

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

Supervision for the Telecommunications Division

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ABSTRACT

Supervision for the telecommunication division is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because this division is a vital part of the work flow of law enforcement. If there is inefficiency or discord in this process, law enforcement officials cannot effectively protect the safety and welfare of the public. The purpose of this research is to show the effectiveness of a supervisor in the dispatch division who actually has experience in the area of telecommunications. It will evaluate if the law enforcement's telecommunication center will run more effectively and efficiently for the agency and the citizens of that community.

The method of inquiry used by the researcher included: a review of articles, Internet sites, periodicals, journals, and survey distributed to 75 survey participants, and interviews with six telecommunications supervisors and ten telecommunicators.

The researcher discovered that telecommunicators would prefer a supervisor in the telecommunications division that has experience working the console and being able to ask the questions that need to be asked as calls come into the telecommunications center. That telecommunications supervisor is able to answer any questions that may be brought to them by the telecommunicators themselves, and if the telecommunications supervisor does not know the answer, they know where to go and find what the telecommunicator needs. This researcher also discovered that if there is a telecommunications supervisor in the telecommunications center who enjoys what they are doing and does have the experience, the telecommunications center is a more effective division for the agency, patrol officers, and citizens in general.

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INTRODUCTION

The issue to be examined in this discussion centers on the effect of professional experience on job performance in a law enforcement environment. Specifically, the subject examines supervisors for the dispatch center in a police agency and whether or not this individual should have previous experience in running the telecommunications center. By knowing the operational procedures that are set out by the Texas Department of Public Safety, the supervisor provides a key leadership role vital to the workflow in this division. This topic is relevant to the modern practice of law enforcement because the telecommunications center is the hub of the police department. This vital part of the law enforcement process is often the first contact point for the public, which relies on the police to protect and serve. The supervisor in this department serves a vital role to the mission of law enforcement. The telecommunications supervisor is looked upon as the resident expert in the policies and procedures adopted by local, state, and federal authorities. Morale in the telecommunications center of a police department is higher when the center is supervised by someone with experience. The turnover rate in the dispatch center will be reduced if administrators have someone with experience that they can rely on to ensure a quality job is done.

The work environment between the supervisor and the subordinates in such an environment should be that of respect and appreciation. Supervisors who do not have experience may not be the leaders that administrators want in the telecommunication center. The reasoning behind this is that they are unable to answer questions that arise in the center concerning policy and procedure. Also, the supervisor cannot lead by

example because without the working knowledge gained through experience, the supervisor cannot lead subordinates effectively. It will be demonstrated through interviews that telecommunication supervisors who have practical working experience in the telecommunication center have a passion to not only succeed at their jobs, but also to help subordinates who work under them succeed.

The purpose of this research is to demonstrate that having a skilled and informed telecommunication supervisor, who has working knowledge as a telecommunicator and knows what is expected of every telecommunicator that works in the division, would be beneficial for any law enforcement agency. Such a person would help with the morale in the division and the turnover rate, and they would also increase the respect the telecommunicators have for the supervisor. The agency will be a more cohesive division within the agency when this situation exists. As an administrator, it should be a priority to make sure that when an individual is placed in the position of a dispatch supervisor, that individual does want the position. The work gained from a hands-on and knowledgeable supervisor and the telecommunicators working in the telecommunications center would be phenomenal. As administrators, the job the telecommunications unit does reflects upon the agency and through the citizens. When an individual approaches an administrator and tells them, "thank you, the telecommunicator that answered the phone when a citizen called for help was very courteous and helpful," that compliment goes a long way for administration and in the telecommunications center. Career paths in law enforcement agencies usually lead to the role of an administrator. Therefore, it is vital for a professional law enforcement

officer to anticipate the demands of the position, and the hiring of key personnel is one of the job requirements of an administrator.

