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STRATEGIC SECURITY

Illustration by [Gordon Studer](#)

## THE TWO-WAY MANAGER



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A common problem plagues many organizations—the rift pitting employers against employees. This perspective of us versus them is not new; it has been around since the beginning of business. But in the current age of rising income inequality and corporate mergers and acquisitions, the dynamic remains in many firms, even if the situational details have changed.

This problem is relevant to security organizations of all types—whether they be private sector companies, public agencies, in-house departments, or contract security firms. That’s because the disruptive conflicts resulting from the employer versus employee cleft can easily distract from the critical mission of offering quality security services.

Sometimes, the rift is worsened by the prevalent forces shaping today’s workplace. These forces include growing diversity and the values revolution that accompanies it; exponentially exploding information, to the degree that everyone seems to be an expert on everything; and the rapid pace of change, which taxes even the most adaptable, forward-looking managers.

The challenge for security managers, then, is how to move away from the unproductive paradigm of employers versus employees to a more mission-supportive dynamic of unified team versus obstacles to the security mission.

Smart security managers who are acutely sensitive to this challenge understand how they can help close this rift: by shifting from the traditional one-way management system—in which managers give directives to employees under a command-and-control model—to a two-way management, communication, and decision-making approach.

The heart and soul of two-way management is that it recognizes the importance of listening to, learning about, and assimilating competing values and ideas from all members of the organization. When management consistently demonstrates that the views and perspectives of employees are valued and sought after, staffers feel enfranchised and empowered, rather than disengaged and alienated.

Two-way management allows the organization to make best use of some of its most valuable resources—the ideas, opinions, and skill sets of its employees. It also leads to a greater professional understanding of employees’ capabilities and concerns, which goes a long way toward retaining talent. With resources used wisely and talent engaged, the two-way organization can go from merely surviving to thriving.

The following are case studies showing how security leaders have successfully used two-way management methods to resolve workplace conflicts. These true-to-life examples of security professionals we’ll call Jones, Smith, Hamilton, and Roberts can serve as a roadmap and best practice guide for those security managers who are interested in exploring two-way management practices.

## **SOLICITING STAFF PERSPECTIVE**

Under the traditional management model, the leaders of an organization determined its core values, and then it was up to the employees to support or not support those values.

Similarly, leaders determined the “what” of work, while the employees determined the “how” of work. The growth of diversity in the workplace has prompted a values revolution—values are no longer imposed on employees from above.

Security Manager Jones, who works in a government agency, is a two-way manager who understands how this dissemination of values has changed. She understands the importance of listening to all members of her organization, learning about their competing values, and accepting ideas from employees on all levels.

One important project Jones initiated was to form a team to find out the most important success factors in meeting her agency’s operational and financial goals. Under Jones’s leadership, the team took an active listening approach, and solicited information and perspective from all corners of the agency.

Employees were glad to provide such information and perspective, and it facilitated their sense of progress and accomplishment in contributing to the agency’s operational and financial success. This included the security officers in Jones’s division, who were successfully doing their jobs.

Equally important, the two-way communication allowed Jones to discover how employees wanted to be rewarded for their contributions in different ways. Some wanted salary increases or bonuses; others valued things like more time off, greater flextime, and wellness benefit reimbursements. Some desired more personal involvement in arranging their schedules, duties, and performance reviews. A few simply wanted sincere private recognition.

This last discovery highlights one of the key advantages of two-way management. Instead of imposing a one-size-fits-all system onto employees from above, the perspective solicited from individual employees allows managers to tailor rewards to staff members in meaningful ways. Such a practice pays great dividends for organizations interested in keeping employees engaged, and in retaining talent, management experts say.

And so it went in the case of Jones. Not only did the information gained in the process help Jones improve the sustainability of successful operations processes, but it also turned out to be instrumental in a spinoff effort to reorganize and improve the hiring process, reducing costly turnover through better retention efforts.

## **IMPROVING FEEDBACK**

As the previous example illustrates, soliciting feedback is a crucial component to successful two-way management. Jones realized this, and it led her to undertake another, somewhat related, project: improving the methods by which her organization received and processed feedback.

Jones’s effort involved a program her organization had in place in which stakeholders provided feedback on security performance report cards. When the report cards were returned, Jones had employees review the completed cards and recommend potential action by management.

