

**EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE TESTING FOR DISPATCHER
CANDIDATES**

By

**Shelley McKerren
Anaheim Police Department**

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The Command College Futures Study Project is a FUTURES study of a particular emerging issue of relevance to law enforcement. Its purpose is NOT to predict the future; rather, to project a variety of possible scenarios useful for strategic planning in anticipation of the emerging landscape facing policing organizations.

This journal article was created using the futures forecasting process of Command College and its outcomes. Defining the future differs from analyzing the past, because it has not yet happened. In this article, methodologies have been used to discern useful alternatives to enhance the success of planners and leaders in their response to a range of possible future environments.

Managing the future means influencing it—creating, constraining and adapting to emerging trends and events in a way that optimizes the opportunities and minimizes the threats of relevance to the profession.

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By Shelley McKerren

The scene from *A League of Their Own* played through her mind. She remembered Jimmy Dugan yelling, "There's no crying in baseball!" She kept saying there's no crying in dispatch, yet she used another tissue box for a dispatcher who just left her office. The Communications Manager felt she used more tissues per square inch than any other Bureau at the PD. Communications Managers across the State report many dispatchers have a great deal of personal turmoil and distress and bring it to the workplace. Couple that with the many known stressors of working as a dispatcher, and you have a recipe for disaster. These were the people she depended on to make the instant life threatening decisions daily, yet several have so many issues at home it affected their performance on the job.

Dispatchers are very intelligent people who have all the skills to do the right thing. The excellent work far outnumbers the number of personnel complaints. But what's a manager to do? Trying to figure this one out, she could hear the loud voice of one of her dispatchers on the phone. "I told you to stop talking or I am going to disconnect the phone!" the dispatcher shouted. It was exactly 45 seconds before the citizen called asking for the supervisor to complain.

Does this sound familiar? The author, as President of the Southern California Public Safety Dispatcher Association (SCPSDA), met with other managers to unravel the mystery of the dispatcher who does a terrific job during probation, but then slowly becomes confrontational in his or her public contacts. The group also discussed why so many dispatchers bring their personal issues to work, and whether the high stress environment of the modern dispatch center has a long-term impact on its members. One area of possible resolution presented asked the questions: are we hiring the right people? Could emotional intelligence testing help us to discover how dispatchers can manage not only their workplace stress better, but their lives?

Data and Goals

Statistics from the 9-1-1 Magazine in July 2008 show there are more than 6100 emergency call centers in the United States (Troxell, 2008) In addition, approximately 200 million 9-1-1 calls per year are made nationwide. (Troxell, 2008) That does not include the number of non-emergency telephone calls and in-house calls per year handled by an agency's dispatch center. The national retention rate of dispatchers in 2005, according to APCO (Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials) PROJECT RETAINS (Responsive Efforts To Address Integral Needs in Staffing) is 83%. (Troxell, 2008) Certainly, a high-volume Communications Center is a tough environment for even the most stable, happy employee. Has it been the problem of dealing with co-workers, the public or both? Has it been the influence of other dispatchers or the nature of constantly dealing with people and their problems? Could emotional intelligence testing be the answer?

Daniel Goleman, author of "Emotional Intelligence" and several subsequent texts, writes that "workers such as customer service representatives, who regularly deal with people in bad moods are also in danger of empathy distress. This problem often plagues people in the helping professions, who are exposed day after day to people in dire circumstances. The alternative is to stay open to feelings, but to be adept in the art of emotional self-management, so that we are not overwhelmed by the distressive catch from those we deal with." (Goleman, 2000, p.144) As customer service representatives, dispatchers are susceptible to the emotional self-management issues of others, perhaps intensified due to the nature of public safety work.