The research question for this discussion focuses on whether or not the supervisor in the telecommunications center should have at least partial experience as a dispatcher before assuming a supervisory role within the agency. If a supervisor in the telecommunication center has a working knowledge in the subordinate role, it can benefit the telecommunicators working for them and the citizens of the community. The intended method of inquiry includes a review of Internet site information from various agencies and a review of professional literature, including Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas (LEMIT) research papers. Also, a survey will be delivered to local law enforcement agency telecommunications centers, including county and municipal agencies, that will have anywhere from four to 20 telecommunicators working a shift.

The intended anticipated findings of this research are that it would be more beneficial for a law enforcement agency to have a supervisor of the telecommunications center with experience as a telecommunicator. It will also show that the center will, and does, run more effectively when they are experienced than if the agency hires someone without any experience as a telecommunicator. The field of law enforcement will benefit from the research because the telecommunications center is the central area of the agency. Everything that happens comes through that division first, including telephone calls from citizens, officers radioing for help, and 911 emergency calls. It would be more effective for the agency to have people working in the telecommunications center that are happy and content with the job they do as telecommunications supervisors,

which then will set the tone for the work environment. The telecommunication center has to be under the supervision of someone that has the experience of working the console and knows firsthand what goes on in the minds of telecommunicators. The supervisor needs to understand why telecommunicators handle certain situations the way they do and what kind of stress level comes with the position of a telecommunications officer.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

There has been limited research conducted on supervision in telecommunications centers. Applications from law enforcement agencies were reviewed for a comparison list of the qualifications for a telecommunications supervisor. An expectation common to these job descriptions is that they are expected to have experience in different areas; this can range from coordinating shift schedules and overseeing employee performance to identifying resource needs and implementing approved policies and procedures. There are several applications that administrators can also look at. The application for the telecommunication supervisor from the City of Redlands states the job description as: "Under direction to supervise, assign, review and participate in the duties of dispatching police and other City personnel; receive, interpret and code "911" information; ensure work quality and adherence to established policies and procedures; and perform related work as required" (City of Redlands, 2007).

The telecommunications center is the central area of the police agency. If the agency has someone in the telecommunications center that cannot fulfill some of the criteria listed above, then there is a potential for a dysfunctional telecommunications

center. Praul (1978) found that administration should have “trained personnel, and these personnel should be properly supervised and have standard operating procedures to follow” (p. 6). The agency should have a supervisor that subordinates can approach and ask questions for different situations or when they need advice on a call. The supervisor should have the knowledge to lead them in the right direction. The Texas Law Enforcement Training System (TLETS) Manual (2000) has mandated that “member agencies shall be responsible for assuring the adequacy of training of all persons authorized to operate the terminal” (p. 14). The manual also states that “each agency shall make every reasonable effort to acquaint their personnel with the rules, regulations, capabilities, and services offered by the Texas Law Enforcement Training System” (TLETS, 2000, p. 14).

Telecommunicators’ stress levels are extremely high. As one researcher presented, “police dispatchers are the forgotten victims of stress” (Clark, 1977). Telecommunicators need to know that the agency has placed someone in charge of the telecommunicators that does know how to do the job. The dispatch supervisor must know the role of the dispatcher. If the role is not known, then it will make it harder for the supervisor and the telecommunicators to work together: “familiarity breeds respect, and a healthy working relationship is born” (Eller, 1998, p. 2). If a dispatch supervisor in the telecommunications center knows the role of the dispatcher, then the agency will have a working relationship of respect between the supervisors and subordinates. The reason for this is that the dispatch supervisor has experienced the role of a dispatcher and has the experience behind the console. They know what needs to be done, how

individual calls should be handled, what stresses dispatchers may have, what can be done to handle these stressors, and how to give advice to dispatchers about calls

At the end of a rotation of calls, a telecommunicator may have to compose his or herself following a stressful situation that may have had a personal impact. In a worse case scenario, the only people in the room are a new telecommunications operator who has been in training and a supervisor who has not had the experience of dealing with calls. The supervisor has no experience and they do not know how to answer a simple 911 call because the supervisor does not have the experience. In this case, the agency has a dispatcher that is emotionally unprepared to protect and serve the officers and community, and the dispatcher has another ten hours to go before the end of the shift. The dispatcher may have to work like this the remainder of the shift. The emotional instability could impact safety issues for the officers as well as other personnel still working. Holt (1989) questioned: "when are they going to show us doing four clerical jobs, while answering the phone, trying to eat at the desk, train the new guy and take abuse from an officer at the same time?" (p. 53).

