

# **Strategic Decision Making in Police Organizations**

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**Stephen A. Morreale, D.P.A.**  
New England Community-Police Partnership  
Worcester State College

**Brenda J. Bond, M.A., Doctoral Candidate**  
Brandeis University

**Laurie A. Dahlin, D.B.A.**  
Worcester State College

**Abstract**

Executives and managers of police agencies are depended upon to deal with crisis and change in their environments and in their organizations. The decisions made by these leaders are distinct from those on the spot decisions often made by law enforcement officers, correctional officers or court personnel in field situations. In most instances, there is time to reflect, assess and collect data in order to make more informed decisions.

In recent research, focused on perceived leader styles in law enforcement, it was found that a majority of sworn officers surveyed preferred to work for a leader who exhibits transformational leadership behaviors. Some of these behaviors include trust, empowerment, consistency and fairness and decisiveness. Leaders that display these behaviors have employees that are more satisfied in their jobs and exert extra effort (Morreale, 2002). Decision-making is an important element of a leader.

Unlike line-level personnel, administrators are most often positioned to engage in strategic and long-term decision-making as opposed to crisis-driven decision-making. Engaging in a systematic decision-making process can be beneficial if the process includes collecting and evaluating information and data, giving other stakeholders the opportunity to review and provide input, and reviewing previous “best practices” in organizational decision-making

This paper first discusses literature on decision-making. After this review, the paper reports on a limited qualitative exploratory study of decision-making processes utilized by police administrators. It then posits the use of several decision-making models that may enhance the organizational decision-making processes in police agencies.

The paper sets forth the findings of a limited exploratory, qualitative study aimed at identifying processes used in decision-making by police administrators. The paper also includes

recommendations for enhancing the decision-making processes used by police administrators using decision-making models.

By linking this study to theories of change and action, (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980) the paper identifies systematic approaches that can be used by the police administrator in the decision-making process.

This research was undertaken by a group of practitioners with an interest in identifying and analyzing the current practice of decision making by police administrators. Future research will expand this paper to include a wider sample of police administrators to test the application of theory and practice and seek prescriptives for future decision-makers.

## **Overview**

There is no question that police organizations play a vital role in the quality of life of every community member. Police managers are required to make quick judgments and decisions that affect the lives and well being of officers and citizens that they have a duty to protect. However, there are two levels of decision-making that present themselves in police organizations. These decisions fall into the domains of crisis management and strategic management.

This paper does not focus on the decision-making of the patrol officer or street supervisor in field situations who are required to make quick decisions based on the need for immediate action. Instead, this paper focuses on the strategic management and change situations. Strategic decision-making, as a context, allows for deliberation and reflection and involvement of stakeholders. In this context, it is important to have a “systematic” process of information gathering, discussion, review, consideration and weighing alternatives and ongoing assessment.

Very often, decisions are made based on limited information and an individual’s intuition. While this is commonly viewed as effective on the street and certainly plays a role in parsing or vetting an issue, when considering the organizational level, there are additional steps or methods that should be considered. Intuition should not be underestimated for those with substantial experience levels (Burke & Miller, 1999). However, incorporating intuition into a more systematic process may strengthen the decision results.

This exploratory research was conducted to identify thoughtful or systematic approaches or steps that police administrators have used in the decision-making processes, and to understand how lessons learned are or can be transferred to future decision-making.

There is limited research available on criminal justice management decision-making, including the area of policing. But, this topic is important to benefit future and current police administrators. Most of the focus of decision-making research has revolved around line-level officer decision-making and the use of discretion as an important tool. Further, in the latter part of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, there was a focus on the patrol officer as problem solver, which included the use of a problem-solving system. However, scant attention has been paid to law enforcement administrator decision-making processes and the elements of effective decision-making process. This aspect of policing is equally, if not more, important to the future of the policing industry.

The advent of community policing introduced the SARA Model (Scanning, Analysis, Response and Assessment) as a problem-solving model, and primarily utilized by line-level personnel (Goldstein, 1990). The culmination of nearly 20 years of research, Problem Oriented Policing (POP) outlines the basic “systematic” elements of the problem-oriented approach to policing, in which police focus on the underlying causes of crime rather than just respond to calls for service. With the introduction of the S-A-R-A model of policing, officers were provided training in the use of this model, which focuses on the benefits of a process (Goldstein, 1990).

POP calls for adopting a proactive stance. Goldstein (1990) proposes strengthening the decision making processes and increasing accountability and problem identification along with considering alternative solutions. Although he was referring to line-level officers, there is a clear application to the administrator-level of the organization.

