The CompStat Process: Managing Performance on the Pathway to Leadership

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CompStat is a “strategic control system” designed for the collection and feedback of information on crime and related quality of life issues. The CompStat process can be summarized in one simple statement: “Collect, analyze, and map crime data and other essential police performance measures on a regular basis, and hold police managers accountable for their performance as measured by these data.” This statement reflects the paradigm of modern policing: accountability at all levels of a police agency. Since the CompStat process was introduced by the New York City Police Department in 1994, it has been widely adopted and is partly responsible for contributing to significant improvements in the way many organizations control crime and conduct daily business. The process has recently been described as an “emerging police managerial paradigm” or “a new paradigm revolutionizing law enforcement management and practice” while others have called it “perhaps the single most important organizational/administrative innovation in policing during the latter half of the 20th century.”

It is undeniable that the core management theories of CompStat, “directing and controlling,” have been demonstrated to be effective means for controlling crime. But the CompStat process also has an inherent opportunity for developing leaders and improving the leadership process. According to D. V. Day, leader development concentrates on developing, maintaining, or enhancing individual attributes like knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs). But Day distinguishes between leader development and leadership development, emphasizing that leadership development focuses on the nature of the leader-follower relationship and not just the KSAs of the leader. In this model, the most important leader ability is interpersonal competence in fostering a spirit of cooperation in problem solving and embracing, creating, and implementing change. The leadership aspect of the Comp-Stat process must instill in people a sense of willingness to accomplish the goals of the organization using initiative and innovation. “The chief executive should create a thirst for leadership in an environment in which all officers feel they can attain and exercise leadership capacities, not simply attain hierarchical leadership posts,” as an IACP report on leadership put it. “This includes imparting leadership knowledge and understanding of the organizational culture.”

In a recent national survey, 58 percent of large agencies (those with 100 or more sworn officers) had either adopted or were planning to implement a CompStat-like program. As the proliferation of CompStat continues, the model is becoming firmly entrenched in modern police curricula and will clearly be embraced...
by future police leaders. By adding the management concepts outlined in this article to an agency's CompStat model, police executives can create the leaders that law enforcement agencies (and communities) so desire.

It takes effort to develop and refine the skills necessary to become a well-respected leader. Fortunately, leadership is learned behavior and new leaders can be developed through properly designed leadership experiences.

Because CompStat has been so widely diffused over the last decade, there is ample opportunity to see it in practice in agencies small, medium, and large. The benefit of such a diverse body of users is the opportunity to review and improve upon the core elements of the original model. One such needed improvement is the adoption of progressive law enforcement leadership principles, as many organizations have failed to capitalize on the opportunity for developing better leaders.

This article addresses the role of performance feedback in developing leaders and enhancing leadership through the CompStat process during the pre-CompStat meeting and the CompStat meeting protocol. Using the CompStat process in this way can serve to develop better leaders whose skills and interpersonal competence are forged through an organizational process that is cooperative and supportive. Using the CompStat process to develop leaders and promote positive leadership is likely to create a culture in which creative and cooperative problem solving are paramount, and organizational change can be successfully implemented in order to enhance public services.

Enhancing Leadership

John W. Gardner, a foremost authority on leadership, asked the complex question: "Why do we not have better leaders?" The answer is equally complex, but it is helpful to remember that leadership is merely one of the factors that determine an agency's success: "The accomplishment of group purpose . . . is furthered not only by effective leaders but also by innovators, entrepreneurs, and thinkers; by the availability of resources; by questions of morale and social cohesion." The CompStat process is the quintessential forum for turning ideas into actions and developing better leaders who can help an agency facilitate the accomplishment of group purpose.

Law enforcement agencies are complex bureaucracies that need strong leaders to survive. The report of the IACP President's Leadership Conference on Police Leadership in the 21st Century makes the following observation: "Command and supervisory staff are two groups that successful executives must be sensitive to. They serve as a critical link to the rank and file for a chief executive's vision, goals, and objectives and their beliefs should never be taken for granted." In this regard, "most leadership today is an attempt to accomplish purposes through (or in spite of) large, intricate organized systems. There is no possibility that centralized authority can call all the shots in such systems, whether the system is a corporation or a nation. Individuals in all segments and at all levels must be prepared to exercise leader-like initiative and responsibility, using their local knowledge to solve problems at their level. Vitality at middle and lower levels of leadership can produce greater vitality in the higher levels of leadership."
The Pathway to Leadership Development

Feedback is an essential mechanism for developing the capacity of field personnel to improve, generate innovative solutions to problems, accept responsibility, and develop into high-quality leaders.

Feedback is essential to enhancing learning, motivation, and performance as well as directing future behavior. Whether or not feedback is successful depends on both the content and process by which it is delivered. According to experts, many people “come to feedback meetings with strong feelings of anxiety, fear, and hope, [and thus] it is necessary to manage the feedback process so that constructive discussion and problem solving occur.” Because policing is usually described as a quasi-military model, many current leaders rely on outmoded tradition and failed logic to gain compliance. For example, they may use demeaning, depreciating, or other offensive language and raise their voices in a way that belittles subordinates. Those who adhere to the principle of “if it was good enough for me, it should be good enough for my subordinates” may miss out on the opportunity to develop competent leaders who will take greater initiative and more effectively solve problems.