If there is a dispatch supervisor working the telecommunications center who has the experience and has been in the same situation as the dispatcher who took all the emotional calls, the agency would have someone who could sit down behind that console and let that dispatcher walk away, which would allow the dispatcher time to pull themselves together, so they can be able to handle anything that may come in over the next ten hours. An article about dispatcher stress stated that a "lack of experience and/or knowledge about what to do is one of the reasons for failure within the team" (Headsets911, n.d. para. 7). The article further stated that a "lack of knowledge and

experience in the job creates a realm of unknowing which leads to fear, fear of failure freezes initiative and subsequently someone doesn't do what they should have done" (Headsets911, n.d., p.11). There is no known information out that tells about the number of call center supervisors not trained as 911 dispatchers, which would be helpful.

METHODOLOGY

The research question to be examined considers whether or not the supervisor in the telecommunications center should have dispatching experience. For the purpose of this research question, it does not matter if this person is a certified Texas Peace Officer or a civilian. The researcher hypothesizes that most telecommunicators will want supervisors that have experience in completing the everyday duties of the job: sitting at the console and taking calls; dispatching officers, fire, and EMS; talking with the complainants; taking 911 calls; answering phones; and assisting administration.

The method of inquiry will include surveys that will be sent out to agencies that have telecommunicators both working different schedules and have different amounts of telecommunicators on a shift. The survey will address telecommunicators who have worked in a center for supervisors with experience and for supervisors without experience. A review of literature will utilize articles from the Internet and other law enforcement training material. The instrument that will be used to measure the researcher's findings regarding the subject of who should supervise in the telecommunications center will include a questionnaire that will be sent out to local county and municipal law enforcement agencies. The questionnaire will be given to each telecommunications center for the telecommunicators to answer. This author will

design a survey instrument that consists of seven questions, which will be distributed to 75 different survey participants from several different agencies throughout the Brazoria County area. This area includes one county entity and eight municipalities. Additionally, interviews will be conducted with six telecommunications supervisors and ten telecommunicators currently working in a telecommunications division. The information obtained from the survey will be analyzed by this researcher.

FINDINGS

Upon speaking with telecommunications supervisors, 50% stated they really did not want to be a supervisor, but they did so because the administrators needed someone to fill the position. In interviewing six different supervisors from local municipal agencies, this researcher was able to conclude that most did not have the experience. The reason they were in the position as telecommunications supervisor was the administrators of the agency needed someone for that position, and the person hired was a ranking officer, even though they did not have experience.

Upon interviewing ten telecommunicators from local county and municipal agencies, this researcher found that the telecommunicators were enthusiastic to have someone over their division that knew exactly what it was to be a dispatcher for variance of calls that were taken, how they should be handled, what actions needed to be taken by the telecommunicator for different calls, and how anxiety, stress, and officer safety plays a role in every day calls and situations. The opinion of those same telecommunicators that were interviewed of someone without experience was a much more volatile working environment. They did not respect the supervisor or feel comfortable going to that supervisor for questions or advice. They also felt the

inexperienced supervisor was not capable of handling the job of supervisor. The dispatcher in the telecommunications center of a police department is often the first contact law enforcement may have with the public. Many times, this contact occurs at extremely stressful times in people lives. Some examples of this first contact may include those having to do with officers in a harmful situation, such as family violence calls; assaults; officer involved shootings or a robbery in progress; emergency medical calls, such as a child not breathing; heart attack victims; or a person being attacked by dogs.