The advancement of a community policing philosophy recognizes the importance of both internal and external stakeholders and decision-making. It appears, in many instances that many executives continue to rely on a reactive approach to the management of law enforcement agencies (Greene, 2000).

A study focused on identifying those leadership behaviors or actions that lead to improved job satisfaction and willingness to exert extra effort of sworn officers was conducted. Leaders using approaches including empowerment, trust, participatory decisions and consistency were rated highly (Morreale, 2002). The importance of decision-making weighed heavily in this study as a vital dimension for police leaders.

Most of the work performed by law enforcement organizations is related to crisis management, focused on short-term results instead of a long-term problem-solving approach (Bayley, 1994). Unfortunately, the attention paid to strategic long-term development, problem solving and prevention in law enforcement organizations (Bayley, 1994; Greene, 2000) is limited.

The existing literature provides little insight into models of manager decision-making in the law enforcement arena, which are necessary at both the administrator and organizational level of police agencies.

The various utilities of information and decision-making processes in the criminal justice context are unknown. However, systematic incorporation of data, research, experience, assessment and political, socio-economic factors are critical. Consider the following thoughts advanced by Pope (2001) regarding the current role of information in decisions:

Decision makers must find specific research findings to be so compelling that they base changes in programs and policies directly on the research information. Research and data may influence a decision, as opposed to dictating change. Decision makers may use the data or research to help guide or clarify policy making.

Decision makers may use the data and research to substantiate or legitimize a position or decision already arrived at, to refute or cast doubt on propositions advanced by others, to persuade or neutralize others, to buttress a request for funding, or similar purposes. (Pope, 2001)

This is common in many industries, and it is clear that information plays a significant role in decision-making. The challenge for researchers and practitioners is to identify what, if any, formal and systematic decision-making processes, including the utilization of data, are being used in police organizations, and then to evaluate their use and effectiveness.

## **Methodology**

This qualitative, exploratory study is limited in power, yet provides significant insight into police administrator decision-making. Semi-structured interviews were conducted using the same interview guide, although the “change examples” varied.

Of particular importance in this research is that the aim was not to generalize to the larger police administrator population, but to provide insight into organizational change decision-making processes, therefore, providing a first step in the generalization to theory (Yin, 1995). This study consisted of semi-structured interviews, designed to gather specific data to answer the research questions and gain an understanding of decision-making processes (Maxwell, 1996).

An interview guide was constructed to serve as a roadmap for the interview (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Allowance was made for flexibility in the interviews dependent upon the data revealed throughout the interview. Also, the guide was developed so that it could be adapted to varied organizational contexts and change examples.

A key premise is that environmental forces often require an agency to adapt or change their policies and procedures, and that change takes place often. In order to focus the interview, the participant was asked to select one change process they had engaged in and focus on that particular process as a context for the interview. Again, the exploratory study was intended to allow seek generalizability of the decision-making process theory as opposed to the selected change examples (Yim, 1995).

Once a change example was selected, the questions probed the nature of the change, seeking out who may have been involved or considered, what information was brought in for consideration, what prompted the decision to change, what process was used to engage in that change, what were the results and how were those results evaluated.

A final question was asked to elicit the participant's reflection on the process. The purpose of this question was to identify what lessons had been learned during the change process and how those lessons had been or could have been applied to future change processes.

Each of the interviews was taped and transcribed verbatim. Each interview lasted approximately 60 minutes. This process of transcription ensures that the description included in this report is valid (Maxwell, 1996).

## **Sample**

The participants selected for this pilot study (n=3) were identified through professional association. At the time of this study, each of the law enforcement administrators was a member of a state association of chiefs of police, and current agency administrators. Their tenure as administrator ranged from six to seventeen years.

The administrators participating in this study manage municipal law enforcement agencies in New England. Each of the interviewees is supervised by a City Manager, who in turn reports to a city council. Two of the communities selected were urban, and one agency policed a suburban community, with a significant private industry base. Each agency has a labor union for patrol and command officers. This particular context requires significant knowledge of and bargaining of union contracts when engaging in management and change processes.



## Change Examples

*Participant 1:* The change example discussed by the first participant was the process of achieving state, rather than national accreditation, for the agency. The process required to achieve accreditation is both lengthy, and time and resource consuming. This change example is certification focused.

*Participant 2:* This participant used an organizational structure change as an example. This administrator spoke of the decentralization of the investigative operations in the agency. Traditionally, special units within a law enforcement agency are centralized and fall under the command of a centralized supervisor.

*Participant 3:* This participant discussed a change in communication processes that had been embarked on within the agency at the onset of his appointment as administrator. This particular administrator was the only research participant who had been hired from outside the agency after serving in another police agency.

