

Examining the Interactive Relationship Between Policing and the Community

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Abstract

In this Capstone Research Project, Team Tigers has chosen to explore the importance of a healthy interactive relationship between policing and the community through the examination of leveraging technology, transparent risk management, and community outreach. Each avenue of communication supports servitude, fosters credibility, and nurtures partnerships. Organizations committed to a trust-based communication information exchange, allows adaptations to meet new contingencies whether legislative or community based, course correction and the opportunity to proactively plan for future collaborations.

Introduction

With new technology, open risk management, and a “better” way of doing things, those of us in law enforcement must show those we serve how we operate. This community engagement is all about letting the public know who the organization is, and about what the organization can accomplish because of what the community allows. Better technology allows us to “see more.” Risk management allows others to “see” how we are operating. Community engagement brings all three elements together to build trust and relationships in all communities. We are not only allowing the public to understand us, but in turn, we are learning about the public. In the module on Emotional Intelligence, Robinson (2017) spoke about the importance of knowing yourself. This is a must before anyone can truly understand others (Robinson, 2017). In this instance, the “others” is the community. If we learn to understand the community and what they want, we can change the way we operate to better serve them. This benefits everyone.

Technology

When looking at how we can leverage technology in our law enforcement organizations and communities, we must do so while still maintaining and building public trust. The use of various technologies can be a very effective tool in solving crimes, preventing crimes, collecting evidence, and helping build community trust through transparency and accountability. In the same breath, leveraging the use of certain technologies inappropriately will shatter community trust with law enforcement much quicker than it can be built. In a quest to identify key traits of leadership, Ellis and Normore (2014) agreed and prioritized the top six leadership traits in order of their importance. These traits included *caring, competence, credibility, communication, courage, and collaboration* (Ellis & Normore, 2014). Each of these traits are crucial when leveraging technology in our communities.

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We would argue these six traits are all critical to ethical leadership and it starts with *caring*. When the leader of your organization models a *caring* behavior, others within the organization will be inspired to follow and model the same behavior. Once you display the first five traits, this culminates into the sixth trait of *collaboration*. It is no secret that law enforcement cannot do its job at the highest of levels without collaboration and cooperation from our citizens we serve and organizations we partner with throughout our communities. Ethical leadership utilizing these six traits will bring credibility to your organization and foster relationships within the community to achieve common goals. When talking about a sensitive topic such as leveraging technology or utilizing certain technology within our communities, these six traits of leadership are key components to success.

We will focus on two pieces of technology that the Mesa County Sheriff's Office in Colorado has introduced into our community. The first is Body Worn Camera (BWC) systems, which many agencies in Colorado are required to adopt due to state legislation. The Mesa County Sheriff's Office was already looking at this technology, but due to legislation, our timeline moved up to prioritize this for our deputies.

When we look at the climate of policing throughout the United States today, we face every dimension of the environment: legal/political, economic, social, competitive, and technological (Long, 2017). As agencies face legislative changes, whether from political pressure or social pressure through advocacy groups due to police actions, it forces our agencies, leadership, and staff to engage in the phases of the organizational communication process, both within the agency and within our communities. This requires communicating legal changes, updated training for our staff and educating our communities on the changes, challenges, or opportunities we face as a profession.

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At the Mesa County Sheriff's Office, this change had been talked about for the last couple of years. However, several factors had to be examined before we could make it happen such as initial cost, on-going costs, additional staff to manage the system, etc. Our timeline was sped up due to external factors in our state with police reform and new legislation. While the legislation (<https://leg.colorado.gov/bills/sb20-217>) states all law enforcement agencies must be wearing BWC's starting in 2023, the Mesa County Sheriff's Office implemented our program in March of 2021. Several reasons went into this decision such as known advantages to wearing BWC's like transparency for our community, protection of our deputies from untruthful complaints, and strong evidence for court cases. Perhaps one of the most important reasons, is our command staff wanted everyone in our agency to get used to wearing this piece of equipment a year and half early. This is due to built-in legislation that result in severe consequences for not having a BWC activated during a citizen contact or incident.

There was some pushback as to why we had to attend this program so far in advance of the legislative mandate. It helped having line staff involved in this process to help deliver the message as to all the advantages BWC's bring to the table. The Mesa County Sheriff's Office went a step further in protection of our staff understanding that in stressful situations a person is likely to forget to activate their cameras. So, our agency invested in technology to activate our BWC's when our front emergency lights are turned on and/or when our handgun is drawn from its holster. It wasn't long before staff began seeing the many advantages to BWC's versus the fears that had been perceived for implanting this new technology into our daily work lives.

