

**The Bill Blackwood
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Emotional Intelligence for Law Enforcement Officers

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ABSTRACT

Law enforcement is a dynamic profession and critical service provided to communities. Expectations of officers change frequently requiring skills beyond the traditional fighting, driving, and shooting. Although those skills are high lethality and low occurrence, there are other skills such as communication, empathy, and decision making which occur every day for officers which can often have a significant impact on a community. Decision making, and professional relationships are foundational skills for officers, so having emotional and social awareness, and self-control has a direct impact on the outcomes of decisions. Officers are frequently tasked with making significant life and death decisions, and often those decisions can prevent critical situations from ever occurring, potentially avoiding some applications of force. Having quality relationships with understanding, empathy and support with the community is valuable for police legitimacy and procedural justice. Law enforcement agencies should mandate emotional intelligence training for all officers.

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INTRODUCTION

Everyone possesses emotions and these emotions occur in different situations for many valuable reasons. Whether it is fear due to unfamiliarity or threat of danger or the elations from a long-awaited accomplishment, emotions have value. The wide range of emotions available to experience is near 150-200, yet most have an awareness of only 15-17 which they might experience on a regular basis and law enforcement officers are no different (Brunell, 2022). Officers have a challenging and dynamic job in every community. They are asked to do more and more to serve their communities, beyond the traditional crime fighting done by predecessors. It is no secret that officers have become the fix for many community issues from truancy, and homelessness, to mediator and mentor. These same officers are often the target of complaints regarding the application of force, the lack of empathy and poor decision making in just about everything they do. Several researchers (Terrill & Ingram, 2016) indicate that complaints about use of force are most often related to the age and years of experience an officer has. Experience is an invaluable lesson for officers, who learn from it. When lessons are learned earlier, officers are often able to avoid complaints, have fewer force utilization issues and overall, a more successful career.

Despite these challenges, officers go out every day to serve their communities in the best way they know how. Officers use the skills and tactics taught in academies, in-service training and those learned from veteran officers around them. However, most of the formal training officers receive is focused on mechanical skills such as tactics, driving, report writing, investigations or other mechanical tasks. Rarely is training focused on abstract and foundational skills such as emotional intelligence. Some of the

most applicable and valuable skills officers need such as empathy, teamwork, and mental agility are directly related to emotional intelligence. Emotionally intelligent officers make better decisions, are more self and socially aware of emotions, are empathetic and develop quality professional relationships within their community. Law enforcement agencies should mandate emotional intelligence training for all officers.

POSITION

Emotional intelligence has been a trending term across many professional disciplines. This trend has caused many to define emotional intelligence in different ways. According to Mayer (2009), emotional intelligence is often equated to a personality trait, such as agreeableness, optimism, or motivation. Although those are good qualities to have perhaps in certain situations, in and of themselves, they are not emotional intelligence. Those and other traits are often haphazardly lumped in with many personal qualities, causing even trained psychologists to believe those traits are emotional intelligence (Mayer, 2009).

Emotional intelligence is “The ability to perceive and express emotion, assimilate emotion in thought, understand and reason with emotion, and regulate emotion in the self and others” (Mayer et al., 2000, p. 396). According to Goleman, (2020) it can be simplified as self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, and relationship management. Knowing this simplified statement about emotional intelligence, it is hard to argue the applicability to the work done by law enforcement. It is critical for officers to have awareness about every aspect of themselves, manage themselves well, appropriately interact with others, develop relationships, and make sound decisions in every aspect of their work.

Many scholars have presented empirical evidence supporting the value of emotional awareness, function, development, and competence as a quotient of intelligence (Sternberg & Kaugman, 2011). Law enforcement officers are frequently put into situations requiring a high degree of intelligence along with numerous other skills. A quick Google search will reveal an enormous list of skills valuable to law enforcement. Some of the more common skills are effective communication, decision making, active listening, empathy, teamwork, mental agility, compassion and more. Many of these skills are directly related to the components of emotional intelligence, encompassed in the pillars identified by Goleman (2020). With the vast applicability of emotional intelligence for law enforcement, it is valuable to focus on self-awareness, decision making and relationships.

