individual but should be guided by

teams under the direction of strategic managers. Police executives should scan their talent pools for command and support staff members who have the expertise, credibility, and competence to get the job done. Working with the chief executive and top managers, strategic managers assist in expediting change by educating, training, and marketing the reasons for change to management staff to make the vision a reality.

Impediments to Change

Police chiefs are expected to implement theoretical frameworks that support contemporary leadership models such as learning organizations, enlightened leadership, or the consensus model. Although most police executives would agree with the argument for developing more adaptive organizations, they realize that the difficulty lies in implementation and the ability to affect the behavior and attitudes of managers to facilitate change.

As leaders define the vision of the police agency, they must also identify mechanisms to drive change. One important aspect often overlooked is the potential utility of the managerial influence in the organization. Managers interpret the vision as expressed by the chief and will choose either to accept or to reject it. The managers then communicate the vision, in either a positive or a negative manner, to employees.

Police executives recognize the fact that first-line supervisors are responsible for implementation and ensuring policy compliance of the operational units. However, if the middle managers are not properly prepared and informed by the executive, they will fail to provide supervisors with the rationale for organizational renewal, hampering implementation by the supervisors. It is important to recognize that the rate of change is not primarily driven by operational procedures but rather by the emotional commitment to, or ownership of, the vision. Middle managers must excite change in supervisors, and this can only happen when the middle managers believe in the vision and are excited about the change.

To offset these challenges and to help the chief transform vision into actual practice, police executives are turning to a strategic manager. The strategic manager provides the chief with a person who serves as an instrument to navigate the human side of change, while using strategic planning as the tool to drive new operational functions. In this manner the strategic manager becomes a resource for all levels of management to help them institute change and keep the excitement and momentum of the change moving.

How a Strategic Manager Can Work for an Organization

The key purpose of strategic management is to enhance the organization's performance by establishing operational strategies across organizational boundaries while addressing employees' resistance to change. Core competencies require the strategic manager to do any of the following:

- Conduct research to support and coordinate the department's strategic plan
- Identify adjustments in organizational designs
- Identify potential barriers or gaps created by human system resistance
- Monitor and assess departmental progress toward strategic planning goals
- Serve as the department liaison with external stakeholders in planning projects
- Review program research to determine applicability to departmental needs
- Identify proactive approaches to issues through trend analysis and predictive indicators
- Work to drive organizational change through marketing and educating personnel on best practice methods
- Assist middle managers in navigating the change process
- Enhance efficiency by evaluating operational systems across organizational lines

Strategic managers, working as a team with other agency managers, can help top management drive cultural change. The configuration of the strategic management team is dependent upon the complexity of the change and the organization. In smaller organizations one person can serve as the strategic manager working with supervisors to implement the vision and effect change. In larger organizations it may involve several persons in the role of strategic managers crossing many working divisional lines and teaming with managers from various units.

Whatever configuration used, in order to be successful the strategic managers must have the continuous support of the police chief, a strong knowledge base, the skills to work with staff, commitment to the organization, and energy. Regular and frequent communication between the chief and the strategic management team is essential. These strategic management teams will oversee quality control, strive to ensure consistency in performance, provide immediate feedback, and interact with managers at all levels. They guide the strategic plan, working not to control but to help establish new behaviors.

Why Employ Strategic Managers?

John Kotter notes in his Harvard Business Review article "Why Transformation Efforts Fail" that executives may initiate a new approach or vision, but they often fail to carry the vision to the point of institutionalization.² To institutionalize a vision it is necessary to keep in mind that employees are both suppliers and customers of change; they must participate in the change process.

Strategic managers navigate the change process, drive the vision, and keep it alive through implementation to change the culture of the organization. In order to reduce resistance to change and the fear of the unknown, strategic managers must improve the opportunities for employees to influence and control the change process. Input allows for the design of better solutions by allowing managers to look at problems from different perspectives. Thus, the organization achieves a faster start-up and implementation with a better flow of information.

Peter Senge's definition of organizational change is learning to do new things or the same things for different reasons.³ People change when they want to learn, which is why strategic managers must articulate and market the reasons for change up and down the chain of command. When employees understand the need for change, they begin to interpret what that means for them. Employees do not think in terms of maximizing the value of organizational change without first thinking about how it affects them. This reflective conversation and thought affects learning as well as the degree to which organizational renewal will be accepted. Therefore, communication becomes a key factor in affecting the culture and climate of the organization.