Public CompStat meetings are a time to exercise command presence and establish accountability. Yet many agencies have interpreted the CompStat method as one in which criticism of personnel in front of an audience of colleagues, subordinates, other government agencies, or invited guests from the community is necessary to emphasize a point or influence someone's perspective. Some argue this is a necessity because the insular, perhaps recalcitrant culture of policing is highly resistant to change. Therefore publicly chastising those who lack the leadership KSAs or initiative or actively resist change, for whatever reason, can be self-defeating. Better understanding the reasons behind such resistance or lack of initiative could foster improved accountability. Personal leadership shortcomings and failed leadership training are often the rudimentary cause of such problems and are best dealt with through improved feedback and enhanced personal development. When such behavior stems from lack of KSAs to effectively carry out one's role, then developmental feedback, training, or opportunities for personal development are essential. But sometimes resistance or lack of initiative is due to the manner in which feedback is provided.

Certainly, when negative feedback is provided in public, it can create more problems than it solves. Criticizing or disciplining someone in front of others can cause embarrassment, and the subordinate can come to resent the supervisor. Because law enforcement agencies are seen as paramilitary organizations with strict codes of conduct, individuals may build resentment but resist outwardly manifesting it through anger or other inappropriate behaviors toward superiors as that would be tantamount to insubordination. Instead, the resentment leads to poor work performance or mistreatment of one's subordinates-or worse, mistreatment of the service population. Public criticism promotes employee indifference and, in many cases, creates an adversarial relationship between managers and subordinate personnel.

When the agency's managers (that is, the executive or command staff) adopt a daily autocratic management style that includes public criticism, neither a sense of teamwork nor the spirit of cooperation is fostered. Some of the consequences are a loss of respect and status for rank. In this case supervisors begin to align themselves more closely with line personnel than with management in a show of solidarity. Another problem is that this style inhibits developing future leaders and undermines the cooperative leadership process. Contemporary leadership theory holds that law enforcement executives should adopt a participative management style, also known as democratic leadership, for daily business, except when emergencies arise. A participative CompStat process will help ensure that law enforcement organizations become more responsive, effective, and efficient while developing leaders who are willing to take risks, initiate change, and solve complex problems.

It takes effort to develop and refine the skills necessary to become a well-respected leader. There are few born leaders and even those identified as such use introspection to make adjustments. Fortunately, leadership is learned behavior and new leaders can be developed through properly designed leadership experiences. The channels of communication created through the practices outlined in this article address this issue and set the stage for these experiences: “While training may even be a necessary element of leadership development, developmental experiences are likely to have the greatest impact when they can be linked to or embedded in a person’s ongoing work and when they are an integrated set of experiences. Activities like coaching, mentoring, action-learning, and 360-degree feedback are increasingly key elements of leadership development initiatives.”

The Pre-CompStat Meeting as a Performance Appraisal

The pre-CompStat meeting is an innovation that has yet to take hold because too many executives fancy the public forum over the private one to appraise subordinates’ performance, using CompStat as a modern show trial instead of the progressive management technique it was intended to be. The pre-CompStat meeting is designed to strengthen the executive’s communication and interpersonal skills, set individual goals, and evaluate individual performance. The pre-CompStat meeting should be viewed as an individual
performance interview that can be held whenever a chief executive believes he or she must meet with an individual commander to discuss business.

"A key ingredient for a successful performance appraisal interview is 'ownership,' the psychological concept of participation by the subordinate whereby the subordinate is encouraged to provide input into the process," according to Kikoski and Litterer. "Employees are more satisfied with their appraisal interviews and with their superiors who conduct them when they participate more in the appraisal process, more particularly in the interview itself."22 The purpose of the pre-CompStat meeting is to address individual shortcomings or someone's resistance, be it tacit or explicit. The ultimate aim is to positively influence and motivate that person to improve work-related performance.

The pre-CompStat meeting should be held weekly before the regular CompStat meeting to discuss the previous week's expectations and conduct follow-up. As with any performance interview setting, it should be conducted in private between the chief executive and the individual commander. The chief executive must supply useful feedback to enable individual officers to determine whether progress is occurring organizationally and for the commander themselves. Effective feedback provides the necessary information people need to build on their strengths and to shore up weaknesses. It is a powerful tool for accelerating learning and for developing mastery. Without such feedback, the probability that weaknesses and errors become ingrained through practice and repetition is heightened. The feedback process is critical to leadership development because it helps identify and refine personal skills by developing a subordinate's full potential. Moreover, providing effective feedback is essential for empowering employees to think creatively without constant supervision.

