

FOREST SERVICE

Synthesis & Summary

LE&I Discussion with Chief and Associate Chief:

5/2/2014

This report synthesizes and summarizes the results from a content analysis that was performed on a transcript of the phone conference and webinar session held between members of the Forest Service's Law Enforcement and Investigation organization and the Chief and Associate Chief of the Forest Service.

Synthesis & Summary

Introduction

The following is a summary of a content analysis performed on the transcript from a dialogue that occurred via a phone conference and chat pod between the Chief, Associate Chief and members of the Law Enforcement & Investigations organization of the Forest Service. The actual conversation occurred on April 11, 2014.

Content analysis is a fairly rigorous process for identifying, grouping, and completing qualitative analysis of comments. Analysts independently review all comments and derive an initial set of content categories. Then the analysts reconcile their lists to form one agreed upon corporate list of categories.

The content analysis process begins with coding coherent segments of text (comments) from each response. Comments are organized by category code so that analysts can review and compare comments with similar topical themes. Generally speaking the coding is completed in an exclusive manner where each comment is assigned to only one content category. Exceptions are allowed if the content of the comment contains more than 1 content category and if the context of the comment would be lost if separated.

Due to the nature of the call and the interconnected aspect of the comments, the final category or topic area the content of a comment was assigned to may have resulted from not only the verbiage used but the placement or arrangement of certain words. Analysts then distill comments into a list of distinct sub-topic areas to better capture the overall sentiment that was being shared by participants¹.

Content analysis was completed on all comments received from participants but was not performed on comments made by the Chief and Associate Chief. Comments that did not contain any content were coded as non-code. Comments that cannot be coded due to use of no recognizable terminology, etc. were initially highlighted and re-evaluated to see if context could be put to the comment. Generally speaking comments that were solely an affirmation of a previous comment (agree, thank you, you go, etc.) were considered not to contain any new content and were coded as non-code.

The content analysis team did not have access to any identifiers associated with the participants; other than the Chief and Associate Chief. Due to the nature of the dialogue and the methods used to build the transcript, in particular the chat-pod function, there were a high percentage of comments that lack sufficient context to allow a formal content analysis on each individual comment.

A tally of the comments was made by each topic area and sub-topic area to provide an idea of the magnitude of levels of interest by these classifications during the dialogue.

¹ It should be noted that even with a common set of principles associated with the coding; analysts may still assign a particular comment to a different category. Given the interconnectedness of the comments associated with this dialogue this may happen on this case on a higher rate than normal.

Synthesis & Summary

Leadership

Trust in Leadership	37
Leadership Change	22
LE&I Leadership	35
Qualifications for Leadership	22
Characteristics of good leadership and leadership environment	53
Total comments	169

Employee Morale and Visible Support for Law

General	38
Job Satisfaction	30
Organizational Structure and Breadth	67
Support from Leadership	72
Total comments	207

Administrative Investigations

Total comments	87
-----------------------	-----------

Hostile work environment

Total comments	40
-----------------------	-----------

Safety

General	7
Organizational Stress	51
Total comments	58

Budget Formulation & Execution

Planning	18
Leadership and hiring	14
NFS Budget & Other federal agencies with relation to F.S. LEI	23
At what cost?	23
Total comments	78

Career Opportunity and Development

Hiring Process & Policy	36
Opportunity & Promotions	59
Total comments	95

Consistency of Policy Interpretation and Application

Policy Interpretation	60
Jurisdiction & Policy	3
Chain of Command	7
Total comments	70

Synthesis & Summary

Law Enforcement Image

Mission	29
Respect	36
Visibility	36
Recognition by other Law Enforcement Entities	24

Total comments **125**

Appropriate Equipment for the Job

General	2
Uniform and Components	13
Technology	23
Firearms	3
Facilities and Vehicles	4

Total comments **45**

Further Advice to Leadership

	7
Union Involvement	5
Contacting Chief's Office	5
Advisory Group/Council	16
Further Communications	12

Total comments **45**

Synthesis & Summary

Summary of Results

The vast majority of the comments surrounded the themes of leadership and employee morale. Almost all other content could be linked back to these two broad themes. In total we identified 11 different topics or main themes in the content of the comments.

- Leadership
- Employee morale and visible support for law enforcement
- Administrative investigations
- Hostile work environment
- Safety
- Budget formulation & execution
- Career opportunity & development
- Consistency of policy interpretation and application
- Law enforcement image
- Appropriate equipment for the job
- Further advice to leadership

Participants shared a variety of personal experiences, emotions, and perceptions surrounding these topic areas. The following is a summary of key points associated with each of these topics along with a few excerpts from the participant's comments.

Leadership

Participants expressed a strong lack of trust and a desired for a change in leadership; particularly executive and senior leadership. They identified other issues associated with leadership throughout the ranks of the organization and shared perceptions about the qualifications of existing leadership and characteristics of what they envision for good leadership.

