

## System helps keep managers InTouch

**W**hen was the last time that improving employee communications was a priority in your organization? In contrast to the business world, most law enforcement agencies do little to encourage communications between employees and management.

Why don't senior law enforcement executives place more emphasis on interacting directly with their officers? Does the traditional command-and-control, top-down approach to managing remain the best way to motivate employees in a contemporary law enforcement organization? The Washington State Patrol found the answer to that question is "no."

Over the past 2 years, the Washington State Patrol (WSP) has introduced several innovative technology initiatives designed to promote a two-way flow of information between employees and management. These programs, which are patterned after several corporate world best practices, have had significant and positive impact on the effectiveness of the agency and the confidence of troopers in the patrol's leadership. The initiatives have helped eliminate some of the communications static that interfered with the organization's effectiveness in the past.

### Less ears to listen

The need for introducing some changes stemmed from budgetary pressures, similar to those that have affected many agencies across the country. In April 1995, the Washington State Legislature responded to decreasing revenues by dramatically reducing the executive staff at state-funded organizations. In the cuts, the WSP had its executive staff of 11 pared down to four: a chief, an assistant chief and two bureau commanders.

Three months later, the legislature implemented further changes, among them converting the state fire marshal's department into a bureau of the WSP. At the end of the year, the number of WSP employees had grown about 4 percent to 2,000 employees (1,000 of them troopers), while the executive staff had been



**Chief Annette Sandberg speaks with employees about changes made as a result of the InTouch system.**

cut by more than half.

As a result, there were fewer sources of information for employees, and fewer ears to hear concerns and complaints. Troopers were feeling uninformed about the changes being made in state patrol policy, and felt they had little input in crafting that policy. Other employees were increasingly frustrated by an inability to discuss their increased pressures and workloads. And just about everyone felt as if they had no support from the top. In short, a communications vacuum had developed between employees, who didn't know what was going on, and management, who was distanced from what employees needed.

### Devising a better way to listen

Around that time, an article appeared in "The Wall Street Journal" describing The Pillsbury Company's use of a unique employee communications system designed to connect employees directly with the company's CEO. Employees simply dialed a toll-free number and recorded their feedback on a voice-messaging system. These messages were transcribed daily by an independent company and e-mailed to the CEO's office. Callers were not required to identify themselves, and because the information was routed through a third-party, it eliminated fears about the potential ramifica-

tions of speaking up.

"It seemed to offer a simple, but elegant solution to our communication gap," reports WSP Chief Annette Sandberg. "It was also highly cost-effective."

The WSP management team decided to implement the Pillsbury model with two goals in mind. The department wanted to provide a more effective way to exchange information. It also wanted to make it easier and more comfortable for employees to give feedback on any topic, even controversial ones.

The first objective was met by beefing up the employee communications mechanisms already in place. This included revamping daily bulletins and periodic newsletters, so that they reported about more than upcoming birthdays and anniversaries.

The department addressed the second objective by introducing InTouch, the 24/7, telephone-based system that Pillsbury used. The system seemed like an ideal way to collect upward feedback from a group of employees, who are highly mobile, work around the clock, and are widely dispersed geographically, according to Sandberg.

Conceived by a Minneapolis-based former executive, who had