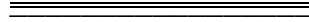
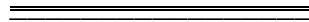


**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**



Proactive Public Relations Policies by Law Enforcement



**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**



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ABSTRACT

American society is in a state of constant change. Law enforcement agencies must continually adjust to society's constant change. To function effectively and adjust to these changes, police agencies should actively pursue public relations strategies. The agency must first determine what this actually means. A definition of public relations, found on the website for the Public Relations Society of America, provides sound reasoning for this type of focus: "a strategic communication process that builds mutually beneficial relationships between organizations and their publics" (PRSA, n.d., para. 3). One can see how these strategies could have several positive effects, ranging from benefits to the public and to law enforcement, to reducing misunderstandings and frustration, to improved recruiting and local support. The goal of this paper is to identify strategies for law enforcement agencies to use in improving public relations with the people they serve. In addition to building trust, an agency can determine what the community wants the agency to do, can enhance recruitment efforts, may diversify their agency and be more representative of the population they serve, shift responsibility to the public where appropriate, and familiarize the community with the agency through the adoption of effective and proactive public relations strategies. Agencies should consider being more transparent by educating the public in non-traditional means (putting portions of operating procedures on their website) and actively educating the general public on certain policies and procedures of the agency. Community discussions and input on agency procedures should also be considered.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | Page |
|----------------------------|------|
| Abstract | |
| Introduction | 1 |
| Position | 1 |
| Counter Position | .8 |
| Recommendation | . 11 |
| References | . 12 |

INTRODUCTION

In today's society, law enforcement agencies have a primary mission of addressing community safety issues. The manner in which these issues are addressed affects a municipality in many significant areas, ranging from crime, the economical climate, the general public's feeling of safety, to the local attitude towards government. History is replete with illustrations (the overall success of community oriented policing strategies in New York City and the Rodney King incident, are two examples) of positive and negative effects of law enforcement actions. Events in Ferguson, Missouri and North Charleston, South Carolina suggest the public expects law enforcement agencies to change the manner in which they interact with the populace. The purpose of this paper is to affirm all law enforcement agencies should adopt effective proactive public relations policies and strategies with the goal of establishing or enhancing public trust in the agency.

POSITION

A primary concern for any agency involves the effectiveness of the agency in the area they serve. By establishing proactive public relations policies and strategies, law enforcement agencies can foster both trust and effectiveness with the people who are served. Determining what a community wants a law enforcement agency to do can be difficult. Kanable (2009) stated, "To some extent, 'what do we want the police to do?' is a never-settled question" (para. 4). Most law enforcement agencies have their own sense of community needs and expectations. A commonly accepted principle in the law enforcement profession centers on an agency teaming up with the local masses to address issues in lieu of trying to solve issues through the efforts of a law enforcement

agency alone. The manner in which this team effort is to be conducted can be problematic. In his book *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Lencioni (2002) referred to an absence of trust. He stated, “team members who are not genuinely open with one another about their mistakes and weaknesses make it impossible to build a foundation for trust” (Lencioni, 2002, p. 188). When an agency refuses to accept responsibility for mistakes or does not provide their citizens with a realistic view of agency capabilities, the result can be an increase in distrust and frustration for the public served by the agency.

The lack of clarity in the desires of local residents, as related to a law enforcement agency’s focus or emphasis on issues, can result in the alienation of the people an agency serves, resulting in a lack of trust. This is especially confusing for an agency when actions and policies are formed with good intentions but with little or no input from the general public or education of the local populace on the procedures or actions of the agency. Additionally, the public may perceive a different set of needs and expectations than those perceived by a law enforcement agency. Without proactive public relations strategies, an agency will not be able to effectively address local concerns and agency resources will be directed in areas which may not be a priority for the community.

