



National Institute of Justice

Research Preview

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Managing Innovation in Policing: The Untapped Potential of the Middle Manager

Although conventional management thinking assumes that middle managers will subvert organizational strategic change, the power and responsibility to convert leaders' words to organizational deeds place great innovation challenges in middle managers' bailiwick. Whether middle managers are part of the problem or part of the solution is being tested by police agencies that have recently embraced community policing and problem solving as operating strategies. At issue is whether a critical mass of police middle managers can contribute productively so that strategic changes called for by chiefs to implement community policing permeate deeply and enduringly in the organization.

A new book, prepared under a National Institute of Justice grant, concludes that middle management's power to affect change can be harnessed to advance community policing objectives by including those managers in planning, acknowledging their legitimate self-interests, and motivating their investment in long-range solutions that enhance community safety and security.

Tapping middle managers' time-tested strengths

Community policing reorients police philosophy and strategy away from primary reliance on reactive tactics toward the view that crime, disorder, fear, and other community problems can be better redressed and prevented proactively—through multifaceted, consultative, and collaborative relationships among police, diverse community groups, and public- and private-sector institutions.

When the book's authors looked for examples of middle managers—lieutenants, captains, and their civilian employee counterparts—who had led their organizations toward strategic innovation, they identified those with several personal qualities likely to enhance success. These included comfort with unpredictability, clarity of direction, a desire to make a difference for "customers,"

thoroughness, participative management style, persuasiveness, persistence, and discretion. The book notes that, under the right leadership and conditions, many in today's police midranks could be comfortable with, and make a significant contribution to, change.

Architects of the strategic transformation from traditional to community policing must build on such time-tested strengths of middle management as these: close relationships with beat officers; breadth of organizational vision (vis-a-vis first-line officers and sergeants); knowledge of departmental culture (including agency strengths, weaknesses, and receptivity to innovation); the know-how to get things done without undermining resource commitments to preexisting programs; and attention to detail.

Empowerment: delegating authority for implementing community policing

Respecting middle managers, recognizing their demonstrated abilities, and committing to progress through building on strengths are the starting points for enlisting support. Even those middle managers unwilling or unable to lead innovation can bolster the organization's changeover by ensuring that traditional essential capacities (e.g., rapid response to citizens' genuine emergency problems) are enhanced or at least not weakened by the shift to community policing.

Community policing's emphasis on problem solving necessitates that middle managers draw on their familiarity with the bureaucracy to secure, maintain, and use authority to empower their subordinates. The goal is to help officers to actively and creatively confront and resolve issues, sometimes using unconventional approaches on a trial-and-error basis. Recognizing the occasional need for strict top-down operational control, middle managers must generally shift the emphasis of their responsibilities from controlling others to coaching them and from ruling by rules to leading by reason.

Without abdicating responsibility, they must delegate authority to well-trained and motivated officers who can make and share responsibility for decisions and actions.

Middle managers, in turn, need support and authorization from chiefs to devise strategies and modify systems and procedures to support multishift, team problem-solving approaches. Such delegation of authority entails:

- Visibly involving middle managers in planning for change to increase their credibility with subordinates.
- Maintaining consultative relationships with middle managers to motivate ongoing thinking about effectively meeting goals.
- Developing a clear linkage of rewards to performance in implementing desired changes.
- Making a serious commitment to training middle managers well in the skills they need in their adjusted roles.

To lead and guide these changes, police chiefs, senior managers, local government officials, and other stakeholders should:

- Articulate and adhere to an unambiguous, powerful, and consistent vision for the department.
- Provide a clear mandate to all department employees for the changes they must help achieve.
- Help secure resources needed for adequate planning, any needed pilot testing, subsequent redesign, and assessment of impact.
- Allow middle managers and others to make honest, constructive mistakes — to “fail forward”— and provide ample room for them to turn mistakes into opportunities for significant innovation.

- Develop powerful external constituencies regarding change through considered openness to the news media, the community at large, and community leaders regarding crime and fear reduction needs and opportunities.
- Ensure that long-term police-community strategies are sheltered from the short-term timetables and vicissitudes of electoral politics.

The book’s research underscores the potential power of middle managers to devise, implement, and monitor police strategic innovation. Much more needs to be learned about what does and does not work in the community policing approach, but it is evident that middle managers will continue to play a key role in implementing this strategy.

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Points of view in this document do not necessarily reflect the official position of the U.S. Department of Justice.

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