The Bill Blackwood
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In Support of Multi-Agency
Critical Incident Review Boards

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A Leadership White Paper
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ABSTRACT

Police agencies are missing golden opportunities to enhance their ability to prepare for critical incidents because they do not share their lessons learned from the review of critical incidents with other agencies. Often, departments review their actions at the conclusion of critical incidents, i.e. natural disasters, active shooter situations, bank robbery responses, etc. Critical incident reviews are a rich source of information sometimes resulting in changes to policy, procedures, response plans, and budgetary requests for resources all in the name of improving officer safety and service delivery. Surrounding agencies typically do not reap the same benefits until the same or similar situation occurs for them.

Using journal articles, government reports, and information from fire service publications, this white paper explains why law enforcement agencies should take a multiple agency approach to establish critical incident review boards-- a board whose resulting conclusions are shared with multiple departments in an effort to improve the policies, procedures, responses, and an agency's resource readiness. Changes and modifications that come about as a result of a multi-agency review board process improve the safety of more officers and citizens without the need for additional incidents to occur. Law enforcement agencies will improve not only their policies, procedures, and response plans for future major incidents, they will also improve their relationships with outside agencies. This paper draws the conclusion that agencies will stand to benefit greatly through the multi-agency approach to reviewing critical incidents.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Page

Abstract

INTRODUCTION

A critical incident is best described as, "any event or situation that threatens people and/or their homes, businesses, or community" (Jones,Kowalk, & Miller, 2000, p. 4). A critical incident can, therefore, range from a natural disaster, such as a tornado or major flooding incident, to a bank robbery, shooting, or other situation involving a threat to life. It is difficult to predict these situations, including their size and magnitude, which make them very difficult to prepare for. Any preparation, however, may be vital to the successful management of these incidents. In the post 9/11 age of law enforcement, information and resource sharing through the review of critical incidents is a vital and necessary function in the preparation process. Many agencies conduct after incident reviews to learn what they did right, what they did wrong, and make necessary changes to ensure their future success; however, few share what they learned with other law enforcement entities. The review of a critical incident can result in changes to policy, procedure, and improved training (Faigin, 2011).

Information and resource sharing has become a mandate in post 9/11 policing. The events of that day make up one of the largest and most devastating critical incidents in American history. With a crime scene stretching from New York to Washington D.C. to Pennsylvania, the sheer size and magnitude of this incident has provided law enforcement agencies across the country with insight on preparing for similar types of events that might occur in their respective jurisdictions. Sharing information learned through the process of a post-critical incident review, even on a much smaller scale than that of 9/11, serves as an excellent opportunity to help keep

more officers safe, more departments prepared, and instill a sense of confidence in the community that public safety resources are capable of handling these events.

The results of the 9/11 Commission, a body of policy level appointees who conducted the in-depth review of the events surrounding 9/11, led to ground-breaking revelations regarding the shortcomings and long term conflict between intelligence and law enforcement agencies which, in their conclusion, might have led to the prevention of the most significant terrorist attacks in US history. The review and results of the 9/11 commission provided the back drop for the largest shift in multi-agency prioritization for federal law enforcement and intelligence agencies (National Commission for Terrorist Attacks, 2004). In the years following the Commission, government leaders begin to push for multi-agency collaboration across federal, state, and local law enforcement lines. In 2001, then United States Attorney General, John Ashcroft, made it quite clear that these agencies "must work together, sharing information and resources needed" to seek out and arrest terrorist cells operating within the US (Waxman, 2009, p.1). The relevance of sharing information with other agencies after a critical incident stretches far beyond the boundaries of capturing terrorists; although it is this event that has spurred this concept into what should be an emerging trend in law enforcement culture.

This white paper asserts the position that law enforcement agencies should partner with other departments in establishing multi-agency critical incident review boards to broaden learning opportunities, improve response plans, policies, and procedures, and improve multi-jurisdictional relationships. Using current scientific data on group success, government reports, and fire science data, this paper supports and

emphasizes the benefits of utilizing combined efforts to effect change within multiple agencies using a multi-agency approach to post incident reviews.

