



PROJECT: HUMAN-CREATING DIALOGUE, EMBRACING CHANGE

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To say that police-community relations in our communities are strained would be a tremendous understatement. Because everyone has a cell phone, a single encounter between a police officer and another person or group of people caught on video can not only cover the local community, but can spread throughout the country in a matter of hours, or even minutes. Members of the community believe they have the right to protect themselves against the possibility of police misconduct – and they do. Police officers and departments believe they have the right to be judged according to all the relevant facts of any encounter, not just the brief time captured on a cell phone video – and they do. How can both sides have their voice heard? More importantly, how can both sides learn to communicate with one another instead of shouting at and over one another?

Among the things that community leaders expect and community members deserve is transparency from their local police department. Trust cannot be built and maintained on any other foundation. As police go about their routine activities in a community, or especially whenever an incident occurs in which an officer is accused of misconduct, the people of that community should know the answers to these three important questions: 1) What is the police department doing, and why? 2) What are the results of the department's activities? 3) What mechanisms are in place to discover and respond to problems from the officer to the department level?

As much as many communities feel as though they cannot trust their police department, most police officers and departments feel as though the public does not fully understand and appreciate the risk of being a police officer in this present culture. Officers worry about their safety, and rightly so. In 2016, 142 police officers were killed in the line of duty, nearly half of

them by gunfire, and many of those were “ambush” attacks in which the officers were targeted specifically because of the uniform they wore.

With the attention given by the media on the seemingly unbridgeable gap between communities and law enforcement, it is refreshing to know that police officers and the people in the communities they serve have much more in common than meets the proverbial (and literal) eye. Based in research and informed by experience, Project: Human is an effort by one organization to take a message of healing and hope to divided communities by meeting with community activists, community leaders, and police departments to encourage cooperation and dialogue, to build understanding, and to motivate community members to work together to implement meaningful changes in attitudes and actions that show respect for the fact that we are all . . . human.

Literature Review

Importance of Police-Community Relations

If public safety is to be maintained, and if policing is to be effective, there must be an attitude of mutual trust between police departments and the communities they serve. For example, police officers investigating crimes “often rely on the cooperation of community members to provide information about crime in their neighborhoods, and to work with the police to devise solutions to crime and disorder problems” (U.S. Department of Justice, 2015). In many of the most crime-ridden neighborhoods of cities across the country, residents are simply afraid to cooperate with the police, not necessarily because they do not trust the police, but because they live in fear in their own neighborhoods. McBride (2017) comments that people living in such communities:

fear retaliation by those engaged in the suspicious behavior, especially when they are reputed gangsters, terrorists, violent criminals, or ‘street people’ who have earned a reputation for being dangerous. Unfortunately, protection offered by local and state police, in return for cooperation, is only temporary. After the case is over, witnesses are on their own . . . (para. 5)

There are, of course, those who distrust the police because of the publicity surrounding certain cases, and response to many of those cases has led to demonstrations of protest, and sometimes even riots, over what some members of the community perceive as police misconduct. In a national forum that was held in 2015, community leaders and leaders of police agencies from across the country came together for a day-long discussion to explore ways that feelings of mistrust can be replaced by mutual understanding and the building of positive relationships. Several suggestions for collaborative strategies came out of that meeting:

1. Acknowledge and discuss with your communities the challenges you are facing.
2. Be transparent and accountable.
3. Take steps to reduce bias and improve cultural competency.
4. Maintain focus on the importance of collaboration, and be visible in the community.
5. Promote internal diversity and ensure professional growth opportunities. (U.S.

Department of Justice, 2015)

Police Attitudes Toward Their Communities

Interestingly enough, most police officers believe that the relationships they have within their own communities are essentially good. Morin, Parker, Stepler, and Mercer (2017) write:

These opinions, if anything, have grown somewhat more positive in recent years despite the national outcry over police methods and behaviors that followed a series of recent, highly publicized deaths of black men at the hands of law enforcement officers. (p. 48)

Because police officers routinely see people at their worst, those stressful situations often take their toll on the attitudes officers have when interacting with the residents of their communities. Morin et al. (2017) report that “a 56% majority [of officers] say they have become more callous toward people since starting their job” (p. 49).

Despite that fact, though, about two-thirds of police officers feel like they are respected in their communities, and over 70% of officers disagree with the notion that police officers have reason to be distrustful of most citizens (Morin, Parker, Stepler, & Mercer, 2017, p. 49). Most officers (about 97%) also either say it is very important or at least somewhat important “for officers to have detailed knowledge of the people, places and culture in the areas where they work (Morin et al., 2017, p. 50).

