

The BJA Executive Session on

# Police Leadership

2015

*The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership* is a multi-year endeavor started in 2010 with the goal of developing innovative thinking that would help create police leaders uniquely qualified to meet the challenges of a changing public safety landscape.

In support of an integrated approach to creating safe and viable communities across America, the project directors recruited 20+ principals from a range of disciplines. The principals, in turn, led national field teams of practitioners focused on the work of policing and the organization of the future.

To gain new insights on leadership, the *BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership* engaged police chiefs in documenting their own paths and invited leaders to participate in various audio and video forums to tell their stories and discuss the future of policing and police leadership.

Please visit our website, [www.bjaleader.org](http://www.bjaleader.org), to learn more about this project and to access a broad array of interactive, multimedia resources.

The principals are supported in their work by a team that includes project director Darrel W. Stephens, project strategist Nancy McKeon, and BJA Senior Policy Advisor Steve Edwards.

## Organizational Culture Eats Policy for Lunch

by

Chief Steve Anderson  
Metropolitan Nashville PD

### Forward

In December 2014, President Barack Obama signed an Executive Order authorizing The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. The final report of that Task Force was released to the public on May 18, 2015. Shortly afterwards, Chief Steve Anderson of the Metropolitan Nashville Police Department (MNPD) surveyed his department on the proposition that "Organization Culture Eats Policy for Lunch." On July 15, 2015, Chief Anderson wrote about his own reactions to the responses and included some of those responses. With his permission, we provide a brief excerpt from that email and a link to the full text below.

### From Chief Anderson's Email to the MMPD

... I must admit that your responses and analysis were much more perceptive than my initial understanding as to the gravity of this statement. Many of you correctly identified this statement as being utilized in the

report from The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing (page 11). The text from page 11 is as follows:

*There's an old saying, "Organizational culture eats policy for lunch." Any law enforcement organization can make great rules and policies that emphasize the guardian role, but if policies conflict with the existing culture, they will not be institutionalized and behavior will not change. In police work, the vast majority of an officer's work is done independently outside the immediate oversight of a supervisor. But consistent enforcement of rules that conflict with a military-style culture, where obedience to the chain of command is the norm, is nearly impossible. Behavior is more likely to conform to culture than rules. The culture of policing is also important to the proper exercise of officer discretion and use of authority, as task force member Tracey Meares has written. The values and ethics of the agency will guide officers in their decision-making process; they cannot simply rely on rules and policy to act in encounters with the public. Good policing is more than just complying with the law. Sometimes actions are perfectly permitted by policy, but that does not always mean an officer should take those actions. Adopting procedural justice as the guiding principle for internal and external policies and practices can be the underpinning of a change in culture and should contribute to building trust and confidence in the community.*

The first two times I read this report the meaning, and value, of this statement did not resonate with me. It went over my head, unnoticed. The third time, something made it pop off the page at me. It was then I realized that this was a concept that I knew and understood but would not have had the ability to articulate in such a succinct manner.

My eye is always on the future and where we need to be 5 years and 10 years from now. Occasionally, however, moments like this give me pause to examine the past. There was a time we did not have the caliber of people we have today, both in the sworn and non-sworn ranks. There was a time when we did not serve the public in the manner we do today.

When I was a rookie officer one of the first things I was told by many older officers (and supervisors) was to "Forget everything you learned at the Academy, we're going to teach you how to pole lease." First, I was puzzled as to why they would elect to substitute two words for the one word that would more accurately describe the concept they were talking about. Second, even as a rookie officer, it seemed nonsensical that we would maintain a Training Academy to indoctrinate new officers with the latest policies, procedures and law enforcement techniques, only to be told to forget everything learned over the last six months.

Clearly, as this same statement was repeated to me many times, the message being conveyed to me was:

- We are going to do things we way we have always done them.
- We are going to do things in a manner that best suits our purposes and not necessarily the purposes of the public.

- They can make all the policy they want to make, we are going to do what we are going to do.

Those days certainly exemplify the statement I asked you to give your thoughts about—Organizational culture eats policy for lunch. The culture of the MNPd was eating the policy of the MNPd for lunch—and for breakfast and for dinner and a late night snack.

As I have said earlier, today, we, as a police department, are where we need to be. The public is very satisfied with the work you are doing. We have to take into account, however, that we need to evolve with the times. The way we do things now will likely not be the way we need to serve the public five and ten years from now. That is why we have formed a steering committee to work our way through the report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. Through this committee, the entire department will have the opportunity to be involved in the process.

