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The Media, the Public, and the Law Enforcement Community: Correcting Misperceptions

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The law enforcement profession has always been a tough business. Over the course of a career, law enforcement officers see the best and the worst in humanity. They may be thanked for what they do and then be spit upon not an hour later. Sometimes this leaves officers confused as to how the public they serve feels about them—and consequently, how they feel about the public.

Law enforcement officers often wear Kevlar vests to protect themselves from lawbreakers' bullets. Over the years, officers also tend to develop an emotional "Kevlar exterior" to protect themselves from the negative things they see and feel.

In spite of well-developed emotional armor, it is sometimes impossible not to let some of this negativity slip inside and bring an officer down. But there are ways to cope. In Montana, for example, a partnership has been established between university-based researchers and the Montana Highway Patrol to help those who pledge a life of continuously *positive* service through the badge.

The formation of this partnership followed a legislative session in 2005, in which a task force was established to bring about change in Montana's impaired-driving statutes. As the work of the group progressed, both law enforcement personnel and academics who were participating realized that they had much to contribute through the shared aspects of their respective disciplines.

One important revelation resulting from the work of the task force was that laws and those who enforce them enjoy enormous support from the public. This countered the perceptions of some participants, who had seen the worst in people over many years—people who did not support the mission and the actions of modern law enforcement agencies. The partnership formed when officers and researchers decided to take a closer look at this discrepancy.

Research conducted by Montana State University in the summer of 2006 points out numerous misperceptions on the part of the law enforcement community. What the mainstream media report and what the public as a whole believes are not the same. The research revealed overwhelming support for police officers and their efforts to reduce crime and keep neighborhoods safe. On the street, however, it is easy for officers to believe that

the opposite is true, because they generally do not come into contact with the supportive segment of the population. The same research indicates that many police officers do in fact feel distrusted and unappreciated by the public.

Police Perception Study

The Montana Highway Patrol, in conjunction with researchers from Montana State University, conducted a study of how law enforcement officers across the United States believe they are perceived by the public—how officers see themselves in a "social mirror" of sorts. An additional survey was conducted to see how the public really feels about the law enforcement community.[1] Initially, the study was restricted to measuring the support the public had for the enforcement of impaired-driving laws, but as the study design phase continued, it became obvious that the underlying issue of trust in police officers to do their jobs also needed to be measured to determine if the perceptions of the public and those of the police were in agreement.

What the study found in the survey of law enforcement officers was as surprising as it was troubling. Regardless of where researchers looked, no matter the differences in agencies and communities, there appeared to be a nationwide consensus opinion among law enforcement officers that they are distrusted by the public. For example, a state trooper in Boston, Massachusetts, stated, "People don't like us much," while a police officer in Portland, Oregon, said that he was angry because people form a negative opinion of him without even knowing him. Boston and Portland are 3,092 highway miles apart. It is unlikely that these officers have ever met, yet they have the same negative opinion of how the public views them. Researchers asked why they feel the way they do; both said it was because of the negative press coverage they routinely saw on television.

Time and time again, despite vast differences in communities, the study found that law enforcement officers firmly believed that the populations they serve had primarily negative perceptions of them. This pervasive feeling is not new. Consider this excerpt from a study of police behavior by William Westley, a social scientist:

The policeman finds his most pressing problems in his relationships to the public. His is a service occupation but of an incongruous kind, since he must discipline those whom he serves. He is regarded as corrupt and inefficient by, and meets with hostility and criticism from, the public. He regards the public as his enemy, feels his occupational [responsibilities] to be in conflict with the community, and regards himself to be a pariah. The experience and feeling give rise to a collective emphasis on secrecy, an attempt to coerce respect from the public, and a belief that almost any means are legitimate in completing an important arrest. These are for the policeman basic occupational values. They arise from his experience, take precedence over his legal responsibilities, [and] are central to an understanding of his conduct.[2]

Although this was written by someone familiar with the profession only from a research perspective, parts of it could have been written by the state trooper from Massachusetts or the police officer from Oregon. The negative perception is as real today as it was when Westley wrote about it in 1953.

