

THE POLICE, PEOPLE

AND THEIR COMMUNITY

Police Community Relations:

A Process, Not A Product

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PEOPLE DO NOT UNDERSTAND how difficult it is to be a police officer. This sentiment is often expressed and deeply felt by many police officers.

Presumably, better police-public cooperation and accommodation would result if police were better able to communicate with citizens. Yet, such mutual understanding has been hard to achieve for at least two reasons.

SOURCES OF THE PROBLEM

First, there are practical problems. The roles police are called upon to play are so diverse that it is not always clear what should be explained. Further, the population in most urban areas has many different elements often with different and sometimes conflicting expectations of the police. And, because of the uniqueness of individual situations, the policeman himself must operate with considerable discretion.

These are the ambiguities about which police roles should be explained to whom, about what types of situations.

Secondly, there are communication barriers. Most individuals have little contact with the police and, therefore, they have little motivation to seek out information. After a person has had direct personal contact with the police, his level of involvement may be considerably increased, but the person himself may not be receptive because of this situation. In cases which attract widespread public interest, there may be legal barriers to communication. Because of pending charges and the necessity of protecting the civil rights of the person, the police are often not free to use the news media to reach an interested public. As a result, misinterpretations of police actions must often go unchallenged.

In short, the policeman is isolated and frustrated because he is unable to

communicate with those whose cooperation and support he must enjoy if he is to do his job effectively.

COMBINING UNIQUE SKILLS

There is no easy solution. The police have the street experience which provides the firsthand knowledge of the problem, but no means to reach the public. A community relations department of a city may represent the public interest, but it has no direct authority and often little influence over how other city departments are run. And, concepts from the police science literature are usually abstract ideas which are not easily translated into practical forms of direct action.¹

In Champaign, a cooperative program has been started between the police department, the community relations department, and police science students of the community psychology program from the University of Illinois. Taken together, they provide a unique combination of skills through which each group has made a partial contribution to the total effort. Each is necessary, but none is sufficient.

A catalog of incidents. Individual patrolman, by definition, make up the group which has collectively experienced the total range of police-citizen encounters. Because there are hundreds of citizen contacts each day, the problem is how to collect the relevant data and how it should be analyzed.

Our answer is to compile a catalog of incidents. Psychology students interviewed each officer to determine situations during a recent tour of duty in which a citizen behaved in an inappropriate way or failed to act the way the officer would have liked. The student records the facts of the situation (e.g., number of people, time of day, sequence of events), what the citizen did or failed to do, and the source of the policeman's expectations about the citizen's response.

All officers contribute to the catalog. The goal is to build an objective record of the events and situations in Champaign which result in misunderstanding or failure on the part of citizens and police to meet the expectations of each other.

Community response. The same students, working with the community relations department, carried the vignette into the community in the form of a standardized questionnaire. The purpose of the questionnaire is to determine: (a) whether the citizen has correct information about what is expected of him and (b) whether the citizen agrees with the police officer's expectations. The first question measures the communication gap, i.e., the amount of

information the public lacks; and the second measures the accommodation gap, i.e., the willingness of the citizen to meet police expectations.

Method. The first step is to summarize briefly the important aspects of the incident. The second step is to divide the situation into two information components (i.e., what inappropriate action did the citizen take and what should he have done) and two explanation components (i.e., the source of the police officer's expectations concerning citizen behavior and why the citizen behaved as he did). The third step is to construct a questionnaire about the information and explanation component of the incident in which citizens are asked to check one of six categories: SA = strongly agree, A = agree, MA = mildly agree, MD = mildly disagree, D = disagree, and SD = strongly disagree.

Frequency of disagreement with officer expectation on the two information questions indicates the degree to which citizens are uninformed and may have made inappropriate responses. The two explanation questions determine whether police expectations are shared by the public. True accommodation (as opposed to forced compliance) can only occur when both the public and the police mutually share expectations regarding police services and functions.

Classification of responses. Because the citizen can either agree or disagree with police expectations of citizen behavior, and because the citizen can either agree or disagree with the basis for police expectations, there are four possible relationships.