“We will not solve our issues with more discussions. The field has lost faith and confidence. We need a change in leadership. When field employees are rated this poorly, they are disciplined, put on a PIP, or removed. Our leaders have had enough time to address our major issues; they have failed. We need a change in leadership.”

“Leadership is out of touch with the field. They haven't put boots on in years!!”

“How can we respect leadership when they do things that we would get hung out to dry for? Once we get competent leaders in place we can address equipment issues.”

“You cannot make everyone a leader! Leaders have that trait and gift...it can be fostered. NOT MADE!”

“The use of the word leadership within LEI is completely inappropriate. Those in supervisory positions within LEI at the RO and WO level have completely failed. Additionally, they can barely fulfill basic management roles.”

Synthesis & Summary

"A supervisor does not equate to LEADERSHIP. We need leadership. Qualified people leading the LEI ship. We are a broken unit right now."

"Good leadership would have a real knowledge of the "nut and bolts", if you will, of what those in the field do in order to understand what the job really takes and how that is impacted by leadership decisions. Communication must be two way without fear."

"Definition of leadership/success: approachable, honest, truthful, straightforward, understands the toils of the job, understands the nature of the work, willing to stand up for their "front line"."

Employee Morale and Visible Support for Law Enforcement

Participant's responses indicate a poor overall environment related to employee morale and a lack of visible support from leadership for the law enforcement community. Perceptions were often couched in reference to the Employee Viewpoint Survey and the PEER survey. References were made to the perception that morale appears to be getting worse over time and along with additional organization stress, this is affecting their ability to perform their duties in an effective manner and affecting the satisfaction they derive from performing their job. There is deep concern over the number of law enforcement personnel that appear to be leaving the agency.

"It seemingly took the PEER survey, and media attention for this dialogue to start...that is a failure...and is the underlying notion many of us have - we are the blacksheep of the FS..."

"We were the flagship land management agency when I came here, we no longer are."

"I will die if I stay in this agency!! Literally, spiritually, emotionally, mentally and physically. All I ever wanted to do was work for this high quality outfit when I started years ago. I hope we can stop the ship from sinking. But like it has been said....the only place we have to go is up."

"You have A+ LEI folks on your crew but we feel we can only do D minus work anymore. This takes a huge mental and physical toll on us. We keep trying and are killing ourselves to do good quality work because we are wired to do our best and to keep working. We don't give up. All we want to do is to do good work for our fellow employees, our agency, our public and for our resource."

"I was once told I drive too many miles for the number of VN I write. Yet one of my districts was on the opposite side of the state. This is an example of leadership without real world LEO experience."

"That is creating hardship and discontent amongst our law enforcement officers because now people are afraid that if they go out and do their job, they are not going to be supported."

Synthesis & Summary

Administrative Investigations

There was a lot of concern brought up about recent and ongoing internal administrative investigations. Comments revolved around whether the agency should be investigating itself or whether an external party would better serve in this role and help maintain relationships within the agency. There was also concern about timeliness, communications, and transparency regarding the results and outcomes of any internal investigation as well as fear of reprisal if the investigation involves a superior.

“I've got somebody who wrote me a note on internal investigations.—that we need to stop using our Forest Service special agents as an internal investigation force. We do not want to feel like we cannot talk to our special agents.”

“These are our coworkers and all of a sudden they are investigating us. It creates a lack of trust amongst our coworkers, to be honest with you.”

“I was told after I exposed inappropriate actions by a manager against me that HR would do an investigation. I later was told the investigation is complete, but I didn't have the right to know the results of the investigation. What good does that do me?”

“These "investigations" mean little when the Agency refuses to act on them.”

“I recommend that the Chief's Office conduct an inquiry into the internal investigations conducted by LEI, looking at such factors as the type of investigation, proposed discipline, and final outcomes. There is a huge problem in this area.”

“Chief Tidwell you said you have an investigation on the issues of the Prohibited Personnel Practice, But how long will it take to find the outcome? You say you will hold people accountable for their actions. But in the meantime just as [...] stated, we still get retaliated against. How do we get that to stop?”

Hostile Work Environment

Participants stated they regularly encounter a hostile work environment. The hostile work environment may be a result of management activities as well as a conditions associated with the type of work they perform.

“Currently, there are multiple cases of hostile work environments and talks those toxic work environments going on within LE&I across the nation to our employees are being targeted based on a multiple of factors which are protected under labor laws.”

“The public are extremely disrespectful to the point of open hostility. The lack of respect fosters an environment of high danger for employees (LEO's and line).”

“When the employee speaks out in hopes of getting relief, management retaliates against that employee and targets them in any way possible.”

Synthesis & Summary

"I have had death threats over firewood theft."

