

Improving Motivation and Productivity of Police Officers

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Motivating police personnel can be complicated. Supervisors must work hard to ensure officers perform their duties efficiently and effectively. Many factors can negatively affect productivity and cause officers to become complacent, doing the bare minimum necessary. The difficult nature of crime fighting can cause officers to become cynical toward the population as a whole and develop an “us-versus-them” view.¹ A negative attitude in police work can lead to feelings of inconsequentiality toward law enforcement goals and either slow or stop internal motivation.

Officers who begin their careers with an attitude of “saving the world” can become jaded toward that goal after years of witnessing the worst in people. Constantly observing the aftermath of violent crimes, like robbery, rape, murder, and assault, eventually can take its toll on even the most dedicated officer. Administrators must look for ways to offset this constant bombardment of negativity while reinforcing the positive aspects of society and the benefits provided by quality law enforcement practices.

Considerable research exists addressing motivation that can help administrators facilitate increased productivity, and some results may seem surprising. Extrinsic rewards, like pay raises and educational and longevity pay, often are considered effective motivators. Although pay in the public sector normally is much lower than in private companies, people who become police officers usually are interested in more than a high salary.² Intrinsic rewards, such as providing a safe community and reducing crime, can motivate police officers more

than pay raises or promotions. Strategies that include internal shifts in assignments that break the monotony of crime fighting in tough neighborhoods also can provide relief for officers on the verge of burnout. Further, rotating officers in and out of high-crime neighborhoods and alternating with patrols in more affluent areas can result in a positive change in attitude.³

Generating increased productivity and stimulating individual motivation are constant processes that leaders in any career field always can improve. The profession of law enforcement is no different from others that require ambitious and productive employees to serve effectively, but some aspects of motivation are unique to the professional police officer.



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FACTORS

Basic Needs

One of the most commonly cited theories of motivation is that of Abraham Maslow.⁴ According to Maslow people are motivated based on a hierarchy of needs. At the bottom of this list are basic physiological essentials, such as food, water, and shelter. After obtaining these necessities, people look for safety, security, and a sense of belonging. Individuals then seek out praise and recognition for a job well-done that is related to a quest for improved self-esteem. This is followed by a desire for self-actualization or the potential to grow professionally.⁵

A prominent feature of this theory is the need for praise and recognition under the self-esteem model. When properly used by management, praise can be an effective motivator of police personnel. Mark Twain once commented that he could live for two months on a compliment alone.⁶ Managers who strive to inspire personnel can adopt this adage and use it as an example of motivational philosophy.

Stress

Conversely, stress can serve as a demotivator if not properly addressed and understood. Law enforcement is broadly considered one of the most stressful occupations and often is associated with high rates of alcoholism, suicide, emotional health problems, and divorce.⁷ All of these factors can negatively affect officers' motivation and productivity.

Organizations must strive to recognize and reduce stress associated with the profession to maximize job performance, motivation, and productivity.⁸ Although the inherent dangers (e.g., apprehending suspects and facing assaults) of the law enforcement profession create a certain amount of stress, leaders can implement organizational changes that affect supervisory style, field training programs, critical incident counseling, shift work, and job assignments. These internal factors have been rated highly among police officers as major causes of stress. Some officers have reported that the job itself is not as stressful as a call to the supervisor's office.⁹

Several consequences of police stress include cynicism, absenteeism, early retirement, emotional detachment from other aspects of daily life, reduced efficiency, increased complaints, and rises in health problems. In a recent survey, nearly 100 percent of respondents agreed that giving recognition can positively impact morale.¹⁰

Praise and Recognition

In studies dating back to the 1940s, recognition has outranked salary as a strong motivator when pay rates already competitive. Money is an extrinsic motivator, while praise and recognition are intrinsic motivators. Effective leaders must stress the importance of such intrinsic motivators as achievement, recognition, fulfillment, responsibility, advancement, and growth.¹¹

Self-Motivation

Although often considered a responsibility of management, a certain level of motivation must come from within the individual. In a 2003 study on the effects of self-motivation, the actions of police gang unit members in Gothenburg, Sweden were observed. The researcher identified several ways officers can reduce burnout and increase motivation to survive a long career in law enforcement. The intense stress of working constantly in tough, crime-ridden neighborhoods caused officers to desire transfers and redeploy to "nicer" areas as a way to avoid becoming too cynical.¹²

Police officers also can seek different specialized jobs within the organization to help self-motivate and reduce individual stagnation. Large departments often have greater opportunities for internal transfers. Many officers in this study served for several years in the patrol division, then later applied for deployments as investigators, school resource officers, crime prevention officers, or specialized response-team members.¹³ These jobs all require different training and varied core job responsibilities that can reinvigorate an officer's professional drive.

