

KNOWLEDGE RETENTION AND MANAGEMENT

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Jim Collins, author of *Good to Great* characterized companies that made a “leap to greatness” as those that after a transition point had cumulative returns at least three times the stock market for the next 15 years. His point was that you cannot be lucky for 15 years so there must be something that the company (and presumably its leaders) did to achieve this performance (Wexler, Wycoff, Fischer, 2007). There is a move to apply the concept of “good to great” in the public sector. While there are a variety of questions as to how to apply this concept to policing (not the least of which is how one measures “greatness” in policing or other entities where profit is not the purpose?), one question that immediately arises is how can this be done considering the relatively short tenure of most police agency heads? The average tenure of a major city police chief is under 4 years. Generally the rule is the larger the city, the shorter the chief’s tenure (Wexler, Wycoff, Fischer, 2007). How do you make a police department, sheriff’s office, or other law enforcement agency into a “great” agency, particularly given the short tenure of the chief and other leaders in the agency?

While a complete answer to that question is beyond the scope of this paper and will require that the police industry examine itself in detail over the next few years, it seems clear that the great agencies do not just plan for the next budget cycle and continue to do business as usual. Leaders who hope to lead their agencies to greatness must plan for the future and continually examine their business practices. It is suggested that an attribute of a “great” leader (of whatever rank) is the tendency to look beyond his or her career, to look to the future, to recognize and give effect to the fact that the agency (particularly a police agency) does not have a life span, that it continues on past the career of any one person. Looking beyond the “here and now” requires succession planning, not just for the Chief Executive Officer but for all those positions that require specialized knowledge (and, what position in a modern police agency does not require that?). Knowledge management and knowledge retention must be part of the secession plan of modern police leaders.

For a variety of reasons businesses and police agencies will be facing even more critical hiring and turnover issues in the near and longer term future. The impact of the looming retirements of baby boomers will impact policing just as it will impact other industries. Those who are replacing the boomers are, according to the Department of Labor, more mobile than ever before. “The average American worker today changes jobs nine times before age 34 to pursue greater economic opportunities. And that's not just because of technological change or the competitiveness of the worldwide economy. Young workers in America today are much more interested in trying out a variety of experiences, before settling on one career path” (Chao, 2005). World events also impact the makeup of local police agencies. Practitioners in policing are well aware of the impact Operation Iraqi Freedom has had on manpower with call up's of National Guard and Reserve forces. The direct connection between working cops and the military is well known. Many agencies are struggling with vacancies created by the war with officers being gone for periods of over a year and even called up multiple times.

Leadership requires knowledge—leaders have to ensure that institutional knowledge is passed on to provide consistency of leadership and continuity of operations. Leadership is made more difficult by a vacuum of knowledge...of where the widgets are, where and who the community leaders are, what font is used for policy, etc. Time taken by a leader to get up to speed – or for a subordinate up to get up to speed - is gone forever. In their 2008 Workforce/Workplace Forecast, the Herman Group notes a lack of succession preparation by organizations. Investment in leadership training has been lacking and there will be a dearth of personnel to move into leadership positions (Herman, 2007).

One of the appealing things about working in a police agency (particularly a medium or larger sized agency) is the ability to transfer and do many different things-- patrol, investigations, planning, and undercover work, among others-- but the ability to transfer (and in unionized agencies, sometimes the right to do so) is a liability to managing an agency. Couple this with the rules some agencies have about not leaving personnel in particular assignments too long (such as undercover, drug, or intelligence assignments), means that there is a regular loss of experience and knowledge. Every time an officer or employee leaves the agency, temporarily or permanently, that person takes knowledge with them. We keep track of

the number of police cars we have, how many riot helmets are stored where, and how many computers the agency owns. We do that because these are seen as having value and therefore they need to be tracked. The intellectual assets of the agency are also important. Why do we not have an inventory of knowledge so that we know where the knowledge is in the agency, who has the knowledge and, at least equally as important, how we transfer that knowledge? It is critical for leaders to know where the knowledge assets are and to ensure that methods to transfer knowledge are in place.

