

**Maintaining Leadership Credibility in Times of Crises:
Navigating a Police Agency's Internal and External Communication Channels**

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Abstract

This research aims to identify and define the leadership principles and theories used to narrate the response by law enforcement leaders during a crisis. The American public has come to expect instantaneous knowledge of events and full disclosure of timelines and details. Various social media platforms used by both individual and commercial outlets have made this direct access possible. Law enforcement agencies are not exempt from the public's inquiries, especially during times of crisis, so today's leaders must have the knowledge and skill to mitigate the field of information release. To this end, an important detail to remember is that internal customers are as critical to an agency as external customers; employees need to be able to have the belief that their superiors are not going to "throw them to the wolves" if the incident could be considered inflammatory to the public. We discuss how law enforcement leaders can utilize authentic leadership principles to manage their relationships with the public and agency members effectively. Forward-thinking leaders will establish relationships before the crisis occurs so trust exists.

Introduction

This culminating narrative is a collection of the thoughts of five law enforcement members from various backgrounds and assignments. Regardless of their varied experiences, each member agrees that an agency must operate transparently with internal and external stakeholders. We aim to highlight how agency culture, leadership styles, and level of authenticity affect how messages are communicated. The public demands transparency and the media no longer waits for information to be released before releasing their narrative, so a negative story's impact can overshadow any statement released by the agency. Law enforcement leaders must learn to avoid this phenomenon by forming relationships that garner trust.

Planning for the Future

Law enforcement agencies must have focused and established action plans to handle crisis events. These plans must include steps and direction for communication internally between agency personnel and externally between the agency and the community. With the advances in technology and social media, the public expects instantaneous information on critical incidents in their communities. Agency leadership and credibility must be maintained during these critical times. There must be a coordinated balance of communication inside and outside the agency.

Internally leaders must provide consistent training in dealing with critical incidents. Erik Therwanger (2017) stated, "Organizations do not fail; leaders fail." If leaders do not provide the training and resources to handle crises effectively, they fail the agency and the community. Leaders must already have designated personnel trained and in place to carry out assigned tasks during the crisis. The last thing an agency wants is to handle a critical incident without established plans. The beginning stages of essential incidents require trust and confidence among

agency personnel to handle these situations. Agencies must be prepared to deal with the immediate impact of chaos and misinformation from inside and outside sources. The effect of internal misinformation can be significantly reduced if a critical incident plan is already established and in place (Police-Community Planning, 2021).

Established Guidelines for Communication

An established checklist must be in place to guide agencies in responding to critical incidents. The U.S. Department of Justice has provided a Police Critical Incident Checklist with the following guidelines on immediate action responses from agencies.

- Ensure that a command-level staff member is on the scene and providing information directly to agency leaders as it is received.
- Notify vital public officials and community leaders about the situation promptly.
- Gather as much preliminary information as possible about the incident.
- If possible, have designated leaders go to the incident scene.
- Contact your public information, media office, or liaison and develop an initial plan for their role.
- Start planning a press gathering to release information as quickly as possible. This plan should include various local media outlets and social media platforms.
- Avoid “dueling” press conferences; engage all interested parties to share podium time so the community can see unity among local leaders.
- Assign staff to monitor social media activity to assess what is said about the incident and gauge the community's mood.

- Provide the preliminary information you can to the public about the incident; if applicable, explain why you cannot provide additional information and indicate when you can share further details.
- Explain that it may also take longer for some information to be released if there is an ongoing police investigation. Let the public know how often you will update them on the status of the incident or new information and how these updates will be provided.
- Consider opportunities for the community to provide additional input.
- Consider having third parties or community leaders host and facilitate the meetings.
- Review any policies, accountability systems, or training protocols related to the incident (Police et al.).

Every agency may have a different definition or policy for crisis management, but organizational strategy should be present to facilitate the necessary actions. In a functioning community, people will always have an investment in what is taking place. The human aspect will consist of bystanders, informative voices, and the media. News outlets give value to critical incidents because of their ability to relay information. There may be fragments of knowledge essential to safety, location, or person identification that must be forwarded to community members. These outlets provide verbal and visual information assessments designed to keep people informed. From a law enforcement professional's perspective, the presence of the media can create an array of responses that lead to emotional reactions (Terrizzini, 2022). Sometimes, news outlets can be condescending and disruptive during incidents requiring a mass response.

The challenge is that while media can be used for the betterment of society, it can also be used to promote images and messages that can be damaging.

