Facilitated Self-Assessment of Community Policing

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In the spring of 1996, Michigan State University’s (MSU) School of Criminal Justice, which houses the National Center for Community Policing (NCCP), received a grant from the Office of Community Oriented Policing Services (COPS) to enhance police departments’ implementation of community policing. The grant provides resources for MSU faculty and training specialists to work with seven Michigan law enforcement agencies in developing new methods for supporting organizational change. Facilitated Self-Assessment, a process of engagement with community policing administrators, is one innovation developed under the grant. Here we describe the uses of the process, its specific products, and their potential for fostering organizational change.

**TRAINING ASSUMPTIONS**

A transition to community policing dictates significant organizational change including new relationships with citizens, public and private agencies, businesses, religious bodies, and the media. Contemporary NCCP training assumes that successful implementation of local community policing requires three essential elements:

- A customer-based organizational strategy;
- Unlimited community partnerships;
- An information based, unified effort to solve problems.

Unfortunately, the underlying personnel roles, rules, and processes of many law enforcement agencies inhibit these three critical elements. Organizational change often fosters anxiety and resistance to a change in the "status quo." Community policing efforts are often beset by communication breakdown, distrust, and blaming which damages leaders’ credibility. In addition, the delegation of responsibility is frequently superseded at the critical moment real change begins to take place for police personnel (internal customers).

Resistance to community policing often occurs when line officers and supervisors believe the administration intends no *real* change. When they are right, the resistance and cynicism of line officers, supervisors, and the community at large is reinforced. Facilitated Self-Assessment responds to a perceived lack of commitment or understanding from the top of the organization.

**FACILITATED SELF-ASSESSMENT’S PURPOSE**

In recent years, administrators’ greatest failure in community policing has been an overreliance on training. Rather than face the difficulties of organizational change and cultivation of community relationships, training is prescribed. This approach ignores the tangible administrative commitments required to significantly change line officers’ daily work lives.

The NCCP focuses on helping administrators recognize their ongoing implementation role. Administrators’ best insights into the three elements of community policing are the basis of a process which both *prescribes* and *motivates* action by local participants. Its goals are to:
• Show the need for organizational change (not just more officer training);
• Uncover the management team’s own experience, insight, and capacity to analyze and generate local strategies; and
• Provide the NCCP faculty opportunities to analyze the organizational dynamics that impede or support change in order to customize subsequent training to local dynamics.

KEY PARTICIPANTS
Facilitated Self-Assessment is a half-day encounter centered on drawing out the insights and experiences of local personnel. It includes the chief executive, all administrative officers, NCCP faculty, and a facilitator to direct, manage, and frame the dialogue. A recorder, usually the facilitator or one of the content experts, is also designated for each session.

The Facilitator
The facilitator elicits the experiences, good and bad, of local personnel in implementing community policing. Taking a neutral stand on community policing’s value and principles assists in revealing falsely optimistic reports of change and defusing anxiety and defensiveness. The facilitator must be devoted to helping participants openly express doubts and deal with them candidly. Local administrators are asked to demonstrate how they manage the difficult work of establishing a customer-based strategy, unlimited community partnerships, and problem-solving efforts. In addition to drawing out the full range of experiences, the facilitator helps participants distill their collective insights.

Faculty Experts
Although concerns and doubts about the local implementation process are aired, a context for good community policing must also include standards against which participants may compare their experiences. The Facilitated Self-Assessment process begins with a very short presentation by the faculty on the three core elements of community policing. In keeping with a neutral stance, the facilitator should ask, "This is what the experts say community policing requires—does your experience bear this out?"

The faculty’s second function is to act as informed observers. They participate very selectively in clarifying the local experience and the best practices of community policing. The group should not be allowed to avoid clearly describing the local experience by shifting responsibility to outside experts. Generally, the facilitator manages faculty involvement by periodically asking for their clarifying questions and enforcing limits on their comments. Observation of the department’s key players, rather than direct interaction, provides the best chance to reveal training needs. This approach also allows local personnel to recognize on their own, rather than being told by an expert, ways to change their organization.

