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Character and Ethics Within the Law Enforcement Community

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ABSTRACT

A curriculum involving ethics and character is one that every law enforcement agency should have as a part of its training program in order to maintain the public's trust and support. Since ethics training is not state mandated, police agencies are left to decide on their own, if and when to implement this type of training. Determining the lack of emphasis of training in this area can be quite challenging as training programs vary greatly across the state.

Several Texas police chiefs were surveyed regarding the importance of ethics training at various career levels. These officers were also questioned to determine if any resistance was encountered during this specialized training. All of the officers surveyed seemed to understand the value and need of strong ethics training programs. However, according to the surveyed individuals, disruptive schedules and a lack of continued emphasis on ethics training has become troublesome and therefore led to a diminished awareness in this area.

Continued and uniform ethics training is of vital importance to both police agencies and the public they serve. Because of this, the Texas Legislature is working a Law Enforcement Professionalism and Standards Act, which would address the statewide shortcomings relating to ethics training. Holding all peace officers accountable for any and all misbehavior is a critical aspect of a well run, organized policing agency. Moreover, ethnics training can further enforce the concepts that can potentially eliminate officer misconduct.

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INTRODUCTION

In holding the public's trust, basic character traits and standards of conduct are fundamental cornerstones for those entering the law enforcement profession. Most police departments provide initial character and ethics training for their officers, but fall short during subsequent continuing education. More and more police departments are realizing that concepts (regarding character and ethics) do not have a permanent and lasting impression once taught. Many young, impressionable officers gravitate to experienced officers who are often deficient in character and ethics. If this situation is allowed to continue, the experienced officers become supervisors and the cycle of promoting officers devoid of these basic character traits continues from generation to generation. Additionally, moral bravery (in the context of officers reporting the bad conduct of fellow officers) can be difficult to cultivate due to the attitude that police should stick together no matter what occurs.

The purpose of this research is to determine whether or not there is a lack of cooperation from administrative level police supervisors in implementing ethics training due to their own deficiencies in this area. The Texas Legislature mandates continuing education covering several subjects. However, ethics is not among them. A good standard of conduct requires a working knowledge of basic character traits whose list varies slightly from expert to expert. These character traits should be a continual work-in-progress to ensure a proper balance.

The method of inquiry will consist of the analysis of research by experts in the ethics field and by those who have followed the decline of ethics within major metropolitan police departments. A survey addressing character and ethics issues will also be employed. This should provide insight as to why such a critical component of police work is often ignored or minimized in training manuals.

Since most departments rely on the input and recommendations from upper level command staff in the areas of training, the anticipated finding is that there is reluctance from this group pertaining to character and ethics training due to their own deficiencies in this area. The more significant finding should reveal that the highest levels of command allow unprofessional behavior to continue. Subsequently, by persistently ignoring such an important issue, morale and job satisfaction will continue to decline. As public distrust increases, it will become harder to effectively perform the simplest of tasks when dealing with the public. Police will always be held to a higher standard of conduct. If developing a higher quality officer is the objective, then more emphasis will naturally be placed in the area of character and ethics training. It is the author's belief that it is imperative for the law enforcement community strive to maintain the standard of conduct that is expected by those they serve. The public tends to be more aggressive in policing itself when they trust the members of their own law enforcement agencies. Consequently, respect and trust are the result of maintaining high ethical standards.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

The issue of character and ethics training within any police organization should be of great importance since the public often holds law enforcement professionals to a higher standard of behavior than they do personnel in other jobs.

Moral soundness needs to be the benchmark used by police leaders in deciding disciplinary decisions, not expediency or public opinion. Police executives must engage in quality deliberations when confronting disciplinary decisions. (Barry,1999). Determining if the lack of ethical practices is the result of unethical supervisors can be difficult to determine due to the absence of a nationwide training program which specifically addresses ethics.

Measurements of the inclination of the U.S. police to resist the temptations to abuse the rights and privileges of their occupation are likely to prove useful for academic, historical, and

cross-cultural studies of police. For police administrators, however, measurements of the culture of integrity of individual police agencies are more prevalent than national averages, which often masks significant differences among agencies. (Klockers, 2000).

