

## Small departments, big changes: A blueprint to modernizing the heart of policing

***Agencies must begin preparing today to capture the benefits of tomorrow's advanced technology***

***By Chris Shields, MSPM, PMP***

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The heart of policing in the United States is made up of the thousands of departments employing fewer than 100 full-time police officers. According to the [Bureau of Justice Statistics](#), about 92% of the 17,451 state and local law enforcement agencies in the United States employ fewer than 100 full-time sworn police officers, and only 80 agencies employ more than 1000. The resource constraints smaller law enforcement organizations face challenge their ability to adapt to today's fast-changing policing environment. The [Police Executive Research Forum \(PERF\)](#) reported a decrease of 3.48% in officer staffing levels over the two years of 2020 and 2021; hirings were 3.9% lower, and resignations increased 42.7%.

Resource constraint challenges are compounded further by [rising crime rates across the country](#) and, in some cases, reduced funding and community support. We often ask our nation's police departments to do more with less. Today, with demands for modernization in such a challenging environment, we ask them to do nearly the impossible. However, the heart of our nation's policing can successfully modernize by following the proper blueprint.

### **How do small police departments successfully modernize?**

Successful modernization requires projects that deliver new operational ways of working integrated with modern policing technology. These projects focus on enhancing a department's situational awareness, leading to improved service delivery, positive policing outcomes, and optimized resource efficiency and effectiveness.

Achieving project success, regardless of type, is a challenging and complex endeavor. Technology projects are notoriously difficult to execute. Around the world, about [two-thirds of technology projects fail](#). Projects that do make it to completion frequently fall short, with only about 30% meeting expectations. The country's largest law enforcement agencies, like the NYPD and LAPD, have dedicated project management officers with teams that deliver complex new programs and solutions. Unfortunately, replicating the [NYPD](#) or [LAPD](#) model may be impractical for many police departments.

### **A 3-step blueprint**

The following blueprint for modernizing the heart of policing aims to leverage the strengths available to many police departments, especially project strengths that are unique to their size and internal environment. For example, smaller agencies may enjoy greater agility and less bureaucracy. Simple, cost-effective enhancements can quickly make significant impacts across the agency. Project leadership and teams are more likely to be compromised of those close to the operations, improving commitment, fostering change, acceptance, and supporting the delivery of new benefits that meet the unique needs of their organization.

There is a three-step process. The strategy begins with discovering the department's interdisciplinarians who will form the coalition needed to execute complex projects. The next step is enhancing the organization's project management competency through career development initiatives. The final step is to select project-proficient service partners that will support the implementation and integration of new products and services.

An agency that follows this blueprint can strengthen its modernization efforts and deliver high-value policing services to its community.

#### **1. Discovering interdisciplinarians**

Modernization efforts have emphasized hiring college-educated candidates, particularly those studying criminal justice or a closely related field. Many of these candidates may view a patrol assignment as a temporary step toward a specialized law enforcement career. The reality is that specialized opportunities are likely limited in most police departments. And even if those opportunities exist, everyone starts in patrol, and it may be several years before specialized opportunities become available. Additionally, in many cases, specialized assignments will end, and the return to patrol may be inevitable. The police department must be transparent about specialization opportunities during the recruitment process. This not only sets expectations for improving retention later, but it can also identify individuals who are the right fit for the organization.

Instead of being a prerequisite for specialized assignments, a patrol assignment should be viewed as its own specialization requiring a unique blend of knowledge, skills and abilities. Consider the assignments of a patrol officer in a small-to-medium-sized police department. In addition to their regular job responsibilities, they may complete tasks reserved for specialized

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assignments in larger organizations. They may lead investigations, obtain search warrants and collect evidence. They may be part of tactical, negotiations, forensics and other teams comprised of other patrol officers who perform those duties as a secondary responsibility. They may also lead community policing initiatives, represent the department at community functions, and engage community leaders on important issues. Recruitment efforts should aim to attract candidates with a wide range of interests that can be satisfied through the diverse assignments available to the patrol officer. Candidates with a wide range of interests may also have an interdisciplinary mindset, which is very valuable for policing modernization efforts.

Interdisciplinary solve new problems by combining the knowledge, skills and abilities from two or more knowledge areas, often taking advantage of the different points of view in an integrated approach. When evaluating a candidate, explore their multi-faceted interests:

- What is the candidate's field of study, and did they minor in another discipline?
- Does the candidate have a wide variety of interests or participate in diverse activities?
- What kind of jobs has the candidate had?
- What knowledge, skills and abilities from those jobs could be transferred to patrol operations and modernization efforts?

It is important to remember that a college degree is not a prerequisite to being an outstanding patrol officer or having an interdisciplinary mindset. A college education is just one road to developing these attributes. Expanding the search for the interdisciplinary beyond academic achievement will identify outstanding future patrol officers of diverse backgrounds and experiences; it only takes a few individuals to make a big difference.

It is also important to remember that the department likely has some of these individuals already on the team, so identifying them should not be restricted to recruitment. Discovering them is key, but is equally important to develop that talent. Once the interdisciplinary are identified, the organization is ready to enhance its project management competency.