## Review Questions

The primary questions developed for this review included:

- What systematic processes do law enforcement administrators engage in when contemplating the development or implementation of policy or program changes?
- What criteria are included in this decision-making process?
- How are change efforts assessed or evaluated?
- What “patterns of criteria” in the decision-making process are identified in effective change efforts?

## **Research Questions BB**

### **Research Propositions**

The next section focuses on the findings as they relate to the propositions, as well as, a discussion of other important findings identified from the pilot study.

**Proposition 1: There is no systematic process utilized by police administrators during an organizational change process, and that the inputs into the decision to change vary, and are often incomplete.**

This proposition was difficult to quantify, but the data did support this statement. However, the analysis indicated that it was more complex than just a confirmation of this statement. The data indicated that inputs do vary, but based on the ever-changing environment and context, it is appropriate for inputs to vary. As previously discussed, although it may be inappropriate to standardize a process, it is certainly conceptually and operationally possible to “systematize” a process.

**Proposition 2: There is no formal way of evaluating the change results, or for transferring lessons learned to future change processes.**

Based on the data analyzed in this exploration, there is no “formal” way of evaluating change results. While one survey participant identified evaluation as a missing component, there appeared to be no intention to institute an evaluation at this point. Unexpectedly however, the analysis did find that there was a commitment to ongoing assessment of how the change efforts were progressing focused on minimizing error rather than evaluation. For the purposes of this analysis, the term “minimization of error” was used in the interviews as a measure of success.

Many of the measures of success identified by the administrators were not the traditional quantitative data typically used to evaluate policing effectiveness, but could be used as measures that get to underlying actions in the change process. When asked how effectiveness is measured, one administrator reported, “There are several different ways that we are able to make that determination. Hard numbers are not one of them. We have anecdotal information that there are certain types of crimes solved because of the change, which would not have been solved without the change.” This administrator implied that clearance rates (a quantitative measure), and feedback from the community provide indicators into effectiveness.

The notion of transference of lessons learned to future change efforts was barely mentioned by the participants. Any lessons were described as a “live and learn” concept, as opposed to conceptualizing how certain elements or aspects of a process could be tailored and transferred to other change efforts.

The subsequent reflection on the change process allowed for the administrators to think back on what could have been done differently in order to improve the process. Reported themes from the analysis included:

- Better planning with clear timelines
- Decision based on data, as well as other information, including anecdotal data
- Incorporating more systematic processes into change decisions and strategies
- Piloting change activities before making department-wide change
- Evaluating the process more formally.

The identification of these themes implies that the process being practiced was incomplete, or different aspects of the process were not fully realized. As one administrator stated, “I don’t think we did the analyzing as well as we should have. But we’re cops, no cops ever do. Cops scan a problem and then jump to a conclusion.”

This administrator went on to explain the importance of stepping back and being more thoughtful, and that bringing in others and re-examining the process is critical, even if it risked altering or stopping the proposed change.

This is a significant result of this analysis, and points to the need and desire of administrators surveyed to adopt “systems” for managing change. Coupled with the previous statements, this infers that a systematic process can be utilized across varied contexts and change efforts. While the change examples in this study were different, there were significant common themes and potential universality indicating that these themes may be applied to other decision-making processes.

### **Additional Findings**

The study was initiated in an attempt to identify any decision-making and change models in policing or testing of models in the policing context. The research found that there is no formal process used by those police administrators interviewed for this preliminary study. While there were some common themes, there were no formal evaluation systems in place.

The executives referred to several informal evaluation process activities. Common themes included the inclusion of internal allies in the discussion phase. In each circumstance union involvement and/or impact was considered. An assessment of political support and necessary resources was generally conducted.

The minimization of error prompted change and drove an informal evaluation, as a success indicator. Some reference was made to model programs from other police agencies. Police administrators did not have data to support “best practices” they were trying to emulate. In the study interviews, there was limited mention of data and research in process or identification of effective strategies.

Past mistakes were considered in an effort to focus on “what not to do” to minimize risk versus “lessons learned” and “what works.”

The measure of success described was, in all circumstances, qualitative, anecdotal and non-traditional.

## **Policy Implications**

The findings of this preliminary study can lead to a more formal process for decisions. The utilization of processes can have a tremendous effect on police agencies. As citizens and officials demand more efficiency and effectiveness for their tax dollars, institutions such as police agencies must identify systematic ways to implement and evaluate change. The themes identified can inform and help shape that process.

Along with the need for more systematic processes is the need for clearer, measures of effectiveness that are generally not used in policing. Moreover, the utilization of research and data in these processes is seriously lacking, which has implications for both practitioners and researchers.

