The Role of Organizational Design in Twenty-First Century Policing Organizations

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The law enforcement profession is again battered by the cyclical fiscal upheaval that returns every few years. Just one decade into this new century, and the issues that confront law enforcement, as well as the challenges that lie ahead, threaten to overwhelm its leaders. Yet many law enforcement leaders do not take time to think and act strategically to meet these challenges. As philosopher Francis Bacon suggests, “Things alter for the worse spontaneously, if they be not altered for the better designedly.” Similarly, police futurist Bernard Levin, EdD, said of law enforcement, “Short term thinking abounds and strategic thinking does not.”

Identifying the forces of change that will challenge the current organizational design and designing the new organization are the hallmarks of twenty-first century leadership. This article will present a framework to consider when making organizational design changes.

Forces of Change

Forces currently at work are causing significant change. According to Sarah Miller Caldicott, great-grandniece of Thomas Edison and coauthor of Innovate Like Edison, the primary reason for this change is the transition from the Industrial Age to the Information Age: “Information is not yet knowledge. Organizations will be charged with taking information sets, looking for patterns, and creating products or services through innovation. . . . Putting information together in new ways is what the Information Age is teaching us.”

1. Identifying the forces of change that will challenge the current organizational design and designing the new organization are the hallmarks of twenty-first century leadership. This article will present a framework to consider when making organizational design changes.

2. Galbraith recommends his “Star Model” for choosing an effective organizational design. The Star Model provides a framework that identifies five categories for consideration when making organizational design changes: strategy, structure, people, process, and rewards. When these five categories are properly aligned, the organization will operate most effectively to guide employee behavior in ways that produce the desired results. This framework will be used to explain the role of organizational design as a tool for leaders to use in improving organizational effectiveness as departments move further into the twenty-first century.

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3. Caldicott identified the following additional forces:
increasing complexity in the world, which is shrinking the decision-making horizon to three years or fewer; 
social networking, which allows individuals to find real expertise faster; 
the Gen X and Gen Y mind-sets have been acculturated with technology, social networking, and a high level of visual 
stimulation, which gives them access to real-time information and enables faster decision making; and 
a deeper culture that emphasizes learning and flexibility in light of the developing supercomputing capacity that allows 
organizations to get information faster, even from the field.

Levin agreed that social networking is increasingly important in a global community where jurisdictions and 
crime are morphing and as crime increasingly crosses country borders, such as with child pornography. 
Different networks have developed to give officers access to other officers around the world. Some of these 
networks are formal, sanctioned functions of departments or governments, and others are informal networks 
that thousands of officers from around the world use to share information and link with officers dealing with 
similar problems.

Another police futurist, Gene Stephens, PhD, believes that the lack of resources will put pressure on some departments to move 
toward public safety agencies tasked with delivering police, fire, and EMT services. This will require a more highly trained staff 
who will demand higher salaries. On the topic of declining resources, Levin felt the current fiscal crisis is endemic of the future, 
causing police to scale back to basic service levels. Citizen groups desiring more service will look for other options to supplement 
the basic police service.

Greg Warren, EdD, Wilmington University professor and retired Delaware State Police captain, believes litigation over issues 
internal to police departments is a driving force for change. Many of these issues pertain to character, which relates to who is 
hired and retained, as well as how employees are developed over the course of their careers.

In summary, there are a variety of forces pushing for organizational design changes in police organizations. Examples include 
innovation in the Information Age, complexity in an increasingly global community, social networking, technology, shifting 
employee mind-sets, shrinking resources, and a litigious society. The organizational design of the department must address these 
forces of change.

Organizational Design

In their article “Business Not as Usual,” Susan A. Mohrman and Ian I. Mitroff capture this thought, “The deeper problems . . . result 
from America’s failure to produce quality products that can compete in world markets. The root of that failure is the inability to 
realize that the rules of doing business have changed fundamentally and permanently.”

Often, the mind-set of police leaders is that these rules don’t apply to them because police agencies do not produce products or 
compete in the global market. But law enforcement does produce a product—it is called “service.” Chief Todd Wuestewald, 
Broken Arrow Police Department, Oklahoma, said, “We are a business and, as such, are bound to be cost effective and innovative 
to reduce costs . . . and bring information from people to the top of the organization.”