Each Communications Manager and Supervisor has listened to thousands of tapes where the majority of the dispatchers show stability, care and compassion; however, others are prone to emotional outbursts. The tapes are reviewed as part of Quality Assurance control and in

response to citizen and in-house concerns. This work is supported by the SCPSDA, which strives, in part, to mitigate the negative effects of working long-term in a Dispatch Center. Their goal is to provide dispatchers skills to better manage this difficult, but important career and not let it intrude into their family life. The group's concern is how to lead people who are detail-oriented and used to controlling crisis situations, but display emotions causing conflicts with coworkers and citizens. This led to discussions regarding the possible use of EI as a tool to help select and retain only those who can cope with the requirements of the work environment. Before we discuss how EI may be used in dispatching, it is important to understand the development of this theory.

What is EI?

To determine if Emotional Intelligence (EI) assessment is a possible answer to issues seen in many dispatch centers, we must first understand what it is. EI is the ability to interpret, understand and manage one's own and other's emotions. In a 1973 study, Professor David McClelland noted that "Testing for Competence Rather Than Intelligence and discovered the measure of excellence in job performance was not in grades and credentials, but in "...empathy, self-discipline, and initiative." From his studies, it was discovered that the key to success was emotional intelligence. (Goleman, 2000, p.16-17) The theory of Emotional Intelligence was further developed by two psychologists, Drs. John Mayer and Peter Salovey in 1990. They believed that emotional intelligence "develops with age and experience from childhood to adulthood." Salovey and Mayer described emotional intelligence as "being able to monitor and regulate one's own and others' feelings, and to use feelings to guide thought and action."

Another main model of Emotional Intelligence was developed in the 1992 by Dr. Reuven Bar-On, an Israeli psychologist. (Goleman, 2000, p.371) He viewed Emotional Intelligence as

“an array of non-cognitive capabilities, competencies, and skills that influence one’s ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures.” Bar-On believed that emotional intelligence addresses the emotional, personal, and social and survival dimensions of intelligence, which may be more useful for daily functioning than the more traditional cognitive aspects of intelligence.” (Capsambelis, 2006, p.28-29)

In 1995, Harvard Psychologist Daniel Goleman wrote in *Emotional Intelligence* that Intelligence Quotient (IQ) doesn’t really show true successes in work or in our lives (Goleman, 2000, p.17) Being intelligent and having technical skills is part of doing a job, but relating to people is the backbone of being successful in life and work. Unlike IQ, EI increases throughout life. “To a large extent, maturity itself describes this process of becoming more intelligent about our emotions and our relationships.” (Goleman, 2000, p.240). Goleman’s “model accepts that people in the workplace have feelings and emotions—and says that we should deal with them by first dealing with our own. He defines EI as ‘the capacity for recognizing our own feelings and those of others, for motivating ourselves, and for managing emotions well in ourselves and in our relationships.’”

There is a difference between Intelligence Quotient (IQ) and from Emotional Intelligence (EI) as they exist in the brain. According to UC Berkeley Professor Elaine Fukuhara Schilling, a leadership development consultant and cofounder of Pinehurst Consulting, “Part of the differences may be physiological. Intellectual intelligence is centered in the brain’s neocortex, while EI is centered in the limbic system. An emotional center, the limbic system is considered an open loop. To manage itself, it depends on the external sources. Emotional Intelligence is based on connections with others, and interactions with others can change its physiology.” (Schilling, 2008, p.2).

EI and its Implications for Policing

Two graduates of a California futures-based police executive development program (Deputy Chief Patrick Farmer, Fresno Police Department, and Lieutenant Phlunte' Riddle, Pasadena Police Department), researched emotional intelligence for officers. Chief Farmer researched incorporating emotional intelligence for law enforcement to assist with the stress of doing the job. He suggested utilizing emotional intelligence training as a way for officers to make good decisions and reduce the liability for them and their departments. (P. Farmer, personal communication, December 24, 2007). Riddle conducted research concerning leading the next generation of law enforcement through emotional intelligence.