This new practice had several benefits. It further opened the door for obtaining and using honest feedback from team members so that a wide range of work processes could be improved. It also allowed Jones to find out about, and then mitigate, any concerns employees had that could potentially pollute the employee-employer relationship.

With the door to more honest feedback now open, Jones pressed on with creative solutions, and another exercise in two-way communication. She organized a team of supervisors and tasked them with gathering an accurate assessment of the quality of the organization's workplace culture, which would take into account both employees' perceptions and management's intentions.

The feedback solicited in the culture assessment revealed an incongruence—management's intentions and actions to sustain a strong workplace culture were not succeeding based on employee perceptions of the culture, which were often negative. The team of supervisors then served as a neutral party in delivering this "bad news" assessment to agency leadership.

Once delivered and processed, the assessment led to positive changes. Management took various actions to improve the quality of the organization's culture.

For example, one important solution was to reinvent the organization's training initiative, so that it functioned as an open-ended, interactive, online platform through the website. In addition, the job application form was streamlined so that it was more user-friendly.

Finally, certain worksites were criticized as being unsafe, so a system was started that would ensure monthly safety inspections completed by security personnel, with inspection results turned over to the safety committee so identified hazards could be mitigated.

In light of the disconnect between management's intentions and employee perceptions, these actions included an effort to sustain better two-way communication and be more responsive to employee issues.

## **CLOSING THE GAP**

Traditionally, there has been a knowledge and performance gap between highly skilled, experienced security managers and their much less experienced employees.

However, the staggering amount of information that is now available to anyone with Internet access is in some cases quickly closing the information gap, and sometimes the performance gap as well. This may present credibility issues for security managers.

And so, savvy two-way security managers like Smith, an operations manager for a large contract security firm in the Midwest, do not ponder how wide this gap might be. Instead, they roll-up their sleeves, jump in, and get their hands dirty to find out from first-hand experience.

While working in the trenches with their staff, they learn about employee capabilities and knowledge levels by asking questions, actively listening, and observing—in short, by maintaining two-way communication.

In Smith's case, one of the key conclusions he learned from this approach is that sometimes performance baselines, and compliance with the firm's day-to-day work rules, can turn out to be much lower or higher than expected.

Résumés and interviews during the hiring process may not accurately reflect working knowledge or actual skill levels. A prize hire may have some working knowledge deficiencies; conversely, an employee may have a

certain skill that managers are unaware of. When this happens, seasoned two-way managers, like Smith, are able to accept the fact that all they thought they knew about an employee may not necessarily be so.

Smith's active approach also taught him another lesson: not all gaps can be closed, and some may not even need closing, given the particular position and staff member. As a result, Smith learned that it is crucial to identify which particular gaps will have the highest return on investment if they are closed.

For example, in one particular case Smith worked with an employee who broke one of the firm's conduct rules involving the documentation of real-time area patrols, and who had problems in providing detailed answers to basic questions when writing up security reports.

Smith ascertained that the conduct violation represented a temporary gap in office behavior—it was not part of a pattern—so he decided against disciplining the employee for misconduct. However, Smith did decide to send the employee for remedial training in report writing, which later paid off in improved performance in an important component of the employee's job.

## **THE FIRST DEADLY SIN**

Sometimes, being a two-way manager does not come easy for seasoned leaders. Take the case of Hamilton, a veteran security executive with 40 years of experience who has worked in both contract and in-house security.

Hamilton was a traditional, one-way security manager who was reluctant to concede that some of his hard-earned knowledge and experience was in danger of becoming obsolete.

He was not completely cut off from contemporary ideas on managing; he had read Marshall Goldsmith's seminal management work *What Got You Here Won't Get You There*, as well as other books that advocated for continual professional self-improvement.

Still, he took much professional pride in his previous success with traditional command-and-control management practices. As a result, he was emotionally invested in the old system and highly conflicted about change.

But Hamilton's traditional view became more and more dissonant with his growing awareness that each of his younger employees possessed a base of knowledge and a skill set that were impressively deep.

He also realized that these employees wanted their professional attributes to be respected and valued. In that way, they reminded Hamilton of himself; he remembered being in their shoes early on in his career. This empathetic identification led to an epiphany, and he decided to explore two-way management practices.

He then began to investigate how to work with employees to reshape his traditional one-way management process into a true two-way practice that incorporated the perspectives and ideas of all employees, ultimately leading to better results.

The most effective changes he made involved what he called "P" Points. The name came from the engineering term perturbation point, which Hamilton translated into small, well-placed, and well-timed interventions that yielded significant results.