Just as each member of an agency has a role to fulfill within an agency, different portions of a municipality have roles to fulfill for the betterment of all concerned. Law enforcement agencies tend to focus on crime and criminals. Non law enforcement entities tend to focus on quality of life issues. When a law enforcement agency works with non law enforcement entities, such as non-profit agencies, crime issues for a local

area can be addressed as well as quality of life issues. A team effort conducted in this manner increases the effect of law enforcement efforts and the efforts of support agencies attempting to improve quality of life. An additional benefit of this type of agency and community teamwork may be seen in instances when an employee of the law enforcement agency makes a mistake in a public setting. In locations without a team format between a law enforcement agency and the community, the response of the public is much more likely to be negative and result in a generally negative attitude towards law enforcement, painting all officers as committing the same mistake as the one employee. In areas with a team format between the local law enforcement agency and support entities, the response of the public is more likely to result in a realistic view of the agency and the related incident, seeing the law enforcement agency employee's mistake as an isolated incident or an incident which is not representative of the agency as a whole. This type of public support is crucial for agency effectiveness and for maintaining an adequately staffed department.

Attracting qualified recruits continues to be a major concern for most agencies. An additional consideration is having diversity in an agency which is representative of the local area the agency serves. In many instances, "Communities often desire a police force that is more ethnically representative of the neighborhoods they serve; thus candidates must be sought out and recruited" (Raymond, Hickman, Miller, & Wong, 2005, p. 11). Effective public relations policies can serve to enhance the desire of potential qualified recruits to join an agency and foster the trust relationship with the community as a whole. An effective public relations strategy will consider generational differences and the impact of the agency function in the area it serves. Consideration of

issues for minorities and females would also increase the selection pool and attraction of potential recruits.

In an environment of ever-increasing demands and continually shrinking resources, the ability to shift responsibility for certain issues from police agencies to the community is a necessity. This process “entails assisting others to develop the capacity to identify and rectify problems without further police intervention” and occurs where police work to develop “the ability of neighborhoods to realize the common values of residents and maintain effective social controls” (Scott & Goldstein, 2005, p. 6). Utilizing this type of philosophy allows an agency to address conflicts in expectations more effectively and expeditiously while conserving resources where possible. The public can also perceive a greater level of ownership and participation. Realization of these benefits, to the agency and to the people the agency serves, will not occur without effective public relations strategies and an agency or department focus on these benefits. This may necessitate some give and take between law enforcement and the public.

A law enforcement agency must have information from the general public in order to function effectively. A locality needs information from a law enforcement agency to understand the agency and to assume the public’s role as the first line of defense against crime. In many instances, members of the general public do not realize their position and responsibility as the first line of defense against crime. One technique to meet the needs of both parties involves the utilization of an internet website by law enforcement agencies. Such websites are “a portal through which outsiders can achieve greater understanding of police organizations” (Rosenbaum, Graziano,

Stephens, & Schuck, 2011, p. 28). Agency websites also represent “organizational culture as manifested in technical capacity” (Rosenbaum et al., 2011, p. 30). Law enforcement agencies can utilize websites to receive information from the public and to disseminate information to the public. One challenge in receiving information from local residents is ensuring the received information is valid, reliable, and actionable. Another challenge involves the volume of information to be released by the law enforcement agency to the public at large. The information released by an agency “has to be necessary, pertinent information that makes a difference in people’s lives at that point in time” (“Social networking,” 2010, p. 3). Effective public relations strategies address each of these concerns and allow for a two-way dialogue between the community and the law enforcement agency. These strategies, which utilize the exchange of information between law enforcement and the community, also enhance both parties’ ability to address local crime and quality of life issues. This interaction can lead to further strategizing in other ways.

Communities and law enforcement agencies tend to desire more tools when dealing with and responding to crime. Community justice programs provide the “ability to enhance public trust in government and provide law and justice agencies with more tools to both respond to and prevent crime” (Wolf, 2012, p. 1). By involving the community in planning committees, focus groups, advisory boards, holding public meetings, conducting joint projects, having offices in the community instead of a central location, and conducting relationship building activities, law enforcement agencies can accomplish several things. These include empowering the community, improving public safety, solving problems, improving public trust in law enforcement agencies, saving

money, and receiving better information (Wolf, 2012). Community justice programs can not be established without proactive public relations policies in a law enforcement agency. Community justice programs can have ancillary benefits for the court system by reducing case load through referral of first time and non-violent offenders to the justice program. Another benefit of community justice programs includes the involvement of crime victims. These victims may be able to have some input in the sentencing of criminals processed through the justice program. This involvement could allow the victim to feel a renewed sense of control over their own fate and sense of future. Involvement of the victim can also allow the victim to see the justice process at work, both the strengths and areas of needed improvement for the criminal justice system. This may begin to address confusion over the justice system.