Fortunately for the Mesa County Sheriff's Office, we live and work in a community very supportive of law enforcement, so the addition of this technology has not been met with resistance as far as privacy issues are concerned. In the short time we have been utilizing

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BWC's, complaints against deputies have gone down or deputies have been cleared due to evidence captured on the BWC. While it has also increased our accountability and transparency with the citizens we serve, we really have not seen any significant perception issues from our citizens regarding police legitimacy or our professionalism due to our existing relationship and reputation with our community. In the end, leadership must identify the internal and external resources needed for change, should always ask who, what, when, where, why and how questions and should effectively communicate the "why" with clarity and vision. As Harrington (2017) states, "if change is left up to chance, leadership is in for a wild ride."

The second piece of technology we have begun using is our Community Camera Program, commonly referred to as NOLA, in partnership with ProjectNOLA.org in New Orleans, Louisiana. This was a "technology leap" for our agency and community in many ways not only due to the very conservative political climate, but also a climate that is very supportive of law enforcement = The words "Big Brother" were exactly what we believed we would hear from citizens, so we knew we needed a proactive plan entering this venture to receive "buy-in" from our community.

In addition to frequently viewed as an agency with ethical leadership, we have also been extremely involved in our community and community leadership, making deposits into our trust and confidence account with the community (Ellis, 2017). We identified and approached some of our "most conservative" business owners to present this idea of NOLA cameras in our community with the focus of teaming up with business owners, landlords, etc. We started with the "Why" when explaining how we see this technology working in our community and advantageous to law enforcement and citizens alike. Instead of being met with "Big Brother" talk, we were met with positive support. The business owners and landlords saw the advantages

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to partnering with the Mesa County Sheriff's Office and ProjectNOLA.org in harnessing the latest technological advances in security cameras to make our community safer.

Since 2020, when we started introducing this technology to our community, the news has spread to other businesses, landlords, and property owners interested in teaming up with our agency and the NOLA program. We have held community meetings with other interested partners, Homeowner Associations. Currently, we have sixty-six active NOLA cameras, at least fifteen more ready to be installed in the community. Our goal by the end of 2022 is to have one hundred NOLA cameras up in unincorporated Mesa County.

What we have experienced at the Mesa County Sheriff's Office when leveraging technology in our community when it comes to policing has been positive. We believe the trust we have built over the years with our community, as well as our transparency in what we are trying to accomplish, is the reason for the positive response to the Community Camera Program.

Risk Management

Public safety professionals face many obstacles with effective communication between the organization and the community. Therefore, it is imperative to examine the interactive relationship and nurture a healthy exchange. Organizations must keep two fundamental areas mindful to optimize control of the narrative and mitigate the high consequences of a failed communication in the wake of a critical incident. First, we must offer a respectful and trusting position coming from a perspective of servitude and credibility and two, offer transparency regarding the process of Risk Management and the response of the organization. The key to success is by-passing the emotion of the moment and redirecting the focus to the issue at hand and to what the organization is going to do (Nash, 2017).

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Laying the groundwork for success with maintaining a respectful approach is cultivated through building a strong trust-based relationship with the population you are serving before the crisis occurs (Nash, 2017). Ironically, this can begin with budgeting. The groundwork begins with building relationships outside of daily business (Mack, 2022). It is vital to build a highway of common ground by not only knowing the names of your governing body, who are the committee chairs and their responsibilities, department heads, but also about their interests and hobbies (Mach, 2022). Thus, it is important to attend meetings, give tours, allow ride-a-longs, share social media and invite them to employee events for the organization as well as events designed as community outreach. Through this effort you get to know the people you are collaborating with for the good of the community and what values they bring with them. Coming to community leaders with open hands builds a relationship where you inform and participate 80-90% of the time in a collaborative spirit and only ask for something of them 10-20% of the time (Mack, 2022). The community leaders and the community members who witness these exchanges see the partnership and a deposit is made into our trust bank. Additional deposits are made as the budgeting process continues through developing priorities, describing them in measurable terms and why they are necessary and finally, what the impact or result of the desired action (Mack, 2022). The transparency of the process demonstrates the integrity and high standard of accountability the organization operates from in a very public forum. In summary, this process solidifies our vested commitment to the public safety interest first and foremost from a position built in trust through something often looked over, the budget. Trustful communication has been established.

