Participative Management – A Case Study

There is a great deal of “talk” about participative management these days, particularly in relation to police departments. Community Oriented Policing is flourishing as a way to conduct police business, and if you read articles about Community Oriented Policing, you are bound to come across discussions of participative management. But can it work? And how does it work? This paper will discuss participatory management and look at a case study where it has worked.

Background

Harvard Business School professor Elton Mayo conducted studies at the Western Electric Hawthorne Works in Chicago from 1927 to 1932 in which he studied productivity and working conditions. These studies became known as The Hawthorne Studies. Many theories were developed out of these studies. One portion dwelt with the positive effects of benign supervision and concern for workers that made them feel like part of a team. Over time, these studies evolved into a variety of management forms such as quality circles, team building, and participatory management. Some of Mayo’s conclusions from the Hawthorne Studies included the following:

* Work is a group activity.
* The need for recognition, security and sense of belonging is more important in determining workers’ morale and productivity than the physical conditions under which he/she works.
* Group collaboration does not occur by accident; it must be planned and developed.

Out of early studies such as the Hawthorne Studies and many others, there developed an organizational culture within industry to be more collaborative, provide employees with higher levels of decision making authority over their own work, building teams to harness creativity and increase productivity. In the mid-80’s many of us in the private work sector became involved in Total Quality Management and other similar variations on the theme.

Meanwhile, the culture of police departments was also changing over time. Throughout the entire world, police departments began adopting a philosophy of community oriented policing. Community oriented policing is about values and reform, empowering officers to work with the community to resolve problems and improve communities. An article on police reform in South Africa included the following:

“…the public service was identified as the key sector requiring transformation. This involved refashioning the types of delivery offered to the public and a complete renovation of the labor relations practices and institutions within public service organizations. The police were expected to dramatically change their labor relations
framework and practices to allow for increased ‘worker’ participation in decision-making processes and enhanced performance management….Existing legacies of authoritarianism and police disciplinary customs and a lack of directive leadership from management have seriously limited this attempt at transforming police labor relations. This, in turn, has hampered the unit’s transition towards operating in accordance with the community policing framework that is supposed to guide the practice of the ‘new’ South African Police Service.”

Change, as we all know, is difficult. Change managers learned that in order to transition to a philosophy of community oriented policing, changes needed to happen within the very core of the department.

“Two of the greatest dilemmas facing the change manager at the most fundamental level are: 1) reconciling the needs of the organization with the needs of the individuals who work for it; and 2) creating a vision with a set of core values and an implementation strategy for community policing which are congruent with and supported by the structure, systems, and practice of the police organization.”

You may notice a similarity between community oriented policing and participatory management. Both involve empowerment of the employee to make decisions or provide input at a higher level than the traditional para-militaristic culture of taking orders and following orders. Being that the two have these similarities, there was an evolution of thought towards the realization that in order to be successful in community oriented policing, an organization must also be successful in participatory management. The organization must adopt a model of participatory management to empower workers to feel that they are a part of the department team and take that teamwork philosophy with them throughout their day. “Encouragement of a participatory management style is essential if empowerment is to become a reality.”

**Participatory Management in Action**

May 1991 found the City of South Lake Tahoe police department in a state of extreme turmoil. Each unit of the police department was at odds with other units. All were suffering from broken trust. Sworn and non-sworn were separated into camps. The environment was bogged down by mistrust, lingering grievances, unforgiveness about past mistreatment, and hopelessness. Both the Police Officers’ Association and the Sergeants’ Association were pursuing a “no confidence” vote towards the Chief and a Lieutenant, an action which led the City Council to direct the City Manager and Chief to pursue some sort of team building process. A month later a meeting was held with a cross section of the department including representatives from each bargaining unit and work unit. The group identified desired outcomes of the team building process, including increased stability in the labor-management relationship. It was decided to hire an outside consulting firm to assist in the process.

The path to participative management started in these early steps to repair the damaged department. The process of selecting the consultant was done with representatives from
every unit of the department. All department members had the opportunity to interview potential consultants to ensure there was across-the-board support of the final selection.