Local Personnel
Participants are encouraged to honestly describe the experiences of their departments. In some instances, officers may be reluctant to state their opinions forthrightly. The facilitator counteracts this reluctance by properly framing the purpose of self-assessment, eliciting the chief executive’s permission to reveal both positive and negative aspects of implementation, and asking pointed follow-up questions. Local personnel also synthesize and articulate their collective experiences and insights regarding community policing. The facilitator assists them through both open-ended and structured formats.

THE FACILITATED SELF-ASSESSMENT PROCESS
Time and Space
The session is three to five hours long, and conducted in a comfortable, preferably familiar, space. A table is arranged to allow participants to see each other and to focus on an empty common area. A three-sided, "U"-shaped arrangement of tables, with a fairly large open space containing flip charts, adhesive boards, and other materials, works well.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Provide at least:</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✔ one flip chart;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ five differently colored, easily readable markers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ a hundred half-sheets (5.5&quot; x 8.5&quot;) of white paper;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ twenty half-sheets each of two differently colored papers;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✔ a large adhesive board (preferably 4' x 10').</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

For particularly rigid or uncommunicative groups, it can be effective to change the room shape in the middle of the session. The facilitator assigns the group to "Take two to five minutes to revise the space to make it easier and more comfortable to freely share information." This usually produces a more chaotic room arrangement which relaxes inhibitions and reveals those who are uncomfortable with changing established structures. Observers can watch the department accomplish a free-form assignment; local approaches to organizational change may mirror this exercise.

The Steps
As it has evolved over the past year, the self-assessment session comprises three steps: Setting the Framework, Open-Ended Discussion, and Structured Self-Assessment.

Setting the Framework. This brief step begins with a short lecture by faculty on the best practices of community policing, highlighting the three interrelated core elements (customer-based organizational structure; unlimited community partnerships; and an information based unified effort to solve problems). The presentation triggers discussion and provides a framework for local experiences. It may be accompanied by a short video of a successful community policing experience. Next, the facilitator outlines the session, emphasizing the following points:

- The session’s purpose is to illuminate the department’s experience with community policing, including both successes and frustrations, and to determine what needs to be done next.
- The "experts" are local personnel, not the visiting faculty. The faculty provides a framework for discussion, but the group must describe local experiences which challenge or revise the framework.
- The facilitator elicits and tracks valid perceptions of local experience. The facilitator remains neutral about the value or practice of community policing.
- The discussion involves first, an open-ended dialogue whereby the group correlates its experience with the three elements; and second, a structured process for defining the group’s Victory, Strengths, Obstacles, and Needed Actions.
- Products from the session include a written report on the discussion, including an initial action plan.

Open-ended Discussion. The facilitator begins the discussion by placing title cards for the three core elements near the top of the adhesive board. Focus questions may be placed near the bottom of the board (see Figure A). Questions may move participants from experience to insight to action or may focus on the strengths and weaknesses of the community policing effort. Focus questions are based on interviews or surveys of the department conducted before the session.
As participants describe the local experience, the facilitator should summarize key points and place summarizing comments on the adhesive board near the relevant card. The facilitator tracks points made and responses to points raised so that varying perspectives on the same experience can be clustered together.

Facilitating and tracking an open-ended dialogue provides a constant visual picture of points made, so that key issues are not lost as the discussion branches off. The group’s shared perceptions, or disagreements, are also revealed. As the discussion is tracked on the adhesive board (see Figure B), local efforts may be concentrated under one of the core elements but lacking in the others. The facilitator guides the group to delve further into areas avoided or only superficially discussed. Whether the blank spaces reveal shortcomings, resistance, or confusion, the local experiences, both good and bad, are examined and clarified by the faculty.

Finally, tracking the open-ended conversation is useful in creating the written report which will be given to the department after the session. The report is generated by transforming the related strings or clusters of cards into bulleted sentences, thereby capturing the essence of the dialogue.