Leaders who are trying to take their agency to the status of a great agency must address retaining knowledge. A knowledge retention policy addresses these problems by providing a formal means of retaining corporate knowledge and transferring it to the newly assigned person. Knowledge Management is not just for lower level skill positions. Jim Collins suggests that in order to get the flywheel of greatness turning and to keep it turning, CEOs should mentor future leaders. According to Collins, Level 5 leaders (the highest level in his measurement system) set their successors up for greater success by identifying and preparing the next generation of leaders. Level 5 leaders do this by giving managers the authority to make important decisions, by creating leadership academies, and by sending them to external management and leadership training (Wexler, Wycoff, Fischer, 2007). It is suggested that this preparation is enhanced by permitting future leaders to identify the knowledge centers in the agency and creating ways to ensure knowledge is retained.

How Does an Agency Create a Knowledge Management Policy?

To ensure that necessary knowledge is retained and to assist with easier transitions for new personnel, the agency has to make a conscious decision that retaining knowledge is important and a priority. Knowledge management is an emerging discipline concerned with the creation, discovery, and retention of organizational knowledge (Tryon and Hawamdeh, n.d.). It is “the name given to the set of systematic and disciplined actions that an organization can take to obtain the greatest value from the knowledge available to it” (Marwick, 2001). “A *Knowledge Retention Policy* or KRP is a formal document that declares the knowledge vital to an organization. A KRP does **not** define an organization’s intellectual assets; it simply identifies

them and then provides a roadmap on how to find them and how to transfer this knowledge from one generation of employees to the next. One way to think about a Knowledge Retention Policy is as a succession plan for organizational knowledge” (Tryon and Hawamdeh, n.d, p. 2). At a minimum then the agency has to identify: where are the knowledge areas; what are the knowledge topics; and, what are the transfer mechanisms? Then, the agency has to document that process and make it part of the culture. As with many dimensions of police leadership, the challenge is successfully implementing these concepts.

Identify Where the Knowledge Areas Are in the Particular Agency

In a modern police agency some of knowledge areas are apparent. For example, most agencies have an investigative function, perhaps a records function, and most certainly a patrol function. According to Tryon and Hawamdeh (n.d.), an examination of the organization chart and interviews with senior staff members will reveal the substructures that perform critical work that should be considered knowledge areas. In addition to staff interviews, the agency should consider discussions with the rank and file to identify these critical areas. There is usually a wealth of information about how things REALLY work residing with those who are ACTUALLY doing the work. In addition, in most agencies a particular individual may very well wear more than one hat. For example, a patrol shift commander might be the one with the most information on how the agency implements the Incident Command System; a detective sergeant may be the person in the agency with the most interest and knowledge in mental health issues; a field officer may be the person in the agency with the most knowledge of crime scene analysis, etc. Identifying these persons is important because the agency must do more than simply identify the Knowledge Area. The subject matter expert for that area must be identified (sometimes, but not always the person currently in charge to the function). That person will assist in determining the Knowledge Topics and ultimately the preferred transfer mechanisms.

Knowledge Areas will vary by the size of the agency. Larger agencies may have different squads for different crimes in their investigative function whereas smaller agencies will of necessity be less specialized. The former might have different Knowledge Areas for homicide,

robbery, burglary, and larceny, whereas smaller agencies may have investigators who are responsible for follow up investigation for all crimes. This would impact the Knowledge Area but the Knowledge Topics would likely be similar. Whatever the size of the agency, it is suggested that breaking the Knowledge Areas down as far as possible would be advantageous in defining the Knowledge Topics.

What the Knowledge Topics Are for Each Knowledge Area

Simply put, Knowledge Topics are the heart of the KRP. They are “distinct groupings of explicit and tacit knowledge that provide the basis for an organization’s work. Knowledge Topics are the elusive intellectual assets we are seeking” (Tryon and Hawandeh, n.d., p. 3). Knowledge Topics in a typical police agency might include internal investigations, staff investigations, or accreditation. Depending on how the agency is organized, one or more of these might be under the Knowledge Area of the Headquarters Division. Similarly, the Knowledge Area of the Property Room or function might be broken down into Knowledge Topics of how evidence and property is stored, how it is purged, research into how and when it can and should be released, etc. The criminal records Knowledge Area for most agencies will include a Knowledge Topic of Uniform Crime Reporting (UCC) or National Incident Based Reporting System (NIBRS).

