

# **The Bill Blackwood Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**



## **People-focused Policing: A Need for a Paradigm Shift in Texas Policing**



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## **ABSTRACT**

With recent events such as the police involved shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri, the choking of Eric Garner in New York City, New York, and the handling of a pool party by Officer Eric Caseboldt in McKinney, Texas, a glaring problem has received international media scrutiny. This problem is the failure of police officers in the United States to effectively communicate with people while on the job. As such, officers need to be trained in empathetic communication tactics as part of a larger model of people-focused Policing.

Empathetic communication uses emotional labeling and other tactics to show compassion between the officer and the member of the public. This communication style helps bolster the legitimacy of the policing institution and affects the citizenry's perception of the process of being unfair or fair; this directly supports the concept of procedural justice. Officers must be fair, knowledgeable and empathetic. Training of officers in empathetic communication and the concepts of legitimacy should be conducted for both current officers and recruits in the academy process. The implementation of people-focused Policing will require a cultural change in the policing environment.

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## INTRODUCTION

Police departments around the United States incorporate mission statements into their culture. These mission statements help to define the goals of the departments, but many also describe the methods by which the departments will achieve those goals. Among the words found in these mission statements that shine light on the goals are professional, courteous, and responsible. While these words are easily understood, all too often, citizens are exposed to police conduct that fails to achieve these standards.

Community members have a legitimate expectation that police officers will uphold these values. The nature of the governmental system in the United States is that government governs by the consent of the people. Police officers, therefore, serve at the will of the people. Recent events such as the shooting of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri have drawn out the voice of many community members who are speaking out against injustices in their community. These voices are blaming the police officers, who dedicate their lives to justice, as the perpetrators of injustice.

Many police officers start their career with a goal of, or similar to, making a difference in their community. In employment interviews, many candidates state their reason for becoming a police officer is to help people. All too often, these young police officers forget the reasoning for becoming a police officer and will hold fast to the reason they remain a police officer. The perks of the job are numerous. The camaraderie and relationships formed with other officers gives many officers a sense of belonging. It is this culture that changes the officer from wanting to make a difference in their community to just trying to get through the shift.

So between the calls for justice from one side of this debate and a sense of apathy and tradition on the other lies a solution to the discord and discontent felt on both sides of this argument. All too often, police officers act with impunity by violating traditional social mores and folkways such as the use of terse or profane language toward citizens, strong verbal commands at times when simple requests would suffice, and other actions along the use of force continuum that, when looked at objectively, are excessive.

One factor that seems to play a role in the divide between the public and the police is a lack of efficient and effective communication. If police officers were properly trained to communicate with the variety of individuals with whom they come in contact, then officers could potentially improve those relations. Unfortunately, many of the training topics that police agencies choose to focus on are based on firearms, tactical situation resolution, and self-defense.

In order for police to be more effective, officers should utilize communication tactics that draw on empathy and compassion and that allow citizens who come in contact with officers to maintain their dignity. One study showed that students used the communication tactics of their teacher to assess how the teacher feels about them (Teven & McCroskey, 1996). In fact, Teven and McCroskey (1996) went on to state that it was how the students perceived the teacher and not necessarily the true feelings held by the teacher that mattered. A correlation could be drawn to police officers. As both officers and teachers hold positions of authority, it stands to reason that if officers used communication techniques that showed concern for the citizen, officers could be more effective. Teven and McCroskey (1996) go on to state, "it is not the caring that

counts; it is the perception of caring that is critical” (p. 3). With the number of public contacts that officers have, there are many chances to affect public perception in a positive way (Mazerolle, Bennett, Davis, Sargeant, & Manning, 2013; Johnson, 2009).

Communication that shows caring has three factors: empathy, understanding, and responsiveness (Teven & McCroskey, 1996). Empathy is being able to take the perspective of another (Stiff, 1987). By using empathy with all parties involved in an incident, officers would be able to effectively consider all sides of an issue (Stiff, 1987). This would make the officers decisions less partial and give the participants in the incident a sense of fairness. Officers are called upon to use their authority in an impartial manner. By showing bias, officers can risk losing the public trust.

Teven and McCroskey (1996) define understanding as comprehending another’s ideas, feelings and needs. One of the factors people consider after a police encounter is whether or not the officer showed concern for their side of the story (Hinds & Murphy, 2007). Hinds and Murphy (2007) also identify fair treatment and whether or not the officer showed respect and allowed the citizen to maintain dignity as ways the public decides on the quality of treatment they receive from the police system.