Public Support of Police

It is very unfortunate that officers see themselves as distrusted and underappreciated, but the good news is that the Montana State research also points out that the law enforcement community holds numerous misperceptions about the way it is viewed. What the mainstream media report and what the public as a whole believes are not the same. The innovative research conducted in the summer of 2006 shows that there is overwhelming support for police officers and their efforts to reduce crime and keep neighborhoods safe.

Specifically, 85.3 percent of persons responding to the national survey Montana State conducted stated that they were supportive of the law enforcement community, whereas only 10 percent stated that they were not. On the street, it is easy for an officer to believe that the opposite is true, because they generally do not come into contact with one of the 85.3 percent. Officers are judging the people that make up their day-to-day work world

not based on an objective view of reality but rather based on powerful misperceptions that bias their attitudes and behavior.

Interestingly, the study found that two important groups do feel that law enforcement officers are not generally trustworthy. First, African Americans were much more likely to report negative feelings; this is not surprising, according to the sociologist Loïc Wacquant, and is likely related to disproportionately high incarceration rates and withdrawal of governmental resources at all levels from poor black communities since the urban riots of the late 1960s.[3] As a result, the most visible daily representation of the government is now the police. With greater opportunity for contact comes greater opportunity for conflict—and greater opportunity for police officers to make mistakes or either intentionally or unintentionally create negative perceptions. None of these issues foster much support for the police.

Another group that has less than a favorable opinion of law enforcement officers in general comprises victims of such crimes as impaired driving. Although the overall numbers of support are high, the survey's results indicate at least two areas of opportunity to improve perceptions of the profession.

Even though some of the survey's results were not ideal, these results are a great starting point for launching a positive community norms campaign to improve morale and public service in law enforcement agencies. The general public supports what the profession does in the community regardless of negative perceptions of some members of society and especially negative press coverage. But officers themselves are not immune to the effects of media reports on their actions.

Media Influence on Public Perception

Police officers take seriously news representations of what they do. They believe that the way the profession is represented in the media both reflects and creates a real public sentiment.

Highlighting this predicament in 2006, a 23-year-old black male was killed by three police officers—an incident that was especially emotional because it occurred just hours before the man was to be married. Most police departments have an internal review policy, and the city police department that was involved has a very well-developed review protocol. In an effort to avoid causing interference, or the perception of interference, in other processes (such as internal and external investigations), the department does not release the results of its reviews until those other processes have run their course. For this reason, very little is said on behalf of the police department during this lengthy period of time.

Meanwhile, the media has a limited amount of information with which to generate a story. Invariably much of that information comes from the angry and grieving relatives of the deceased. So the story that is told for many months, as the department's legal and internal review processes continue, is very much one-sided, almost always casting the police in a negative light. In the present case, the state criminal charges against the officers were dismissed. However, the officers still potentially face federal civil rights charges as well as internal sanctions from their department.

It is easy to put oneself in the place of an inexperienced 23-year-old police officer watching the evening news. She watches the story unfold and sees days and weeks of follow-up stories that send the same message: the public believes that the police are violent, corrupt, and untrustworthy. This is not the picture of appreciated and valued public service that the young officer had in mind when she raised her hand and took the oath of office perhaps only one year earlier.

However, the data obtained from the Montana studies indicate that, frankly, police officers and administrators have not given the public enough credit. As mentioned earlier, the national survey information states that more than 80 percent of individuals across the United States describe themselves as supportive or very supportive of the law enforcement community. Approximately the same number feel safer when they see a law enforcement officer nearby, compared to only 11 percent who do not feel safer in an officer's presence.

The national survey results show that people typically disregard media reports when it comes to forming their own opinion of law enforcement officers. In reality, people's opinions are formed by their own experiences with law enforcement agencies. How people are treated by officers and the behavior they actually observe in a

police-citizen encounter are the two major factors in determining their opinions. This is an important fact that savvy police administrators have driven home for years.

