

The Justice Academy Journal

Law and Justice Executive Series

November 2016 - Volume 1



Risk Management and Public Safety Leadership

A few months ago the Police Chief magazine had a survey of IACP members regarding the skills and/or qualities most needed by a leader. Of course comments such as ethical, visionary, decisive, and other one word descriptions were brought forth by the respondents. Interestingly, the skill or quality of risk management was not mentioned in the long list. It is especially disturbing to me to see that the need for good risk management skills was not something identified since law enforcement, corrections, and probation-parole functions are constantly working in dangerous environments.

This is not to say that law enforcement administrators don't incorporate policies and training related to risk management into their operations. They do. However, most do it in a piecemeal fashion. There are policies and training related to felony stops, suicide prevention, prisoner transportation and multitudes of other functions. Too frequently there is no single risk management system or umbrella that unifies the functions for leaders within these agencies. Nor are there simple conceptual tools seemingly available to assist organizations in developing such a system.

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Risk Management and Public Safety Leadership

In consulting and teaching leadership and risk management over the past two-plus decades, I have emphasized the inseparability of these seemingly separate components. I have encouraged agencies to use a couple of simple tools to help them get started in systematizing and prioritizing risks inherent in their operations. I have identified as many as twelve separate tools that can be used, however, to get started I will focus on two of them.

the risk management matrix, leadership or command cycle

The risk matrix is seen in one form or another if one visits the subject of risk management on the internet. Frequently the various insurance companies show their own versions of the matrix and the military services also have their versions. So what concept do they portray?

Visualize a square divided into four quarters with upper left and right quadrants and the same for the bottom two quadrants. In the upper left hand quadrant we write "high volume & high risk". In the upper right quadrant we write "low volume & high risk". In the lower two quadrants we put "high volume & low risk" in the lower left and put "low volume & low risk" in the lower right hand quadrant. We bring together a brainstorming group from our most talented staff and then begin to rate the risks confronted by the agency and put them in one of the four quadrants. For example, in a patrol setting, traffic stops may be listed as "HV & HR". In custodial settings, the room checks on detained youths may be listed as

"HV & HR". Attempt suicides might be placed in the "LV & HR" category in a jail or prison.

High volume & low risk activities could generally include the unending meetings that managers are forced to attend and are "usually" not accompanied by high risks. (See the Four Disciplines of Execution by Sean Covey and other authors for a means to reduce the number of meetings and focus on priorities.)

Now once the group has reached agreement on the priority of risks, the next step is to assess how the agency's human and material resources are assigned. It is not at all unusual to find that the agency has placed staff, staff time and energy, management attention, and physical resources in significant disregard for the risks facing it. Obviously the next step is to engage in a serious effort to realign all of these human and non-human assets into a structure that makes more sense and one that helps to protect the agency against unnecessary crises.

It has not been uncommon for administrators or managers to claim that they used this matrix or at least had seen it before. The problem has been the failure to take the next two steps:

to assess how their present resources have been applied; and,

to then act on those measurements and change the resources to reflect their understanding of the new set of risk priorities.

About the Author:



Jerry L. Harper
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Jerry Harper has served the law and justice professions with distinction for the past fifty years. He began his career with the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department in 1962 and served in a variety of operational, supervisory, management, and executive leadership roles. Because of his leadership ability, along with the strategic vision that he brought to the department, he was promoted through the ranks and eventually accepted an appointment to serve as the Department's second in command. From 1993 - 1999, Mr. Harper served as Undersheriff for the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department and oversaw all operational and administrative functions. After retiring from the LASD, he accepted an invitation to serve as the Chief Probation Officer for San Bernardino County, where he served from 2004 - 2009.



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