

Conflict Management Strategies of Police Managers - A case study -



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<Abstract>

Conflict management within a police organization is one of the most significant areas from the organization management point of view. This study aims to explore procedural entrepreneurship of police managers when they face difficulties in their workplaces. Adopting a case study strategy, this study examines real cases from three police agencies from Japan, the US, and South Korea. Interviewing police officers from these different countries, six main themes are identified: (1) the pervasiveness of hierarchical authority, (2) procedural conflict, (3) organizational cultures, (4) the origin of their values and assumptions, (5) characteristics of the strategy, and (6) organizational learning.

Research findings pointed out that there were more similarities than differences among the three cases, such as the pervasiveness of hierarchical authority, the significance of informal networks, and characteristics of informal networks. The main finding was that police managers used informal networks in order to overcome the procedural conflicts regardless of their nationality. All the participants relied on informal communications to raise the adaptability and survivability of their organizations. It was found that the Asian culture and American culture respectively permeated the three police agencies, supporting the role of informal networks in the formal organizations. This presents a paradox which well reflects the reality of organizations: informality within formality.

Keywords: Conflict Management, Procedural Entrepreneurship, Case Study Strategy, Informal Network, Culture

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I. Introduction

Most leadership theories try to find an appropriate leadership style for a situation. One commonality of those theories is that they assume that a circumstance or situation is a given, undervaluing influential aspects of leaders (Hersey & Blanchard & Natemeyer 1979, Tannenbaum & Schmidt 1973, Vroom & Jago 1974). However, leaders, in many situations, are energetic agents that change situations. On a daily basis, not only lower ranking managers but also managers at executive levels find themselves in opposition to the rules, roles, or procedures in their organizations. In these cases, they are not merely subservient to situations, but they identify, analyze, and figure out how to overcome or get around obstacles they are facing. Through this process, managers try to change those established routines that obstructed the accomplishment of the organization's work. This is a critical example of how managers can actively influence a situation or circumstance. It is also called as "procedural entrepreneurship" (Brower & Abolafia 1996). It reflects the active involvement of managers in the political dynamics within their organizations. This paper is based upon leadership theories concerning the procedural entrepreneurship to reflect internal dynamics of communications when overcoming a procedural conflict.

Police organizations are not an exception. Officers within a police agency face internal conflicts which need to be addressed to accomplish what they think is important. To

take a deep look at procedural entrepreneurship, the authors collected three good examples across the globe which are from South Korea, Japan, and the United States by interviewing a police officer from each country. The reason the authors chose the cases with different national backgrounds is to examine the effects of cultural or societal factors on the organizations. As a way to control organizational differences or to make cultural or societal disparities among the nations easily noticed, the three cases are all from the same functional organization which is “police”. Our research questions are the following: Do police agencies in different cultures and societies have a different style of procedural entrepreneurship? Do police agencies in different nations have a similar style of procedural entrepreneurship, no matter what cultures they are in?

II. Research strategy

This study adopted a case study strategy which seeks to identify patterns of a contemporary phenomenon with consideration of circumstantial context (Yin, 2003). This implies that a case study ought to reflect contextualized manifestations (e.g., culture, socio-political values, or beliefs). Despite criticisms against this approach such as lack of objectivity and neutrality, many disciplines in the social sciences adopt it extensively (Robson, 2002). Three research participants, A (Japan), B (U.S.), and C (South Korea), were all police managers as well as leaders in a separate unit within their own police forces. They were referred to the authors for this research when their police forces were asked to recommend one officer who may fit the orientation of this research. As the authors summarize the cases of the participants, the authors examine a common characteristic of the three police agencies based on “hierarchical authority” (Weber, 1997) of bureaucracy and suggest how and why the hierarchical authority is pervasive. As a next step, the authors analyze the strategies of the three interviewees and figure out how they successfully overcame or got around the barriers. Also, the authors go over whether the successes of the cases served public interests. Finally, the authors find out implications from this case study. The cases that each interviewee faced within his own police organization

were as follows.