Self-awareness is more than just knowing who a person is, it is knowing what makes them tick (Connors, 2021). Police academies provide technical training for the many task's officers do and such training is often supported by why those skills are done a certain way. In some cases, it is standard practice for the industry and in other cases it is safety for all involved. Understanding why people do what they do is critical in technical skills and emotional skills. Self-awareness also helps people be more disciplined and reflective on their decisions (Connors, 2021). When people are disciplined with their choices, they are more likely to know what they need to do, when they need to do it and how it will meet the objectives and mission of law enforcement. Citizens count on officers to remain calm, cool, and collected when interacting with them. If officers are not self-aware, they fail to even recognize the faults of their actions

which can lead to a loss of trust within their inner circle or much worse, the community (Connors, 2021).

Police officers have stressful jobs and are tasked with interacting with others in many types of situations ranging from simple cordial conversations to high stress life or death situations. Inclusive with the severity of the incident comes a wide range of emotions which can significantly impact an officer's decision making. According to Magny and Todak (2021), research on emotional intelligence in policing and the workplace tends to show there is great value such as improved decision making especially in the application of force in critical incidents. When emotions are high, rational decisions are often overpowered by emotion which can lead to poor outcomes. An emotionally driven decision in a high stakes situation can have dire consequences, and in some cases death. Several researchers have argued emotional intelligence is important for effective police performance, given that there is a high need for officers to manage their own and others' emotions as part of their job (Daus & Ashkanasy, 2005). Emotionally charged decisions rarely have positive outcomes. Training on emotional intelligence can provide officers with the tools to not only be aware of the emotions they are experiencing, but also manage those emotions in a way that maximizes the positive impact on their decision making.

Officers are often presented with situations where he or she must decide in a fraction of a second whether to utilize force, how much and what type. He or she must have an extreme amount of self-control over their emotions during a critical decision. These types of situations happen frequently in the law enforcement profession and are often controversial, costly, and significant for officers and departments. Impacts on

budget, morale, community relations and life can create substantial and long-lasting deficits for communities. In 2019, claims against the police cost the public over \$300 million (Carrega, 2020). With so much at risk with decision making, especially in the utilization of force, having officers with emotional intelligence skills is essential.

Relationships are everywhere in policing. Professional relationships with coworkers, supervisors, and most importantly, the community is essential to positive police-community relations. The quality of relationships people experience is often a direct reflection of the heart and mind applied to the situations experienced daily (Serio, 2017). Most police work is centered around human interaction of peers and the community. The ability to express and interpret emotions is a critical part of relationships and emotional connection (Mayer et al., 2000; Whitman, 2009). Without a strong knowledge and competence in these areas, officers will likely struggle if not fail at their role. According to Al Ali et al. (2012), having good relationships with the community, interacting with aggressive people, witnesses, and victims requires excellent communication, interpersonal and empathy skills.

The ability for the police to interact with, support, communicate, show empathy, and help solve crime has always been important, but never more than now. More than just relationships, communities desire some degree of procedural justice. According to Meares (2017), procedural justice is desired by many, but more significantly, community members want to believe the police care about them. Emotional intelligence is directly associated with empathy, resilience, social support and caring (Nightingale et al, 2018). Empathy builds relationships and creates opportunities for collaboration and teaching which lead to more positive outcomes and connections with the community (Connors,

2021). When the community feels or experiences care from the police, it supports police legitimacy which enhances respect and trust. When there is respect and trust with members of the community, they are more likely to comply with the laws (Tyler, 2006; Jackson et al., 2012). An assessment done by Campbell Collaboration (Mazerolle et al., 2013) found efforts to improve procedural justice and carry out ongoing dialogues with the community improved relations and were generally successful. When self-awareness, self-management, empathy, and motivation coalesce, people have the confidence to influence and engage others in an impactful way (Connors, 2021). Relationship management is one competency of emotional intelligence which can improve police community relations, thus increasing procedural justice and police legitimacy.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

Despite the many benefits of emotional intelligence identified by numerous researchers, it is equally important to look at the other side of the coin. Becoming more self-aware requires great work and reflection, which is often difficult to teach. According to Connors (2021), self-awareness is one of the most difficult pillars of emotional intelligence to master. The difficulty is compelling oneself to go deeper with self-reflection than one typically goes with a spirit to understand for the purpose of growth. Reflection requires time, dedication and discipline which isn't appealing and is not often promoted in social media and the culture. However, discipline helps people understand what they need to do, when they need to do it and how that process will help them to achieve what they want (Connors, 2021).

Like with many things, too much of a good thing is not always a good thing. Emotional intelligence will allow for greater understanding and recognizing what others are feeling which is valuable. However, individuals with extremely high emotional intelligence can pull on the emotional strings of others in a manipulating way, which may not be in the other's best interest (Grant, 2014). There is a very narrow line between manipulation and motivation (Grant, 2014).

