

Chapter 9

Effective Engagement and Communication Between First-Line Police Supervisors and Police Officers

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is the act of influencing others whereby power comes from things such as referent and reward bases and “have an ethical responsibility to attend to the needs and concerns of followers” (Northouse, 2010, p. 4). In this chapter, the authors highlight the extant literature on organizational leadership and its role in effective communication and engagement processes. The authors focus on first-line supervisors and the impact of communication and engagement on people under their supervision. Employee trait, state, and behavioral constructs coupled with the culture of emotional connection between police officers and the police organization are explored. Further, the authors examine the principles of empowerment including meaningfulness, competence, choice, and impact and its applicability to police leadership. The outcome of the relationship between effective leadership and employee engagement is directly linked to innovation, participation, teamwork, accountability, and the ability to face challenges. Conclusions and recommendations for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

While there are many organizations studying the implications of employee engagement, minimal information exists in the study of employee engagement within police organizations. In western policing, the profession has seen many standards of performance, with regards to the training and readiness of their police forces in the field. Unfortunately, little is required to supervise this new workforce. In California

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for instance, while a police academy offers approximately 664 hours of instruction, only 80 hours of training is mandated to become a supervisor (www.post.ca.gov). To complicate the issue of training, the higher an officer promotes in a police organization, the less education is required. In a hierarchical setting such as police organizations, it remains essential that leaders within those organizations have the competency necessary to enhance performance, and make police organizations vibrant places where officers remain highly engaged to deliver great customer service. This occurs through the ability of leaders to understand what drives employees to do excellent work, and how to better attach employees to organization values.

Like any other professional, police officers have signature strengths. Those strengths are seen as traits or interests that allow officers to flourish in some environments and become frustrated in others (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). It becomes central for leaders to identify the needs of each individual, which may include their individual traits, behaviors, and work setting to maximize their abilities (Macey & Schneider, 2008). Furthermore, police leaders must be effective at utilizing empowerment. Empowerment stems from understanding and proper application of the numerous sources of empowerment: *meaningfulness*, where employees attach themselves to the work itself by understanding how the work makes a difference; *competence*, the ability to become proficient at a job, where one feels they have mastery of a role or task; *choice*, or the ability for one to do work in a fashion that compliments them; and *impact*, which is knowing that the work they complete is making a difference (Yukl & Becker, 2006). Finally, for police leaders to deliver the next generation of best practices, they need an understanding of all who are positively impacted by an engaged employee. Within this context, the authors argue that there are positive impacts for the police employee, the organization, and the public they serve and protect. We further argue that engagement and communication lead police employees to improved teamwork, creativity and innovation, accountability, and the ability to more effectively deal with any potential organizational adversity (Lakshmi, 2012).

This chapter will expand on the above-mentioned concepts (i.e., engagement, communication, leadership) and its applicability within police agencies. In understanding the process of effectively engaging employees (e.g. police officers), the leaders (e.g., first-line police supervisors) must first focus on social processes (e.g. cultural, personal, professional, and organizational). Northouse (2010) asserts that leadership is the act of influencing others where most power comes from things such as referent and reward bases and “have an ethical responsibility to attend to the needs and concerns of followers” (Northouse, 2010, p. 4). Towards this end, we will highlight the extant literature on organizational leadership and its pivotal role in effective communication and engagement processes. First, we provide examples of employee trait, state, and behavioral constructs (e.g., Mark & Schneider, 2008; Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000) as seen in police organizations. Then, we discuss the culture of emotional connection between police officers and the police organization (Tomlinson, 2010). Next, we highlight the synergistic effect of the four principles of effective empowerment including *meaningfulness*, *competence*, *choice*, and *impact* (Yukl & Becker, 2006) and its applicability to effective police leadership. We articulate the outcomes of effective leadership (Gladwell, 2008) and employee engagement (Chughtai, Buckley & Finian, 2008; Harter, Schmidt, & Hayes, 2002) and how employee engagement has direct links to innovation, participation, teamwork, accountability, and the ability to face challenges (e.g., Lakshmi, 2012). Conclusions and future research directions are articulated.

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