

The BJA Executive Session on

Police Leadership

2017

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, 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 co-directors Darrel W. Stephens and Nancy McKeon, and BJA Senior Policy Advisor Steve Edwards.

Creating an Innovative Platform for Officer Engagement

by

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In *Behind the Badge*, the PEW Research Center reports the results of its recent survey of police officers across the country.¹ What emerges is a portrait of a profession whose members understand the critical nature of their job and are proud of the job they do. But what also emerges is a portrait of a profession whose members are personally impacted by the police-public turmoil around them. Furthermore, they do not always feel supported or included by their own leaders.

Leaders may want to consider allowing the conflicts and tensions embedded in the PEW findings to surface in a productive way within their departments. In this brief article, we outline some of those findings and suggest a creative way to address them.

¹ For details of the study's methodology, see [PEW Research Center report Behind the Badge](#), January 2017, p. 90.

PEW Findings: Complicated Perceptions, Underlying Conflicts

The conflicts revealed in the PEW findings can be seen as external (police-public) and internal (police-department).

External Conflicts: On the external side, police must deal with a kind of baseline conflict at the heart of their job: 62% of officers see themselves as equally protectors and enforcers, 31% see themselves primarily as protectors and 8% see themselves primarily as enforcers. An equally striking differential came from the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing which highlighted roles for the police as Guardians vs. Warriors. The contemporary environment further complicates those differences.

Overwhelmingly (86%), officers say that police work has become harder in this era of police-black incidents and 84% say they now worry more about their own safety.² In fact, officers worry more that their fellow officers will act too slowly rather than that they themselves will act too quickly. While many report that they received thanks from a member of the public in the month before the survey, two-thirds reported that they received verbal abuse in the same period. In general, police do not believe the public understands their job or the risks they face. They also largely believe public protests of police use of force incidents are driven by entrenched anti-police bias rather than by genuine concern for police accountability. Half (51%) of police officers compared to only 29% of employed adults say their job nearly always or often frustrates them. Finally, police officers fall behind other employed adults by ten points (42 vs. 52%) when it comes to a measure of job fulfillment.

Internal Conflicts: Internal conflicts have to do with police-department dynamics. Most officers (74%) are very satisfied or satisfied with the departments they work for. Far fewer (only ~30%) are happy with the direction their leaders are taking their departments. Officers who are out there every day in communities have a less positive view of the public than their supervisors do. 56% of officers say they have become more callous since joining the force. While they believe disciplinary procedures as defined are fair, they also feel that officers who consistently do a poor job are not held accountable. There is high expressed agreement (65%) with the usefulness of treating the public with respect and fairness but of those 65% less than half think their leaders support that approach. Finally, across all departments, less than 20% of survey respondents report that they are always/usually asked for input into matters affecting them while more than 40% say they are hardly ever or never asked. Even acknowledging that inclusion is more difficult in large departments, easier in smaller ones, the numbers overall are not impressive.

² The authors wish to point out that there are differences in some of the data based on size of the department. For example, large departments are more impacted by police-black incidents but on the other hand, officers in large departments report that more has been done by their departments to repair/build relationships with black communities. Furthermore, it is also important to point out those officers in all geographies and size departments report the effects of national incidents on their work and attitude toward work.

Making the Case for a Leadership Response

The Pew findings should be a real eye-opener for police leadership. Based on these findings, police leaders may want to take a lesson from the community policing history that has championed community engagement and begin to develop a platform for officer engagement. To this end, leaders should consider engaging with police officers just as they are engaging with the community and collaborating to solve problems.

We recognize that not all leaders may think that a response to the PEW data is required. After all, officers are proud of their work and satisfied with their department. Right? Also, don't employees everywhere question leadership? As leaders, we might be tempted to question these perceptions because we ourselves have become engaged in critical thinking and evidence-based analysis of conflicts and solutions.

However, we think a strong argument can be made that today's police leaders should take on the perceptions and conflicts reflected in the PEW data. In contrast to other professions, most do not have the power or face the risks of policing; do not have a fundamental duality at their core; are not regularly assaulted by the public; and most professions are not at the center of national controversy. We believe giving these perceptions and conflicts a platform could pay off significantly. Doing so has the potential to improve the delivery of police services, to bridge seamlessly into community problem solving, and to help repair the disaffection and misaligned perceptions that have come between police and the people they serve. It also could improve the satisfaction and fulfillment of the job.

Engaging Officers: Taking an Innovative Peer Based Approach

What is the best way to draw out officers and get their perspectives on what is happening in their communities and what they are encountering day to day?