"The Director does a very good job of reporting up to you (Chief). Making you feel good about LEI. The interaction to the LEI workforce is very different. You have an entire workforce that is frankly "miserable". "

Safety

Employees expressed concerns over the risks associated with their work and the managerial decisions that increase these risks. They also expressed concern that executive and senior leadership may not recognize the magnitude of this risk. Many of these issues are also related to the topics on hostile work environment and law enforcement image.

"Nobody would go to work if they knew it would be their last day. We go to work knowing that it COULD be our last day."

"Our lives are on the line...not leadership."

"When cops do not manage cops, and they're put in that position, it is disastrous. It is the recipe for disaster and can get somebody killed."

"So that is a real big concern for me is we have got to somehow try to give our budget back to where it was in 2010, 2012 levels because ultimately it is affecting safety when you come down to it."

"To my knowledge, there is not a single employee with the Forest Service who dons a uniform every day and, as a result of doing their job, may be actively sought out by someone in an attempt to murder them. That is what your law-enforcement do every single day. They do not know what they are going to face. But yet they get out and they do the job to represent you and to represent this agency and to keep people safe."

"Our jobs and what we do are very similar to what the National Park Service does. Yet, we have over twice the acreage, we have approximately have 30% more employees, half the budget, and approximately 1/3 of the number of FTEs to that job. It doesn't keep us safe."

Budget Formulation & Execution

There is concern over the perception that the budget for LE&I has declined at a rate greater than other entities in the agency and is not commensurate with other law enforcement organizations associated with other land management agencies. This is placing greater stress on the workforce and placing officers at greater risk. There is also concern over how the budget is being executed and how LE&I leadership is allocating and spending these funds. The execution of the budget affects a variety of managerial aspects including hiring and training of employees.

"Why did LE&I budget get hit so hard compared to others? Who was responsible for that?"

Synthesis & Summary

“Do not hide the budget. Don't hide what you spend money on. And there are places where we have had hidden and things that are lost because people retire and they have been told to hide budgets and expenditures.”

“It is a huge concern because we put so much time and effort into going into the field and doing our job and the budget is killing us.”

“Chief: We are 3% of the budget.....If you want to talk about the budget, answer why? How come the rest of the FS got increases this year and they are hiring regularly?”

“Why does LE&I have to operate within the confines of a budget but fire can spend out of control and then take from those programs who budget wisely.”

“With where our budget currently stands we are no longer serving the public, protecting the land or anything else except keeping our office chairs toasty. We are effectively ineffective!”

Career Opportunity and Development

Participants expressed dissatisfaction with many aspects of career opportunities and development; in particular hiring processes and lateral transfers. Some expressed concerns related to a lack of career ladder and many thought these policies and processes were negatively affecting the quality of the workforce as well as limiting employees' abilities to meet personal needs.

“Maybe if the Director supported transfers and allowed the SACs to do something, they could move LEOs around to fill positions in Forests that need them.”

“Lateral transfers - offer FS jobs to FS employees first, but management will tell us that TOS costs make this too expensive. Please allow USFS to fly jobs with "No TOS authorized" and "Agency Employees Only" like DOI, DOD, DOE, and various other agencies do.”

“Why has management moved away from hiring and developing leadership from within and hiring SAC's from other agencies?”

“Hiring practices, hardship transfers should be fair and equitable and I'm recommending we have some sort of advisory committee that views all requests for hardship transfers that way it is not done any different than any one region. “

“I have not seen much upward mobility. Management seems to hire our supervisors from outside the agency. We end up training our supervisors. The learning curve is already very high for a LEO to become captain but, when an outside agency comes in it is extremely harder for them. The morale goes down when you have to train your boss. Special Agents are also hired from outside the agency making upward movement impossible.”

Synthesis & Summary

Consistency of Policy Interpretations and Application

Employees express concern over how management may interpret and apply policies regarding pay, leave, transfer of station, use of equipment, etc. differently. They are also concerned about policy is communicated and documented. One of the biggest concerns appears to be about the use and understanding of Administratively Uncontrollable Overtime (AUO).

“Chief- The real problem is not our process, but the perception the application of policy is inconsistent from employee to employee.”

“Management is attempting to cheat the LEO’s out of pay repeatedly across the country. The AUO/overtime issue is well known to the agency management. Management knows how to pay us correctly but they continue to attempt to attack our pay rights.”

“Why do we not have a standardized policy to deal with hiring and hardships and transfers. Mgmt will not replicate those employees that ask for it but the SAC will directly reassign employees in order to align with the organization chart!”