Law enforcement officers frequently deal with situations where individuals are very vulnerable and susceptible to influence such as interactions with sexual assault or family violence victims. One example is an officer who recognizes the vulnerability of a victim and chooses to manipulate the victim into having an inappropriate or intimate relationship with the officer. Officers are frequently put into these and other situations where they must exercise a high degree of ethics and integrity. A manipulative officer with ill intentions can take advantage of situations or victims negatively impacting the victim, community, and department. Manipulation by the highly emotionally intelligent officer without ethics and integrity can result in disaster for many.

Of equal importance is the positive side of manipulation better described for the purpose of this article as negotiation and motivation. Negotiation for police officers in crisis situations can be used when an individual is suicidal or in emotional crisis. These situations require the negotiator to use skills such as active listening, and emotional assessment to facilitate a positive outcome (Grubb et al., 2018). Additionally, when officers are in arrest situations with an individual who is resistant to comply, officers may consider negotiation to gain control and compliance and affect the arrest in a safe manner. Motivation provided to others to remove themselves from situations which are

unsafe such as domestic violence or homelessness can be productive for both the officers and citizens who act on such motivation to change their situation.

Although the highly emotionally intelligent officer may utilize his skill to manipulate, agencies have long prepared for the susceptibility of officers to make poor ethical decisions and should have a strong culture of ethics instilled from the academy and in daily life. Abuse or behaviors by law enforcement which violate creeds of ethics and integrity have been a challenge since the concept of policing originated. Monitoring and addressing these types of violations is a well-defined aspect of police management with many tools and practices available to diminish these types of issues.

A high competence of emotional intelligence supports that the individual is likely good at navigating challenging and critical conversations in tricky circumstances with great diplomacy (Dickie, 2020). However, this same individual may also be so keenly aware of the emotions of others that may struggle to take action to correct negative behaviors or make unpopular decisions out of a reluctance to play the bad guy in the situation, essentially avoiding conflict (Dickie, 2020). Law enforcement is one of the unique professions where there is a high expectation of self-accountability. Officers are expected to confront unethical and inappropriate behavior as well as address violations of law and regulations. If an officer is reluctant to play the bad guy and avoids the conflict, then inappropriate behaviors or law violations may go unaddressed thereby perpetuating the problem.

Avoiding conflict out of reluctance to play the bad guy can be simply due to the fear or discomfort with anger and frustration (Bacal, 2004). There are many leaders who may default to this strategy because of the traditional view of conflict versus a

modern view of recognizing the value of conflict as an opportunity to expand an officer's perspective or view of a situation or concept. Unfortunately, avoidance often ends with an exacerbation of the problem which can tell others the leader or employee is simply oblivious to an obvious problem (Bacal, 2004).

It is important to note conflict is not always bad. In the traditional sense, conflict may indicate a lack of order, stability, or structure (Bacal, 2004). Many people sense this instability and disorder and think something is wrong as most law enforcement prefer and appreciate stability and order. On the good side of conflict are the benefits conflict creates when looked at from a functional perspective. Conflict can provide feedback about a situation or culture, encourage flexibility, innovation, and productivity (Bacal, 2004). Conflict can facilitate mutual understanding of problems between groups and individuals compelling greater coordination and relationships. Often law enforcement agencies experience conflict with individuals first before moving towards a greater understanding and collaboration to solve problems.

RECOMMENDATION

Despite potential for manipulation of others, or conflict avoidance by an officer with high emotional intelligence, there is far greater value in possessing such skills than risk. Emotional intelligence provides officers with essential skills which add value to the officer, agency, and community. These skills improve officer self-awareness, decision making and professional relationships. Officers, agencies, and communities are negatively impacted when decisions are poor, especially when it is associated with the utilization of force in critical incidents. Improved relationships with the community and others will increase police legitimacy and procedural justice.

Emotional intelligence can be provided in many ways ranging from formal training with accredited or certified instructors to simply reading books or listening to podcasts about the topic. Formal training, although costly, can provide structured, and validated content for officers. Formal training often consists of content presentation, self-assessment tools and application instruction providing officers with a safe environment to practice and learn skills associated with improved emotional intelligence. Books and podcasts are plentiful on the internet and have the flexibility of being inexpensive and portable. People learn in many ways and each option presented can add value to an officer and agency. Regardless of the learning method, emotional intelligence will improve any officer or agency that employs its concepts and should be mandated for all employees and officers in law enforcement.

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