

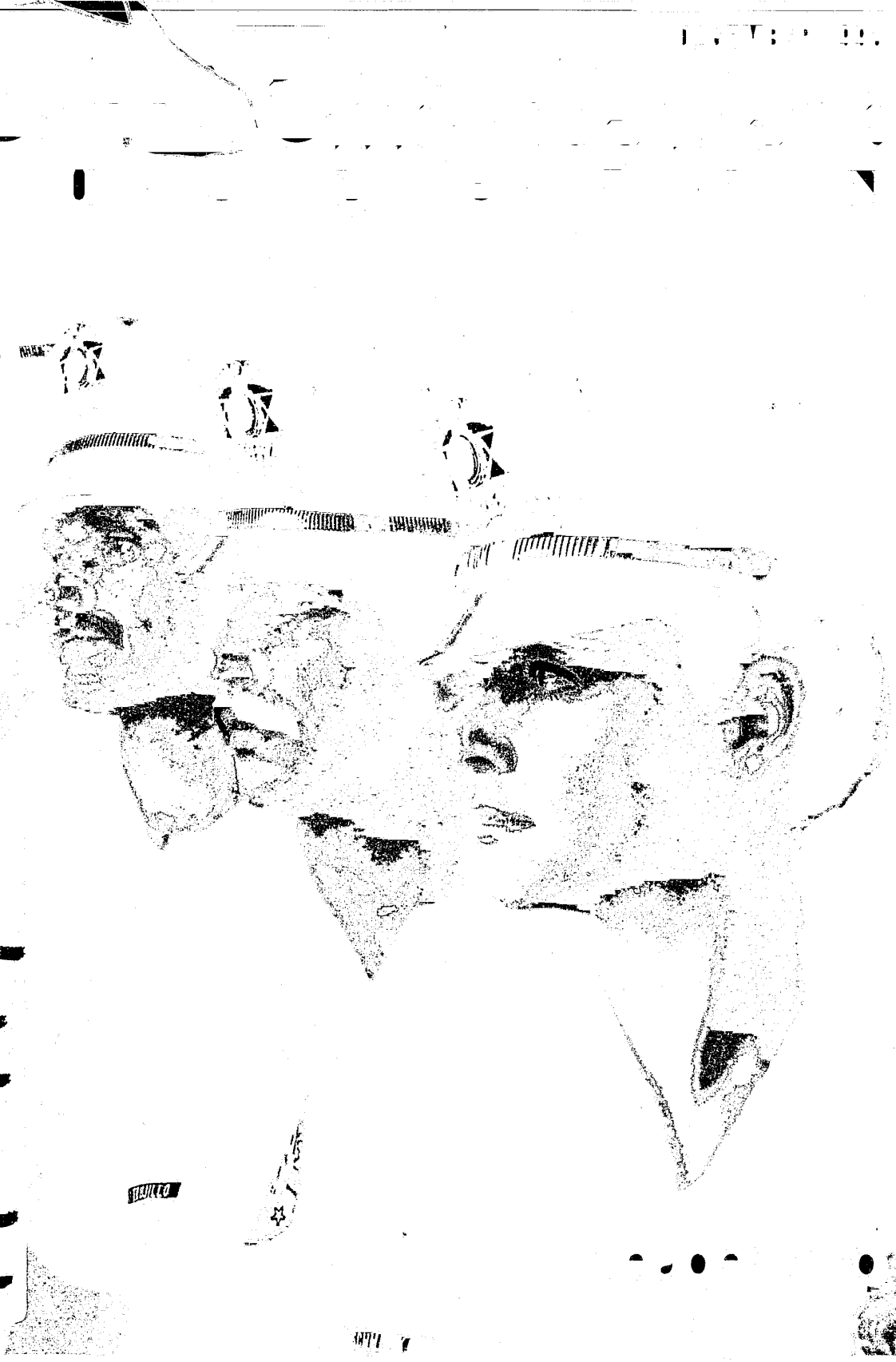


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Employee Empowerment

By
SHELIA BERGLUND

In many organizations, particularly those in the public sector, employee satisfaction is often sacrificed to the demands of other compelling objectives, such as cost containment and the constant pressure to do more with less. Unfortunately, employers who take this stance fail to recognize that unhappy employees are unable to put customers first, no matter what the organization mandates.

While budget cuts require that police managers learn to accomplish objectives with fewer resources, employees do not have to suffer as a result. By balancing the needs of employees with the demands of the organization, police departments can empower workers to meet—or even exceed—the goals of the agency willingly.

Empowered employees actively participate in setting and achieving department objectives. In doing so, they feel a sense of ownership and pride in the tasks they perform. The Lakewood, Colorado, Police Department recently discovered the benefits of employee empowerment when faced with the problem of increasing turnover in the Police Records Section.