An informed-cooperative relationship represents the ideal in which the policeman and citizen agree about what he should do and why. Since we selected only problem situations, this outcome is the desired goal. The uniformed-cooperative relationship is a prime target for public education, because no basic conflict represents the problem source, only lack of information. The informed-uncooperative type of relationship is one in which the public, with full awareness, will be resistant to or uncooperative with the police. The uninformed-uncooperative relationships are difficult and unpredictable because the citizen is both opposed to police values and also does not know what is expected of him.

The end products. The project was undertaken with five specific goals in mind. All center on improving and better understanding police-community relations. The effort is directed at the practical problems and the communica-

tion barriers which were identified as sources of the problem in this article's introduction.

PRACTICAL PROBLEMS

At the practical level, there is the issue of which police roles should be explained to whom about what types of situations. We expect to find answers to these questions in a catalog of 300 to 500 incidents which provides an objective record of the actual misunderstandings which occur in Champaign. The task is to query this data source in a way which yields useful information.

Types of situations. At first glance, 300 to 500 incidents, each with their own unique aspects, may seem overwhelming. In fact, it is the apparent uniqueness of each encounter that underlies the area of police discretion and the considerable importance of police professionalism. Such judgments require skill, but they also require knowledge.

The catalog of incidents will provide an objective basis to identify the basic sources of conflict. By categorizing the actual incidents on the basis of shared characteristics, the hundreds of specific conflicts can be reduced to a manageable number of fundamental issues.

Police roles. Citizen responses will allow the separation of situations into two categories: (1) The identification of those areas where the public fails to meet police expectations because of lack of information. This finding will provide the basis for a community education project. At the same time, citizen responses will provide the information police need to gain a better understanding of the public. In this sense, the process is also a police education project. (2) Identification of areas of conflict will indicate the limits of education and the requirements for conflict resolution programs. Only by monitoring public reactions can the police become aware of the reasons for public resistance and thereby understand how police actions may contribute to the problem. In many cases, the solution may be in the hands of the police themselves through relinquishing those expectations which are neither essential nor required for effective delivery of police services and functions.² Once identified, these differences of opinion become matters of public policy in which it is necessary to seek mutually acceptable solutions. These areas will place as much demand on the police as on the citizen to be open to change.

The public audiences. The responses of citizens throughout the community are unlikely to be uniform. The police-community relations literature acknowledges that a community has

¹Rocky Pomerance, "Police-Community Relations: Frosting on the Cake?" *The Police Chief* (March, 1975), p. 8.
²Tyree Broomfield, "Conflict Management," in J. L. Steinberg and D. W. McEvoy (eds.), *The Police and the Behavioral Sciences* (Charles C Thomas, 1974).

many diverse elements, all of whom have many different views about the police. Such an assertion, even though true, has little practical value. Our procedure, however, will allow us to identify the specific information and accommodation gaps which exist for specific target groups (e.g., those based on age, race, area of city, etc.). In this way, efforts at public information, accommodation, and conflict resolution can be focused on an appropriate audience.

COMMUNICATION BARRIERS

As discussed earlier, there are natural, personal, and legal barriers to effective public communication. To overcome these difficulties, the first requirement is to have a clear message and the second is to have some means for delivery. The purification of the message is an internal communication process requiring consistency between police officers in their expectation of citizens; whereas, the delivery of the message is an external communication process.

Internal communication. The wide range of police discretion is due in part to the difficulty of defining equivalent situations from which to arrive at a uniform set of standards reflecting a consistent police philosophy. Our catalog provides a long list of specific examples of each type of fundamental problem. These vignettes provide an objective basis for in-service training which reflects unique local problems. They will provide the basis for group discussion and should insure that the behavior the citizen is expected to show reflects the demands of the situation and not the idiosyncrasy of the particular officer. Police consistency and police professionalism in the form of knowledgeable judgments requires internal communication conceptualizing the dimensions of the current tensions between the public and their officers. The achievement of this goal depends upon police willingness to evaluate critically their own behavior and to have a real interest in self-correction where it appears appropriate.