Also, what is the role of citizens and community officials in defining those measures, and how can these constituent groups participate in this process? Lastly, the operations and strategies of police organizations are fluid, so it behooves an agency to adopt a systematic change process that will ensure more effective outcomes in change.

## **Useful Decision Models for Consideration**

Law enforcement administrators often make decisions based on intuition and experience, therefore, it is important to understand some of the other factors that go into the decision making process. A model that has been widely used in understanding how people make decisions is the

theory of reasoned action (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). The theory of reasoned action assumes that human beings are quite rational and make systematic use of the information that is available to them. It states that behavior is determined by intentions, a combination of personal attitudes towards the behavior, as well as the opinions of peers. According to the theory, the immediate determinant of behavior is the person's intention to perform. Behavioral intention, in turn depends upon (1) the attitude toward performing the behavior, and (2) the subjective norm. Attitude towards the behavior is based on a person's beliefs that if performing a behavior leads to a mostly favorable outcome, then a person will have a favorable attitude towards performing the behavior, and vice versa. Subjective norms are one's beliefs that if others who are important to him/her think he/she should perform the behavior, and then he/she will be motivated to comply with that belief and perform the behavior, and vice versa.

According to Morgan, (2001) if there is a need for others to implement a decision, they should be involved in the process. The law enforcement executive needs to recognize the need for a balance between quick decisions without full-data or information and the problems that emanate from analysis paralysis. The manager needs to look at the upside of the potential decision and not always fall into a damage-control mode.

## **Ethical Considerations**

In policing, executives are responsible for making daily decisions that affect the workforce and the community at large. There is an implicit trust granted and high expectation of police executives. Attention should be paid to ethical and moral standards in every decision that is considered.

Nutt (2002) cautions that executives should stay “issue centered” and maintain an exploratory posture and to pause for reflection. Nutt also feels that the executive must consider and confront, not ignore, any ethical questions that arise during the decision-making process.

### **Putting Theory into Practice: Prescriptives for Success**

There are a number of decision-making models that should be considered for introduction into the law enforcement community. Janis (1989) recommends that managers avoid quick and easy decisions. He points to historical decisions by Presidents Kennedy and Reagan that led to serious errors in foreign policy. Through his research he holds that the likelihood of failure is minimized where sound procedures are following for information search, appraisal and planning. Janis (1989) points to cognitive and affiliative decision rules as vital and suggests avoidance of self-serving, emotive decision rules. Janis (1989) investigated the issues of groupthink and cautions others to avoid the circumstances in their future deliberations.

Rajagopalan and Spreitzer (1996) propose an integrative framework for strategic change that brings together the strengths of the rational, learning and cognitive perspectives of change, incorporating the aspects of each model that contribute to effective change. The testing of the integrative model does not appear in the literature to date.

The integrative model provides a systematic framework to engage in change that considers many of the elements discussed in the exploratory study. The steps of this framework, originating or adapted from, the three change perspectives, are described below.

The first two steps require a consideration of the internal and external environments, which will inform, and often prompt, change. In the case of the administrators, each had identified a need to engage in change prompted by their environment. This point was highlighted by one administrator who when speaking of the existence of issues and consideration

of the conditions, stated, “When we laid the problems out, we could make a logical argument that this was the way to go.”

A consideration of managerial cognitions and actions must also take place when formulating the change strategy. This was clear in the interview analysis as administrators spoke of individuals within the organization, including union officials who must be included in the change process. This is particularly important in an institution such as a police agency where culture and tradition has dictated how things take place. For example, at least two administrators spoke of it as an internal force. One indicated, “The longer things have been in place, the more difficult the change”, while the second stated that “tradition is very important in a police agency, but it can also make change impossible – so we factored that into our change decisions”. Change agents must consider this as part of the internal environment and actors.

Once change takes place, outcomes are identified, which may be planned or unexpected. For example, administrators may identify a goal for the particular change, but may also identify unexpected outcomes such as stronger team-based management. Manager action is likely to influence these outcomes as well as others. Individual action and interaction can have an impact on how change is implemented. Further, the outcomes are also likely to be influenced by the internal and external conditions in which the change takes place. Finally, the outcomes become an aspect of manager cognitions, which in turn influence actions and organizational conditions and changes (Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1996).

