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Communication Strategies in a Police Department

Testing Methods for Increasing Staff Engagement in Training

Agency: Charlotte-Mecklenburg (NC) Police Department (CMPD)

Project Duration: November–December 2021

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Context

CMPD's aim of building a strong foundation of cultural awareness includes effective training. This pilot trial tested a pre-training communication strategy, informed by behavioral economics and motivation theory, for engaging supervisory staff in mandatory leadership training.

Key Finding

A larger percentage of participants randomly assigned to receive the modified training announcements completed the pre-course survey (a proxy for engagement) than did participants receiving a standard announcement.

*BetaGov provides ongoing training to agency personnel to become research-savvy "Pracademics" who can lead trials.

Background

Training of police officers is intended to prepare them for the demands of the job. Recently, some law-enforcement agencies have expanded the types of trainings offered, in recognition of the evolving needs of police officers in many areas. Leadership is one of the most important predictors of organization effectiveness and the need for effective police leadership is greater than ever. Leadership training is designed to instruct personnel on how best to supervise other staff and to appropriately meet everyday demands of the job in interacting with community members and making sound decisions.

Despite the potential benefits of training, some law-enforcement staff object to training requirements or often don't fully engage. One stated aim of the CMPD is to build a strong cultural foundation that includes effective training and an awareness of its importance. Pre-training engagement has been shown to improve outcomes. The CMPD launched a trial to test a modified pre-training communication strategy, informed by behavioral economics and motivation theory, about a required leadership-training program for supervisory staff.

Design

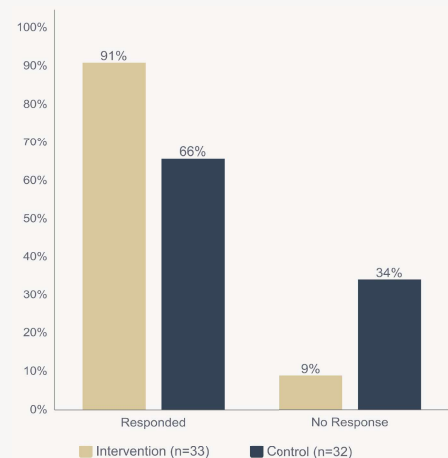
A small pragmatic randomized controlled trial was conducted to assess the benefits of a modified communication approach with three cohorts of supervisory staff (totaling N=65 supervisory officers). Leadership-course attendees within each cohort were randomized to receive either a routine informational-training communication (control) or the modified communication (intervention), along with a link to a pre-training task (a survey). The modified communication was clearer, was more specific on why the supervisor was targeted and

the content of training, and motivated participation by noting that other opportunities could follow. The pre-training task-completion rate, by condition, provides a measure of engagement.

Lessons Learned

Supervisors in the intervention group were significantly more likely to complete the pre-training task than those in the control group ($p < 0.05$).

Percent completed surveys by condition



Next Steps

These findings suggest that tailored communication may contribute to engagement in training programs, as measured by a greater willingness to complete a pre-training task. A larger study with more participants is warranted to confirm these results.

Why BetaGov Spark?

Sometimes a rigorous trial of an innovative idea just isn't possible, but with a Spark project a practitioner can learn important information about the idea, the agency, and the sample. What's more, a positive signal may inform a future randomized controlled trial and more definitive results. Spark projects meet Pracademics where they are comfortable—giving them the opportunity to learn about research and apply that learning to internal research projects.