Initially the selected consultant had the goal of simply stabilizing the department. They met with small employee groups, with council, with city management. They gained the trust of the officers association and started work on showing management that there were alternative ways to manage employees. They completed 130 hours of executive coaching, confrontation meetings, and personal counseling.

The consultants worked with the initial team (a cross section of the entire department) to help them understand that the department needed to develop its own participatory management style. Early points of key interest included:
* Representation – parties had to learn that they must represent each other honestly.
* Wholeness – every aspect of the department is important.
* Empowerment – everyone is accountable and responsible.
* Integration – working on the participative management team is a bona fide part of work.

The group formulated rules to govern their teambuilding process. The most significant of which was the fact that decisions by the group would be made by consensus.

By October 1991 the consultant was conducting training related to trust, behavioral patterns, effective communications, and win-win outcomes. Open doors and building trust through constant communication and participation was already paying off. Committee members and the entire department were beginning to accept the changes and see the potential of this new way of doing things.

In November 1991 a series of meetings were held among work groups to discuss the problems and establish stronger relationships for moving forward. The focus of these meetings was on participative management that would result in increased morale, work satisfaction, employee commitment and accountability, and effective/open communication. The level of participatory management to pursue was discussed: from a simple open door policy to full employee empowerment.

As the year came to a close, the initial committee developed into the first participatory management team (PMT). One of the very first tasks of the team included providing input into the qualities the City should look for in a new Police Chief. This input was included in the job announcement and the PMT was invited to participate in the actual selection process. During this time the PMT also developed itself. A mission statement was written. Sub-committees were established in the areas of design, communication, commitment/planning, and training. In a paper addressing the progress of the teambuilding process, PMT members wrote, “The following assumption was discussed related to the committee’s direction: Successful organizations are learning organizations. Self confidence is required to learn. Participation is required to have self confidence. Participation has to be planned and sheltered to work over the long haul.”
The PMT also developed a “Code of Trust” which was distributed with the approval of the Acting Chief. In addition, confidence in the PMT process was built by the team being able to reach a consensus for a temporary solution to some scheduling issues within the department.

1992 saw a new openness fostered by improved communications, a sense of optimism throughout the department, and improved attitudes at all levels. The consultants declared the department stabilized and moved on to address Phase 2: sustained improvements in morale and operational efficiency.

Concerns regarding how the PMT would operate within the department were addressed. These included: who exactly was in control? All parties agreed that the Chief continued to be in control of the department. Decisions made by the PMT would be within guidelines established by the Chief. All members of the department grew to recognize that everyone benefited from this process. The Chief and City management would have greater access to employees and could base decisions on having all the needed information; employees would be able to participate in decisions and feel empowered which would lead to stronger commitment to the organization and the community; the City would potentially see monetary savings from reduced workers compensation claims, reduced sick leave usage, reduced turnover, and reduced labor litigation/grievance costs; and the public would see a more caring, dedicated, effective department.

Over the next few years the PMT process flourished and evolved. Early decisions made by the team included manpower adjustments, equipment selection issues, major event staffing decisions, recommendations and involvement in promotional exams, department redesign, and K-9 program expansion.

The PMT history binder kept by the department includes the following statistics for changes between the fiscal year 1990/91 and 1991/92:
* Grievances went from 6 to 0
* Disability retirements went from 4 to 1
* Formal internal affairs investigations went from 24 to 6
* Sick leave usage went from 8344 hours to 6533 hours.
* Hours spent in meet and confer negotiations with the Police Officers’ Association went from 90.5 hours with no agreement reached, to 12 hours and a satisfactory agreement.

Fourteen Years Later…

Fast forward about fourteen years – where is the PMT today? How does it actually operate?