“New system, reinterpretation of the rule” The participant A who was a commander in a police box in Tokyo was experiencing difficulty satisfying the rule which ensured that patrol officers should respond to all the 911 calls as immediately as possible. The rule was, somewhat, incompatible with reality due to the lack of personnel and dissatisfaction from residents. The rule was considered as having a symbolic meaning rather than reflection of the reality. There were too many prank calls and simple complaints that didn't require immediate police responses. For the police box, only 6 officers during a shift were not enough to be dispatched to every caller. He thought dispatching officers only to serious and urgent matters was necessary and other simple calls could be dealt on the phone or callers could be encouraged to visit the police box, based on “selection and focusing” principle. However, Internal Affairs Division found out that this new practice was against the police rule. The participant A worked informally with other commanders of a police box under the same police station to change its responding system. At the same time, the commanders asserted that the new system did not violate the rule, arguing that they just reinterpreted the rule. The Internal Affairs Division finally accepted the reinterpretation.

“Personnel Recruitment, New Program” The participant B was a NYPD(New York Police Department) lieutenant in charge of the detective squad in a precinct in Brooklyn. In The participant B's precinct, two high schools have recently been considered as criminogenic places due to the sudden increase in aggravated assaults, killings, and drugs. As the detective squad leader in the precinct, The participant B wanted to apprehend the situation, but the high school students were reluctant to give information to detectives because of psychological distance. Also, schools' officials were not willing to give advice to detectives in the fear that letting detectives in might lead to investigations or arrests. He felt the need to have a consultation with a youth-crime analyst to understand the reason why the youth-crime rate was suddenly surging. But his efforts to recruit a professional analyst temporarily were blocked by personnel rule because there was no rule or precedent which allows temporary recruitment in a precinct. The participant B informally contacted helpful staff in the Detective Division under the Department in

order for the Division to create a temporary program for prevention of youth crimes. With the creation of the program, the precinct could consult with the new crime analyst directly hired by the Detective Division about the two high school crimes.

“Budget support for the enlarged meeting” The participant C was newly appointed as a commander of Public Safety Division in a police station in Seoul whose goals were creating programs to prevent crimes and communicating with residents in the jurisdiction. After two months of the job, he felt that something was wrong. Community meetings included only Citizens Advisory Board members, but it was obvious for him that the meeting with Citizens Advisory Board did not fully represent public interests and opinions. The meeting was conducted with a perfunctory and there were no substantial discussions. He pondered over for a week and came up with an idea to enlarge the meeting to include any residents who were willing to participate. To do this, he needed a budgetary support from Management and Budget Division to enlarge the scope of the community meeting. However, the Management and Budget Division expressed unwillingness to support it financially by saying that they did not have extra budget for it. By informally building relationships with “established” commanders of other divisions, The participant C could successfully create a favorable atmosphere enough to give pressure to get additional budget for the enlarged meeting.

III. Findings and analyses

1. The pervasiveness of hierarchical authority, Chain of command

The three organizations where the participants A, B, and C, worked were all police agencies which are considered typical bureaucracies. Among the characteristics of bureaucracy Weber argued, “hierarchical authority” was found as the distinctive common theme during the interviews. When the three interviewees were asked separately, “what is the most important thing that you keep in mind when you are working?”, “Do you think

you can use your own judgment when working?”, they replied as followings:

“I only try to do something that was permitted by my boss, not to do something by my judgment. It’s because if something goes wrong, my boss is the person who should take the responsibility for it.” (the participant C)

“Questioning to the order that our supervisor gave us is the last thing we do. Basically, officers are afraid of using their own judgments, so they try to ask seniors about various situations and find out what is an allowed response and what is not.”(the participant A)