Good police officers are always aware of their physical surroundings. However, the same officers are often unaware that perception issues may be media driven. Officers across the United States have greatly overestimated the ability of the media to influence public opinion of policing.

In fact, data from the Montana State University public survey show that 77 percent of respondents stated that media coverage of law enforcement agencies did not change their opinion of police officers one way or another. Of the remainder, more people gained a more positive view of the profession through the media than a negative view. These numbers run totally counter to the perceptions of many law enforcement officers.

Internal Influence on Law Enforcement Attitudes

This negative way the law enforcement community believes the public perceives it is reinforced not only by the public and the media but often by senior officers as well: at police academies, at the station, in training, and in the lunch room. Biased media coverage only confirms what they already "knew" from years of police work and shared stories in the squad room.

Are there consequences to police officers believing that the public distrusts them? What happens if police administrators come to take for granted a culture of negativity? Can negative attitudes about, and expectations of, groups turn misperceptions into reality? The risk to police and sheriff's departments is that prolonged negative feelings can become self-fulfilling; an untrusted, unappreciated department can come to find itself at odds with a public it perceives as ungrateful, self-entitled, uncooperative, or worse—"stupid." This potentially dangerous situation not only can give rise to demeanor complaints against officers but can raise the stakes to the possibility of violence between officers and the public.

The potential for disaster begs the following question: what can police chiefs and sheriffs do to ameliorate the negative sentiments that their "troops" take home from their day-to-day encounters, their viewing of the news, and the culture of the squad room?

You never change things by fighting the existing reality. . . . To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.
        —R. Buckminster Fuller

Using Social Norms Theory to Transform the Culture of a Department

Social norms theory, a sociological theory that attempts to explain how the perceptions of a group can shape the group's behavior, suggests that when police officers come to believe that their peers have negative beliefs about the populations they serve, they are likely to take on those attitudes themselves.[4]

Social science research, including interviews, surveys, and observations of the public's attitudes toward the law enforcement community, can shed light on the reality of public support for law enforcement agencies. Such data reveal that police officers significantly misperceive the public's support for them. Chiefs, by sharing this information, then have the power to bring their employees' perceptions into agreement with reality.

Studies such as those conducted by Montana State University can be used to assist chiefs in transforming the culture of their agencies from negative to positive. In short, if chiefs want to change their agencies' culture, they need to encourage their officers to stop telling antagonistic stories about their relationship with the public. Data

gathered on what the public thinks of its agencies as well as what it considers to be serious problems allow agencies to have an objective sense of where they stand and how well they are doing in meeting public expectations. Officers will think and function differently when they are given an accurate sense of how their communities perceive and support them.

Why might changing police officers' perceptions of how the public views them transform their behavior? Social norms theory states that, to a large extent, people's behavior and attitudes are influenced by their perception of normal behaviors and beliefs within their social group. According to social norms theory, people tend to misperceive (that is, exaggerate) the negative behaviors and attitudes of their peers. If people think that negative behavior is typical, they are more likely to engage in that type of behavior.

But such perceptions are often incorrect. If negative behaviors or attitudes are perceived to be the standard in a social group, the social urge to conform will negatively affect overall behavior and attitudes of the group members. Alternatively, by educating a group about the sort of positive behavior that is in fact the usual and expected practice among their peers, behaviors and attitudes can be affected in a positive manner.

Integrating the "Thin Blue Line" into General Society

The law enforcement community has been described in countless ways, but arguably the most famous is its representation as the "thin blue line" that protects the law-abiding side of society from the criminal side.

It should come as no surprise, then, that the individuals who make up the thin blue line—which is actually not just blue but also brown, green, beige, and white should think of themselves as set apart from normal society. Since they form a boundary, they cannot truly belong to either side; for this reason, they usually belong only to each other. They are their own social group.