Because a substantial part of motivation remains with the officers themselves, the level and need for self-inspiration increases as officers rise in rank to supervisory roles.¹⁴ An important part of a supervisor's function is to lead by example and, above all, have a positive attitude. Self-motivation is a prime ingredient in that formula. According to the U.S. Marine Corps officers' training statement, "Officers have to...self-motivate to keep themselves inspired and focused on the mission. This is the reason they don't sing cadences."¹⁵ If leaders do not motivate themselves, who will do so? And, how can unmotivated leaders expect exceptional performance from subordinates?

Another way persons can increase their own motivation is by examining their strengths and what makes them truly happy and then looking at their weaknesses with a degree of self-examination.¹⁶ For instance, someone could compile a journal with photographs of family members and special events that are inspiring and motivational. By reviewing and adding to the journal regularly, it can serve as a powerful motivator and a reminder for individual inspiration.

Attitude

Research data confirmed that officers' individual attitudes can influence their level of productivity and motivation. In one study officers who perceived traffic enforcement as a personal priority engaged in more enforcement efforts and subsequently issued more citations.¹⁷ They also were influenced by the ideal that management rewarded officers who issued more traffic tickets, and those who agreed with this perception followed suit.

The positive attitudes of the officers' supervisors also resulted in an increase of the number of citations issued. Personnel working for supervisors who perceived traffic problems as a personal priority or under superiors who issued more tickets themselves were more likely to issue additional citations.

Health and Fitness

The health and physical fitness of officers also can affect their motivation. Many employers have seen increased absenteeism as a result of employees' health issues.¹⁸ Absent workers strain resources, reduce productivity, and increase costs. In police field units, manpower must be maintained at a minimum level, and illness or injury can cause serious cost overruns in overtime and sick-leave reimbursements. Health insurance costs are steadily rising, and employers pay an average of \$13,000 per year, per employee to provide coverage.¹⁹

Many organizations are moving toward proactive strategies for improving employees' health and fitness to decrease the cost of health coverage. In law enforcement organizations, physical fitness is essential and can impede officer performance if not maintained. Most job descriptions for police officers include lifting, running, jumping, and using force to apprehend and detain criminal suspects. The unique work demands and related stress levels require that those in law enforcement establish lifelong wellness habits.²⁰

DISCUSSION

Productivity and motivation are important in any organization. In police agencies, officers have a lot of freedom and discretion and often are unsupervised for many hours of the workday. The individual level of commitment and desire to serve the noble and ethical cause help guide officers' productivity and motivation on the job.²¹

Many variables can influence officers' levels of motivation, including supervisors' attitudes, job environment, and personal factors. Individuals experiencing family problems, health concerns, financial issues, or negative social experiences can exhibit significant declines in productivity and motivation. Job security often can help officers with personal problems as much as a stable personal life can assist them with a difficult work environment.²² Administrators and direct supervisors seeking to improve work performance should understand this basic psychological process.

The community holds police to a high level of public trust while expecting them to prevent crime, maintain order, and provide an equal and unbiased application of law enforcement. To be an equal opportunity enforcement officer, the individual must be motivated to do the job and held accountable to the highest standards at all times. Fellow officers depend on each other for physical backup, emotional support, and technical guidance.²³ Lack of motivation can be contagious and cause problems for management if not recognized and treated early.

Agencies must have early warning systems in place to recognize symptoms and identify officers experiencing a decline in productivity or a lack of motivation.²⁴ Computer software programs can recognize possible early warning signs, such as decline in performance, suspicious sick leave patterns, unreasonable uses of force, and increased complaints. Such issues can indicate personal problems that result in a lack of motivation and productivity.