Leaders may already be ticking off all the potential negatives in bringing officers together to air conflicts: such events will turn into gripe sessions; the most discontent will dominate; officers don't have the big picture; this can only turn into us versus them. These negative perceptions are real, based in part on the all too common events in which the emphasis begins with or devolves into personal problems and in which the participants make their remarks to the person(s) at the front of the room who mostly listens and makes soft promises to do something.

We recommend that police leaders adapt a new approach – introducing opportunities that focus on situations that worked and on upcoming challenges that provide lateral discussions among peers, that are facilitated rather than led, and that allow officers to learn how to see the positive when everything seems to be falling apart.

For the sake of illustration, we will call these gatherings *Engagement Roundtables*. Peers engaging in problem solving and collaborating to improve service delivery, community relations and job fulfillment.

In this engagement approach, officers gather in small groups to talk about work and issues they are facing. The dynamic is lateral with all participants on an equal footing. It is not be-

tween the group and a leader. The leader is replaced by a facilitator who guides the process, but is not the problem solver. In contrast, the officers become the problem solvers.

The facilitator should use a frame of some kind to guide the process and keep it productive. One model to consider is *Appreciative Inquiry*, which can use a set of questions like these:

- What worked well this week/month/since we last met?
- Why did it work well?
- What problems did you encounter?
- How could you handle a situation like that differently in the future?
- What is coming up?
- How are you thinking of handling it?

Information about *Appreciative Inquiry* is available online. The questions can be asked of each participant in turn or by volunteer and peers ask questions and offer suggestions. The following session can open with a review of solutions from the previous session.

What constitutes an issue? What worked well could include a tense encounter successfully deescalated. In contrast, problems could include an angry exchange with an individual shooting cell phone footage at an arrest scene and yelling taunts. Upcoming events could include a chronic problem, or a scheduled neighborhood meeting. All aspects of the job apply.

Let's be clear about what these work-focused collaborative problem solving roundtables are NOT:

- Not a gripe session or a therapy session
- Not a transaction between the group and the leader or facilitator
- Not confirmation that we have a lousy, unappreciated job
- Not a focus on just what went wrong
- Not a one and done meeting or task force

Here is what these sessions ARE:

- A session based on experiences and problem solving
- A peer discussion with the help of a facilitator
- Recognition that we have a tough professional job to do
- A focus on the future, on what can be different
- An ongoing dedicated event that stands on its own (is not incorporated into other meetings or training)

Engagement Roundtables: Making Them Happen

As with any new or different approach, these work-focused collaborative problem-solving roundtables will have a learning curve for the organization and the individual. They may be greeted with suspicion, they may get off to an awkward start, and the road to collaborative problem solving may initially feel a little rocky. We suggest a few guidelines that may ease the way.

- Design your approach to meet your department's situation. Consider not only size but also history with inclusion and training. Consider community, history of police-public relations.
- Determine if/how to use *Behind the Badge*. The report should be available to officers (and may already be). You could decide to hold first sessions framed by some of the findings to draw officers out by asking for their agreement or disagreement with the data.
- Structure around small groups of no more than 25. The event should be dedicated, not part of a regular meeting or training. The roundtable groups could be natural work units or not. Many configurations could work based on the department. Roll out with a few groups and move through the organization. Finally, think about starting with the command staff itself.
- Use facilitators. While such groups can become self-directed, early on and possibly for some time, skilled facilitation will be essential to their success. These facilitators need to be able and willing to create a peer dynamic. The right answer for your department will depend on resources and experience. But the key here is to find people with the right predisposition, not people in a particular role. In fact, hierarchy is contra-indicated in this peer environment! Choices to consider include a selection of officers from across ranks, a subset of sergeants, a few members of the command staff, or an outside facilitator with a suitable style.
- Provide support and expectations from the top. As we suggested above, a chief might want to begin with a command staff roundtable to get a feel for how this approach works. You might want to use PEW findings as a frame. The chief should communicate to the department that we are trying an innovative approach to talking about our work and solving day-to-day challenges in a productive peer exchange. Be clear about how this fits into where the department is now.
- Absorb the process. Over time, these roundtables can become part of the "way we do things." Sessions may become self-directed once everyone internalizes the frame and approach. It may however, be more conducive to long term success to have designated facilitators who do this facilitation as a recognized part of their professional development.

Engagement Roundtables: Sustaining Innovation

Introducing officer *Engagement Roundtables* starts at the top in terms of leadership support and circulating information throughout the department, and then following up to show that there is a serious intent to support officers and gradually change how they see their jobs and do their work.

Continue to tailor as you go along, recognizing that you are engaging in a change process and that you are creating an innovative platform as a way to engage your officers in collaborative problem solving.

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