POSITION

As previously discussed, the review of critical incidents offers agencies an opportunity to learn about their strengths and weaknesses and how to build on them for future success. These are important lessons for today's progressive law enforcement agencies operating in the dynamic environment of major incidents. Sharing these lessons learned with other police agencies provides an opportunity to create many reciprocal relationships. For example, the agency sharing their incident provides information learned that may not have been encountered by other agencies. The review board format allows agencies that have never experienced a similar critical incident to return to their respective agencies and conduct a needs assessment to determine if there is a need for a change in policy, procedure, training, or resources. The review board format also allows the agency in which the incident occurred to receive input of their own from agencies who have encountered a similar incident or even additional perspectives for the purposes of pre-planning for a future situation (U.S. Fire Administration, 2008).

The dynamic that is created in this instance goes well beyond the lessons that are learned and shared with other agencies. The most important need that is served by a multi-agency learning approach is the development of positive, cohesive relationships built on trust, a trust that is developed in a review board, group setting. Law enforcement agencies develop long term relationships in other areas of expertise, primarily in the area of criminal interdiction task forces. Through these more structured

relationships, agencies develop long term working environments where intelligence regarding ongoing criminal enterprises is shared and encouraged. The development of a multi-agency critical incident review board acts as another opportunity for agencies to further develop their long term relationships which serve a mutual benefit. With the right structure, joint efforts in critical incident reviews also create a positive working relationship in the event that a future critical incident requires the same agencies to work directly with each other during an event. The pre-established relationship builds trust between the involved departments. Trust is recognized as the single most important piece to establishing an effective team or group environment and can lead to improved chances of a successful outcome (Lencioni, 2005).

Joint efforts in critical incident reviews lead to improved training and procedures due to the collective knowledge and experience of group members. Many agencies are looking for opportunities to reduce operating costs while maintaining and even improving current training standards (Solis, 2002). Combining with additional agencies to share the details of critical incidents allows officials to go back to their respective departments and provide training based on what they learned. This training provides departments with the opportunity to modify, enhance, and, in some cases, develop response procedures while adding a cost effectiveness component as well.

One way of looking at the concept of a multi-agency review board is in terms of developing a group environment. A group in this situation can best be described as any number of people who meet with each other over a period of time and can communicate with each other collectively and individually (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2008). The individuals that make up the group can come from different backgrounds, different agencies, and

different levels of knowledge and experience for the purpose of a predetermined set of goals or functions. A group environment promotes a greater diversity in experiences from the various group members. With an enhanced knowledge base of contributing group members, a group will tend to produce better results. In a study published by the American Psychological Association, the collective knowledge of groups was studied after the use of knowledge intervention; a process whereby individuals were allowed to create their own reference information based on their personal knowledge and experience in order to answer a set of questions. These individuals were then placed in groups to discuss their answers. The researchers found that those groups whose members were given a knowledge intervention, performed at a higher level in terms of their collective knowledge and discussion. The researchers concluded that individual group members bring a variety of knowledge and expertise which enhance the outcomes of the collective group (as cited in Bonner & Baumann, 2012).

In the case of a multi-agency review board, the group input is seen not only on the individual level but also at the agency level. For instance, one agency may be represented by three members who each have differing levels of experience and knowledge. Collectively, they bring the experience and knowledge of their department. The same is true of the participating agencies such that the base of knowledge and experience grows exponentially with each contributing department.

COUNTER POSITION

There are concerns that are relevant to the discussion of multi-agency review boards. One of the issues with combining efforts with other agencies is the size of the group. Group size relates directly with the success of the group in that as the group

size increases, the potential for disagreements also increases which can result negatively on the overall productivity of the group. In a recent study by the American Psychological Association, researchers observed the increase in counterproductive behavior as the size of the group increased. Specifically, they found that the as the group size increased, that the likelihood of one of more group members causing some sort of internal strife also increased. This increase, they observed, was also likely to spread throughout the rest of the group, ultimately leading to the groups' inability to meet it objectives (Aube, Rousseau, & Tremblay, 2011).

To prevent the increased potential for behavior that causes dysfunction within the group, it is imperative that the group maintain its focus on clearly defined and established goals. In addition to the focus of the group, the design of the group should be established well in advance of the group meeting. The group structure should be kept to a minimum by only bringing those with first-hand knowledge of an event and those who have the authority to make decisions for their departments. By establishing the proper structure and keeping the group focused clearly on the collective goals, the dangers of counterproductive behaviors will be dramatically reduced (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2008).

Group decisions in a multi-agency environment often result in the dangerous mentality known as groupthink. Groups developed for the specific purpose of reviewing a critical incident are placed in a high stress situation (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2008). The decisions that are made are often critical to the survival of an officer or member of the community. The very nature of the review process can often result in a collective

decision by a group that is contrary to sound judgment based on a rationalization that their decision is the only option available.

