Organizational Change and Policing: The Issue of Readiness

Change has a considerable psychological impact on the human mind. To the fearful it is threatening because it means that things may get worse. To the hopeful it is encouraging because things may get better. To the confident it is inspiring because the challenge exists to make things better. - King Whitney Jr.

The questions raised by various stakeholders interested in improving policing constitute a call for significant changes in how police organizations operate, collaborate with the community, and hold officers accountable for their actions. Each question asked is in essence asking for a particular type of change. These calls for change vary in terms of the complexity and difficulty of the change required (e.g., dealing with issues of body cameras versus dealing with issues of enhancing trust). Regardless of the type of change, any change effort needs to be systematic and enduring.

Typically we think in terms of five stages that a change effort must go through, including exploration and commitment to a new direction or vision, extensive planning to develop strategies required to meet intended goals, effortful implementation of the planned strategies, monitoring and revising the plan as the implementation unfolds, and persistent leadership of the change in order to achieve sustainable outcomes where procedures, policies and systems that emerge as a result of the change effort formally replace the old methods. This final stage involves systems alignment, continuous learning and improvement, and a transfer of knowledge. Alignment occurs when the organizational structure (e.g. roles and responsibilities, accountability, communication patterns), operating systems (e.g. budget and time allocation), and human resource systems (e.g. rewards, selection criteria, training) are consistent with the vision for the change effort. Continuous learning and improvement is a core element of change, which ensures that the institutionalized change will result in the replacement of policies and practices with new systems and methods of operation and those new behaviors become standard procedure. The challenge of any of the change initiatives that might arise out of attempt to address the questions being asked are clear.

For police organizations to make significant change, they must start by exploring and committing to a new direction or vision for policing and its relationship with the community. It occurs as a result of the pressing needs to actively investigate alternative approaches to the current system or way in which the organization operates. Within this critical first stage, leaders in police agencies and in the community can collect information about the current state and the more desirable future state. It is the going where there is a recognition that alternatives are available and may be worth pursuing. This can lead to creating a vision for the future as well as attention to the investment in time and resources needed to move beyond the status quo. A key step in the exploration and commitment stage is the issue of “readiness for change.”

Readiness refers to the extent various stakeholders/constituencies believe that change is necessary, feasible, desirable, and likely to lead to positive outcomes for each stakeholder group. Readiness for change captures the concept of “unfreezing” in that it recognizes that before significant change can occur, individuals must first accept that the status quo is untenable and that a new reality must be created. When readiness is not addressed, leaders are likely to encounter significant resistance when launching a change effort and the endeavor is more likely to fail. A growing body of research has provided strong evidence that higher levels of readiness for change are predictive of engagement and
higher levels of satisfaction with various change efforts (Armenakis, Benerth, Pitts, and Walker, 2007; Engstrom, Jason, Townsend, Pokorny and Curie, 2002). Therefore, change agents, organizational leaders and community leaders interested in pursuing changes in policing and police community relations should assess current levels of readiness and pursue strategies that promote readiness for change before implementing a change effort.

A Community Readiness to Change framework has been developed that recognizes that communities, and even different stakeholder groups and organizations within a community, are at different stages of readiness and that these readiness stages (and the variability across a community) have significant implications for the success of any community change effort. Understanding where various stakeholder groups are on the stages of readiness is critical to identify the interventions needed to build the necessary levels of readiness before a change effort is launched. Below provides a table of the readiness to change stages and suggestions from Edwards, Jumper-Thurman, Plested, Oetting, and Swanson (2000) on strategies for each stage that can be considered:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Readiness Stage</th>
<th>Goal</th>
<th>Strategies</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No Awareness</td>
<td>Raise awareness of the issue</td>
<td>One on one visits with community leaders and members. Visit existing and establish small groups to inform them. Make one on one phone calls to potential supporters.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Denial</td>
<td>Raise awareness that the problem exists in the community</td>
<td>Continue one on one visits and encourage people to assist. Discuss descriptive local incidents related to the issue. Engage local education systems to assist in effort. Point out media articles that describe local critical incidents. Present information to community groups. Develop effective media messaging.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Vague Awareness</td>
<td>Raise awareness that the police and community can do something</td>
<td>Present information at local community events. Initiate own events to present information on the issue. Conduct informal local surveys/interviews with community people and police. Publish newspaper editorial related to local situation.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preplanning</td>
<td>Raise awareness with concrete ideas to address issues</td>
<td>Introduce information about the issue. Visit and develop support from community leaders. Review existing efforts in community to determine who benefits and what success has looked like. Conduct local focus groups to discuss issues and strategies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Preparation</td>
<td>Gather existing information to help plan strategies</td>
<td>Conduct community surveys. Sponsor events to initiate effort. Present in depth local statistics. Determine and publicize costs of problem to community. Conduct public forums to develop strategies.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Initiation</td>
<td>Provide community specific information</td>
<td>Conduct training. Plan publicity efforts with startup of new activities. Attend meetings to provide updates on progress. Conduct interviews to identify gaps and improve new systems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stabilization</td>
<td>Stabilize efforts</td>
<td>Plan community events to maintain support. Conduct training for community professionals and members. Review progress and modify strategies based on data. Hold special recognition events for local supporters.</td>
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This readiness assessment includes factors such as (a) discrepancy, particularly the recognition that a problem exists; (b) efficacy to address the problem, including current capacities such as knowledge and skills, and historical approaches to and success with change; and (c) formal and informal leader support for the change. Interestingly, this framework also includes what organizational researchers refer to as “reshaping capabilities” or characteristics that help entities manage change effectively: (a) development capabilities—the availability of resources to support the change; and (b) engagement capabilities—the involvement of community residents in planning and decision-making. Research has found that a community’s level of readiness is predictive of a community’s effectiveness at implementing a variety of social programs and creating comprehensive community change (Foster-Fishman, Cantillon, Pierce, and Van Egeren, 2007; Foster-Fishman, Fitzgerald, Brandell, Nowell, Chavis, and Van Egeren, 2006). For example, one study showed that communities that had made the largest changes in community readiness to enforce youth access to tobacco laws during the three-year intervention were the ones most likely to continue enforcement activities into the follow-up period (Jason, Pokorny, Kunz, and Adam, 2004).

Resources