In a crisis communication plan, an agency should designate a point of contact to communicate with the public and the media. The more reliable information you can get out quickly, the better your chance of framing the narrative and establishing your agency as the source of credible information (Pal, 2021). Depending on the situation, several potential spokespersons may exist, but they all should be trained in speaking to the media. This is especially important in incidents that could damage the agency's reputation. If every staff member presents their view of an incident, things can quickly become chaotic. There may be misinformation or misunderstandings, which can ultimately damage the agency's credibility. The designated spokesperson(s) can present prepared statements, answer questions, respond to rumors, and manage press conferences. Media interviews will be a formalized way of dealing with hazards and not allowing them to stand uncontrolled. The media attention surrounding this event may be high because of previous incidents involving law enforcement. Therefore, short debriefs should be conducted until the conclusion of the incident. The designee would then take this time to reassure the community that the priority of this department is public safety and that this agency will never put the public in harm's way if at all possible (Terrizzini, 2022).

During a crisis, keeping on-scene personnel abreast of every occurrence involved with this situation will become essential. There must be credible leadership throughout the ranks to accomplish this task. Credible leadership is defined as the quality of being believed or accepted as accurate (Soaring Eagles, n.d.). Effective communication between the administration and those immediately supervising the different elements will be critical to comprehensively

understanding the crisis. Risk management tactics will be essential to set a precedence for future incidents.

Underlying Causes

Law enforcement credibility can sometimes suffer during a crisis due to insufficient preparation. Law enforcement incidents are rapid occurrences that require strategic preparation. This has to include proactive scenario-based training to ensure all personnel understand the importance of balance during critical incidents. This strategy will be a detailed plan providing roles and responsibilities within the agency. There will be other factors, such as how the officers are prepared mentally and physically. Influential leaders will put a demand on training and fitness, which will correlate with the mindset of individual and team safety. These actions are a result of having credibility during times of peace and times of crisis.

Proactive preparation also begins with communication serving as the foundational base. PowerDMS (2020) stated that law enforcement always needs clear communication. Nevertheless, it is especially crucial in the case of a crisis. Effective law enforcement communication can distinguish between keeping a handle on a situation or watching it spin out of control.

Sometimes, no matter the leader's influence, the individual follower must always have the intestinal fortitude to give maximum effort. This is an example of credibility transitioning into the ranks utilizing force as the arterial vein. This trait provides the follower with a cohesive balance not only to work to honor themselves but also to honor the effect the leader has on their work. According to Leadership During Crisis Response, specific training within law

enforcement-development programs should focus on what makes on-scene commander leadership and decision-making effective (Johns, 2016).

Social Movements

Social media has dominated every facet of American lives for decades. Today the iPhone and similar smartphones allow users to have social media apps in the palms of their hands 24 hours a day, seven days a week. This boom has had a dramatic impact on society and has also significantly impacted law enforcement and will continue to into the future. It has created a positive platform for police agencies to send and receive information, recruit resources and future officers, and engage with the public faster and more efficiently.

Social media gives a unique way to decipher what is right or wrong during a crisis, depending on the source. The relationship between social media and law enforcement has changed the dynamics of police encounters. With speedy access to cameras and social networking sites, it takes just a few seconds to record a police encounter and post it to billions of people around the world. Social media has often damaged law enforcement's public image by posting photos and videos of officers in precarious situations and causing concern for officer safety on and off duty (Musteen, 2013).

Social movements can galvanize public opinion and increase scrutiny of law enforcement practices and policies. If social unrest is the catalyst for a crisis, a leader must be prepared for an operational catastrophe. Today's tactics, procedures, and organizing look different, less hierarchical, and more technocratic (Blessing, 2020). As a result, law enforcement leaders may feel pressured to address the concerns and demands raised by these movements. Social movements often push for greater transparency and accountability within law enforcement

agencies. This can involve promoting more transparency in investigations, implementing body-worn camera programs, or creating civilian oversight committees to monitor law enforcement practices. Leadership must be prepared to address complex issues if social unrest is causing the crisis. Implementing a long-term strategy would include law enforcement leadership actively working to diversify the police force, improving cultural sensitivity training, and fostering community-oriented policing to address the concerns raised by these movements.

Political Actions

A major crisis can cause several complex issues to arise. A common problem is a need for more funding and resources. Political decisions can determine the allocation of resources to law enforcement agencies during a crisis. The style of law enforcement, formal departmental policy, and informal norms can all be heavily influenced by local politics (Course Sidekick, n.d.). This includes financing, personnel, equipment, and technology to handle the situation effectively. Government officials may also exercise emergency powers during a problem, such as declaring an emergency or implementing curfews. These actions can influence law enforcement's authority and duties. Political leaders are crucial in coordinating efforts between various agencies involved in crisis response, including law enforcement. Their decisions can impact the effectiveness of joint operations and information sharing. Politicians have the power to shape public opinion and support law enforcement. They can communicate expectations, advocate for law enforcement's needs, and maintain public trust amid crises.