Police departments finding themselves under public scrutiny are more often faced with misconduct issues versus those involving the mishandling of criminal cases. It is for this reason that the police community must place a greater emphasis not only on its recruitment and hiring practices, but their initial and ongoing ethics training. For police-public cooperation, there must be a respect of the police by the public. Where this trust does not exist, because of a lack of honesty or openness, the channels of communication between the police and the public are clogged and the police must desperately struggle on alone. (Glenn, 2003).

Many departments lack of standards and training for police executives have materialized in several ways. Some departments had height requirements for employment, while others required some officers have a certain number of years of service before promotional consideration, regardless of the officer's ability. Many officers would continue along with no plan in place, hoping for the best outcome as ethical issues arose. As the public demanded better accountability from its police departments, police executives and researchers looked at ways to improve both the quality of newly hired officers and the cultivation and maintenance of professional standards.

The 1960s proved to be a historic decade as police were somewhat ineffective as both war and racially motivated protesters confronted them. Police were often left to handle these situations as they saw fit. The result was often violent and what was perceived as barbaric behavior. As more police operations were being captured by television, not only were their

actions being criticized, but also the need for a more highly trained officer. Left to monitor themselves, the police were ineffective in improving the public's trust.

Several national commissions were assembled to address police misconduct and inefficiency. Community policing was utilized to combat the negative perception that the public had for the police. Working more closely with the public was productive in healing wounds. As effective as community policing was at the time and continues to be, it wasn't enough. Communities still voiced a need for a more educated, professional officer, which would require mandated curriculum to ensure consistent compliance.

Even though minimum-training requirements were adopted by many agencies, it was still the responsibility of individual departments to implement additional training to specifically target ethics issues. Even as turnover occurs at command staff levels, new polices regarding ethics may or may not be implemented. The police role includes that police officers understand what they must be, and what they must do, both individually and as police officers. This, in turn, requires a clear understanding of what is expected (and in fact necessary) in terms of police ethics and conduct. (IACP training, key #475).

Surveys have proven to be somewhat successful in showing the need for uniform training and the continued enforcement of ethics. They have also produced many ideas aimed at producing ethics models for police agencies to use. The area of consistent enforcement though is problematic. As the research progressed, a pattern emerged as to what areas would be scrutinized in order to recruit, hire and retain the most desirable individuals for the police profession.

Hiring directly off of the street, with little or no experience/training, was once an accepted practice within the law enforcement community. Prior to mandated academy training, a

new recruited officer was placed with an experienced officer to receive on the job training. Once the training officer felt comfortable with the trainee's progress and newly acquired skills, they were allowed to patrol on their own. It was a luxury to hire an officer who brought with them experience from another agency.

As the demand for a better-trained officer and liability increased, hiring practices began to change. Fewer departments were hiring without either prior service from another agency or basic academy training. As background checks became more stringent, so did the requests from investigators for information regarding the applicants' character.

Early on, the training recruits received, were from officers with differing levels of experience, training and philosophies. This often led to confusion and indecisiveness on the part of the new officer as they tried to mesh all the "training" they received. Due to a lack of leadership and/or supervisory training for those who trained the new recruits, a more formalized and structured program was surfacing across the country. The F.T.O. or field training officer was now being selected for their ethics and their ability to develop new officers. By rotating the officer between several F.T.O.'s, the new officer stood a better chance of succeeding by combining the differing patrols styles they encountered while in training.

As more effective recruitment, training and hiring practices began to dovetail, the recruit's introduction and continued reinforcement of policy and procedure were vital in ensuring that they not only were well versed, but also understood the reasoning behind those policies and procedures. If not instructed to read and understand the policies that directed their departments, many officers carried out their duties without much thought given to the potential liability of their actions. By understanding those policy and procedures, officers were less likely to stray, knowing that they would be held accountable.

The current state of ethics training within the law enforcement community continues to evolve towards statewide standardized programs. States such as Texas are introducing legislation which not only will hold chief administrators accountable for the actions of their officers, but also provide the framework for polices that will improve the quality of entry-level and in-service law enforcement training.

The trend towards a more ethical, better-trained officer is one that benefits the entire community. Additionally, law enforcement professionals, as a whole, are less elusive and more willing to respond to issues that in the past they felt were not police related. The result is a more involved community, one that is motivated to partner with the police in an effort to combat criminal activity.

METHODOLOGY

Analyzing the way in which character and ethics are promoted by policing entities has been exhaustively researched. As more and more research is conducted, just as many solutions are recommended. It is proposed that this research will be very beneficial to the extent that police departments are able to tailor their policies and procedures using various methods and recommendations based upon the size and makeup of their departments.

