Supporting Culture Change through Internal Communication with Officers and Civilian Staff

It is important for police leaders to be mindful of the importance of effective communication with the communities they serve. It is equally as important for these leaders to ensure they are effectively connecting with their officers and civilian staff. This fact sheet offers ideas for communicating and connecting with those working in your agency to improve organizational efficiency, enhance individual productivity and problem solving, increase officer morale, and build internal and external trust and transparency.

Internal communications are those shared with sworn and civilian personnel, labor organizations, and fraternal organizations. Other internal stakeholders may include volunteers, foundations, professional associations, and organizations established to support law enforcement personnel.

Effective leaders do more than just communicate, they find ways to "connect to" and form bonds with their officers and staff. Leaders motivate, inspire, train, and develop others through their actions and the way they communicate. They create an organizational culture that speaks to their goals and vision for the agency and provides inspiration to agency staff to reflect these visions and values into their work in the community.

The following are strategies for effectively communicating with internal staff:

- **Identify Goals and Share Vision.** Leaders should regularly convey critical agency goals and needs through a variety of communication methods. Sharing a vision for the department and sense of purpose in the work can serve as motivation for agency staff and create a culture that embraces shared values. When leaders effectively communicate the prioritization of community engagement and align internal staff with their vision, they create an organizational culture that is open to the kind of transformational change that can enhance agency efficiency, effectiveness, and community trust. Regularly sharing goals and an agency vision will also serve as a reminder to officers and staff why they chose a career in public safety and public service.

- **Be Honest and Transparent:** Leaders should be authentic in the way they communicate with their officers and staff. Deliver information in a timely and transparent fashion. It is important that employees learn about agency-related news or situations from leaders before they hear about it from the media.

  Leaders should demonstrate honesty in guiding the development of officers and staff, and regularly provide objective, constructive feedback on their work performance.[1] Such honest communication is essential for a healthy organization, but also dependent on fostering an environment where workers feel comfortable giving feedback and raising concerns without fear of repercussions.

- **Use Emotional Intelligence:** It is important for leaders to remember that both verbal and non-verbal communications transmit a wide range of emotions. A leader's attitude and tone can be contagious to members of the agency. Officer morale can sometimes be traced to attitudes about department leadership. When a leader demonstrates care, compassion, and concern for the members of their team, those they lead will likely exhibit those same values toward each other and the communities they serve. As public servants, leaders, officers, and civilian staff have an obligation to recognize and understand that feelings impact their own thinking and behaviors, and those of their coworkers and community members. Demonstrating emotional intelligence helps leaders to effectively lead, and officers to effectively serve.

- **Actively Listen:** Leaders should know or learn how to be active listeners. This skill requires listeners to fully concentrate on and paraphrase what the speaker said to demonstrate an understanding of what the speaker meant. Providing this type of focus on someone and fully engaging in a conversation is the first step in relationship-building. Ongoing active listening builds trust and loyalty.

1   Dan Willis, "Principles of Effective Law Enforcement Leadership," *Law Enforcement Bulletin*, March 1, 2011, https://leb.fbi.gov/articles/perspective/perspective-principles-of-effective-law-enforcement-leadership.

Sometimes an officer will approach a leader with a request that can be granted, like the purchase of new equipment, and other times, he or she may just need to talk or vent. There are also times when a staff member is frustrated about something and is looking for change. An active listener might respond by asking for ideas to address the issue. This approach is empowering and can lead to innovative ideas from emerging leaders.

■ **Give Credit:** Celebrate successes by publicly and privately praising the work of officers and other staff. Take time to recognize the strengths and accomplishments of others. It motivates them to continue pursuing excellence and working toward agency goals. This also demonstrates the leader's humility, integrity, and transparency, and builds trust, loyalty and buy-in toward the agency. Highlighting notable acts that are consistent with agency values and model community engagement will support and institutionalize these shared priorities. Giving credit and recognition also serves as reminders for officers on why they took an oath to serve.

■ **Mentor:** Look for ways to mentor and develop employees. Effective leaders recognize the contributions of others in their own development, and the importance of teaching and developing others in return. The more leaders can mentor others and share their vision, mission, and goals, the more effective the organization will become.[2]

■ **Communicate in a Variety of Ways:** The range of generations in the workplace, from baby boomers to Generation Z, calls for a variety of ways to communicate. While email and phone calls remain primary forms of professional communication, many people are starting to rely more heavily on texting and new platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams. Assessing your personnel and determining the most effective channels for your team can help streamline the flow of information and guard against potential miscommunication. In addition to written communication, most leaders find ways to have "visual" communications with internal staff, which provide the opportunity to use not only verbal, but non-verbal communication, like body language. This can be especially challenging in larger agencies, but with platforms like Zoom or Microsoft Teams, agencies can hold virtual "all-staff" meetings, which can be recorded for officers who are on patrol or off-duty to view later.

The most effective form of visual communication is "face-to-face" contact, which can be achieved through attendance at roll calls, small team meetings, and informal hallway chats. Attending mandatory trainings or joining dispatchers or officers on midnight or weekend patrols can signal "even though I'm the boss, in the end, we're in this together."

IACP Resources

A. IACP Community-Police Engagement Page

B. IACP Policy Framework for Improved Community-Police Engagement

C. IACP Law Enforcement Policy Resource Center

D. IACP Model Policy: Standards of Conduct

E. IACP Model Policy: Social Media

F. IACP Model Policy: Performance Recognition Awards

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