“An instant reporting to the chief when an emergency happens is our top priority. When emergencies happen, like gun-fighting, we can make a decision based on our instinct, but we should report it as fast as we can.”(the participant B)

As it is obvious from the interviewees’ remarks, the chain-of-command was significant enough to outweigh other bureaucratic characteristics such as efficiency, written rule, impersonality, and division of labor. The importance of the chain-of-command in the police agencies puts emphasis on a hierarchical order which accounts for the rigidity of police structure. An authority of an officer is proportionate to his or her rank. In other words, there is not much discretion that subordinates can exert so that orders are transmitted down while information goes up the chain of command. In the case of the participant B, American police officers seem to exercise more discretion than the other Asian officers in that the participant B and his co-workers depend on their judgment when a gun-fight occurs. However, police agencies in the U.S are trending toward adopting stated rules and regulations which forbid them from exercising discretion. The fact that street-level bureaucrats keep losing their ability to use discretion might translate into more significance of the chain of command which represents the conspicuousness of hierarchical authority in these police agencies.

“There are lots of manuals and internal regulations that control officers’ discretion. Officers are getting worried about the consequences of the responses they take.” (the participant B)

2. Procedural conflict, its relationship with change

After the participants, A, B, and C made up their minds for change, they realized that the barriers they were confronting were rules and procedures and not bosses and competition with other units. Those rules and procedures in these cases were installed and had been practiced in the organizations for a long time, creating the perception among officers that the rules and procedures were something by which they should abide. More obedient officers considered that the rules and procedures were a given, and that they should not be modified. Their descriptions show how deeply embedded the rules and procedures were in the organizations.

“Every patrol officer felt that the previous system is not realistic not only to them, but also to residents. But there was nobody who said “change”.” (the participant A)

“People just thought that the meeting was with the member of the Board. The enlargement of the meeting meant extra work for every division. People did not like it.” (the participant C)

“There was no precedent, so nobody thought about employing a crime analyst in a precinct. There was no obvious rule that disallowed it, but people saw it as a rule.” (the participant B)

The above descriptions suggest the connectedness between change and procedural conflicts. The common theme is that initiatives for change resulted in the situations of procedural conflict. In other words, the initiatives were preconditions for the conflicts in these cases. The relationship between the needs for change and procedural conflicts implies that the conflicts have emerged due to resistance to change. In the case of the participant A, the Internal Affairs Division deemed the new responding system a threat to the established system, assuming that the change was only for the convenience of police boxes' officers. In the participant C's case, the Management and Budget Division did not want to make an exception for the new style of meeting. In the last case, the Personnel Division was not cooperative, for the Division staff thought that it might bring other similar demands from other precincts should they make an exception for the participant B's Detective Division.

Basically, units in an organization are inclined to maintain their resources and not to use them up. Supporting other units by spending their resources means extra work and if they use them up, they are more likely to be criticized for overspending. Thus, in these cases the conflictual units resisted the changes for fear of unplanned consumption of their financial or human resources. Moreover, the tendency of the proposed changes to create new rules and procedures were against the existing routines that the established officers had relied on.

3. Organizational Cultures, the same artifact but different values and assumptions

Interestingly enough, all three interviewees relied on informal relationships with other officers to resolve the conflicts. Even though they could challenge other divisions in conflicts through established procedural channels such as talking in a formal meeting and asking a boss for mediation, the formal channels were not adopted. Why did they think using informal networks a better strategy? The analysis here is based on the model of Schein(2010) which classifies organizational cultures into three distinct levels: artifacts, values, and underlying assumptions.