Organizations, even in policing, are at risk of going out of business. An Ohio study cited by Edward R. Maguire and William R.
King found that during a 29-year period ending in 1999, 115 police departments disbanded and only 15 were formed. Two 
reasons organizations disband are lack of resources and poor use of resources.

Galbraith writes, “The business world has changed. The solutions to many of today’s issues have their roots in new organizational 
designs.” In other words, the role of organizational design is to help an organization achieve its mission. When the operational 
environment changes, so must the characteristics of the organization’s design.

Galbraith’s Star Model provides the opportunity to review how each category plays a role in organizational design.

**Strategy.** Strategy refers to the organization’s vision, mission, values, goals, and objectives. Pursuing these is critical for
organizational success. For example, many policing organizations began to gravitate to community policing in the 1980s. This switch from traditional policing to community policing reflected a change in strategy—one that put a priority on building community partnerships to address crime and quality-of-life issues in the community. Community policing fundamentally involves a philosophical mind-set shift from a perspective that police are solely responsible for fighting crime to a perspective of partnership to address not only crime, but also quality-of-life issues.

In order to accomplish the strategy, the other categories of organizational design—structure, people, processes, and rewards—should be adjusted in ways that will support the strategy. Failure to develop this alignment will undermine a successful transition.

**Structure.** Structure primarily refers to how power and authority are dispersed in the organization. Typically, structure is manifested in four ways: specialization, organizational shape, distribution of power, and departmentalization.

Using community policing as an example, when organizations adopted a community policing strategy, many of them developed specialized community policing units. This not only signified a move to specialization, but also changed the organizational shape by adding another box to the organizational chart. Part of the success of community policing was pushing decision making to lower levels of the organization by empowering officers to enlist assistance from staff in other divisions internal to the police department, as well as by enlisting help from external stakeholders to facilitate problem solving.

The role of structure is to support the organization’s strategy. Levin says of the typical police hierarchy, “Policing is an industrial-age, linear, hierarchical, centralized, specialized, and tradition-bound enterprise. It is paramilitary, having adopted the least functional characteristics of the military (e.g., command, hierarchy, tradition, and rigid structure) while abandoning the most vital characteristics of the military (e.g., quality training, research, team orientation, leadership development, and mission/values consciousness).”

According to Caldicott, “When you have complex decisions, you have to go higher up the organization. You lose a lot when you have to go to the top of the pyramid to get a decision. . . . Information, knowledge, and passion is lost along the way.” As a result, Caldicott maintains that organizations need to be flatter to make faster decisions and speed innovation.

Chief Wuestewald implemented a structural change to empower officers at varying levels of the department to participate in a shared leadership program called Leadership Team (LT). He described it as a parallel organization comprised of 12 people who make important policy decisions about the organization. The chief’s office does not participate, and all decisions made by the LT are supported by senior management. According to the article “Shared Leadership: Can Empowerment Work in Police Organizations?” written by Chief Wuestewald and Brigitte Steinheider, organization commitment, employee productivity, and labor relations have improved as a result of implementing the LT. The LT approached served to “flatten” the organization by involving frontline employees in this decision-making process.

Chief Richard Myers, Colorado Springs Police Department, Colorado, suggests that a networked structure, which is a matrix type of organization, could be more effective. In this type of structure, an employee might answer to more than one boss, depending on the type of reporting relationship. Chief Myers provides this example:

*Neighborhood beat officers receive the “big picture” (mission and values) from the chief. They receive fiscal and human resource direction and support from local governmental resources. They identify priorities through the direction provided by their Neighborhood Advisory Council. Intelligence is received from local intelligence centers, and the beat teams consult the analysis center to identify strategies in problem solving. Problem identification is developed with input from the intelligence, the neighborhood citizens, the beat officers, the chief, and the local elected officials. Expert and specialized input comes from community-based resources such as universities and business leaders.*

The crux of the matter is this: what structure will optimally support an organization’s strategy? Policing organizations in the future will likely be different from today if leaders are to meet the needs of an increasingly complex environment.