Several theories of motivation exist that supervisors could consider, including Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, Herzberg's Motivation-Hygiene Theory, and McGregor's X and Y.²⁵ Administrators can learn many positive, as well as negative, points from these theories, but they all have one thing in common—the idea that supervisors must know their people.²⁶ To effectively manage motivation and productivity, leaders must possess the human skills needed to work with employees and have the empathy to understand their issues.²⁷ This idea also means that supervisors must work as a team with officers and build a cooperative effort for the common goal of the agency. By working closely with and understanding officers, effective leaders can identify problems earlier and create effective solutions to deal with those issues.

Physical fitness holds importance when discussing individual motivation and performance. Of course the first step of being productive in an organization is actually coming to work. Officers who participate in regular exercise programs less likely will develop health-related problems that keep them away from the job and negatively affect their work performance.²⁸ A police officer's job involves interacting with the public, entering and exiting police cars, walking up steps, apprehending suspects, and performing other physical activities dependent on a high level of physical fitness. Law enforcement leaders must take a hard look at agency physical training standards and long-term health programs to help ensure the highest levels of efficiency and effectiveness.²⁹

Much of a patrol officer's day is sedentary, often involving seemingly mundane duties, like operating radar from within cars or conducting routine patrol. But, such activities can be interrupted when officers receive calls to apprehend suspects or handle volatile situations. The dramatic increase in heart rate and adrenaline can strain vital organs and muscles not conditioned for this type of response.³⁰

Although often considered a responsibility of management, a certain level of motivation must come from within the individual.

Related to health, fitness, and productivity, actual costs are significantly more than once thought. The average employer has \$3.00 worth of health-related productivity costs for every \$1.00 spent on actual medical expenses.³¹ This information is important for administrators and reinforces the reality that healthy employees bode well for business.

The profession of criminal justice is similar to others where the productivity of employees is vital to the bottom line. Whether a business involves farming, sales, construction, teaching, or public safety, evidence indicates that the motivation of the person doing the job is directly proportionate to the level of productivity in that industry.³² In a criminal justice organization, individual health is important for improving attendance and productivity and related to the safety of the officer and the public. Most law enforcement personnel agree that appropriate physical fitness ensures safe and effective completion of essential job functions.³³

CONCLUSION

Administrators and managers in law enforcement agencies must remain cognizant of the many factors that can influence individual motivation and productivity of police officers. The nature of the job can result in officer burnout, followed by a decrease in the motivation to perform. Recruits starting out in law enforcement with a strong desire to change the world and who possess a great ethical desire to serve the noble cause easily can be swayed toward mediocrity by the contagiousness of other jaded officers.³⁴ Although some officers who realize a decline in motivation can self-motivate by seeking out interdepartmental transfers or changes in duty assignments, many police agencies do not have such opportunities. In these smaller organizations, supervisors must work harder to discover other ways to improve an officer's performance.

The intrinsic factors of praise and recognition for a job well-done can help improve officers' attitudes and increase their desire for doing the job. As pointed out in Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, the need for self-esteem is part of the makeup of all individuals. However, supervisors must rely on this sparingly and in coordination with other methods to avoid crossing the boundary of diminishing returns. Too much emphasis on compliments and recognition easily can ruin officer's effectiveness; therefore, they must be distributed with reason and common sense.

Administrators also should recognize the stress associated with police work and strive to create a healthy organizational environment where officers are not subjected to harsh leadership. Police officers have sufficient worries while carrying out their responsibilities without the additional stress of managerial problems.³⁵ When officers perceive interacting with supervisors as causing more stress than dealing with criminals, a fair self-evaluation of management practices clearly is in order.

Management also must set the example for motivation. A positive attitude on the part of a supervisor can directly impact the motivation and productivity of subordinate officers.³⁶ This makes sense and follows the old saying of "lead by example," a useful adage for all leaders to follow.

Finally, the health and physical wellness of the officer is so important and universally recognized that completion of a physical fitness test is mandated in most recruit training programs.³⁷ Evidence reveals that the level of vitality and health of employees has an effect on the bottom line of achieving the goals of any organization, and the benefits of physical fitness can directly improve an individual's stress level.³⁸ Administrators who realize the importance of health and fitness can implement sound strategies and strive to improve the level of well-being within their organizations.

Enhancing the motivation and productivity of police officers is a difficult, yet achievable, objective. When administrators, supervisors, and officers are educated about the many ways this can be achieved, they consistently can work together for the common goal.

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Endnotes

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