“If we directly talk to the chief over the issue and say that the Internal Affairs Division is doing something wrong, it is a huge disgrace for them. It’s disrespect against the whole staff in the division. Then, there is no way to stay here anymore. I should leave this police station.” (the participant A)

“Broaching an issue directly and formally to other officers never worked for me. If they think they were humiliated, they will probably try to kill me. And people will point the finger at me forever. Not to make an enemy, we always pretend to be modest.”(the participant C)

“Based on my experiences, using formal channels takes much time and it doesn’t guarantee much outcomes. So it is inefficient to depend on it. I think I can still use formal channels without much backlash, because that’s why there are formal channels. But only rookies use them.” (the participant B)

They concurred on the usefulness and effectiveness of informal networks. Additionally, they implied that group members of the interviewees also shared the perception on the merits of informal networks, thus actually tapping into informal networks when conflicts happened. The fact that the behavioral pattern that avoided the formal channels and depended on the informal channels is manifested, the behavioral pattern can be considered as an artifact of group cultures. The three interviewees have the same artifact, but the artifact is based on different values and underlying assumptions that are derived from different cultural backgrounds. This is one facet of social and cultural factors permeating the three police agencies.

The participant A mentioned “disgrace” and “disrespect” while the participant C suggested “humiliation” and “modesty”. The two officers underscored the importance on similar values, such as “respect”, “modesty”, and “group harmony”. On the other hand, these values could not be found from the account of the participant B. Instead, for the participant B, “efficiency” and “outcome” were his values that defined his behaviors. Let’s delve into one more step in terms of underlying assumptions that the artifact and values were based on. While the participant B assumed that efficiency and outcome were top priorities of the agency, the two Asian commanders appeared to have the following assumptions: Group harmony outweighs individual performance. Public challenges cause personal disgrace and humiliation.

4. The origin of their values and assumptions

To have a deeper understanding, a subsequent question was cast for the participants A and C: “Did you learn your values such as respect, modesty, and group harmony in your agency? Where do they come from?”; for the participant B “Did you learn your values such as efficiency and better outcomes in your agency? Where do you think they are originated from?”

“No, no, everybody working in government agencies or even private companies knows it. The reason why Japanese politicians and CEOs of conglomerates kill themselves is because of the pressure from society and group culture. People say that society keep

pressure on individuals.” (the participant A)

“Respect and group harmony are embedded in any organizations in Korea. When I meet my friends working in other organizations, I find the same themes. The interesting thing is that when I visited a police agency in Beijing, I found out that those values were also pervasive in Chinese police. ” (the participant C)

“I think the importance on efficiency and outcomes are fundamental motivations for the development of organizations in America. These values are more accepted in private sector than in public sector, but they are getting emphasized in public sector. For example, the performance of police officers is measured by numbers.” (the participant B)

What they are all saying is that those values are embedded in their culture and society. According to their remarks, the Asian culture and the American culture are giving weight on different values. The Korean and Japanese values can be captured by the Asian culture which largely rests on Confucianism which puts emphasis on loyalty, respect for seniors, and social harmony. Even today, Confucianism is deemed the fundamental philosophical mainstream in East Asia. Kids are educated to lower themselves to respect others and not to stand out in a group if it hampers group harmony. In the case of The participant B, the values might be originated from Anglo-American tradition which features individualism, moral autonomy, self-reliance, and the logic of capitalism, which could be seen when he referred to private - for profit - agencies which are even more concerned with efficiency. As American cultural values show, the participant B learned the efficiency of informal networks by himself through “trial and errors” in order to have better outcomes of his own. A good contrasting example between the Asian values and the American values is that while individuals who surmount hardships or handicaps by himself or herself are lauded in America, people who maintain group harmony by sacrificing his or her own outcomes are extolled in East Asia.

5. Characteristics of the strategy, tapping into the informal networks

Even though organizational cultures between the two Asian managers and one

American manager are derived from different social cultures, characteristics of their strategies which tapped into the informal networks are very similar: They are weak ties, legitimate goal, trust and credibility, and secrecy.