There were 75 surveys sent out to one county agency, which is the largest county in the state of Texas, and eight municipal agencies with a population ranging from 2,500 to 22,000. This researcher received 100% of surveys back from those questioned. This sample is representative of the area surveyed. The response rate to the survey instrument resulted in 100% of the participants surveyed stating that it would be beneficial for any agency to make sure telecommunications supervisors have experience. Ninety-five percent of the participants felt that agencies did not care who supervised the unit as long as it was a body. The participants felt the agencies believe the unit is just “the dispatchers.” All of the participants stated that it did not matter if a supervisor was a licensed Texas Peace Officer or a civilian as long as the supervisor had experience.

This researcher found that 100% of the participants believe the supervisor should have experience. Also, 100% of participants found it easier to work with a supervisor who did have experience versus a supervisor that did not. The reasoning given for this was that the supervisor with the experience was able to answer questions that were

asked, could step in and take over if need be, and the supervisor could get the pertinent information that the officers would need before arriving to a call. Supervisors without experience could not step up and handle simple 911 calls. It was found that 90% of the participants felt the supervisor without the experience did not care about what was going on in the telecommunications center as much as the supervisor with experience. The reasoning given for this also dealt with the telecommunications supervisor having the experience and knowing all job demands.

Patience was another area that 95% of the participants talked about in the survey regarding how supervisors with experience have more patience with telecommunicators, especially telecommunicators that are new and are trying to learn the policy and procedures. Eighty percent of the participants felt that the supervisor without experience believes anyone can do the job. Participants in the survey stated that they have been told by patrol officers: "how hard could it be, all you do is answer the phone and give the call to the officer, then you play games for the rest of the day it is not a hard job." This researcher found that 95% of the participants felt that telecommunicators were the forgotten unit and that the job performed by the telecommunicator was nothing. They felt they were not remembered as the telecommunicator that will hold an officer's life in their fingers, and they are the ones that send the back up and make sure the officers have the information to get to a call safely. The telecommunicator is the one who will send the ambulance or fire personnel that the officer may need. Participants also included that they are the ones that are looking up the information that the officer is asking for, and if that telecommunicator does not get the information to the officer fast enough, then that officer will become

impatient with the telecommunicator, not knowing what else that telecommunicator may be doing.

This researcher found that 85% of the participants felt that sometimes the supervisor within the telecommunications division will try to come in and implement new rules and regulations into the division. However, the supervisor may not know if the new implementations will work or if the implementations follow the policy and procedure that is set out by the Texas Department of Public Safety. Eighty-five percent of the participants stated that the telecommunicators did have a supervisor who came in and tried to tell them to do things a certain way in the division while working on a shift, and it went against all rules that are established for the telecommunications center. This researcher also found from the survey that 100% of the participants felt that when the agency has a supervisor in the telecommunications division who does not have the experience, and a telecommunicator tries to explain something to the supervisor, the majority of the time, the supervisor has no idea where the telecommunicator is coming from and cannot help the telecommunicator.

This researcher found that 90% of all participants feel more open to suggestions from the telecommunications supervisor who has the experience because the supervisor does have the experience, and they are secure with that supervisor's ability to do the job. This researcher also found that 100% of all participants that were asked the question if the supervisor should be a licensed peace officer or not, stated that it did not make a difference, but it would not hurt as long as the supervisor had the experience as a telecommunications operator. One telecommunicator made a

statement as follows, “knowledge may help you make more decisions but experience will always prevail.”

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

The issue examined by the researcher considered whether telecommunications supervisors should have experience as a telecommunicator in the telecommunications center. With experience, the supervisor should be able to do the job that is demanded of a telecommunicator. The purpose of this research was to prove that it would be beneficial to any agency to have a supervisor in the telecommunication center that has past experience as a telecommunicator. They should have experienced all the duties that are expected of a telecommunicator; they should have gone through the training; and they should have experienced some of the situations telecommunicators often have to handle. A telecommunication supervisor should have experienced some of the obstacles that a telecommunicator faces on a daily basis with assignments or tasks.