Long-term Implementation

As the world advances, law enforcement agencies must be open to new methods of policing and in sync collaboration with other agencies. During a crisis, there must be several

command-and-control methods. Utilizing unmanned drones, AI intelligence, and Virtual Reality (VR) devices can aid trainees and certified personnel in developing strategies. They help prepare officers for the unexpected by simulating complex, real-world situations, augmenting their decision-making capabilities and responses to various scenarios, including potentially dangerous situations. A recent study found that innovative technologies such as AI could help cities reduce crime by 30 to 40 percent and reduce response times for emergency services by 20 to 35 percent (Surveillance and Predictive Policing Through AI, n.d.). Also, the International Data Corporation (IDC) has predicted that by 2022, 40 percent of police agencies will use digital tools, such as live video streaming and shared workflows, to support community safety and an alternative response framework (Surveillance and Predictive Policing Through AI, n.d.). As the capabilities of artificial intelligence technology grow and predictive policing becomes more of a reality, community trust also needs to grow. AI will only reach its full potential in policing when faith and technology come together. The future of law enforcement will always benefit from the value of credible leadership. Agencies must realize that technology, social issues, and changes within the law will continue to guide decisions. However, the profession will endure any changes through forward-thinking, responsible employment, and detailed training, no matter the perplexity.

Effects of Communication

Adaptable leaders provide the support necessary for their internal and external members to meet the necessities of change. Agencies that need to adapt and continue to stand with old, outdated philosophies of limited communication will create an environment or culture of one that is viewed as toxic. Internal members also answer to external customers, and it becomes difficult for an employee to remain loyal to a leader when trust and credibility are questioned during

times of crisis. Public members become wary when they hear conflicting narratives from “anonymous sources” versus official statements. The element of trust then becomes an issue as both entities attempt to move forward and create solutions.

Change and Adaptability

As leaders progress through any situation, there will be calls for change. This change may come from internal or external sources that need to provide an impactful transformation within the agency. During a crisis, leaders sometimes take an open-minded approach to how information is received and processed. Credible leaders can maintain their leadership values regardless of the source of change. They can explore innovative technologies and strategies to enhance law enforcement practices while protecting privacy and civil liberties.

Employees should be included in the changes in technologies and strategies; often, members are reluctant to change regardless of the need. Informal leaders, both inside and outside the agency, can facilitate the information if they have communicated with the agency leaders. Leaders should utilize this resource as these change agents can be the vehicle needed to share the required information, especially in times of crisis.

Versatile Leadership

A versatile leader can adjust their approach or response to the situation. They can determine if utilizing informal leaders to communicate the message is the answer or if a formal response is needed. Changes in the agency, such as practices or policy, can often be addressed through more informal methods, while the agency head better communicates a crisis event. However, a leader with personnel in place to handle social media should have trust in that person or unit so information can be quickly dispersed, as discussed in the following section.

Public Lines of Communication

The public's demand for instantaneous information during a critical incident has become insatiable. In these crucial times, the proliferation of social media and its spreading of information, or misinformation, will test a leader's credibility with the public he serves and the members of the agency he leads. Implementing the dash and body-worn cameras and the subsequent release of their recorded video footage is perhaps the most discussed topic in American law enforcement today. A leader who has established trust as the foundation of his leadership and holds people together can guide his agency and the public during those critical times (Maxwell, 2022). The capacity to recognize and manage the emotional reactions of others, express empathy, and use practical communication skills can build healthy and productive relationships during those critical times.

Whenever a critical incident occurs within a community, and tensions between the public and the officers of an agency become strained, the leader who has demonstrated authentic and credible leadership before these turbulent times will be able to lead his agency and the public. Authentic leaders build relationships with others, the people, and their organization, by making decisions based on honesty, fairness, and decency principles. The connections are not built overnight but take place over time by conscious and consistent effort. When developing these relationships with the public and within his organization, unity, respect, and collaboration are the keys to creating a leader's credibility (Abrashoff, 2008).

A leader of a law enforcement organization who has established himself as an authentic leader with the members of his organization with a consistent display of integrity and strong

moral principles will be viewed as trustworthy, honest, and genuine. Dr. Anthony Normore (2017) stated, "People long for bona fide leadership they can trust and for leaders who are honest and good." As an agency is looking to implement a body camera-worn program, many within the organization will be resistant. Organizations are resistant to change, but if we as leaders are to help our agency grow and maintain the trust of the public whom we serve, we must be willing to change. Effective communication of your vision and goals for implementing body-worn cameras and how the recorded video will be utilized is vital to leading your organization during critical times. Seeking input from the members of the organization will give the leader an insight into the concerns of his officers. Leaders must confront traditional reactive-role perceptions with empathy to be aware of, understand, and be sensitive to their deep feelings and the internal problems or issues connected to their concerns (Dr. Larry Long, 2017). Meeting with members individually and as a group to discuss your vision, setting the standards to be met, seeking their input, and addressing their concerns will help create the atmosphere of trust necessary to influence change. This can also be done with members of the public, such as the various community leaders who exert influence to establish an open and transparent relationship that will help during those times of crisis.