**Structured Self-Assessment Process.** After the open-ended discussion, a break of an hour to an hour and a half is taken. When participants reconvene, the group begins to restate their perceptions in a structured format in order to usefully organize the information for later resolution. The first parts of this session (Victory, Strengths and Obstacles) are quickly generated and tracked on a flip chart (in about twenty minutes).
In order to Define the Victory, the facilitator asks participants to project one year into the future, imagining the most successful possible outcome to their community policing initiative. The facilitator generates list of statements answering the questions: "How are things different?" How can you tell you have been successful?"

Next, the facilitator elicits and records Strengths and Obstacles by asking: "What factors will help you get there?" and "What current or potential factors are likely to stand in your way?"

The Action Question. At this point local insights are pooled and synthesized. Participants are asked to respond to the following focus question: Considering both the STRENGTHS and the OBSTACLES you have identified, what must the department now DO to achieve the VICTORY?

Participants brainstorm as many responses as possible using specifics and framing their answers with action verbs (e.g., "model problem-solving techniques to patrol officers," rather than "strong leadership"). Next, participants are divided into small groups to share their lists, and to agree on four or five responses to write in large letters on the halfsheet cards. The facilitator places the responses on the board, asking participants to: 1) point out responses they don’t understand, and 2) identify pairs of related cards. The facilitator only puts up pairs of cards to ensure that distinct ideas, rather than generalized clusters, are identified (see Figure C).

Larger clusters of related action steps are formed later as participants work out the final configurations. Each cluster of ideas is then labeled with a word or phrase capturing its essence. Figure D shows an example of a fully arranged set of clusters. The clusters form the action plan framework which is funneled back to the department after the session. Because it is generated by the local personnel, not by outside experts, the action plan is much more likely to outline the department’s needs.

The rest of the session is spent deepening the group’s understanding of each cluster. One effective approach asks the group to articulate a goal and specific tasks for the clusters; the facilitator records and modifies the evolving responses. Not every cluster will produce detailed goals and tasks; earlier steps will provide much of the material necessary to "flesh out" the local action plan. Continue the session only until the group begins to run out of steam.

In the final step of the process, a detailed draft report for the action plan is compiled and sent to the local department. The local group reviews and responds to the report. The NCCP staff then prepares a final, revised draft of a report which represents the local group’s prescriptions for organizational change for the coming year.

THE VICTORY

If we are completely successful, one year from now the following changes will be apparent:

- There will be more COMMUNITY INVOLVEMENT in solving crimes, and increased TRUST between the community and the department. Some examples of this would be an increase in positive letters to the editor about police, a decrease in complaints to Internal Affairs, and an increase in citizen ride-alongs with officers.
- There will be a REDUCTION IN CRIME. Calls for service will also be reduced, and the community will understand that this is a positive thing.
- There will be a CONSISTENCY of purpose and philosophy throughout the department. All personnel will be committed to working toward greater police/citizen interaction. All functions within the department will aim at this in an integrated fashion. This will be evident in staff meetings at all levels of the organization. All personnel will be able to describe the community-oriented philosophy of the department, what it means, and how it is done.
- There will be effective QUALITY CONTROL as change occurs. In other words, when any one
person in the department starts to go astray of the purpose and philosophy, others will naturally respond to correct the situation.

- There will be better COORDINATION of all departmental functions, including information, communication, problem identification, community involvement, and identified "best practices."

**STRENGTHS** What will help you get there?

- Determination
- Training
- Young supervisors, young patrol officers; willingness to innovate
- Leadership is devoted to doing the job
- Resources--human, equipment, dollars
- Support from officials and fiscal personnel
- Community support (businesses, neighborhoods, professionals)
- Good relationships with other agencies, i.e., other law enforcement agencies and service providers

**OBSTACLES** What may stand in your way?

- Lack of community support in some areas
- Negative interactions between the public and police officers
- Lack of understanding by first-line supervisors and field sergeants
- Administrative changes
- The traditional, maintenance mindset; resistance to change because the evidence for the need to change is not understood

*Figure C: Example of Victory, Strengths, Obstacles generated by a session.*

*Figure D: Sample clusters from Action Question responses.*

**PRODUCTS OF THE SELF-ASSESSMENT**

The written report is the Facilitated Self-Assessment's principal product. It contains a great deal of information, all produced by the local personnel through examination of their experiences in community policing. Its local
perspective makes it more valuable than any outside textbook or manual. To make the report "user-friendly" NCCP staff separates information into manageable pieces, incorporates visually varied elements, and highlights lists and graphics. Most of the report mirrors the session. It includes:

- A cover page with an overview of the process and its purpose.
- A list of major points made during the open-ended discussion, organized under the three core elements of community policing.
- Three lists under the headings Victory, Strengths, and Obstacles; these are modified and clarified versions of the raw material generated by the group session.
- A visual graphic of the group’s clustered responses to the Action Question, framed as "the beginnings of an Action Plan."
- A draft "action plan," including a specific goal for each cluster, and a series of tasks for that goal. Ways to accomplish each task are briefly described, based on information generated in the session and the faculty’s observations. Although the framework for the draft action plan is based on local responses, the facilitator and the faculty creatively synthesize the report and may include recommendations not directly generated by local personnel.

1. TEAMWORK: Goal: To get everyone in the department to apply the problem-solving philosophy with enthusiasm. This will require a shift in priority for some officers from "what’s in it for me?" to "how can this help me do my job better?"

Tasks:
- Resolve union/contract problems which prevent changes that would allow for greater continuity and officer identification with districts.
- Build "ground-up" support for the philosophy among the officers.

How:
- Seek greater input from union in how to make the problem-solving, community policing approach work. Let them help define ways in which policy can be changed to encourage greater identification between officer and district.
- Utilize MSU School of Labor and Industrial Relations in accomplishing this task.
- Seek greater officer input into how to make the philosophy work, especially from those officers who resist it.
- In trainings, allow officer input to help shape how community policing approach can work.
- Sergeants can more actively encourage teams to develop and implement problem-solving strategies.
- Sergeants can more actively support and encourage problem-solving, not as an obligation but as a method that will promote success.

2. USING DIVERSE TALENTS: Goal: To continue to hire new officers who understand the basic idea of problem-solving and community policing, and empower them early on to apply this understanding to their work.

Tasks: How:
...
• Hire and support new officers who understand the philosophy. Maintain and strengthen peer involvement in hiring processes.

• Identify skills of incoming officers that will support their orientation to the problem-solving approach. Sergeants inventory relevant skills among new officers and reinforce through continuous feedback the development and application of problem-solving community partnership approaches.

Figure E: Detail from a Draft "Action Plan" included in the Session Report.

POTENTIAL APPLICATIONS
Benefits expected from the use of the Facilitated Self-Assessment of Community Policing are that the process will:

• Affirm the knowledge base and insight of local departments. The Facilitated Self-Assessment elicits and demonstrates to local executives their own expertise in identifying and meeting the challenges of community policing implementation.

• Declare departmental commitment to organizational change. Facilitated Self-Assessment helps administrators directly relate their departments to the core elements of community policing (customer-based strategy, unlimited partnerships, and unified problem-solving efforts) and to recognize the high degree of organizational change required. The written report is intended to become a public declaration of the department’s commitment to change.

• Clarify and resolve conflicting perceptions within the department. Community policing initiatives are universally beset by anxiety and communication breakdown. Conflicting perceptions of change are a potent source of rumor and distrust. The Facilitated Self-Assessment session airs conflicting perceptions among administrators and clarifies the initiative’s intent and meaning. The written report can also help clarify the initiative’s intent to supervisors, line officers, labor unions, government representatives, agency partners, neighborhood groups, and the public at large.

• Facilitate trust. Facilitated Self-Assessment helps establish a new foundation of trust upon which to build improved collaborative relationships. True partnerships within a department and community require perseverance, patience, and the slow accrual of trust between disparate groups. Compiling and documenting local expertise and experiences defines the progress made and paves the way to more creative partnerships within and outside the organization.

• Mobilize/engage community partners. The Facilitated Self-Assessment process can help community stakeholders (representing residents, businesses, agencies, government, media, and religious institutions) come to a common understanding of their experiences and the core elements of community policing. In many communities, it can become the key event in helping community stakeholders realize and claim their partnership with law enforcement.

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