The research question that was examined focused on whether it is more beneficial for an agency to have a supervisor in the telecommunications center who has experience. There should not be a difference regarding whether the supervisor is a certified peace officer or not, as long as the supervisor can do the job. The difference between a supervisor who does have the experience and supervisor who does not shows in the working environment of a telecommunications center.

The researcher hypothesized that the findings would show that participants would feel that it was very important to have a telecommunications supervisor that has experience as a telecommunicator, has experience working the console, and has been a telecommunicator. The supervisor should be able to handle calls that a

telecommunicator receives on a daily basis. A telecommunicator will feel more open and secure with their telecommunication supervisor and will be more open to suggestions from a telecommunications supervisor that has experience. Participants stated that a supervisor with experience is open-minded, has the will to learn, and is easy to work for.

The findings of the research did support the hypothesis. The reason why the findings did support the hypothesis is probably due to the fact that the surveys were sent to telecommunicators who have worked both with telecommunication supervisors who have experience and supervisors who do not. The survey responses showed that telecommunicators have more faith, confidence, and respect for the telecommunications supervisor who has done the job. They felt experienced supervisors were more able to be supportive and understanding with any situation that may arise in the telecommunications center.

There were limitations that hindered this study because the participants that were surveyed were only from the geographic area of Brazoria County, Texas. Sixty percent of the participants had a telecommunications supervisor that was given the job because the department needed someone to take over the position. The other 40% of participants had a telecommunications supervisor that had experience and wanted to work in the telecommunications center.

The study of supervisor experience in the telecommunication center is relevant to contemporary law enforcement because an agency's telecommunications center is the central area of a department. Administrators need to take care of the telecommunicators because they are the ones taking care of the officers on the streets

as well as the citizens. An agency's telecommunications officers need to have the same confidence and stability that the agency makes sure the officers have on the street. One division is just as important as another division within an agency. A patrol sergeant would not be put in charge of officers on the street as the supervisor unless that patrol sergeant was licensed and had worked that area for several years.

The researcher hopes that the administrators reading this paper will make changes for the agency's telecommunications division. The agency should give the telecommunication division the support and respect that is given to the patrol division. This researcher hopes and believes that telecommunicators will benefit from the results of this research. Telecommunications is the central area of an agency, and it reflects on everyone that works within an agency's different divisions: it is where everything begins. If an agency has telecommunicators and supervisors who are cohesive and work well together, then an agency and administrators both have a positive image.

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APPENDIX

Dispatchers:

My name is Sgt. Tammy D. McCullough, and I am employed by the Angleton Police Department as a Patrol Sergeant. But, I started my career as a Dispatcher with the Clute Police Department in 1989 and had the privilege to be the Telecommunications Supervisor for the Angleton Police Department for 4 ½ years. I have recently had the honor to attend LEMIT, which is Law Enforcement Management Institute Training out of Huntsville. During this course I have to do a research paper, I have chosen my research paper to be "Who Should Supervise in the Telecommunications Center." So, you has Telecommunicators would fill out the following survey for me and either mail to me or fax back to me I would appreciate it very much.

1. How many telecommunicators are employed by your agency?
2. How many telecommunicators are there on a shift?
3. How many years experience do you have?
4. Do you think the Supervisor in the Telecommunication Center should have Dispatching experience? If so, Why?
5. Should they be Certified Peace Officers, or does it make a difference?
6. Is there a Supervisor on duty at all times during your shift?
7. Have you ever had to work with a Supervisor that did not have any experience in the Telecommunications Center versus someone who does? Could you please explain differences, between the two, if any?

If, you could please get this back to me as soon as possible, I would appreciate it very much and any other input that you may have. Please mail to me ~~at~~: or fax to me.

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