Riddle's research centered on Y generation, and how current leaders can use EI to help them lead. She concluded that EI will be needed to engage this generation with open communication and praise. Riddle also referred to an article on *Emotional Intelligence in the Workplace* by C. Fernandez where the author stated, "EI skills are more than the use of cognitive skills like intellect and problem solving. They are the keys to avoid derailing one's career. It is also using emotional and social capabilities, competencies, and skills that influence one's ability to succeed in coping with environmental demands and pressures. It's more than having a thick skin or a sense of empathy for others. It is the genuine ability to feel emotions in responses to others, understanding what you are feeling, understand how others are feeling, and to move forward constructively with the interest of the larger group at heart. EI has to do with building bridges and alliances, and being able to mend those bridges and alliances if they get damaged." Using Fernandez's foundation, Riddle concluded that Emotional intelligence enables us to make our way in a complex world. (Riddle, 2008, p.4).

On May 21, 2008, a group of Communications Managers and Supervisors from Orange County, California were brought together to evaluate the need for EI in dispatch selection. They agreed the need exists for dispatchers to deal with their feelings and other's feelings to work together as a team. They also noted that dispatchers must be able to deal with the emotional needs of the citizens, officers, and the other dispatchers. Since many of the panel members were dispatchers at some point in their career, they knew that handling conflict and controlling their emotions helped further their upward movement in public safety. The group felt EI could help, especially to deal with the "professional cannibalism" (dispatchers finding fault with the new dispatchers in their midst) that occurs between the established workers and the new employees. The majority of the dispatchers will work in the same room with the same people over a career span of thirty plus years. Keeping their emotions in check will be vital to the group to succeed in processing calls and radio transmissions. The success of an incident hinges on the ability of the dispatcher and how they glean information and relate to the caller.

Goleman suggested that successful customer service representatives will have very high self-control, conscientiousness, and empathy. (Goleman, 2000, p.28) This could relate to dispatchers; yet there is no existing test to determine a dispatcher candidate's EI. As a result of research, perhaps testing an employee's current state of emotional intelligence can determine whether the person can handle a fast paced public safety environment.

The stresses of dispatch

Goleman states the "...fabric of society seems to unravel at ever-greater speed, when selfishness, violence, and a meanness of spirit seem to be rotting the goodness of our communal lives. Here the argument for the importance of emotional intelligence hinges on the link between sentiment, character, and moral instincts. There is growing evidence that fundamental ethical

stances in life stem from underlying emotional capabilities.” (Goleman, 2005, p.xxii) According to Dr. Lawrence Blum, a police Psychologist, many dispatch candidates are not psychologically prepared for the emotions when they are exposed to the types of calls they must handle. (Dr. L.Blum, personal communication, July 16, 2008) Programs to improve EI in officers have worked, but nothing has been put in place to use EI for testing for dispatcher candidates or even train current personnel. (Saville, 2006) Further, according to the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) and the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials (APCO), there is no evidence EI testing has ever been undertaken as a part of the suitability assessment process for dispatch candidates.

In California, the Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) has regulations in place to regulate the hiring and training of dispatchers. Candidates must pass a POST-designed written test comprised of 11 portions of listening to tapes and matching concepts. The dispatch candidate will then participate in an oral panel where questions are designed to see how they will cope with interpersonal conflicts and high priority decisions. A medical background, polygraph, and psychological test will also be performed. The most common psychological assessment instrument is the Multiphasic Personality Inventory MMPI by Starke R. Hathaway, Ph.D., and J. Charnley McKinley, M.D. The MMPI surfaces norms and deviances in a candidate’s personality structure and mental disorders. (Hathaway, 1943). EI, though, is not part of this MMPI. If we are to add to this array of assessments, what choices should we make?

Where do we go from here?

David R. Caruso, Ph.D., one of the designers of Emotional Intelligence testing, was contacted for comments on this topic. He suggested doing a job analysis on dispatchers with

skills and traits and matching it with an appropriate assessment. (David R. Caruso, personal communication, July 14, 2008). Kevin Groves is the Director of the PepsiCo Leadership Center, California State University, Los Angeles. In a 2008 interview, he suggested the Bar-On Emotional Intelligence test might be the way to screen for successful candidates. In *Developing and Measuring the Emotional Intelligence of Leaders* Dr. Groves used the Mayer, Salovey, and Caruso Intelligence Test (MSCEIT) to test 135 fully-employed business students who underwent an 11-week EI training program (Groves, 2008). His findings indicated the EI can be “deliberately developed; the treatment group demonstrated statistically significantly overall EI gains and across each EI dimension, while the control group did not show any significant pre-/post test differences.” (Groves, 2008) He believes there can be a tool tailored for and used for subsequent training on dispatchers. (Kevin S. Groves, personal communication, July 16, 2008).