This model represents a process of surveying the environment; considering the internal context; developing needed change and strategy; examining outcomes; and identifying how those outcomes may influence knowledge and action. This model is comparable to the action-research model put forth by Kurt Lewin, a social psychologist focused on social management (research



within social planning and action), and includes idea generation (based on environmental and organizational conditions), planning (change formulation and strategy), fact-finding and decision-making (consideration of environment and managerial cognitions), execution (strategy implementation), back to fact-finding (to evaluate action, learning, corrective action if necessary, modification of overall plan). (Lewin, in APA, 1997)

Managerial cognitions and actions must also take place when formulating the change strategy. This was clear in the interview analysis as administrators spoke of individuals within the organization, including union officials who must be included in the change process. This is particularly important in an institution such as a police agency where culture and tradition has dictated how things take place. For example, at least two administrators spoke of it as an internal force. One indicated, “The longer things have been in place, the more difficult the change,” while the second stated that “tradition is very important in a police agency, but it can also make change impossible – so we factored that into our change decisions.” Change agents must consider this as part of the internal environment and actors.

Once the change takes place, outcomes are identified. These outcomes may be planned or unexpected. For example, administrators may identify a goal for the particular change, but may also identify unexpected outcomes such as stronger team-based management, which may not have been anticipated. A manager’s action is likely to influence these outcomes as well as others involved in the change process.

Further, these outcomes are also likely to be influenced by the internal and external conditions in which the change takes place. Finally, the outcomes become an aspect of manager cognitions, which in turn influence actions and organizational conditions and changes (Rajagopalan & Spreitzer, 1996).

This model represents a process of surveying the environment (including information); considering the internal context (including the actors); developing a change and change strategy; examining the outcomes; and identifying how those outcomes may influence knowledge and action. This model is comparable to the action-research model put forth by Kurt Lewin includes idea generation (based on environmental and organizational conditions), planning (change formulation and strategy), fact-finding decision-making (consideration of environment and managerial cognitions), execution (strategy implementation), back to fact-finding (to evaluate action, learning, corrective action if necessary, modification of overall plan) and examination of outcomes and the potential influence on environmental conditions and managerial cognitions (Lewin, in APA, 1997).

The models presented above show promise for incorporating the elements described by the administrators in a systematic process for organizational management of change. Neither of these models has been tested in a theory-building context meaning that action research has been identified in the researcher-practitioner context, but not as a tool for management of change. Insider action research, as described by Coughlin (2001) is more attuned with the notion of individuals within and organization that may represent practitioner and researcher roles, engaging in a change process, which is being studied, for learning purposes. Again, a systematic process is possible in a police organization that incorporates the key elements of these change models, without fear of adopting a “cookie-cutter” approach that is likely to end in failure considering the substantial complexities surrounding organizational change.

## **Conclusion**

This paper was intended to explore the current practices of police executives engaged in decision-making. A series of focused interviews with New England law enforcement executives were conducted in an attempt to identify any consistent processes used in decision-making. The interviews were transcribed and responses were coded for analysis.

There are opportunities for future research in this area. This study can be replicated in various settings, including other criminal justice agencies. The study could prove useful for court administrators, corrections executives, juvenile justice agency heads, and other allied criminal justice practitioners.

Police agencies are an important element of each community in America. It stands to reason that if police executives can learn techniques to evaluate alternatives and make more informed decisions that communities will be better served.

## **About the Researchers . . .**

Brenda J. Bond, M.A. is presently pursuing her doctoral education at Brandeis University. She served as Director of Research and Development with the Lowell, MA Police Department where she managed several state and federal initiatives including the Prisoner Reentry Initiative, Regional Community Policing Institute of New England, and the Massachusetts Police Leadership Institute. During her tenure, Brenda co-authored and managed over \$14 million dollars in grant programs, with a focus on development, implementation and evaluation of police-community programs. Brenda currently consults as an Evaluator for the Center for Family, Work and Community at the University of Massachusetts-Lowell.

Stephen A. Morreale, D.P.A. is an adjunct professor of Management and Leadership at Worcester State College. He is a 29-year veteran of law enforcement, having served in the U.S. Army Military Police Corps, the Dover, NH Police Department, and as a special agent and manager with the Drug Enforcement Administration. He presently serves as Assistant Special Agent in Charge for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Inspector General, Office of Investigations. Steve serves as Vice-Chair of the New England Community-Police Partnership (NECP<sup>2</sup>) and has conducted assessments of police agencies, training and facilitation for law enforcement executives and agencies throughout New England. He earned a doctorate from Nova Southeastern University in 2002. His research interests include management and leadership, strategic planning, decision-making, and ethics.

Laurie A. Dahlin, D.B.A., C.M.A. is an Assistant Professor of Accounting and Management at Worcester State College. She is a Certified Management Accountant with over ten years industry experience in the accounting field and twelve years in education. She has written and presented papers at the American Accounting Association and Northeast Business and Economics Association. Her research interests include accounting, ethics, and decision-making.

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