The purpose of this research is to determine if a lack of cooperation exists from administrative level supervisors in implementing ethics training, which is possibly due to their own deficiencies in this area. The research should reveal that supervisors who are responsible for training curriculum might be reluctant or unwilling to pursue and promote ethics training for fear that their own unethical behavior would be revealed.

Information from books, journals and other articles relating to this area are to be utilized for reference. Additionally, a questionnaire will be used to more specifically address the how

ethics training is implemented and how it is received by supervisors. The questionnaire will be sent only to police chiefs for completion. No identifying information will be requested in an attempt to solicit more open and honest responses.

FINDINGS

The overwhelming majority of law enforcement executives across America encourage the members of their organizations to perform their duties in an ethical manner. However, a struggle exists when situations involving ethics surface. Police leaders have historically attempted to weed out unethical officers. In the past, this approach was somewhat effective in exhibiting to the public that bad conduct would not be tolerated and it also sent a message to the rest of the department that they too could be weeded out due to unethical behavior. Administrators would simply shift the blame creating a temporary fix without adequately addressing the core issue(s). The real solution consisted of a structured and aggressively monitored ethics program which begins at the recruitment level.

The intent of this research was to determine whether or not police officials at the highest levels were reluctant in implementing ethics training due to their own past and possibly current unethical behavior. The vast majority of those in positions of implementing and/or monitoring ethics training and the ethical behavior of the officers they oversee are extremely ethical themselves. Issues that confront these command level officers include workload and time consuming activities which disrupt their schedules. A lack of downward supervision, emphasizing ethical practices also lead to minimal emphasis of standards of conduct.

Eighty questionnaires were mailed out and sixty-two (77.5%) were completed and returned. Of those returned, personnel breakdowns were as follows: total sworn officers = 1082, supervisors including the chief = 270. Information gathered from returned surveys indicated an

approximate supervisor to officer ratio of 25%. The importance of ethics training at various points of an officer's career was also reviewed. Since most officers move to different assignments and assume more responsibility as their careers proceed, it would make sense that character and ethics training continues as well.

Police executives can cultivate a more positive and progressive ethics program if they themselves continually promote its benefits. If ethics are seen as a vitally significant part of one's job, starting with the Chief, well trained supervisors will assume greater responsibility in ensuring all personnel follow suit. All surveyed police chiefs agreed that ethics training was extremely important at every point in an officer's career. As indicated by the data provided, this training should be ongoing to maximize its effect.

Table one (below) describes the level of importance of ethics training at various periods of an officer's career.

	<u>Level of Importance</u>				
1	2	3	4	5	
Little Emphasis		Moderate Emphasis		High Emphasis	
	<u>Academy Training</u>				
0	1	4	7	50	
	<u>Field Training - New Hire</u>				
0	0	3	9	50	
	<u>Ongoing after Completion of Field Training</u>				
0	1	9	15	37	
	<u>Street Level Supervisor</u>				
0	0	9	8	45	
	<u>Administrative Level Supervisor</u>				
0	0	6	12	44	
	<u>Chief of Police</u>				
0	0	3	8	51	

Sixty-four percent of the respondents included character and ethics training as part of their training curriculum and only 11 of 62 chief administrators implemented this training on their own. Concerns or resistance from supervisors was minimal as only four were noted. This would seem to indicate that unethical supervisors are not the primary cause for a lack of ethics training, but rather the absence of training or lack of continued monitoring. A consistent pattern emerged from researched material as to suggested requirements relating to the training and maintenance of an ethical department. Key components included recruitment/hiring, training and policy/procedure.

It is very important for officers seeking employment to understand the emphasis a department places on its ethics program. Young officers perform better in an environment in which they understand the consequences of unethical behavior. A closely monitored probationary can assist in exposing potential ethical flaws of officers.

If properly selected and groomed, field training officers have the best opportunity to lay the groundwork in developing a good standard of conduct for the newly hired officer. The F.T.O. can establish a climate of trust the trainee feels comfortable with in discussing their opinions and what behavior is expected.

Many departments have problems in this area for many reasons. Their policy and procedure manuals may be too lengthy and difficult to understand. On the other hand, it may be too loosely constructed and allow broad officer discretion. The manual should be concise and to the point and F.T.O.'s should be responsible for ensuring that trainees not only read, but understand the contents and the reasoning behind them.