Background

Lakewood's police department consists of 200 sworn and 100 civilian employees. With 25 employees, the Police Records Section repre-

sents 25 percent of the civilian staff. The section's daily functions support a customer base that includes citizens, criminal justice agencies,

other city employees, businesses, and police officers. Employees provide comprehensive information management services, including the



processing and release of police records and impounded vehicles, quality control, research, and bonding of arrestees. These employees have to possess computer proficiency, knowledge of municipal and State statutes, and the capacity to interact positively with customers. As the department's central repository of arrest warrants and police reports, this section operates 24 hours a day to provide support to on-duty police personnel.

The Problem

For years, members of the Records Section worked five 8-hour days per week, with staffing levels based on the varying demand for services during a 24-hour day. Employees chose which of the three shifts they preferred to work and kept that schedule during their career with the agency. Seniority determined days off.

By 1990, this system had become increasingly unsatisfactory.

More than one-half of the work group had accrued 10 years of service and consistently selected weekends off. This meant that the remaining employees—some with as much as 8 years' tenure—worked every weekend.

As a result, during a 2-year period, one-third of the work group resigned or transferred to other positions within the city government. At exit interviews, these departing employees consistently cited the prospect of potentially endless weekend work as a major factor in their decision. This high turnover had a particularly debilitating effect on operations because new employees required at least 9 months of intensive training due to the technical nature of the positions they filled.

In addition, even though job applicants learned of scheduling limitations during pre-employment interviews, many new employees—quickly tiring of weekend work—resigned or transferred. Morale,

productivity, and customer service suffered as the work schedule became an issue that divided junior and senior staff members.

The Solution

Realizing that employees are its most valuable resource, the Records Section formed an administrative team composed of the Records Section manager and three supervisors to solve its schedule-related difficulties. The Administrative Services Division commander, well-versed in team building and a proponent of employee empowerment, provided ongoing support and expertise to the group.

The eventual solution was forged through the combined efforts of the staff and their leaders over a year-long period of formal and informal discussions. First, the administrative team met with the employees—individually and in groups—to assess perceptions, solicit suggestions, and discuss issues related to the work schedule. After identifying the most acute problem—the inability to retain a trained staff—the team defined its principal objective, that is, to improve working conditions by distributing weekend work more equitably. As brainstorming and discussions continued, one question repeatedly surfaced: What would happen if employees were allowed to select their own work schedules?

To answer this question, the administrative team decided to test the proposition that empowered employees might become more effective employees. Formal and informal groups met with their supervisors to discuss the potential



Ms. Berglund manages the Records Section of the Lakewood, Colorado, Police Department.

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impact of a new, employee-driven schedule.

Later, in private meetings, individual employees had the option of retaining their existing schedules or selecting a new 4- or 5-day schedule. They could also choose their days off and starting times, within reason. Those employees who selected a 4-day schedule did so with the understanding that they would work some weekends. Fortunately, a number of employees viewed this option favorably because of the additional time off it provided during the week.

Following these meetings, the administrative team inserted employees' schedule preferences into a calendar matrix. After numerous manipulations and revisions, they fit the selections into a schedule that supported required staffing levels, while satisfying employee requests. Then, they took the ultimate product, a well-engineered combination of 4- and 5-day workweeks, reviewed it with employees, and refined it further. Following approval by the division commander, the chief, and the city's director of employee relations, the new schedule—which complied with the Fair Labor Standards Act—was successfully implemented in the Records Section.

Results

The administrative team tested the theory that permitting employees to select their own work schedules would improve job performance and stability. And, as anticipated, the new schedules produced tangible and intangible benefits.

To begin, the section experienced a 90-percent reduction in overtime, representing a yearly savings of more than \$2,500. Next, the amount of sick leave used remained relatively constant, despite the fact that employees working 10-hour days would need to use more leave per day if ill.

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The new schedules also allowed for better deployment of personnel. The variety of schedules provided greater flexibility to manage absences. Planned overlap at the beginning and end of the night shift reduced the number of employees needed to work all night—an unpopular option for most.

In addition, staggered starting times relieved an unproductive bottleneck caused by entering and departing staff at shift changes. There was also a dramatic decrease in the amount of so-called “work in progress,” a reliable gauge of the efficiency of day-to-day operations.

Further, because of the number of employees who chose a 4-day week, weekend work was distributed among a much greater

percentage of the staff. Therefore, in contrast to the old schedule, no employee worked every weekend.

Finally, no employees resigned because of dissatisfaction with the work schedule. In fact, in a survey conducted by the department, employees who did *not* change their work schedules reported as much of an increase in their level of satisfaction with the overall work environment as those who selected new schedules.

In addition to the quantitative benefits, management observed other, more qualitative, benefits. First, because the new schedule allowed for at least 1 day per week with increased staffing levels, training, review, and recertification opportunities rose dramatically.