Groupthink often reveals itself through the belief that group members are invincible and incapable of error. To prevent groupthink, situations it is critical to establish the mechanisms by which groups make their decisions. Assigning a group deviant is also suggested. A deviant is tasked with questioning the decisions of the group by asking pointed questions and verifying that the group looked at the problem from all angles available before making a decision (Hellriegel & Slocum, 2008).

RECOMMENDATION

Almost everyone in law enforcement today can recall the tragedy of September 11, 2001. The post 9/11 environment has created a new era in policing, one that now requires agencies to work closer together; sharing information, intelligence, and response data. So many lessons were learned from a careful and meticulous review of the events leading up to and encompassing 9/11. The lessons that were learned created new governmental agencies and new national response policies. Certainly the most important lesson is that of the need to share intelligence data openly with other agencies. Even at the state and local levels, the notion of sharing information is a priority. Intelligence is shared to keep communities safe and agencies should share intelligence to keep our fellow officers safe. The opportunity exists to share information with officers from outside agencies which could save lives. Sharing information through the review of critical incidents on a multi-agency approach is one of the best methods to insure continued improvements to the safety of the communities served by every law enforcement agency.

Law enforcement agencies benefit from sharing the lessons learned with other agencies in several ways. Working relationships are strengthened, polices are brought to a best practice standard, responses to incidents are streamlined, and necessary resources are discovered. Multi-agency critical incident review boards that are set up in advance, with goals and outcomes established, will help reduce and even prohibit the development of a groupthink mentality. Additionally, because the roles of the members are clearly identified, group dysfunction is reduced even in a large group setting.

Before a review board can be set up, agencies must first make a decision about whether a review board would benefit them or would serve to benefit others. This decision may be based on an agency's geographic location as well as the type of incident involved. An agency near a major metropolitan area may find review boards more logistically feasible as compared with an agency serving in a rural area with few if any surrounding agencies.

Keeping this in mind, agencies in the metropolitan areas could take a proactive step in helping the more isolated areas by publishing the results of their review boards in an electronic format for easy distribution. This approach was used by the City of Lakewood, Washington in 2010 following the shooting deaths of four officers at a local coffee shop (Lakewood, 2010). Lakewood Police shared an electronic version of their after action report with various recipients which began a rapid distribution process as those recipients sent the report to other agencies and so on until they were received and used by many law enforcement departments across the US to enhance officer safety.

Establishing a fundamentally sound review process will help prevent potential

problems found in some group dynamics.   Defining the review process begins with

establishing, as a group, the types of incidents to be investigated. Once the types of

incidents are established and before beginning a review process, the review board

should have a well-defined mission prior to determining its goals and objectives. The

host agency (the lead agency involved in the response to a critical incident) establishes

the mission of the board based on the specific incident encountered. For instance, the

mission for reviewing the response to a natural disaster may be to determine if

resources were organized and deployed properly. Similarly, the response to a

barricaded person/ hostage situation may be to determine if the best tactics were used

in bringing the situation to a resolution. Additionally, the board serves to provide that

should be corrected to enhance future responses to similar incidents (Faigin, 2011).

Member roles should be clearly defined. Prior to any review proceeding, the host

agency should establish, in writing, the specific roles of those participating in the review

process. As an example, a host agency may choose to have the representatives who

were involved in the actual incident attend the review to provide background information

on the incident as well as members of the criminal investigations divisions to provide

background on the investigation. Participants from outside agencies may be instructed

to make inquiries related to a clearly defined set of guidelines to prevent off topic

discussion. Faigin (2011) suggested that agency participants should also be selected

who have decision making authority and the ability to make department wide change in

policy and procedures.

Follow up for any after-action items should occur at specified time frames

established during the initial review board meeting. After-action reports should be

generated as a means of documenting the recommendations and outcomes of the review board process and affirms that follow up and implementation of the recommended items took place. The after-action report serves as a written historical record for an agency regarding the origins of policy, training, and philosophical change; it documents the course action taken to improve the response to future incidents.

Information sharing serves as a vital component to the overall mission of public safety agencies across the country. When information is shared between multiple entities that have a mutual interest in that data, the ability to improve safety in the areas of training, policy, and response multiplies considerably. Developing formal information sharing partnerships through the use of multi-agency critical incident review boards serves as the mechanism for providing valuable, actionable intelligence, intelligence that can save lives, improve response tactics, and increase safety for those involved in the next critical incident.

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