People-focused policing is a policing model that takes community-oriented policing and problem-oriented policing to the next level. Where community-oriented policing focuses on creating community partnerships to combat crime and problem-oriented policing defines a method of using those partnerships, people-focused policing focuses on the everyday partnerships officers make with the average member of the public. People-focused policing uses the concepts of empathetic concern, respect, dignity, and fairness to help build the relationships necessary for community-oriented

policing and problem-oriented policing to function properly. Furthermore, agencies that adopt policies supporting people-focused policing have tools necessary to deal with officers who fail to abide by the core values of the agencies' mission statements.

People-focused policing is about returning to the values previously held by police agencies around the country. Historically, officers were treated with respect because of the authority their position held. Today's generations see respect as something that must be given before it can be received but do not hold themselves to the same values. Some members of the younger generations will require the officer to treat them with respect prior to any show of respect toward the officer.

People-focused policing is about the process, rather than the results. The model does not require officers to change whether or not they choose to enforce the law, make an arrest or write a citation. Rather, the model changes the way the officer goes about doing so, emphasizing respect, empathy, and dignity throughout the process.

The only way to implement this model is through policy adaptation and training. Including the relevant portions of the model in academy training as well as in-service training would facilitate the change. The training needs to be interjected throughout the entire academy curriculum. Police agencies in Texas should adopt a policy of and provide training to officers regarding people-focused policing in order to enhance institutional legitimacy and increase public perception of policing.

## **POSITION**

By employing the concepts of people-focused policing, police agencies can increase institutional legitimacy. Legitimacy is the belief, by others, that an authority figure must be obeyed (Tyler, 2004). Some officers rely solely on statutory authority to

gain compliance rather than building legitimacy to gain voluntary compliance. As Hinds and Murphy (2007) stated, “the actions of individual police can have a direct and fundamental impact by either enhancing or lowering people’s judgments of police legitimacy” (p. 28).

In every police contact, officers can employ verbal tactics that increase legitimacy provided the officer has been trained in those tactics (Mazerolle et al., 2013). Mazerolle et al. (2013) went on to state, “if police apply dialogue that adapts the principles of procedural justice during any of their encounters with citizens, they create opportunities to enhance perceptions of legitimacy” (p. 264). Some of these tactics include the active listening skill of emotion labeling and the employment of empathic concern.

Emotion labeling is very useful in building rapport (Madriral & McClain, 2007). When a rapport is built, trust is gained (Madriral & McClain, 2007). Officers can be more effective in a contact where the officer is trusted than in a contact where doubt and skepticism exist. These communication skills can be learned provided the officer is afforded adequate training (Madriral & McClain, 2007).

Emotion is present in nearly every police call for service. Many citizens do not call because someone is breaking in to their home; they call because they are scared. They do not call because their bicycle was stolen: they call because they are upset. Labeling these emotions helps show empathy on the part of the officer.

Legitimacy is also affected by additional factors of people-focused policing such as when citizens are involved in the decision making process of the encounter (Mazerolle et al., 2013). This is demonstrated by an officer soliciting the input of victims, witnesses and suspects prior to the decision making phase of the encounter.



An officer could ask a suspect for his or her opinion on what course of action the officer should take. Even if the suspect believes that a warning is sufficient, the officer can rebut by politely disagreeing and explaining the reasons behind his decision. A person's opinion on the officer's procedure is reportedly not solely based on the outcome of the decision making (Hinds & Murphy, 2007).

Another factor affecting legitimacy is the officer's efforts to remain neutral during the encounter (Mazerolle et al., 2013; Jackson, 2001). This draws on the principle of fairness. If one side of the incident believes that police officers favor the other, the entire process is seen as biased.

Mazerolle et al. (2013), as well as Jackson (2001), list a final factor in legitimacy as being whether or not the individuals involved in the incident were treated with dignity and respect during the encounter. Many people would assume that officers are required to treat everyone with dignity and respect, and many policies state this fact, but the general practice of some officers is to treat individuals as if they are wasting the officer's time. This does not go unnoticed by the victims and witnesses of an offense and can cause their opinion of the institution of policing to dwindle.

By adopting policies supporting people-focused policing, agencies can be equipped to deal with officers who fail to uphold the core values of the agencies' mission statements. Core values such as courtesy, honesty, responsibility and professionalism only aid an agency if the officers uphold them. Officers who choose to be rude, unnecessarily forceful, or unethical in their dealings with the public should be held accountable for these actions. Citizens must be assured that agencies will effectively police themselves.