The supervisory staff, whose schedules changed from a 5- to a 4-day workweek, faced a more equitable distribution of employees under their command. And, working a 10-hour shift increased their availability during critical time periods.

Most important, the level of cooperation and teamwork increased markedly. An unexpected benefit, employees demonstrated this esprit de corps through their greater willingness to adjust their work schedules to cover for other staff members when needed.

Insight Gained

During this project, the administrative team discovered not only that employees' priorities change over the course of their careers but also that their values regarding work change with time. Employees have a diverse set of needs—some employees maintain single-parent

Police Practices

households, some pursue educational goals, others prepare for retirement. Because of these responsibilities, employees highly value their discretionary time. As a result, they welcome the flexibility to balance work and their personal lives more effectively. Because management recognized these needs, employees reciprocated by willingly cooperating when asked to work a different shift than scheduled.

Conclusion

The Records Section of the Lakewood Police Department successfully implemented an unconventional work schedule that was the product of employee empowerment and administrative teamwork. Records administrators crafted a schedule that balanced worker preferences with staffing requirements, which resulted in more evenly distributed weekend work, improved morale, increased retention of trained staff, and decreased burnout.

Some of today's management problems defy traditional solutions. Lakewood's administrative team discovered a solution that was unconventional, yet successful.

Many experts believe that the greatest potential for improvements in organizational quality involves putting people first. This project proved that employee empowerment can work and provide benefits beyond expectations. ♦

Citizen Advisory Committees

By Maj. Dan Flynn, M.P.A.

Like many law enforcement agencies around the Nation, the Metro Dade, Florida, Police Department embraces the community policing model as a way to forge closer relationships between the police and citizens. The department's strategy involves several elements, including a special community-oriented police squad, team police units, and a tactical drug team that conducts large-scale sweeps of drug-infested neighborhoods.

However, the basic component of the Metro Dade approach is a system of citizen advisory committees that operate in each police district. By working closely with these committees, police administrators can more closely tailor departmental services to the specific needs of residents.

Jurisdiction

The jurisdiction of the Metro Dade Police Department covers 1,840 square miles, which is almost entirely suburban, with a population exceeding 1 million. To serve the residents of the county effectively, the department divides its patrol force into seven districts, each with approximately 225 sworn and nonsworn employees. The seven districts house relatively distinct geographic, economic, ethnic, and demographic segments of the county's population.

Citizen Advisory Committees

Each district has a citizen advisory committee composed of representatives from various segments of the community. These groups include homeowners, business operators, public housing residents (if applicable), church and school representatives, and others. On a regular basis, the committees meet with the command staff and officers of their district to discuss community problems.

The advisory committees focus on local concerns. One committee from a predominantly middle-class district works with the district police staff to develop

antigraffiti strategies. Another committee, representing a primarily retail business district, works with the police to deal with problems involving roadside vendors. Another, from an economically disadvantaged district, works with the police in focusing on street-level drug trafficking.

While the concerns of both citizens and police may periodically change as existing problems are resolved and new ones emerge, the basic process remains the same. Committee members express their concerns, the district police staff advises on the legal parameters of different approaches, and both groups then discuss the feasibility of various options. Once a course of action is implemented, the advisory committees and district police officers monitor progress closely and make necessary adjustments. By keeping the number of objectives manageable, the districts can address all committee concerns simultaneously.

Committee Makeup

Each committee is composed of 15 volunteers, recommended by community groups and appointed by the county manager. In addition, because meetings are open to the public, some of the committees have several nonmember observers who attend on a regular basis.

There is no set limit as to the number of terms a committee member may serve. However, a moderate natural attrition rate and the subsequent entry of new members prevent committees from becoming stagnant.

Benefits

Involving citizens in the police planning process produces more than the inherent benefits of collaborative decisionmaking. Committee members quickly



learn the limitations—as well as some of the frustrations—that police officers experience in confronting various enforcement problems. Citizens also experience first-hand the impact of citizen involvement and cooperation on law enforcement initiatives. At the same time, members of the police department develop and refine a problem-solving process that all employees in the agency can employ.

The police department as a whole also benefits from the focus provided by

the committees. As suburban crime rates rise nationwide, the resources of such agencies as the Metro Dade Police Department become increasingly strained. The advisory committees assist police managers to direct the department's efforts in the most efficient and effective manner possible.

Conclusion

Communication between citizens and the police represents an integral feature of the community policing concept. Citizen advisory committees developed by the Metro Dade Police Department help to foster and coordinate the type of cooperation necessary to resolve entrenched community problems. These committees not only help to direct police resources to the specific problems being experienced in the community but they also give concerned citizens an opportunity to cultivate ongoing relationships with officers in their individual districts. It is through such open communication that police departments and communities together make the best use of limited resources to resolve crime problems. ♦

Major Flynn is the Northside Station Commander of the Metro Dade, Florida, Police Department.