Weak ties The participant A contacted other commanders in the nearby police boxes. According to him, the relationships among the commanders were not strong because they were in a constant competition to have a relatively better performance than other police boxes. As a new commander, The participant C approached other commanders whom he did not know well. In the police station, divisions did not have good relationships because, basically, they fought for limited resources and tried to outcompete other divisions for better performance evaluations. Likewise, the participant B communicated with weak-tie contacts through his chain-of-command. The participant B explained that detectives in a precinct and managers in the Detective Division under the Department were not close enough to have frequent or informal communications. They were in somewhat uncomfortable and official relationships, for the managers in the Division as planners and the detectives in a precinct as street-level bureaucrats possess many different points of view while working.

Legitimate goal Then how did they successfully use informal networks based on weak-ties? The reason why their initiatives appealed to weak-tie contacts was that the proposed changes were predicated on legitimate goals which were intended to raise public interests rather than private ones. The participant A tried to focus more on 911 calls that were urgent and serious. The new system based on the “selection and focusing” principle struck home with their customers. The participant C opened the meeting to any residents in the community. The participant B resolved the conflict to deal with increasing criminal cases in the two schools. The recipients of benefits from the intended changes were the public. The legitimacy of the changes was the strong element that helped them to win over weak-tie contacts.

Trust and Credibility When they were asked, “Who is your role model in your organization? Why do you choose that person?” After choosing one, the participants A, B, and C said “high morality”, “good reputation”, and “good relationship with others” respectively. It might be fair to argue that people consciously or subconsciously try to imitate good

attributes of the role model. Given this argument, those three managers, respectively, had probably tried to raise morality, build good reputation, and maintain good relationships with others. Though they pointed out different attributes, all the attributes come down to building up trust and credibility. Along with the legitimate goal for the procedural entrepreneurship, trust and credibility is another significant cornerstone of persuading weak-tie contacts.

Secrecy It is an underlying characteristic of informal networks. They all were worried about the disclosure of their strategies. Specifically, the participants A and C were afraid of backlash if others knew about their covert activities. When they were asked “Why are you so afraid of backlash?” the participant A said “labeling effect” while the participant C said “branding”. In the Asian culture which emphasizes “group harmony”, “collective activities”, and “social support”, backlash usually involves the prolonged stigmatization that leaves no chance for them to recover their previously tarnished reputation. It was the same case with the participant B. The participant B told that he would have been treated as an outcast if his informal strategy had been exposed. That’s why secrecy cannot be overemphasized due to its strong relationship with trust and credibility for the successful persuasion of the weak-tie targets.

6. Where did they learn? Organizational Learning

Why did they choose to use informal relationships as a strategy? And where did they learn how to take advantage of the informal networks? The interviewees replied:

“Nobody taught me how to manage my situation secretly. You can naturally learn while you are working for a long time.” (the participant A)

“Haha... It’s the politics. People make backroom deals before they talk in front of people. I learned it, usually, from others’ stories. You can just hear that informal networks worked!” (the participant C)

“I learned it through trial-and-errors. My experiences told me that the established channels were inefficient and brought backlash.” (the participant B)

Even though the ways that they learned the usefulness of the informal networks are

different, they got to know them through personal interactions within their organizations. They seemed to assume that most of the officers were appreciating the effectiveness and efficiency of the informal networks as if they were considering the informal networks as a hidden norm.

However, the process they learned was not obtrusive. Also, there was neither demarcation line to distinguish who succeeded to learn from who did not nor a tipping point. What they imply is that it is the ongoing process on a daily basis that is formed through numerous human interactions in the organizations. The fact that the process depends on “everyday” interactions reflects the embeddedness and pervasiveness of the learning process inside the organizations. But the embeddedness and pervasiveness do not guarantee that all the people in organizations successfully learn how, when, where to use the informal networks. People have their own pace in successfully achieving competence. But it was not easy to elicit from their interviews the traits of people who succeeded in learning.

