



Communicating Performance Expectations to Officers

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It seems like common sense that if you want someone to do something for you, you would simply ask or tell that individual what you need to be accomplished. It would seem that this strategy of simply telling people what you need, is a better strategy than expecting people to intuitively know or read subtle hints about what you need. Unfortunately, there is evidence to suggest that leaders in law enforcement agencies, especially first-line supervisors, rarely give their team members clear instructions about what needs to be done.

One study, for example, involved observers attending 251 roll call briefings and ride-alongs with patrol officers on the Baltimore Police Department. The observers found that **in only 4% of the shifts did supervisors give their officers any sort of directives or tasks**. Even when tasks or directives were given, they were often stated in a vague way, such as “There has been an increase in burglaries in the Hampden neighborhood, so let’s give that neighborhood some extra attention.”¹

In another study, 955 patrol officers from four mid-sized city police departments were surveyed about how often their immediate supervisors gave them a specific task or directive. Of the officers surveyed, 20% answered *sometimes*, 32% said *rarely*, and 39% responded *never*. Only 9% of these officers indicated their immediate supervisors *often* gave them a specific task or directive.²

Perhaps one of the reasons first-line supervisors are reluctant to assign tasks and give directives is that they are unsure of what the command staff above them wants or expects. One study, involving the patrol divisions of three city police departments, illustrates this point. In each of the three departments, the commander of the patrol division was given a list of 20 potential priorities for patrol officers. The patrol commanders (all captains) were directed to pick the three most important priorities for his or her patrol officers. Then the lieutenants and sergeants within the patrol divisions were given the same list of 20 priorities and asked to identify the three priorities their captain had picked. Of the 7 lieutenants in the study, none of them correctly identified all 3 of their captain’s top priorities, and only 4 lieutenants (57%)

correctly identified one of the priorities their captain selected. Of the 24 sergeants surveyed, all failed to identify all 3 of their captain's priorities for patrol officers. In fact, only 14 sergeants (58%) correctly identified at least one of the priorities their captain selected.³

Effectively Communicating Expectations

These studies suggest that, at least among some agencies, patrol officers (and field supervisors) are not receiving clear messages from their supervisors about work priorities and expectations. One survey of a sample of patrol officers tried to tap into what officers want when it comes to communicating expectations. Given a list of a number of ways supervisors could communicate work performance expectations, these **patrol officers were asked to select the methods they wished their supervisors would use to communicate performance expectations.** The five most selected responses, in order of popularity, were as follows:

- 1. Reward good performance**
- 2. Provide verbal feedback on performance**
- 3. Model expected performance**
- 4. Put directives and instructions in writing, such as in a memo or email**
- 5. Address or discipline poor performance**

There were no differences in these choices between male and female officers, officers with a college education and less-educated officers, and officers of different races. Veteran officers, however, emphasized the first three – rewards, verbal feedback, and modeling behavior – more strongly than rookie officers who emphasized all five.⁴

Conclusion

Street-level policing is a very complex job. Patrol officers are often the youngest and least experienced members of our organization, yet are faced with the most diverse and complex responsibilities. They need guidance and direction from their leaders to ensure they are doing their jobs right and meeting the expectations of their respective agencies. It appears, however, that many patrol officers are not getting the guidance they need from their supervisors, and many supervisors do not have a firm grasp of the priorities held by their command staff. There are five important techniques leaders at all levels of the organization can take to correct these weaknesses.

Leaders can use informal rewards, such as assigning an officer to his or her preferred beat or vehicle, to reward good performance and signal that good things come to those who perform in desirable ways. Providing verbal feedback is also effective, as it is easier just to say what you want rather than just vaguely hint at what you need. Modeling proper behavior demonstrates to your officers – with real examples – what it is you expect of them. Like with verbal feedback, clearly putting what you need in writing through a memo or email is better than hinting at your expectations, or expecting officers to read your mind. Finally, confronting improper performance signals to officers what behaviors are unacceptable and will not be tolerated.

All of these methods of communicating expectations and holding officers accountable require fundamental proactivity on the part of front-line supervisors. This means supervisors need to be leaders who routinely engage with their officers. They need to be in the field to check up on their officers and observe them at work. They need to pursue clarification from the command staff about their unit's priorities and clearly communicate these priorities to their team. In essence, it means being a Street Sergeant.

References

- ¹ Famega, C. N., Frank, J., Mazerolle, L. (2005). Managing police patrol time: the role of supervisor directives. *Justice Quarterly*, 22(4), 540-559.
- ² As yet unpublished data gathered by the author from surveys in Akron and Columbus, Ohio, Louisville Kentucky, and Knoxville, Tennessee, from 2010-2012.
- ³ Johnson, R. R. (2010). Goal diffusion and miscommunication across rank levels. *Law Enforcement Executive Forum*, 11(3), 53-63.
- ⁴ Johnson, R. R. (2008). Effectively communicating performance expectations to subordinates: patrol officer perceptions. *Law Enforcement Executive Forum*, 9(5), 103-113.