What Are the Transfer Mechanisms for Each Knowledge Topic

A transfer mechanism is how the knowledge in an area is transferred from the person leaving to the person coming to the position. The agency must identify what the current transfer mechanisms are for each of the identified Knowledge Areas. In most agencies there are already in place at least some valid/valuable/effective transfer mechanisms. For example, agencies might routinely transfer personnel early so that the new employee will be able to work with the outgoing person. This can be a form of apprenticeship or mentoring. Obviously, there will be times when that option is not available, e.g., when a person suddenly quits, dies, or becomes incapacitated, so there should be other options as well.

Some common examples of knowledge transfer include:

- a) Documents, such as policy & procedure manuals that apply to the entire agency, what some agencies call “unit manuals” or Standard Operating procedures/SOPs, laws, regulations, etc.
- b) Mentoring by serving as a trusted counselor or teacher, especially in an occupational setting.
- c) Apprenticeship; by working for another in order to learn a trade.
- d) Training, such as formalized training or on-the-job training.
- e) Membership in professional organizations that provide the opportunity for conferences, list serves, or other educational experiences.
- f) Cross training that ensures someone else knows how to do the job before the vacancy arises.

Another way to look at knowledge transfer is to ask, “If the person in the position suddenly quit, how will knowledge be transferred to the new person?”

As noted above, many agencies probably use at least some of these transfer mechanisms. The problem is, at least in some agencies, the methods are not formalized and they are done on an ad hoc basis. By formalizing the process-- by writing it down-- it becomes institutionalized and leaders know, for example, that when their crime analyst puts in his/her papers to retire, if possible the replacement needs to be transferred early to be apprenticed to the outgoing person. The knowledge transfer plan might also stipulate the incoming person needs to be scheduled to attend any formalized training that the agency has recognized to be necessary to perform the task associated with the new position.

In addition, by creating a Knowledge Retention Policy, the agency is forced to recognize characteristics about the knowledge and about the transfer mechanisms relative to particular tasks. These characteristics include how well (or how poorly) the knowledge is defined, whether there are current, sufficient, transfer mechanisms in place, and indeed the relative importance of the task/position/job to the mission of the agency. Are we flying by the seat of our pants or have we identified what the knowledge is and how it should be transferred? As part of this process the subject matter expert needs to characterize the knowledge topics as currently being Well Defined, Undocumented, or having Limited Definition. This analysis is critical. If those tasks critical to public safety are discovered to have limited knowledge

definition and/or poorly defined transfer mechanisms, the agency must seek better definition and develop adequate transfer mechanisms before the need arises.

Chief executive officers of police agencies must be careful to not only apply the concepts of knowledge management within the rank and file of their agency, but also to apply them to their position. Most chiefs of police realize that their position can be tenuous and that their tenure is likely to be short. If an agency is to continue its move from good to great, the chief should set the agency up to succeed by making plans for his or her departure through the development of a knowledge retention policy and identification of the future leaders of the agency. Far too many police agencies have suffered from the failure of the CEO to develop personnel to take his/her place.

While Knowledge Areas, Topics, and Transfer Mechanisms will differ from agency to agency, it is likely that there will be similarities. These similarities make it tempting to simply adopt another agency's policy. Agencies, however, need to customize their Knowledge Retention Policy to their own structure, environment, and circumstances, if for no other reason than doing so forces an examination of their practices and organization.

Conclusion

Considering the short tenure of heads of police agencies and the increasing movement of subordinates in and out of the organization, retaining and managing institutional knowledge should be of utmost important to police leaders. This is particularly so if the leader is trying to move the agency from a good agency to a great agency. By creating a Knowledge Retention Policy, an agency will ensure that knowledge assets of both the CEO and other leaders in the agency do not walk out the door when the person leaves. We would not let physical assets walk out the door. We should not allow knowledge assets to leave, either.

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