IV. Conclusion

In this study, the similarities outweigh the differences among the three cases. The pervasiveness of hierarchical authority, the significance of informal networks, and characteristics of informal networks are the main similarities. When it comes to the reasons why they depended on informal networks, the difference is found in cultural values and underlying assumptions that stemmed from different societal and cultural backgrounds. Given the fact that this qualitative study is limited methodologically in terms of sample size and interview techniques, the main finding is that police managers use informal networks in order to overcome the procedural conflicts regardless of their nationality. This is the answer of our research question.

But, the main finding does not mean that the three police agencies are impervious to the influence of societal cultures. Instead, we found out that the Asian culture and American Culture respectively permeated the three police agencies, ending up supporting

the role of informal networks in the formal organizations. The process would be that the cultural or societal factors are transferred by agents (i.e. individual officers) into the police agencies, and the transferred factors are deeply situated within their group cultures after the interaction with the bureaucratic factors. The transferred factors from society might be under the surface because the organizational characteristics are too rigid, inadaptable, and intolerant of outside factors' intrusion to accept their emergence which might give rise to huge structural changes.

Interestingly enough, obviously the disparate Asian culture and American culture did the same thing. They espoused the prevalent usage of the informal networks. If we follow Barnard(1968)'s definition on an organization as "a system of consciously coordinated personal activities or forces", those informal networks or groups can be also deemed "organizations". His argument that informal organizations which are mainly characterized as interacting "communications" determine the adaptability and survivability of a formal organization is supported by the finding of this case study. That's why all the participants tapped into informal communications to raise the adaptability and survivability of their police agencies by adopting legitimate goals and satisfying public interests. The findings here could benefit police organizations, including Korean ones, in that an understanding of informal networks is vital to comprehend conflict management strategies within those organizations.

It should be noted that this study cannot claim generalization, mainly due to a lack of enough samples and inherent limitations from the qualitative research design. It is encouraged for future studies to obtain enough samples, ideally with a random sampling strategy, to generalize research findings. This will make it possible to explore a causal relationship between dependent and independent variables. An exploration of causal influences may provide different types theoretical or policy implications.

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【요 약】

경찰 관리자들과의 조직 내 갈등 관리 전략 - 사례 연구를 중심으로 -

정제용·신소영

경찰 조직 내에서 갈등 관리는 조직 관리 관점에서 중요한 영역 중 하나이다. 본 연구는 경찰 조직 내에서 절차적인 어려움에 직면할 때 경찰 관리자들이 절차적 혁신성을 갖는지 탐색하고자 한다. 이 연구는 사례 연구 전략을 채택하여 일본, 미국 및 한국의 3개 경찰기관에서 있었던 실제 사례를 조사하였다. 각 경찰기관의 경찰관들을 인터뷰하여, (1) 위계적 권위의 만연, (2) 절차상의 갈등, (3) 조직 문화, (4) 가치와 가정의 기원, (5) 전략의 특성, 그리고 (6) 조직 학습이라는 6가지 주제를 이끌어냈다.

연구 결과에 따르면, 각 경찰기관의 절차적 갈등에 대한 대처 전략에서 유사점이 차이점보다 많았으며, 계층적 권한의 만연, 비공식 네트워크의 중요성 및 비공식 네트워크의 특성이 그 예이다. 핵심적인 결론은 경찰 관리자들이 절차상의 갈등을 극복하기 위해 비공식 네트워크에 상당히 의존했다는 것이다. 연구 참가자들은 비공식적 의사소통에 의존하여 조직의 적응력과 생존 가능성을 높이하고자 하였다. 또한, 사회 문화적인 요인이 경찰 조직에 영향을 주었고, 이는 비공식 네트워크의 역할을 지지하는 결과를 가져왔다. 이러한 연구 결과는 공식적인 조직 내에 비공식적인 요소가 크게 자리잡고 있다는 역설을 보여주는 것으로 경찰 조직의 현실을 반영한 것으로 보인다.

주제어: 갈등 관리, 절차적 혁신성, 사례 연구 전략, 비공식 네트워크, 문화