External communication. Practical outcomes are to provide the factual material necessary to begin the communication process. The catalog of incidents provides extensive illustrative material for each type of misunderstanding. The basic dimensions of the problem can be characterized by highly selected idealized examples which have been stripped of references to real people, thus avoiding legal barriers.

Broad-based public educational efforts can be directed to situations in which there is only a communication gap, and not also an accommodation gap. In this case, the public lacks only

necessary information, although different material may be relevant for different groups. For example, by knowing what information juveniles need, the police may better participate in a high school course on law in society. Or, informative pamphlets may be given to individuals after a situation of the uninformed-cooperative type. Empirical findings will identify appropriate groups or targets. The community relations department of the city and the police department will have the specific information necessary to begin a public education program aimed at specific target groups. Media efforts may be coordinated with cases which attract public attention.

When such cases arise, illustrative material in the form of self-administered quizzes for that type of situation could be run in the newspaper. The material will allow the police to communicate with the public, without reference to a specific case, by merely capitalizing on current public interest.

The issue of basic conflict — the accommodation gap — will of necessity require a higher level review of police activity and of citizen responsibility. The objective data, however, should provide a rational (not emotional) basis for a highly focused policy discussion. The result should be a progressive police department taking the initiative for a cooperative and open relationship with the public. It is an active effort to objectify the assertion that effective law enforcement ultimately rests on public acceptance and support for police services and functions.³

We do not mean to minimize the difficulties of overcoming the communication barriers. They will not be eliminated quickly nor without considerable effort. At this point in time, the psychology students are contributing the skills necessary for interviews, for questionnaire construction, and for the identification of the basic dimensions of the communication and accommodation gap. Later, it may be communication and advertising students who will have the necessary technical skills. Many of these questions can only be addressed after the practical problems have been answered.

CONCLUSIONS

In our experience, patrolmen have been cooperative; we have collected the first round of material for the catalog without difficulty. The officers have indicated a willingness to be interviewed again for additional rounds until the final goal of some 300 to 500 incidents is achieved.

At the outset, it was made clear that the command would have no knowledge about which incident came from a particular officer. All identifying informa-

tion is stripped from the incident by the psychology students and the catalog is maintained at the university.

We suspect that some of the interest resulted from the fact that our project is built around the actual experiences of the patrolmen on the force. In response to interest from the patrolmen we now: (1) provide the officer with a carbon copy of the incident as we transcribed it, (2) show him a copy of the questionnaire derived from his incident for him to edit and verify before it is used in the community, and (3) plan to provide a periodic report of the actual citizen responses to the incidents.

Our feedback procedure illustrates the implementation of our basic concept that police-community relations is a process not a product. In our case, the entire force is involved in an active process of analysis and evaluation of their current experiences, not the achievement of some static condition.⁴

The basic procedure of incident analysis is simple and can be used by other communities. In each case, the content of the findings will be unique to the community in which it is done. The process itself is what is important, not the specific content of the findings. If the specific product (rather than process) of our effort were to be applied in some other community it would first require the assumption that the two cities have similar problems, which is often not true. And, it would require that the patrolmen be made to learn and use the information. Traditionally, this has been in the form of police-community relations lectures in which a finished product is presented. We are suggesting that police-community relations should not be treated in this way, but rather it should be treated as an ongoing process.

Apart from its practical value, the most rewarding aspect of the project is the fact that the unique skills of three professional groups have been combined. University students are analyzing interaction problems of real-world significance; objective use is being made of the patrolman's day-to-day experience; and the community relations department has established a meaningful relationship between the public and an important city service. The process of working together allows each group to overcome its own limitations. Better police-public understanding cannot be achieved alone by either the police, the community, or the academies. ★

³The Urban Police Function (Joint American Bar Association — International Association Chiefs of Police Advisory Committee on Implementation of Urban Police Function Standards, Washington, D.C., 1974).

⁴Much of the success of our project is due to the efforts of patrolmen John Schweighart, Don Rinehart, Von Young, Gene Stephens, and Mike Reid who, on their own time and initiative, became members of the public relations groups started by Lieutenant David and Ms. Cowan and to the patrolmen who are providing the basic material.