It takes every officer to build the reputation of the agency but just one to destroy it (United States Department of Justice, 2007). Therefore, agencies must aggressively correct behavior by officers who act in a way that affects the department negatively or that betrays the public trust. Such actions include both criminal violations and unethical behavior. More importantly, departments should correct issues involving an officer's communication style in order to provide the officer with the necessary tools to communicate in an empathetic and compassionate way. Agencies should be transparent in the results of internal investigations. By allowing the citizens to see the workings of the departments, agencies can build trust with the citizens that the government is employing officers who are committed to providing a fair, equitable and ethical service to the community (United States Department of Justice, 2007).

### **COUNTER POSITION**

Opponents may say that changing to a people-focused policing model requires a significant culture change within the agency and that such a significant change in culture is detrimental to an agency. Two reasons some people resist change is because of a fear of the unknown and for lack of knowledge of the details of the implemented change (Kanter, 2012). While this argument is valid, other factors can strongly mitigate the negative effects of changing the culture of an agency.

Foremost, this should not be a change in culture at all. Departments have set out mission statements that require empathetic and compassionate communication. Rather than focusing on the implementation of people-focused policing as a change in the culture, the focus should be on the process as realignment to previously held values. It should not be difficult to persuade officers that treating others with respect is

the right thing to do. Secondly, the change would be preceded with proper training and communication to alleviate and assuage the fears of officers. Training could be conducted through classroom environments, seminars, videos or reading. The primary goal of the training would be to equip the officer with the communication skills necessary to implement the core values of the model. Finally, proper change management techniques could be utilized to further mitigate the effects of change on the organization (Atkinson, 2012). Through face to face contacts, briefings, printed policies and other forms of communication, change can be brought about in a manner that appeals to varying personalities throughout the agency.

Opponents may also cite the cost of instituting such a change in the organization. Training costs departments in many different ways. Instructor fees or class tuitions are the obvious cost but there are other hidden costs. When officers attend training, additional manpower is needed to cover patrol shifts or otherwise accommodate the vacancy caused by the officer being at training.

Rather than focusing on the fiduciary costs of implementing this model, it is more prudent to focus on the costs of not making the change to people-focused policing. Citizen satisfaction with the agency will continue to decline as officers fail to communicate effectively with the people they serve. Departments may have to spend time and devote manpower to investigating complaints against officers who are rude or terse. In the most extreme cases, agencies may have to absorb litigation costs when a citizen elects to file a civil lawsuit against an agency.

Aside from the costs of not implementing this model, the costs of putting this idea in to practice are less expensive than most other department wide trainings.

Implementation of this model does not require capital expenditures. The primary cost is training time. The basic ideas and concepts of this model can be taught to the patrol officer in approximately 16 hours.

As with any change, the concept of “sunk costs” exist. Sunk cost refers to the loss of invested time, energy, money and other resources to the existing system (Hart, 1996). Sunk costs are more difficult to overcome in organizations with older administrators who have vast experience within the organization (Hart, 1996). Despite the obstacle of sunk costs, the actual cost of implementing the change is small.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

In response to recent public protests to police actions, it is imperative that police administrators objectively evaluate their organizations in order to determine whether or not the services the agencies provide their communities is appropriate. Many agencies have become lax in performing at the levels of the core values of the organizations. Implementing the model of people-focused policing can assist agencies in improving the services afforded to the community.

However, in order for the model to be most effective, all agencies must adopt the fundamental values of the model. In order to improve the image of all officers, the model requires no difference in service from one agency to another. With many agencies being part of the metropolitan areas of Texas, residents and visitors to the state should not worry about what side of a geographic boundary they are on. A

consistent use of empathetic and compassionate communication techniques across geographic borders is necessary to accomplish the goals of the model.

Further, the model should be taught in the academies throughout the state. By starting young officers on the right path, agencies could reduce training time and ensure positive public interactions from the onset of training programs. However, the continued success of a young officer hinges on his or her agency adopting the model.

With recent events portrayed in the media, the likelihood of grant based funding being available to assist agencies in implementing people-focused policing is quite high. The success of the model is not dependent on money. The success of the model is dependent on strong leadership throughout the state to hold officers accountable to treating the public with respect and dignity. It is incumbent on the leaders of the policing organizations to build a culture of empathy, compassion, dignity and transparency throughout their agency. Without strong leadership, officers are likely to return to the callous ways of dealing with the public that have created the strained relations seen in communities today.

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