By exerting power to obtain compliance without first building a relationship with the group based on trust, genuine integrity, and ethics without obtaining a consensus and "buy-in" from the group, the leader will have no choice but to use coercion to get compliance. Understanding the nuances of leadership and building rapport with various people will allow them to take the most effective path forward (Phillips,1992).

Culture Within the Agency Before the Crisis

Leaders must evaluate their agency's culture long before a crisis occurs and begin implementing needed changes during harmonious times rather than attempting to make adjustments following chaos. A culture that does not promote trust will result in employees being afraid to step forward for fear of reprisal (Wickersham, 2016). This lack of confidence, whether real or perceived, will only be heightened if the incident involves a loss of life due to the use of force. Wickersham says in her article that an agency where wrongdoings go without being reported due to fear eventually develops into an unethical environment if allowed to progress due to the lack of correction and training.

On the other end of the spectrum, an agency with established trust within its boundaries will have most members following the established rules and fulfilling the goals and mission. Accountability will be standard, with above-average performers being recognized and violations being reported and dealt with accordingly and in a progressive fashion (Wetzel, 2021).

Both cultures have a level of accountability to their internal members and the public stakeholders. A culture that holds its members to established standards on every level, not just a group of crises, will project that image to its public associates. When an incident comes to light, there will be far fewer questions about the credibility of releasing information. Being accustomed to the support of their superiors, employees will understand the need for transparency to the public as it relates to the established culture of reporting without fear.

Authenticity in Reporting Information

Authentic leaders know their people personally; they work to maintain a relationship beyond strict names on paper (What Is Authentic Leadership? 2023). The relationship between law enforcement and the media should be the same; the interactions should be a regularly scheduled event rather than simply when something occurs. Agency leaders can foster trust by being transparent in everyday affairs, such as informing the media and public about internal procedure changes (Law Enforcement Policy Center, 2019). This information concerning specific practices will help provide answers when situations arise and the perception of the agency being candid and willing to share information.

Usually, this information release is handled through a person or unit dedicated explicitly as a liaison to the media, the Public Information Officer. An agency investing in a position strictly to handle media affairs projects an image of openness; this office has an established working relationship with the local partners and keeps lines of communication open.

Human Factors

Information released after a crisis, even with media partners who have established working relationships, may come with hard questions, especially if errors have come to light and those are included in the release. It is imperative that leaders understand the human factors involved in the decision-making process that resulted in the event in question and that they can clearly articulate those influences in their response. Psychological, physiological, and environmental factors affect officers making split-second decisions. A clear understanding, not only by the media partners but especially by the leaders themselves, prevents unrealistic expectations of the humans filling the role of a police officer (Von Kleim,2023). Expectations can be grounded in reality through scenario-based training in which leaders invite their media

partners to participate. People can gain more understanding when they have practical knowledge of a subject rather than being given a narrative.

Incorporating Human Factors into Crisis Intervention

Taking human factors into consideration when dealing with community members who present with mental health issues, law enforcement leaders can promote trust by furthering crisis intervention training within the agency. Perceptions and preconceived notions are altered with training and knowledge of the local resources for mental health. When made public, these partnerships tell the story that the agency is willing to explore any avenues necessary to handle a subject with mental illness rather than simply using force and taking them into custody. However, when the occasion arises that the outcome is the force being used, the media has a history of previous encounters in which law enforcement utilized the non-judicial resources available to them.

Agencies that implement changes in handling these subjects without changing the mindset are not authentic with their internal members or external stakeholders. These incremental changes are surface level only, and the public will soon realize they are in place to only “check the box.” Deep change occurs when leaders involve the public, media, and local resources to identify the problem and define a solution that works for everyone involved. The leaders agree to adopt the agreed-upon solution as the only acceptable option for all involved, with older philosophies being abandoned. This open candor that an issue exists will increase credibility and authenticity.

Proper CIT (Crisis Intervention Training) does aid in deescalating situations that would have previously become negative headlines. However, improper training can result in an

unwanted effect on the public's perception of law enforcement's treatment of the mentally ill.

Officers trained and supported with ongoing training and strong community allies in the mental health field report feeling more prepared (Sanabria, 2022).

Conclusion

In conclusion, law enforcement leaders must anticipate continued change in society's expectations of information. Social media platforms will continue evolving, affecting the agency's new employees. Employees today expect open lines of communication with their leaders.

Media outlets must compete with other forms of entertainment, so their stories are written to gain an audience. Leaders must proactively communicate with all customers internally and externally to negate the stories with false or misleading information. This incorrect information leads to adverse reactions during crisis events, unnecessarily fueling tensions within the community. Strong relations between agency leaders and their media partners can aid in fostering a more secure and peaceful environment for all to enjoy.

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