Each work unit/division of the department elects a representative who serves a one year term (though one person may serve multiple years). The new term begins in January of each year. The Chief represents himself but is just a member like everyone else. At the beginning of the year the team elects co-leaders. One leader is elected from management and one is elected from line level. The two work as a team to lead the PMT. Over the
years the group has met monthly. Recently they chose to meet bi-monthly with the
understanding that if significant issues were raised that needed more regular attention,
they would return to monthly.

Prior to a meeting, discussion items are solicited from every member of the department.
The only off-limit topic is that of personnel issues. Department members may either
come to the meeting to discuss an item they have brought up, or they can ask their area
representative to present the issue. Based on the discussion items brought forward, an
agenda is prepared prior to the actual meeting.

At the actual meeting, Roberts Rules for meetings is followed. In addition, the group
practices consensus decision making. They never vote. Even though any member of the
department may attend the meeting, only the representatives actually partake in the
decision process. There is no winner or loser when a decision is made and they try not to
compromise. A topic will either be agreed to, shelved for future discussion, or dropped.
A particular representative may not totally like a decision that has been made, but they
seek agreement that it is at least a decision they can live with.

At the close of each meeting the Chief takes a few minutes to discuss various topics about
the department such as budget issues, department direction, anything. The PMT meeting
has turned out to be an excellent communication tool. After a meeting, minutes are
prepared and distributed to the entire department. All supervisors (sworn and non sworn)
discuss the minutes with their employees as part of their briefings.

Recently the PMT has discussed various topics such as changing the patrol cars, a
uniform type of handgun to be issued, changes in uniforms, schedule changes, and
detective rotation assignments. Whereas the earlier part of this paper discussed the fact
that participatory management is supported as a necessary organizational style for
successful community oriented policing, the City of South Lake Tahoe put the cart before
the horse. The PMT process led to a discussion of implementing COPPS philosophy for
the department.

**Into the Future…**

As an early pioneer in implementing participatory management, where is the PMT going
from here?

In researching for this paper I spoke to some long term participants in this process and
gained some very interesting insight into the long term outlook for the PMT process. In
the City of South Lake Tahoe, the PMT arose out of chaos. The early participants
became true believers and very committed to participatory management. Even though it
is much talked about, only a few police departments embrace the process as thoroughly
as South Lake Tahoe. Employees who remember the “old days” continue to have a great
deal of commitment to PMT and are protective of it. However, meetings have become
poorly attended and fewer issues are being raised. It appears that newer department
members see less value in the process. Personally, I have a theory that with the
generational changes in the workforce, our newer employees take a participatory culture for granted and accept it as “what is”. They have not necessarily worked in a department that is as military in style as police departments used to be. They are learning to be more collaborative in their schooling and academy training which fosters an expectation that they will be included in department decisions. Long term employees remember when collaboration and empowerment were foreign concepts. Has participatory management team process run its course in South Lake Tahoe? I don’t think so. Even if it is in a slow period at the moment, isn’t it of value to know that if the department were to find itself in turmoil again, they have a proven method for airing out their concerns and working together to resolve them?

The lessons learned after fourteen years experience with an active participatory management culture will always have value. Lessons such as those learned in the early Hawthorne Studies on productivity; that workers find value in empowerment over their workplace. And empowered workers take that empowerment to the streets; translating it into a greater sense of community as they practice community oriented policing.

**Participatory Management Team Meeting Rules**

(as posted proudly in the conference room of the City of South Lake Tahoe Police Department)

1. Decisions by consensus
2. For the group to be effective, everyone must participate.
3. Attack the issues, not the individuals.
4. No collusion outside the participative management process.
5. No recriminations.
6. All agreements will be recorded in the minutes.
7. Deadlines will be set for all agreements.
8. Don’t re-plow old ground; once an issue is laid to rest, leave it there.

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¹Current Sociology, Vol. 52, No. 5, 784-808 (2004); ‘As Unremarkable as the Air They Breathe?’ Reforming Police Management in South Africa, M. Marks and J. Flemming.

²The Police Organization in Transition; Community Policing Consortium; http://www.communitypolicing.org/pfortrans.secc.html

³As above

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