## **2. Enhancing project management competency**

[Developing project management competency](#) will improve the department's project outcomes. Professionally trained project managers blend leadership, technical and business skills to realize benefits in new initiatives and deliver value through projects. They are service-first leaders who exemplify transparency, trustworthiness and a commitment to quality. The project's stakeholders are at the center of their decision-making, and they build adaptable and resilient teams. They are systems thinkers and change agents, capable of understanding complexity, tailoring their approach based on context and leading others through uncertainty.

Project management training provides other benefits to a police department and its community. Consider the overlapping attributes of the professional project manager and the modern patrol officer, and how such training could improve the organization and its services. Project management training also provides a new career development path for patrol officers. Consider the recruitment, retention and leadership development opportunities captured if the organization enhances its project management competency. The police department is offering an opportunity for its officers to lead change and be responsible for complex initiatives that will deliver real value for their organization and community.

During project management training selection, the department's interdisciplinary should be considered. They will likely be interested in the blended skills required for effective project management. They will also make excellent project delivery team members, able to apply their cross-functional interests and experiences during project execution. Remember that big changes are not required to make significant enhancements and modernize. Only a few individuals trained in project management are needed to get started. Then, once the organization is ready, it is time to identify a service provider to partner with the department, its team members and its stakeholders to deliver new capabilities.

## **3. Select project-proficient service partners**

Whether the department aims to implement a body-worn camera program, upgrade its computer-aided dispatch system, or leverage a cutting-edge technological solution, identifying the right service partner is crucial to project success.

During the procurement process, it is important to look at more than the benefits that the final product is expected to bring. Regardless of what product is selected, implementing the new product and integrating it within operations requires proficient project management. In other words, an outstanding product unsuccessfully implemented and integrated is unlikely to deliver the intended benefits. When evaluating a service partner, review their project proficiency, at a minimum, in the following areas:

### *Tailored delivery approach*

Project execution is improved when the delivery approach matches the unique needs of the project. A variety of delivery approaches exist, including predictive, adaptive and hybrid. A predictive approach is appropriate when the scope of the project is clear and changes are unlikely. Adaptive approaches are best suited for projects where the scope will become clearer as the project progresses and changes are expected. The hybrid approach blends predictive and adaptive techniques as needed for project success. In this evaluation, first identify whether the prospective partner has a recommended approach and can explain

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their rationale. Second, determine the prospective partner's willingness to tailor their approach based on the department's needs. A good partner will put tailoring at the center of their planning and will be capable of explaining their rationale.

*Uncertainty management*

Projects are unique endeavors, and their uniqueness produces much uncertainty. Known and unknown risks constantly threaten project success. Despite its significance, uncertainty management is frequently overlooked in many projects. Prospective partners should have a robust project risk management approach that includes how risks will be identified, monitored and controlled. They also understand that uncertainty can produce opportunities, and they will have a system to identify and capture opportunities that improve project delivery. When evaluating a prospective partner, ask them to explain how they manage uncertainty and what risk management support they will provide to the department's project team. A good partner will emphasize the importance of risk identification, response and communication.

*Change management*

Integrating new technology into existing or new operations requires effective change management. Regardless of the intended benefits, the department's project team will need to overcome change resistance, establish a new way of working, and ensure that the organization does not regress to the pre-delivery state. Failing to fully integrate the new technology makes even an excellently delivered product or service a project failure. Ask prospective partners what kind of support they can provide for the department's project team in managing change. This assistance should at minimum include end-user demonstrations and training tailored to the departments specific use case.

*Project leadership*

The service partner's project leadership is arguably the most important proficiency evaluation. The availability of professionally certified project managers is an excellent indication that a service provider will be an effective project partner. Internationally recognized project management certifications require years of demonstrated experience and rigorous examination to attain. During the procurement process, ask prospective partners whether they can make available any professionally certified project managers and what role those project managers will have in leading the project. A partner's professionally certified project manager teaming with the police department's project team greatly improves the chances of project success and can provide valuable experience to the department's team.

**Foundation for the future**

The benefits realized by incorporating this blueprint into a police department's strategy extend to any improvement or modernization initiative. The cutting-edge of policing modernization includes solutions that leverage the [Internet of Things \(IoT\)](#) to enhance situational awareness and mission management at every organizational level. The IoT describes the integration of technology into the physical world through sensors connected to the internet.

Police officers already interact with connected devices daily, including radios, smartphones, computers, body-worn cameras, drones, passive collection devices and other internet-connected systems. Integrating a police department's sensors with an all-in-one platform produces a portable, virtual command board that improves situational awareness, optimizes responses and enhances resource efficiency and effectiveness. IoT-enhanced situational awareness solutions reduce operational complexity and offer real-time, accurate and actionable data that optimizes mission management.

The near future includes the era of artificial intelligence and machine learning, which promises further advancements in policing technology. The hear of policing must begin preparing today to capture the benefits of tomorrow's advanced technology. These benefits can be delivered by preparing a department's interdisciplinarians to manage projects in partnership with project-proficient service providers.

**About the author**

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