The key to success for any commander at a pre-CompStat meeting is being prepared and exhibiting a willingness and commitment to knowing and understanding the data and the underlying conditions in the command. Once a commander has a grasp of the situation, he or she must then devise effective strategies and tactics, continuously follow up on initiatives, and articulate plans and conditions. Modern law enforcement must develop dynamic and multifaceted crime reduction strategies to address today's intricate and complex social issues.

"Executives must create an organizational environment in which command staff and supervisors work closely with officers to assess situations and to provide guidance for growth," according to the IACP leadership report. "With the obvious exception of egregious errors, most mistakes, if dealt with in a restorative manner, provide excellent learning and growth opportunities for officers."22 "The executive should prioritize creativity by giving latitude for officers to be more creative and to do more on their own, especially to those who share the executive's goals and values, who are well-trained, and who are most highly trusted."25 A properly executed performance interview, including a well documented history of performance management and development, is the most defensible management tool when the need to take adverse employment action against an employee is necessary.

The pre-CompStat meeting is the means for dealing with those who are unwilling or unable to meet the agency's expectations and therefore is the setting where any criticism should take place. If the chief executive must take adverse employment action, such as negative discipline or transferring an employee out of his or her current assignment, then the pre-CompStat meeting is where this should be done. The chief executive should be well documented and explain to the subordinate why he or she is facing such action. The pre-CompStat meeting is a leadership development effort that must be continuous, not a single conversation, program, or curriculum.

**Participative Management and the CompStat Meeting Protocol**

The actual CompStat meeting should be a resource-sharing, problem-solving exercise with discussions that are designed to encourage participants to exchange ideas, share details about promising practices, praise subordinates, collectively develop plans, and promote an environment where new leaders can flourish. "Leaders with good interpersonal skills allow those affected to participate in the management process and create a healthy atmosphere, which encourages subordinates to contribute."26 Moreover, CompStat meetings can serve as proving grounds where new leaders get the chance to demonstrate the skills they have been bolstering with the chief executive in the pre-CompStat meetings.

CompStat has qualities that serve as leadership building blocks. In the CompStat process "police executives must view the workforce in entirely different terms, interact in entirely different ways to motivate members to pursue and achieve agency objectives. Collaboration, power sharing, trust, and even humility are replacing the authority of rank."22 Executives must embrace power sharing and decentralized decision making as a motivational tool that leaves those vested with it feeling committed even obligated to provide the best service possible.29

The CompStat process relies heavily on an executive's ability to empower their people and in turn the people's ability to plan, implement, and adapt if necessary to get results. Executives who create an
environment where participation is stifled will find themselves in a situation where they must micromanage the daily operations of the organization. This situation perpetuates the cycle of poor performance and creates a dependency on micromanagement. Micromanaging an organization with technically and emotionally competent employees can result in the following problems:

- "Information does not flow to the right places.
- Responsiveness to incoming problems and opportunities is slowed drastically.
- Coordination of interdependent tasks suffers.
- Problems are suppressed to the extent that when they finally surface they're violently explosive.
- Employees become disillusioned and dissatisfied with their jobs. They become victim to the 'careless' syndrome. Self-interest takes over within the ranks.
- Advancement is curtailed within the department. If others are not encouraged and are then helped to grow into police supervisors and police managers, the promotable pool of qualified talent is woefully curtailed."  

The beginning of a CompStat meeting is the time to deliver public praise and accolades. Insofar as possible, commanders should bring their personnel to CompStat for recognition of outstanding performance. The commander calls the officers before the CompStat group, provides a brief overview of the action that led to the accolade, and commends the officers. This public display of praise strengthens morale and sends the message that individual efforts contribute to the whole.

When commanders gather and use accurate and timely intelligence, devise effective tactics, and relentlessly follow up on tasks, they have an opportunity to showcase and further develop their leadership skills, abilities, competence, and initiative. Therefore, they should be encouraged to strive toward the responsibilities that go along with the command rank and assignment. The CompStat podium should be a place where new and hopeful supervisors and officers aspire to stand someday. The CompStat process, when used effectively for accountability and problem solving, can be a means for developing potential leaders and promoting cooperative and creative leadership.

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12 J. W. Gardner, On Leadership, xvi.
14 J. W. Gardner, On Leadership, xvi.
17 E. F. Huse and T. G. Cummings, Organizational Development and Change, 78.
18 For more on the myth of the military model, see T. J. Cowper, "The Myth of the 'Military Model' of Leadership in Law.


22 As it did in Stalin’s show trials, the harsh public criticism at the center of some agencies’ CompStat meetings produces a culture of employees who may comply out of fear of reprisal but generally will wither, becoming less productive and more recalcitrant, and may sabotage the work product. In effect, the agency is brought into a state of complete submission to the executive’s authority, and the result is poor agency performance.


29 According to Webster’s, to micromanage is "to manage with great or excessive control or attention to details." A more flexible definition may be the unnecessary interference by agency executives in the delegated responsibilities of various subordinate commanders, managers, and professional staff.


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