The established foundation in trusting communication will add sincerity and validity to the next layer of transparent communication. This is especially true as we navigate Risk

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Management of community concerns. Topics of concern are easily found in casual conversation between officers and the community, informal meetings, complaints, social media and during city council meetings to name a few. As these topics gain attention, it is critical to be present during the initial discussions to be proactive to addressing the potential risk to the organization and the community. The importance of the right communication becomes paramount to solidify the trust between the community and the organization. If a leader fails, there will be a break down in critical incidents and chaos will be the result. The foundations of communication, trust, character, and competency will stand up in a time of chaos as these foundations communicates that an organization is always doing the right thing (Nash, 2017). As an organization navigates these waters it is of vital importance to respond to the meaning of a situation and not to react to the words or the emotion. The professional response requires empathy and the ability to see things from the community's perspective to defuse the situation (Nash, 2017). When successful, emotions are by-passed, and the communication is redirected to what the issue is and grounds expectations into reality (Nash, 2017). Immediacy is communicated and offered through being direct and honest creating an environment that allows the organization and the community to see issues and problems that they might not see otherwise (Anderson, 2017). Healthy and collaborative communication is reinforced.

Following a critical incident, the deposits into the mutual and trustful communication between the organization and the community will be of utmost value. Procedural justice is important as there is no room to bring bias into the justice procedures, trust and public confidence must be the foundation (Tobia, 2017). There must be dignity where all are treated with respect, open dialogue that communicates all perspectives are valued, decisions created based on evidence alone and finally, a demonstration of good will through action that promotes

the message that the best interest of the community is at the heart of the organization's response (Tobia, 2017). Risk Management is at the heart of this process as it promotes a logical process of weighing the potential cost of the risk against possible benefits of allowing those risks to remain uncontrolled (Harrington, 2017). Careful examination of the facts gained through evidence, acknowledgement of hazards or failures, successes or both, and a clear action plan on how to address what is found is the modality through which the organization can communicate a trust-based commitment of justice to the community. The outcome, whether it is a product of hazards related to humans, environmental, mechanical, or external causation, must be transparent and open to discussion with the public. This process opens dialogue and re-sets the relationship with the community through reconciliation (Tobia, 2017). Additional deposits of trust are achieved with the public as safety is improved, litigation is mitigated, and resources are preserved through improved practices (Harrington, 2017). It is the fundamental duty of the organization to serve the community with respect and to preserve constitutional rights and through proper Risk Management this can be achieved. Without the initial efforts to communicate servitude and credibility in an unlikely avenue such as budgeting, and the continued work in daily interactions, the environment of collaboration is not possible in the wake of a critical incident.

Community Outreach

To understand the reason why we have relationships with the communities we serve we must further explore the question of "Why" (Sinek, 2010). The "Why" is our commitment in a transparent, trust-based relationship with our community. Thus, why not show them what we are all about? Listen to the news and it becomes apparent the media is trying to portray us as militaristic, uncaring, biased, and racist. We know this is not who we are. We are a team, caring

deeply for all, regardless of race and sex. Yes, there are some “bad eggs” in law enforcement; most are not (Garcia, 2022).

But this relationship must continue. It is not enough that we say we are done and do not have to further this relationship. Gary Blankenship (2017) stated that “having a legacy mindset promotes our agency and protects our future.” The community is who we serve. We must work with them in furtherance of our existence. Working alongside technology and transparent risk management, engaging the community will prove to them that we are working in the best interest for them, not just for ourselves.

The Larimer County Sheriff’s Office connects with our community through sponsoring a Citizen Academy, presenting special unit demonstrations, participation in parades, providing School Resource Officers (SRO’s) in all the schools in the county, posting announcements on our websites regarding scams and ID Theft, encouraging Neighborhood Watch training and a Community Awareness Program (CAP), and finally, classes on Recognizing the Path to Violence (Kramer, 2022). Through are the programs we help the community not only understand what our world is all about, but ways to educate them of the ways that criminals are trying to take advantage of others in the community.

Citizen Academy

Of all the eight programs listed above, we are only going to examine three of them. The first program is the one that is “all inclusive.” Most agencies will not be able to participate in of the possible programs. If they can only participate in one, they should have a Citizen Academy. At the Larimer County Sheriff’s Office in Colorado, the Citizen Academy is a program where anyone in the community can sign up and participate in a free 12-week training program. This group of people meet once a week and either participate in a lecture or hands on training; the

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same training our deputies receive, but in a shortened manner. Instructors from different disciplines within our agency to come and instruct different components of our jobs. The skills, or crime scene, traffic stops, force on force with sims guns, building searches, and arrest control happen in 12 hours total. Here the citizens get a taste of what it is like to do some of the hands-on stuff. They get a chance to be in “our” shoes and see a bit of what our life is like through our lenses.

This program helps citizens see the same harsh realities most law enforcement officers see every day. They are encouraged to ask questions if they do not understand why we do or do not do certain things in our jobs. Many times, healthy discussions develop that open their eyes and our eyes. They learn how quickly a situation can change and we learn how they are seeing situations from their situation.

Law enforcement receives unique training to effectively do our jobs. Why not provide some of this training to the public? It is not like they cannot learn the information on their own. Explain to them, show them why it is nearly impossible to shoot a knife out of someone’s hand. Provide them with the knowledge that although you know your brother, we do not and have to be prepared for many different possibilities. Additionally, teach our communities how anyone is capable of anything.