Here are some of Hamilton's small actions: At weekly meetings, he moved from the head of the table to a seat at the side, like any other team member. He also changed the meetings from Monday to Tuesday, which was easier on employees because it allowed them to recover from the weekend's work problems.

Before setting the agenda on weekly project goals and evaluations, he asked for input from the team. It then became the team's agenda, not just his.

Although it was difficult at first, he stopped doing most of the talking in meetings and listened more. He also made an effort to ask good questions, rather than assuming he knew the answer.

He worked to control his impatience when he did not get quick problem descriptions and solutions from staff. He listened patiently to the detailed perspectives that sometimes accompanied them.

Finally, he realized that he was expecting excellent work from his employees as the norm, so he wasn't acknowledging or thanking them for their excellent contributions. He implemented a program to recognize exemplary performance.

### **THE 360-SYSTEM**

Unlike Hamilton, security manager Roberts was a longtime believer in two-way management. She led a Fortune 100 company's security program into a two-way reorganization which has now been adopted by the rest of the company.

The first thing Roberts decided to do was to assess the degree of confidence the security officers had in the organization's integrity and trustworthiness and the necessary transparency they thought they enjoyed to prove these things. She used a 360-degree feedback system, involving all the department's stakeholders, to do this.

She found out that the status quo was far from ideal. So Roberts then established a project team to conduct a survey, recommend ways to improve trust and integrity, and then implement the most cost-effective solutions from their recommendations.

The survey results showed that the organization had a defensive climate, not an open culture, which caused all sides to revert to one-way communication, which only aggravated the us-versus-them rift.

From here, the challenge Roberts had was to create a nondefensive climate with open, two-way communication from all directions, including herself. This required her to listen to what her team members had to say about their conversations with employees.

This process of relaying relevant points from the field was a positive one; it helped relieve the intimidation factor of "meeting with the boss," and discussions brought more depth to the information. Roberts and the team then hashed out the aspects of the organization that most needed to be changed.

These changes included some common sense basic behavioral guidelines, such as treating all workers equally, fairly, and respectfully; allowing everyone a reasonable degree of freedom to have a say in organizational matters; and having more sensitivity to competing values and perspectives among employees.

Also on the list was better “two-eared” listening to what is being said and how it is said; greater attention to nonverbal communication, more frequent helpful feedback; more help in dealing with complex problems; and less blaming and fault-finding.

To establish this kind of nondefensive communication, some advance work needed to be done. Thus, Roberts made a focused effort to rebuild rapport, which required her to get to know all of her employees better so that she could deal with them more positively and productively.

To build more honesty and integrity in her department, Roberts followed an important principle: be honest with yourself, own at least part of the responsibility for the way the organization is, and then look to change it from the inside out.

This introspection was not easy; often, managers do not like to accept responsibility for the uncomfortable places in which they find their organizations. But it led to valuable changes for Roberts. She learned how to better control her own bad habits, such as expecting certain outcomes; how to be more mentally flexible in seeing how something that doesn't seem to fit can fit; and how to take action without being completely certain of the results.

### **MANAGERS: AN ENDANGERED SPECIES?**

Of course, most security managers know from experience that even the best management strategies are not a cure-all for dealing with all employer-employee conflicts. Two-way management is not exempt from this caveat.

For example, two-way management will not work in cases where employers or employees are unwilling or unable to engage in true two-way communication. Unmanageable obstacles may involve a lack of communication practices, poor listening skills, immutable resistance to change in general, or hidden or competing agendas and values.

Thus, a few failed applications of two-way management may be an inevitable side effect of using this method of managing. But these speedbumps do not negate its overall usefulness. Moreover, for some, two-way management may also ultimately serve as the best transition to what may be on the horizon: the end of management as we know it.

The practice of two-way management is in line with the evolution of management away from hierarchy and toward teams of equals. For example, in Smith's two-way management of a medium-sized private security company in California, several employees worked as equals to improve an obsolete access control system. Each team member visited a frequent user of the access system; members then compiled the information and used it to inform improvements to the system.

Overall, two-way management maximizes a security manager's chances of keeping up with change, as managing itself is progressively redefined. Two-way management is an effective way for a security manager to organize his or her tool box—to deal with the existing conflicts inherent in the employer-employee rift, and with the risk of failure that can come from a lack of focus on the security mission.

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