**People.** The people aspect refers to the human resource policies in an organization and pertains to the recruiting, the selection, the rotation, the training, and the development of employees. Developing a high-performing, engaged workforce does not happen by accident.
In her article, “Designing Organizations for Growth: the Human Resource Contribution,” Susan Mohrman says, “Organizational approaches must foster extremely high levels of employee engagement and customer focus. Motivational and talent issues can be addressed in part through selection, training, and rewards, but also through the design of work systems characterized by integrated and seamless customer experiences.”

This implies a more holistic approach involving workforce planning—a cradle-to-grave perspective about the employee life cycle. A subset of workforce planning is succession planning, which is preparing employees to accept greater levels of responsibility within the organization.

When organizations made the transition to community policing, many changed their selection processes to recruit and hire officers who would be better fits with the organizations’ new strategies. New and existing officers were trained in community policing and problem solving. Some organizations changed their promotional processes to promote leaders who embraced community policing. These are examples of appropriate steps to align people with the organization’s strategy.

As the strategy and structure of organizations change in the twenty-first century, human resource practices will play a critical role in aligning people to support these changes. Susan Mohrman and Edward Lawler III support this assertion in their article, “Transforming the Human Resource Function,” when they write, “Clearly one of the most important challenges every human resource function faces is to reinvent its structure and organization so that it can deliver in the future the kinds of systems and business partnership behaviors that will make its organization more effective.”

**Process.** Process refers to how an organization functions. Some processes are vertical, such as planning. Other processes are horizontal, or lateral, and are designed around workflow, such as the handling of a citizen’s call, from the initial call to the final resolution.

Both vertical and horizontal processes are important. As organizations grow in an increasingly chaotic environment, lateral processes become more important as a means of coordinating activities. Lateral processes help an organization speed decision making, build stronger networks, and enhance problem solving. Policing organizations benefit from effective processes that can deliver these kinds of results.

In community policing, officers often work collaboratively to solve crime and quality-of-life issues. Crime analysis was added as a tool to provide officers with up-to-date information about emerging crime trends. Armed with this information, officers work together across shifts to collect additional information and develop strategies to stop the problem. Frequently, they involve citizens, community-based organizations, other city departments, and staff in other areas of their organization, such as investigations. This is all part of the problem-solving process.

If Chief Myers is right about the emergence of networked policing, for example, what processes will be needed to support that kind of structure? Where there is a matrix type of relationship, identifying and implementing processes that support the structure and strategy are essential. Without them, people will have problems making the network function properly.

**Rewards.** Rewards provide the incentive and motivation to attain the organization’s strategy. Rewards serve to reinforce the desired behaviors—behaviors that will support the organization’s strategy. Rewards can be extrinsic—such as monetary incentives, promotion, and formal recognition; or intrinsic—such as feelings of accomplishment or self-esteem.

Too often, organizations shift aspects of strategy, structure, people, or processes, but fail to align rewards with the change. When this occurs, rewards become ineffective or countereffective by rewarding behavior that is at odds with the shift.

The right rewards will be essential in the redesign of organizations. Rewards also answer the question of “What’s in it for me?” for the individual, the team, and the organizational workforce.

**The Future**

In the words of psychiatrist R. D. Laing, “We live in a moment of history where change is so speeded up that we begin to see the present only when it is already disappearing.” If this is so, it is essential that leaders and managers understand and employ organizational design effectively. A good design starts with strategy and then appropriately aligns structure, people, processes,
and rewards.

The demands of the twenty-first century require progressive leaders who are willing to take risks with organizational design and let go of the security and tradition of the hierarchical police pyramid. Those who successfully answer the call will be the ones who understand these five categories of organizational design and can align them optimally.

Merlin Switzer welcomes reader inquiries and comments at change@surewest.net.

Notes:
1Bernard Levin, telephone interview, October 30, 2008.
3Sarah Miller Caldicott, personal interview at the Institute of Management Consultant’s Annual Conference in Reno, Nevada, October 28, 2008.
7Todd Wuestewald, telephone interview, October 30, 2008; and Gene Stephens, telephone interview, October 22, 2008.
9Galbraith, 7.

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