In many instances, the public does not understand why an agency or an officer made certain decisions or took particular actions in a given situation. Part of this confusion lies with a lack of knowledge, on the part of the general public, of the operating procedures and guidelines in place at an agency. This could be alleviated in part through the publication of a portion of the agency's guidelines in publicly accessible locations, such as an agency website or through public meetings and discussions. Providing information of this type to the general public would allow the local population to understand the philosophy and values of the agency and could reduce complaints and mistrust or misunderstandings. In addition to providing the information in a technological format, an agency could conduct public meetings where agency guidelines and procedures are discussed with the community. Both of these instances

would be examples of the need for a proactive stance in public relation strategies and policies. There are broader implications for these strategies.

In addition to improving local trust and agency effectiveness, quality of life issues can be addressed through the adoption of proactive public relations policies. During their shift, officers face many situations dealing with quality of life issues rather than dealing solely with crime issues. Without empowerment and an organizational strategy to address quality of life issues, officers and the public are left to deal with unrealized solutions to many solvable problems. This can result in a conflict of expectations and, many times, in a general attitude that the police did nothing about their concerns or do not care about issues or were not fair. A community will judge the fairness of an officer or an agency by their procedures (Crank & Liu, 2010, p.109). By having an agency philosophy which stresses fairness in procedure and a manner for addressing local quality of life issues, a law enforcement agency allows the public to have a greater understanding of the organization's intent and values. Residents can also perceive a higher level of customer service from the agency.

This also gives agency employees an avenue to see short and long term results of their efforts. The employee may also develop a greater sense of ownership and closer relationship with citizens, in the areas where they serve, when the employee is able to make or assist in making a quantifiable difference in the lives of the citizens. To achieve these results, the agency must have a network of support within the community. This network should consist of area entities who can meet the needs of citizens. The agency employee can refer the citizen to local entities who can take care of citizen

problems, resulting in citizen needs being met, reduction in duplication of effort, and increased satisfaction for both the employee and the citizen.

COUNTER POSITION

Many inside the law enforcement profession and in the community believe committing resources to public relations takes too much away from the crime fighting mission. Officers and detectives sometimes express the belief that their ability to effectively fight crime is weakened when any resources are taken away from the street. Victims of crime occasionally make comments indicating their belief that officers should be taking care of real crime instead of looking for a television camera to stand in front of or playing games with kids. One reason this attitude begins to develop is due to the lack of quantifiable results upon which to justify the resource expenditure. This belief can be true if the responsibility for handling public relations is given to one or a few people in the agency. In this instance, the entire cost of the department's public relations strategy is reflected in the supplies, salary and benefits of those few who perform the public relations duties. The expenditure, resource, and result issue can be addressed effectively if the philosophy is adopted agency-wide where every employee has the duty to engage the community in a customer service and community relations approach. The everyday cost of public relations is spread across the agency's entire employee base through this type of customer service approach and can result in more trust in the agency from the general public. When citizens are viewed more as customers rather than just another case or just another number, they may have the impression that every person or issue matters and the agency can be seen as more caring or more professional.