In this way, the people in the academy gain experiences and learn the liability issues we face every day. This academy helps the public learn what our jobs involve. They gain the knowledge of seeing things from our perspective, and I know that we have changed some people’s attitudes along the way. This academy humanizes law enforcement officers. If nothing else, this will enable them to pause when they see something on social media. Perhaps this additional information will give them the opportunity to decide for themselves instead of simply

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going along with what someone posts. This academy allows them to see that we care that we have personalities and are willing to speak with them about the issues in our society. As Lt. Brian Ellis (2017) states in his module, public safety is always judged by our interaction with the public. Why not give all of us the opportunity to have positive interactions with each other.

Instructing at the Citizen Academy requires the versatility skills of assessment and shifting into the role, and intentionally assessing and shifting (Anderson, 2017). Every group of individuals is going to have different skill sets or knowledge. The course is designed to change based upon what skills the community needs and/or wants (Anderson, 2017). Through communication with the community, one learns if they need or want a conversation, problem solving approaches, or consulting (Anderson, 2017). In accordance with that, one may need to shift their skills based on the topic matter at hand (Anderson, 2017). Based on this premise, we can do more.

There is always an ability to teach more, to inform more about current and upcoming technologies, and to make a more inclusive platform to expand the audience we reach. Streaming the courses on Zoom, Facetime, Google Meet, and/or Skype (each agency will need to ascertain which platforms are used predominantly by their communities) to reach those people that may not have the ability to come to the office every week. These lectures will be recorded, so that those who were not able to watch them live can watch them later. Doing this will make the academy available to everyone in our community. Society has learned through the pandemic that in person meetings are not the only forums for teaching. Yes, there are some topics that require in person learning, but most of the lectures can be done virtually.

Awards Ceremony

A second program is having the agency doing a yearly awards ceremony. This ceremony is the proper time to publicly recognize those who have gone above the call of duty in either a meritorious, lifesaving, purple heart, distinguished service, and/or medal of valor manner. In addition, we recognize our citizens through Lifesaving and Medal of Valor medals to highlight incidents in which citizens have assisted law enforcement and helped saved someone's life. The county commissioners, other law enforcement officers, media, citizens are all invited to this ceremony. A brief explanation of what the incident was, along with what the recipient did to receive the award they are receiving. The recipient gets on stage and is publicly recognized for the good they did. Additionally, their name goes on a recognition wall that is in the foyer of the Sheriff's Office for all to see. In the interests of being inclusive, this ceremony will be both streamed and recorded for later viewing by the community and employees.

School Resource Officer

Our School Resource Officers (SROs) are the third program discussed here. SROs are essential for positive interactions with our youth. Students learn to put a face on law enforcement and learn that they too are there to help and provide correction when it is needed. Some SROs teach classes or help with sports teams, further building the relationship with our youth. Additionally, the parent's see the officers at the schools and interact with them on levels other than just being pulled over or talking to one in an investigation.

Leadership

Credible leadership is the thread that weaves acceptance between the organization and the community. The level of credibility a leader has will determine their behavior and the ensuring acceptance or rejection of that leader by the community. A leader with high credibility is

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benevolent, collaborative, consultative, has an open door, encourages interactions, is team oriented, visible, has personal communication and sees the glass as half full (Long, 2017). In general, they have better and longer relationships with their subordinates and the community because there is trust and support in the relationships (Long, 2017). The impact of their credibility is internalization where the goals of the organization and the goals of the community are integrated and long term (Long, 2017). As a result, there is an environment of collaboration. An example of this collaborative relationship can be found in economic prosperity. Economic prosperity depends in part on the degree to which stakeholder are confident that the existing economic arrangements, the rules of the game, will not be altered in the future (Dull, 2009). This is also true in relationship between an organization and the community. If the rules of the game are in flux, credibility suffers. The leader who is intentional about creating community walks the talk and in so doing, creates a common language that allows the power of diversity and multiple constituencies to function in the strength and power of community (Kouzes & Posner, 2004).

Conclusion

When examining the interactive relationship between policing and the community transparency is a key component to the trust-based relationship needed to be successful. We must be proactive with our citizens in having open and honest discussions about issues facing the community and law enforcement. We must be open with our techniques and decisions and why we do things in a certain way. As law enforcement we must not only integrate ourselves into community events to have that outreach crucial in building trust, but we must also be inclusive with our community in teaching them more about our profession. Our profession continues to move forward in the technology-based world, and we must make sure we are leveraging the

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technology appropriately to ensure transparency and continued trust is held with our community.

Only then can we be sure that our relationship will flourish.

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