Again, I was overwhelmed by the very insightful comments and analysis in the responses submitted. Maybe the most inspiring response was the very simple, "You made me think." That is what we have to do for the future. The expectations of the public are constantly increasing. Much thought, from everyone in the department, will be needed to formulate the procedures that will be necessary to meet those expectations.

Most of my best thoughts come from other people. Thank you for helping us form the thoughts that will shape our future.

Below are excerpts from some of the responses:

## Responses

1. The phrase implies that policy is at the mercy of the organization's culture. By its very nature, organizational culture tends to determine the efficacy of policies throughout the organization. Policy is much easier to change than culture. Policy can be changed in an instant, but culture takes time to develop through action and reaction; thus it is much more difficult to change. Organizational culture and policy can, and should be in harmony. Fostering a culture to accomplish this, rests in the leaderships' ability to create the culture within the organization to achieve the desired equilibrium.
2. It is difficult to determine the meaning of this quote, when the quote stands alone and not associated with an article.

But my interpretation in the police arena is the organizational culture will sometimes over ride policy. As an older officer I have seen organizational culture do certain things that although not in policy it was ok because that's "the way we have always done things". But throughout my career in this department I have notice a shift away from that type of behavior.

3. I was watching a COPS episode that was filmed in Nashville on TV a while back...in this particular episode, a few officers were taking a subject into custody and one of the officers had a cigarette hanging from his mouth. It struck me as funny, because the thought of an officer walking around today with a cigarette in his mouth is unbelievable.
4. Organizational culture and integrity go hand and hand in police departments. Just as we train muscle memory with our tactics so should we build a system of shared values that govern our behavior, even when no one is around; sort of an ethics muscle memory. That is “organizational culture” as I see it and when you have that foundation in place, the policies are eaten for lunch because you know the right thing to do and you do it because you want to be a better person, not because you don’t want to get in trouble.
5. “Organizational culture eats policy for lunch,” yes it usually does, all day and every day. “Organizational Culture,” also eats young officers for lunch. “Organizational Culture” can cripple a police career. I was a young officer with a few years on the police department, and made the biggest mistakes of my career. The mistakes I made were not mistakes when looking at them through the rose colored “Organizational Culture” glasses but they were huge when looked at through policy. My mistakes were glowing when viewed through departmental policy and never was I more embarrassed. I came on the police department when the culture was “Whatever it takes,” and I bought into this mentality, and it was reflected in my policing. I had supervisors that would literally sign the 108 and give back for me to fill out after the arrest was made.” I had supervisors that you would only see at roll call, and if you had a question you would not bother them, but rely on the senior officer for the answer. These supervisors were some of the most liked, and everyone wanted to work for them. I made poor decisions, and a lot of these decisions were based on the” Organizational Culture,” on the police department at the time.

These supervisors were the leaders, and they would perpetuate this “Organizational Culture,” that was in direct conflict with departmental policy. This culture changed and it needed to, but for me it was too late. I view policy now, using the analogy of an umbrella that I and my officers want to be protected within policy. I often tell my officers now, that I was stupid and I thought I knew everything, but needed someone to bring me in under this umbrella of departmental policy.

When I came on the police department you carried around the policy in large books in the trunk of your police car, they were so close but yet you were so far away from them. “Organizational Culture” however was always with you. As a young officer you would hear, forget about what you learned in the police academy, you are on the streets now, and the real learning begins. A supervisor would bring you in and inspect your policies to make sure you had signed for them. These policies were rarely discussed and less time was spent on analysis or application. The times and I have both changed, and it was necessary.

As a leader now, I take every moment for a little preventive maintenance with my officers. As part of this maintenance we discuss policies, and if I ever see any resemblance in them of my younger me I root it out. No longer can officers adopt the mentality of, “Whatever it takes,” but actions should be guided by policy and not the ever changing “Organizational Culture.” I firmly believe in the quote, “In my view, good police work is something far different from catching the criminal at any price, It is equally important that the police, as guardians of the law, fulfil their responsibility to obey its commands scrupulously, for in the end life and liberty can be as much endangered from illegal methods used to convict those thought to be criminals as from the actual criminals themselves.” *Spano v New York*, 360 U.S. 315, 320.