Community Attitudes Toward the Police

Among the things that drive the attitude toward police in communities is the community’s concept of procedural justice. This means that even when a member of the community may not like having an encounter with a police officer (e.g. a traffic stop or being questioned about suspicious behavior, etc.), they are more likely to accept the outcome if “they view the process through which decisions were made as fair and appropriate” (Jackson, 2015, p. 5). Three key components of procedural justice are: 1) that individuals are given the opportunity to share their perspective during an encounter with police; 2) individuals believe they are being treated with dignity and respect during the encounter; and 3) individuals trust the motives and

neutrality of the officer (i.e. they do not believe they were targeted, but that the officer is simply responding to their behavior).

While the majority of police officers (62%) view themselves as a balancing force in the community to both protect the public and enforce the law, members of the public (almost twice as many) see the police as primarily enforcers rather than protectors. Only about 53% of the public views police officers as being balanced in their approach as a combination of both protector and enforcer (Morin et al., 2017, p. 76).

One issue upon which both police officers and the public have found common ground is in the belief that the work of being a police officer is much more dangerous now than it was even five years ago. Even though the numbers do not quite match up with police officers who believe this (89%), about 70% of the public agree that policing has become more hazardous in recent years (Morin et al., 2017, p. 80).

Police also believe that protests against police actions stem from a long-standing bias against the police. Surprisingly, the majority of the public actually agrees that this long-standing bias exists. “A smaller but still substantial 79% majority of the public agrees that prejudice against the police provided at least some of the impetus for the protests, including 41% who see this as a major motivation” (Morin et al., 2017, p. 82).

The general disparities in the results described here demonstrate why it may be difficult at times for members of the public to believe that the concept of procedural justice is being applied during their encounters with police. It is difficult because, even though the public is aware that policing is much more dangerous in current times, they still believe that police are there primarily to enforce laws against them rather than to protect them, and they also readily admit that a long-standing bias against police affects both their perspective and attitude.

Where Communities and Police Agree

Dr. Bernice King, daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., believes what her father taught her:

My father said that people hate each other because they fear each other, and they fear each other because they don't understand each other . . . We are still divided in this nation, and we have to find a way to bring the community together with law enforcement.

(Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), 2016, p. 5)

Many people, especially in urban communities, have had negative experiences with the police. And believe it or not, police departments in those communities are aware that those experiences have shaped the perception of mistrust that exist. Boston Police Chief William Gross has said that “you can never dismiss anyone’s negative experiences with the police, what they have gone through, or what their loved ones have gone through” (PERF, 2016, p. 5). Even if the perception in a given local community seems to have no basis in fact, the fact that the perception exists is enough that police departments are taking notice and trying to be more proactive in working with their communities to resolve and avoid issues of conflict.

People do recognize that police officers are also human, and that humans make mistakes. The perception is that police officers are not always held to the same level of accountability for the mistakes that they make, and especially when officers make decisions and take actions that are perceived by the public to rise to the level of criminality. It is important to understand that no one likes a corrupt police officer more than other police officers. The public wants police departments to “create and enforce a duty to intervene” (PERF, 2016, p. 5). In other words, the public wants to see evidence that good officers are stopping bad officers when they are engaged in misconduct. They want more transparency in the process, and so do police. Chief Dan

Slaughter of Florida asserts: “If a chief quickly recognizes that something is wrong, it’s better to take action immediately. We can no longer say, ‘This is under investigation’ and sit coldly for a month. We have to move quickly” (PERF, 2016, p. 7).

Both community members and police departments want officers to be more proactive in building relationships in the community. Clovia Lawrence of Radio One said that “the best way to build trust is to go to the people. Do not expect them to come to you in an open forum, especially in communities that don’t trust police or have had some issues with police before” (PERF, 2016, p. 7). Chief Ron Teachman agrees, saying:

We need to recognize that for too many people, the only time they meet a police officer is when something bad has happened to them, or when the police think they have done something bad. And that’s not the way to build trust. So please invite us into your lives. Ask us into your schools, invite us into your church basements after a service, invite us into your community meetings. We want to go where people are naturally congregating, and not just show up when something bad has happened. (PERF, 2016, p. 8)

Project: Human

Project: Human is the brainchild of Tristi Ogden, co-founder and current CEO of Humanizing the Badge, a non-profit organization dedication to forging stronger relationships between police officers and the communities they serve. Over the past 16 months, members of the Humanizing the Badge team have traveled to several cities in order to engage police and communities in open dialogue and activities that focus on that mission. Below is a brief summary of what was experienced in some of those cities.