Some argue the position that law enforcement agencies have “very little effect on crime” and “preventing crime is really not a function of the police” (Williams & Wagoner, 1992, p. 409). This argument espouses the belief that police should deal with crime after it happens and should not be concerned with preventing crime. While this argument stresses a quick response to crime incidents, it provides little attention to a victim’s fear of crime. One of the major benefits of proactive public relations strategies is to address the community’s fear of crime, as well as, the crime rate itself. When a citizen relies on the media for crime information, or on their own personal experience, or on word-of-mouth anecdotal stories from friends and family, they can receive a distorted view of the crime picture for their area. Through effective public relations strategies, an agency can address actual crime and the everyday citizen’s fear of crime through deployment tactics which address reactive and proactive responses. Agencies can use these strategies to educate the public on actual trends and statistics. Tactical examples of public education could be seen through publication of crime statistics on agency websites, holding public meetings to discuss crime statistics and trends including crime prevention trends, and in officers’ day to day contact with citizens.

Some law enforcement personnel, such as street level or undercover officers, argue increased transparency by an agency reduces the effectiveness of the agency and puts officers at a greater risk of injury. In certain instances, this could be true. An example of this could be procedures and information used in applying for a search warrant or manners in which a search warrant raid could be executed. The release of this type of information could expose officers to a greater level of danger as criminals who researched police tactics and procedures could be better prepared to defeat those

tactics or procedures. Release of information gained from confidential informants could also expose the informants to a greater risk of danger. By scrutinizing the information released and having clearly defined policies on what information can be released or publicized, an agency can minimize or reduce the risk and concern for the officers.

Some espouse the belief that non-law enforcement citizens do not understand the police job or the culture. Most law enforcement officers agree on the disciplining of rude, racist, unprofessional, or criminal behavior, as these issues are normally consistent with the law enforcement culture or agency. The issue with this thinking involves conduct which is not outside the normal or accepted practice in the agency but is outside the culture or values of the community they serve (Couper, 2013). This creates a mismatch between the values and culture of the community and the values and culture of the law enforcement agency. This mismatch creates distrust by the public in the intentions of the agency and discounts the reliability of actions and information from the agency. It is not realistic for an agency to be completely transparent in all areas. Where possible, transparency in several areas, including the release of certain agency policies, can allow a law enforcement agency to effectively display the organization's intent and philosophy. This process may also be effective in aligning the values and culture of the community with the values and culture of the law enforcement agency. In addition to fostering trust from the community, the agency may be able to save money and resources by shifting responsibility where appropriate from the agency to the community. An example of cost savings for an agency could be seen in changing response policies to alarm activations where redundantly nuisance alarm activations are not responded to by police agencies. The person or business responsible for the alarm

would be required to keep their alarm in good functioning order and police agencies would not waste resources by sending officers to false alarms. Some agencies charge a fee for responding to false or nuisance alarms. By publishing certain agency policies, an agency may also be able to more effectively address community concerns of disproportionality or race based policing.

RECOMMENDATION

Agencies cannot afford to avoid developing effective public relations strategies and policies. In an era of decreasing resources and increasing demands, agencies should gain the public's support through the development of proactive public relations policies. In addition to building trust, an agency can determine what the community wants the agency to do, can enhance recruitment efforts, may diversify their agency and be more representative of the population they serve, shift responsibility to the public where appropriate, and familiarize the community with the agency through the adoption of effective and proactive public relations strategies. Agencies should consider being more transparent by educating the public in untraditional means (putting portions of operating procedures on their website) and actively educating the general public on certain policies and procedures of the agency. Community discussions and input on agency procedures should also be considered. Agency employees should be trained on proper responses to questions by the community and on the logical nature and necessity of this type of questioning on the part of the public to increase the confidence of the public in the agency.

Agencies should also expect, and train their employees to expect, an increase in questions in the future from the community on actions taken by the agency and

procedures of the agency. This may be due to a change in traditional community perspectives regarding authority and authority figures. Actions of the agency, which have been accepted by the community over time, may be questioned by future generations. If these questions are addressed correctly, trust between the agency and community can be strengthened and calls by the community for monitoring of the agency by external entities can be lessened. The expense of resources and manpower to address public relations can be minimized when an agency assigns responsibility for public relations to each employee with a focus on customer service. Money can be saved, public trust can be enhanced, and agency effectiveness can be increased through the adoption of a transparent, public relations philosophy implemented department wide. Satisfaction for citizens and employees may be increased, as well.

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