6. Organizational culture eats policy for lunch to me means that a conditioned mindset will not be changed by policy. The interpretation provided by the USDOJ of the majority of police officers having a warrior mindset that will not be changed by policy into that of a guardian style mindset

Each of us, individually, must constantly evaluate our contribution to the culture by evaluating and taking into account the public expectation

Years ago I watched a seminar conducted by a sheriff or chief from a department in South Carolina and it has stuck with me since. He described policy, laws, and the Constitution as an umbrella for police officers. This umbrella protects officers from civil liability, criminal liability, and helps to ensure justice for the guilty. Our policy grants us all of these protections. If someone decides to work outside this protective umbrella we find ourselves open to civil litigation sometimes personally and sometimes with the government we serve. Certainly if someone decides to violate laws then they are subject to arrest and the end of their career. If we do not follow policy we have the potential to harm victims who expect us to follow policy to bring the guilty to justice. Detective Furman in the O.J. Simpson case).

This umbrella requires all personnel to work under it, support it, and to be content to have these protections. If your organizational culture does not do these things then the umbrella fails and the entire department, citizenry, and government suffer. This is similar to the illustration that an organization culture that doesn't have policy interwoven within it simply overrules policy and thus “eats it for lunch.” We must all work to communicate and demonstrate the importance of policy to each other and to new officers on the department.

7. At roll calls we always talk about how we must effectively communicate to the citizenry, so they understand what we are doing, why we are doing it, and how we are doing it. We want the citizens to understand our motives and what we are trying to accomplish with them – not in spite of them. We must have “buy in” from the citizens for us to be successful. I believe the same is true when dealing with our officers and supervisors. We must communicate effectively what we as an organization is doing, why we are doing it, and how we plan to do it. I also believe



we need their input so they can feel they are part of it, and then policy and culture blend.

8. This means taking different approaches to things that we have “always” done. Police officers, including myself, often resist change. We often resist change for no other reason than it is change. I do believe that it is time to analyze ourselves and find ways to improve our service to the community. As I read the report, I felt a sense of pride, because we have already implemented most of the action items and recommendations that have been set forth. We are definitely ahead of the curve. However, that does not mean that we can sit back and be content with our accomplishments
9. As Officers we should be flattered by the high standards we are held. Society expects us to be flawless in all aspects of our jobs, and we should do our best to deliver.
10. The culture of our organization is our personality and character. This means each person in the department shapes and forms our department’s personality/culture. We show our culture/personality each time anyone in the organization has an interaction of any kind. These interactions, big or small, leave a lasting impression on all we interact with each minute. Some of the most crucial functions we have as an organization are to foster a culture professionalism, compassion, integrity, and transparency. This culture puts our strengths and weaknesses on display, which in turn holds us accountable for improving with each interaction. We have to strive to improve each day.

Cultures are carried over into all aspects of our lives. Anyone who has kids, learns how cultures influence and impact their kids very quickly. This is called the school of hard-knocks. Kids with homes that require discipline and responsibility develop and mature into individuals who willingly make positive impacts on the ones around them. I would contend that there is little difference in the organization and the family. I continually work on this in my on family and stumble often.

11. By the nature and importance of the responsibilities law enforcement agencies have, there must be trust by the public we serve. By showing the public we have nothing to hide it can help us defeat the “us against them perception many may have” and ultimately further our goal to serve the public.
12. For years a common phrase in Law Enforcement was “Protect and Serve”, but some agencies using this Motto and similar Mission Statements operated with an “Us vs. Them” mentality. It does not matter what phrase you hang on the wall or what policies are in the Manual if in the daily operations we accept or encourage behavior that is contradictory to our true mission and purpose; Reduce Crime and Improve Quality of Life within our Community. It is for this reason that it is the responsibility of every member of the organization to hold themselves and each other to the highest standards and treat everyone they encounter (including each

other) with the same respect and quality of service we would want our family members treated with.

13. I think back to when I was in the formative years of my police career and how I was susceptible to be influenced in some ways by this very notion. I know that my resolve to uphold the law and citizens' constitutional rights was always sound. But, I remember an undercurrent of organizational culture in those days which subtly espoused that some ends justify some means. Maturity often comes with experience if you allow it. I'm a different person than I was a decade or even maybe a year ago. I'm so glad that eighteen years of police training, a law school education coupled with much more departmental and social awareness these days, has solidified in my mind the understanding that even a moderate dose of organizational culture is a cancer.
14. We have policy and procedures that guide us along the 25, 30, 35+ year career, but we must adapt to the culture changes (i.e., social media, community interaction-CoCo's, electronic crimes, etc.) along the way. If we policed now, like officers did 25 years ago, Nashville would be a disaster.

**You are Invited to**  
**Respond with your thoughts on this topic here...**

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