Informal interaction establishes certain attitudes, understandings, customs, and habits that create the condition under which formal organization may arise.⁴ The possibility of accepting a common purpose is communicated, and the exchange of the information influences the state of mind in which there is a conscious decision to cooperate. Therefore, the informal interaction compels a certain amount of formal emergence into the change process.

Middle managers are key players in this formal emergence of organizational change because they move the process. As top executives set the course for the ship of change, it is the middle manager who determines the speed in the engine room. Top management typically instructs middle managers on the new vision, and once it starts, the momentum shifts, and it becomes the responsibility of middle managers to secure change. However, middle managers are typically left alone in their efforts, taking on the

responsibility for, and risks of, implementation.

Line staff has very little interaction with police executives. However, officers are more likely to have direct interaction with their precinct commander or captain. Middle managers are the link between top management making policy and the first-line supervisor implementing policy. Therefore, it is the first-line supervisor who ultimately decides the rate of change. The police chief must sell the new paradigm to the middle manager who in turn is responsible for exciting a sense of urgency in their lieutenants and sergeants. If middle managers are resistant to the ideology, then implementation is not possible.

It takes personal commitment from police managers to foster credibility for the new paradigm in the eyes of the employees, and managers must demonstrate the behaviors in order to ask for commitment from others. As the police chief articulates the importance of organizational renewal in face-to-face interactions with middle managers, it is the responsibility of strategic managers to provide continuous education and support on the subject. Strategic managers support middle managers in navigating change by educating personnel on best practice methods for guiding renewal efforts. These actions enhance the organization's credibility in the eyes of line staff while reducing anxiety caused by the change process.

Five Key Factors

There are five key factors in transforming the police organization:

1. The appointment of strategic managers to move the change process. In order to have credibility, strategic managers must possess the expertise, competence and demonstrate the ability to excite change. Although all of management is responsible for the change process, the role of the strategic manager is to guide the process. Therefore, they should be appointed to the task and formally announced to the organization by the police chief. Their role should be defined as those sanctioned to carry the vision forward and assist in navigating change.

Strategic management teams guide and support managers in reducing resistance to change and demonstrating best-practice methods. They carry the torch for the department by marketing the strategies and keeping the new paradigm in the forefront. Strategic managers are the designated resource for information and questions. They work to institute, monitor, and when necessary adjust the change process.

2. The commitment of top executives to excite middle managers about change. Most middle managers will be concerned with how change will affect their positional power and the risk involved. Venturing into the unknown is a concern for all employees, but typically the brunt of the responsibility will rest with the middle manager. To be successful the leader must excite middle managers about the vision for change. Executives must encourage risk taking and stepping outside traditional policing methods while demonstrating some tolerance for mistakes.

3. The middle manager's commitment to the change process. It determines the rate of implementation. In order to be credible in the eyes of their subordinates, the middle managers must demonstrate personal commitment to the transformational process through their own behavior and actions. In doing so, they lead by example and start to gain consensus from others. Therefore, as the middle manager sets the course for those under their span of control, the strategic manager works with the middle manager's management staff to move toward the vision of the police executive.

4. A change in the police culture and climate. Police executives cannot navigate change toward organizational renewal without addressing police culture and climate. Formal and informal interactions of employees drive organizational change. In order to

be successful in a transformational process, the organization must institute the operational model while simultaneously providing a mechanism to address employees' fears that lead to resistance. Strategic management teams address the human side of change while adjusting operational procedures that drive change.

5. Communication of the vision and urgency for change. Organizations need an easy-to-read document that outlines the road map for change. Strategic managers must develop a marketing strategy that informs, educates, and provides examples that demonstrate desired behaviors. The document must be readily available, referred to frequently, and consistently talked about. Pulling it off the shelf once or twice a year to check off activities done does not mean the spirit of the strategy is being followed.

Finally, each stage of change results in a greater impact on the organization and generates more energy. As employees are trained, educated, and begin to incorporate new strategies, they learn the new culture of the organization as well as the functions of their position. These cultural changes are then communicated informally to various members of the department. By challenging employees to rethink their purpose and methods, the agency can identify gaps in organizational design and the effects of social controls on organizational culture. This provides for the opportunity for incremental changes and shifts in culture toward organizational renewal.

¹ J. Koteen, *Strategic Management in Public and Nonprofit Organizations*, 2nd ed. (Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 1997).

² John Kotter, "Why Transformation Efforts Fail," *Harvard Business Review* (March-April 1995): 59-67.

³ Peter Senge, *The Fifth Discipline* (New York: Currency Doubleday, 1994).

⁴ C. Barnard, *The Functions of the Executive* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1939).

Suggested Reading on Strategic Management and Organizational Change

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