“During the Government shutdown 2013, my previously scheduled annual leave was preemptively canceled by my supervisor before the Government officially shutdown... During this shutdown, other Regions allowed LEO to take their preapproved annual leave. This discretion leaves such a disgruntlement between us and supervisors. Why isn’t a decision fair across the board? “

“Why has LEI management issued power point presentations in lieu of interim directives or change of policy for overtime on fires. Policy is very clear that when an LEO is called to an emergency incident that the LEO should be taken off AUO and paid overtime? LEI WO sent out a Powerpoint saying that we don't get overtime if the callout is within the administrative workweek for Law enforcement activities.”

“Different rules on backup firearms for different Regions is a concern for example. I have expressed my concern, with not much concern shown.”

Law Enforcement Image

The image the agency portrays and the image others perceive of the Forest Service’s law enforcement organization is of concern to many. There is concern that our law enforcement personnel are not readily identifiable and that other Forest Service employees could be mistaken for law enforcement. There is concern that other law enforcement entities and the public may not perceive Forest Service law enforcement personnel as “police officers”. Many question how well the mission of the LEI organization is understood by others and how well it aligns with the mission of the agency.

“The LEI Mission needs to be clarified to the field. We are the law enforcement arm of a Land Management Agency. The Land Management part is being lost.”

Synthesis & Summary

“Realize the level our skill and training...you have a lot of "ologists" in the rest of the FS. Start thinking of us as criminologists if you need too. Many of us not only work by ourselves - we possess a higher level of education and skill than many other traditional law enforcement programs. We have expertise that we don't expect the rest of the FS to fully understand.”

“I work in an area where most people don't understand Law Enforcement.”

“Lack of Respect-management is openly disrespectful of LEO's in front of agency at large, and public.-agents, an environment of suspicion and hostility now exists.”

“Thank you for addressing this chief, the culture of the "rec tech with a gun" is still alive and well. We give up months of our lives in Georgia and take tests of skill and character most in the FS cannot fathom, to be in our positions, we are highly trained as cops - only to find ourselves in an agency that wants us to diffuse those skills, and we are in a position of feeling we are in an agency that is not sure they want a law enforcement program...”

“We need new uniforms and vehicles that are law enforcement appropriate and do not look like the non-law enforcement personnel in this agency.”

“We also need a leader that Law Enforcement leaders and Sheriffs across the country respect and are willing to work with and listen to.”

Appropriate Equipment for the Job

Implementing the mission of the LEI organization requires the appropriate equipment and uniform components. Participants are concerned that the agency is out of date with technology and is not providing officers with access to important information. This also results in an inefficient use of officers' time. Uniform components are viewed as not very comfortable and there appears to be compatibility issues between components.

“Bottom line is that: LE&I needs to get the LEO out in the field with good equipment and allow us to work on resource crimes.”

“Make uniforms that are to a higher standard. We are out-of-doors professionals and our gear should not be the limiting factor to mission success.”

“For Officer Safety, I asked LEI leadership, Why are we not using drivers license scanners with our mobile LEIMAR system?”

“LE&I needs to invest in a good report writing system that either state or a local police agency uses that has been proven work which would help reduce duplicate paperwork, keep track of stats, etc.”

“Get rid of LEIMARS and develop an effective law enforcement data systems. Police Departments around the country are currently using systems that work, why aren't we?”

Synthesis & Summary

“NCIC - National Crime Information Center- Created by the FBI and just about every agency uses. We do not have this on our computer system. We need to get caught up with the times. This program tells the officer if a bad guy has a warrant immediately. This is a safety issue.”

“In seven years with the agency my firearms have never been inspected by a qualified armorer. Neither my zone nor neighboring zones have an armorer. I've submitted multiple requests for armorer training/certification and have been denied.”

Further Advice to Leadership

Several participants offered advice to how to improve the role leadership plays within the LE&I community. There is interest in making sure the issues that arose during the conference call and previously remain visible and that future issues can be more readily elevated and heard. Participants would like an easier way to contact the Chief directly, if needed, and would like to make sure that executive leadership is receiving good and reliable council regarding law enforcement issues.

“How about creating an e-mail "drop box" for complaints and suggestions, free from the eyes of upper LE management?”

“Chief there are a lot of squared away Officers and Captains out here. You would be well served by having a few advisors.”

“I believe a "sensing group" like the Chief does with the NFS needs to occur with LEI, comprised of agents, LEO's and Cpts, union...a strategy team if you will to develop the solutions for this big mess.”

“A Chief's Advisory Committee that has an employee from each Region, 9 members, 5 LEOs, 2 SAs, 1 CPT and 1 Admin. They receive the input from the members of their Regions and work with Natl LEI to work through challenges, but if not resolved, it will meet with you and give you direct feedback.”

“And with our partnership with the agency and union, that is where we need to start heading is coming up with some solutions.”

“Chief - Please really "HEAR" what we are saying. Hear and focus on the BIG issues. Thank you for taking this time with us. It is meaningful and we appreciate it.”