Disciplining the wayward officer can be challenging policy and procedures are not properly administered and enforced. Many times, supervisors are given too much discretion in

handling ethical violations. This often leads to perceptions of favoritism and inconsistent discipline. A simple system of progressive discipline, evenly applied can eliminate these misconceptions. Supervisors tend to overlook many situations if the system they operate under is time consuming and tends to create more problems than it solves. Progressive discipline takes pressure off the supervisor as policy and procedure will dictate most outcomes.

Employees look to their supervisors for guidance and support. This creates an atmosphere of trust. This trust is crucial in establishing a standard of conduct that reflects positively upon the department. Resolving conflict within police agencies will always create interesting challenges as long as the public they serve expect ethical behavior from its officers.

DISCUSSION/CONCLUSIONS

An unethical officer or department finds it extremely difficult to effectively perform those duties the public expects. As unethical behavior and poor conduct surfaces, questions arise as to the reasons behind the conduct.

The purpose of this study was to determine if a connection existed between unethical supervisors and their reluctance to encourage ethics training in their departments. Research for this paper indicated the need for strong effective leadership from the top down. There was not a clear and definitive pattern showing a lack of training in this area due to unethical behavior from supervisors or those in charge of training curriculum.

Data taken from the survey was encouraging in the sense that every respondent saw the need for ethics training at every stage of an officer's career. This study is very relevant to the law enforcement community as the public is more demanding of an ethically centered officer. The community is less tolerant of the wayward officer. These concerns must be addressed beginning with the interview process for perspective officers.

Top administrators carry the burden of ensuring that ethical compliance within their departments takes place. Consistent and fair enforcement of discipline relating to ethical violations is a key factor in how successful a department is. Taming the badge-heavy officer is less difficult if they are dealt with early on in their career, when most violations occur. Unfortunately, often personnel issues become increasingly difficult to resolve with the passage of time.

The absence of ethics training is more likely to exist in departments that lack forward thinking training coordinators versus those who possess unethical trainers. The “don’t fix what isn’t broken” philosophy must be replaced with one that promotes the establishment and continued evolution of training that parallel current and ongoing ethical concerns. Just as cultural diversity training was determined to be an area of concern, so should ethics. Mandating such training would be helpful in eliminating the risk that some agencies might “fall through the cracks” had such training not been mandatory.

In 2005, the 79th Texas legislative agenda may include the Law Enforcement Professionalism and Standards Act. If enacted, this act would increase entry level standards, promote more accountability in hiring and disciplinary practices, improve the management and utilization of state funds for law enforcement training, and increase professionalism of both line officers and police administrators.

With well over one thousand police agencies within Texas alone, the state would benefit by assisting the police community by finding ways to ensure that only the best qualified enter this critical area of public service. The introduction of ethics based legislation is proof that a need exists for mandated training in this area.

In the meantime, police should move forward in establishing progressive and proactive programs that include a recruitment and hiring practice that actively seeks out not only the most qualified applicant, but more importantly, those who already possess solid character traits that would naturally translate into a strong standard of conduct. A training program with a strong emphasis in ethics is a must. Field training officers need to be selected not only on their knowledge and experience, but their own standard of conduct and vision to become the best officer the department has to offer, one the community can trust and have faith in. Lastly, policies and procedures designed with heavy emphasis on officer conduct. This also eliminates supervisor guesswork when following a fair and balanced policy known by all.

Professional training aimed at upper level managers is on the rise. More and more chief administrators are taking advantage of this training. The result is a department which truly understands its mission. The community benefits as liability decreases and trust increases. The renewal of long stagnated community policing can re establish itself in a way that civic leaders once imagined. The creation of a program with strong ethics overtones is useless unless top administrators buy into it and realize the rewards of such a program. Instead of a revolving door agency, officers might enjoy one that is soundly grounded to support those who choose to make the right decisions for the right reasons. Support for those supervisors who have the responsibility to discipline those who choose to enforce the law in an unethical manner would be invaluable.

The basic character traits of trustworthiness, respect, responsibility, fairness, caring, and citizenship are sometimes difficult to find in one individual. The cultivation and development of these traits on a consistent basis, supported by all members of an agency, can only lead to an environment in which officers can realize their potential. Increased productivity and fewer

complaints, from both the public and officers themselves, are obtainable by-products of such a program.

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