An e-mail conversation on July 15, 2008, with Associate Professor of Criminology Christopher R. Capsambelis, the author of *Emotional Intelligence: A Clue to Success* further enlightens us. Capsambelis received certification on the Bar-On Emotional Intelligence test and suggests this method to assess new law enforcement candidates, including both communications and corrections personnel. He also suggested trying the test on a trial basis and then track the candidates to compare their performance against those who did not have this tool as an assessment for emotional intelligence. (Christopher R. Capsambelis, Personal Communication, July 15, 2008).

There are several groups who have forged ahead in EI to help businesses create better employees. The Consortium for Research on EI in Organizations has done studies on instituting emotional intelligence in organizations. (Goleman, 2000, p.248). The mission of this group is to advance research and practice of emotional and social intelligence in organizations through the

generation and exchange of knowledge. They have 8 core members (Dr. Goleman is one) and 56 additional members who have experience in applied research. They have done collaborative studies with the US Government and Johnson and Johnson. There is a follow-up study in progress now on the effect of incorporating EI into leadership at Johnson and Johnson since 2001. (Retrieved from website www.eiconsortium.org on 2-20-09) This site also provides updated articles on research and studies for emotional intelligence. Six Seconds is one of the major organizations set up to research emotional intelligence. Their editor and COO, Joshua Freedman, has come up with some suggestions for organizations: "Don't pretend people are rational, get assent (ask instead of demand), and stop attacking." (Freedman, 2008, p.1)

EI testing in public safety

The successful implementation of EI as a parameter of initial assessment will face a number of logistical, political and practical challenges to the status quo. As important as it might be to determine success, it may be a novel concept to those who now rely on a standardized battery of tests to select personnel. The advocates of this approach will have to be mindful to collect authentic data regarding turnover rates, citizen satisfaction and similar means to determine success. In any case, the instruments and processes noted above can enhance the potential for positive outcomes for this change.

Although current tests are often successful hiring candidates with the appropriate technical skills, in the long run, hiring someone with the right psychological skills is more important for the public as well as the health of that employee. The ultimate goal is to serve the public as if they were a family member on that other side of the 9-1-1 call. The dispatcher must also be able to serve one another since many will work in a closed office for up to thirty plus years with the same people. Emotions must remain in control and they must understand others

so they can come back every day to do a terrific job. EI testing is an important consideration if we are to achieve this.

Toxicity in a dispatch center, as with any business office, causes the organization not to perform up to standards as expected by the citizens and staff. Managers and supervisors should look to EI as a way to retain personnel, decrease personnel complaints, and create less stress on all. We all want to have the best personnel and the best environment. Many agencies are having a hiring freeze on police officers, but all are hiring dispatchers. We need to perform at the highest level. Having EI in the mix of the various tests, and subsequent training, will maintain some terrific people who care about citizens and do the right thing. It is time to be innovative and have EI as a testing tool.

Conclusion

Learning to motivate oneself despite the daily frustrations of working in a high-stress job in addition to controlling one's moods is essential for dispatchers. Public safety agencies have a lot to gain by hiring the best-suited dispatcher. When emergencies arise, there is a higher degree of skill employed including the care and compassion that is necessary. To provide a highly skilled, calm professional dispatcher to the public and improve the internal environment of the Dispatch Center, agencies should develop long-range goals to continuing important training and evaluation for these critical employees. Introducing emotional intelligence for dispatcher testing could be what is needed. This is a big step forward into the future, but a manageable one with many benefits. The challenge will be changing a culture of emotions and discovering the positive effects of emotional intelligence testing and training.

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