In most parts of the United States, law enforcement officers tend to associate only with other law enforcement officers and their immediate families. Even their families associate mainly with other law enforcement families. The result is a unique societal group with its own norms and practices—one that is susceptible to the phenomenon described by social norms theory. Knowing this fact gives police administrators the opportunity to take advantage of social science to improve morale within their departments, which in turn positively affects their service to the public.

Police chiefs and other ranking officers need to understand for themselves that their departments are overwhelmingly supported. One particular area that the public supports is the enforcement of the motor vehicle code. The surveys performed by Montana State University in 2006 indicated that the public believes that impaired-driving violations are a major threat to their personal safety and the safety of their friends and relatives. Moreover, they wanted to see police officers, district attorneys, and judges take an active and strong stand on offenses related to impaired driving.

The study also found that police officers typically thought there was minimal support for their activities related to impaired driving. Officers reported that this belief influenced their interest and willingness to enforce what in fact were popular laws because they believed that the public thought exactly the opposite. Officers need to be disabused of these impressions if they are to enforce impaired-driving laws—and indeed to perform any of their duties—with maximum effectiveness.

Knowing that a nationwide misperception exists is the first step toward eliminating it and boosting morale within law enforcement agencies. One concept that can help this cause is called the "science of the positive," the aim of which is to promote authentic community transformation through the adoption of a portfolio of applied strategies. This concept offers a new twist on social norms theory that may be appropriate for use in law enforcement agencies.

Turning the Tide of Misperception

Addressing social norms is a new and sometimes controversial approach to changing behaviors. A social norms campaign challenges people's commonly held perceptions about the environments in which they live

and the behavior of their peers, as well as their beliefs about how problems should be confronted. A campaign of this sort informs line officers, supervisors, and administrators of the realities of their respective positions within their communities. Agencies can improve the reception of such a campaign and reduce the inevitable criticisms of it if they educate key stakeholders and community members about social norms theory and win stakeholder and community support before the campaign begins.

To help people better understand and accept social norms, it can be helpful to frame it within the larger context of the science of the positive. The Positive Community Norms Model (PCN) is a process of promoting health and safety norms within a community based on the theory of the science of the positive. PCN incorporates multiple social change theories through a unifying community development process. Consistent with both the spirit of community policing and other law enforcement strategies, this model is a way to approach issues from a positive rather than a negative perspective. It is a move away from the media-driven "if it bleeds, it leads" sensationalizing mentality. PCN and the science of the positive hold that people's behavior can be shaped through positive modeling and reinforcement rather than through threats and punishment.

It is worth bearing in mind that many members of the media decided to enter their profession for the same reason that law enforcement officers enter theirs: to make a positive difference in their world.

The positive aspects of the law enforcement profession are well known to those who serve in it. However, officers can be affected when public perceptions and conversations are skewed in the media. It is critical to understand that to promote positive community norms, agencies must work proactively with the media and use the tools of social science. It is time for agencies to allow their perceptions to be buoyed by the reality of public support for their actions; through that positive affirmation, the law enforcement community can change the perceptions and the reporting of the media.

Framing this mission in this way calls to mind the words of a great visionary, R. Buckminster Fuller: "You never change things by fighting the existing reality. . . . To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete." ∎

Notes:

[1]MOST of Us Institute for Social Norms, "Americans' Attitudes toward Drinking, Driving, and Law Enforcement: The Results of a Telephone Survey" (unpublished, Montana State University, 2006).
[2]William A. Westley, "Violence and the Police," *American Journal of Sociology* 59 (July 1953): 35.
[3]Loïc Wacquant, "Deadly Symbiosis: Rethinking Race and Imprisonment in Twenty-first-Century America," *Boston Review* 27, no. 2 (April–May 2002),http://bostonreview.net/BR27.2/wacquant.html (accessed April 9, 2009).
[4]See, for example, H. Wesley Perkins and Alan D. Berkowitz, "Perceiving the Community Norms of Alcohol Use among Students: Some Research Implications for Campus Alcohol Education Programming," *International Journal of the Addictions* 21 (1986): 961–976.

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