Orlando, Florida

Before Project: Human was officially named, the Humanizing the Badge board turned its eyes toward Orlando following the mass shooting that had taken place at the Pulse nightclub. At the urging of the leaders of Humanizing the Badge, one local pastor got involved by volunteering at the location in which family members would come to find out new about their loved ones, and in many cases, to receive the official notification that their loved one had been killed in the incident. Out of that experience, that pastor helped secure contacts with local officials who, under the direction of the Orange County Sheriff's office and the Orlando Police Department, invited Humanizing the Badge to come to the city to engage both officers and community members in activities that would help promote healing and recovery.

Dallas, Texas

As our team was preparing to leave for Orlando, 5 police officers in Dallas were cut down by a sniper's rifle as they were protecting protestors in a demonstration march. The reason for the march? People were marching to protest mistreatment by the police. Activities in Dallas included visiting the memorial site where the officers had been killed as well as making visits to Dallas Police headquarters and visits to other police departments in the Dallas area. One of the most poignant moments of the trip came during the visit to Dallas Police headquarters. A woman in a waiting area asked the members of the team who they were and why they were there. Upon explaining that many of the group were police officers, she began to rant about her disdain for the police. One of the team members, an officer from the St. Louis area, sat down and began to talk with her. She related how she was there to speak with a detective and was being forced to "snitch" on one of her family members in order to bargain for a reduced sentence on a crime she

had committed. That conversation ended with both the officer and the woman in tears, and with the woman thanking him for taking time to hear her story and to show that he cared.

Ferguson, Missouri

The first trip officially under the Project: Human name was to Ferguson, Missouri, a city many people consider “ground zero” of the Black Lives Matter movement that began as a response to the perceived injustice of the death of Michael Brown. The first stop was at a local church that meets in a storefront in Ferguson. The pastor of the small congregation orchestrated a dialogue between members of the Humanizing the Badge team and several community activists who had been instrumental in organizing ongoing protests and demonstrations. That meeting was followed up by a visit to the Ferguson Police Department. What the team found was that the community members and the police were in harmony on about 95% of the issues at hand, and that it was mostly outsiders coming into Ferguson that were stirring up violence. Some of the same Ferguson residents who were involved in the protests were also showing up at the police station to provide food and water for the officers who had been working long shifts and whose lives had been endangered as people opened fire on lines of officers.

Detroit, Michigan

Detroit is consistently ranked as one of the most crime-ridden cities in America. The Humanizing the Badge team engaged in a wide variety of activities, including serving meals at a rescue mission, interacting with individuals who were inpatients in a drug rehabilitation facility, and hold a public forum with criminal justice students at Wayne State University. They also partnered in activities with the Detroit Police Community Foundation, and helped organize a Law Enforcement Appreciation Day at a local church where dozens of officers from several

jurisdictions, including the Michigan State Police, attended and brought vehicles for parishioners to see and “play” in.

San Diego, California

San Diego, like many cities across the country, has quite a large homeless population. One of the main focuses of the San Diego trip was to go to a “tent city” where many of the homeless stay, recruit police officers from the area to help, and to do a day of cleanup to help make the area safer for those who have settled there. Officers from the San Diego Sheriff’s Office and the El Cajon Police Department led the way in that effort. The trip also included organizing a game of dodgeball between youth and police officers at a local community center.

Columbus, Ohio

In one of their most recent trips, the Humanizing the Badge team visited Columbus at the request of the police department there. A public forum was held which gave the opportunity for members of the team to explain what their career as a police officer means to them and to their families, and to also hear about concerns the community members have about interactions with the police. The team arranged for a couple of silly fun activities such as a giant tricycle race between uniformed cops and kids in the community. The next day brought a water balloon fight between cops and kids at a local park, with the Humanizing the Badge crew cooking hot dogs and hamburgers to serve people who came to enjoy the event.

Conclusion

There is both bad news and good news associated with this conversation about police and community relations in America. The bad news is that there are some situations where the police have done wrong and need to be held to account. There are also situations in which the police have been maligned for doing their duty. People have lost their lives in the process, and this is

something that no sensible person would want to see persist. The good news is that there are people on both sides of the conversation who are moving closer to the middle, closer to one another, and are working at finding solutions to the issues that have caused division in communities across the country. There is increasing hope that this conversation will continue, and that as an ongoing dialogue is created, the needed changes – on both sides of the conversation – will be embraced.

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