

**Breaking News! Media Loves the Police**

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### **Abstract**

This capstone is based on the attitude that the media sensationalizes news stories affecting police officers. They tend to put out a story without all the facts and a lot of the time their stories have a negative impact on law enforcement. In this capstone, we hope to give a foundation that will have the police and media working together. This foundation will have to include the police agency providing honest and accurate information and the press reporting fair and accurate stories. By building a relationship between the police and the media, it should help with the way information is reported whether the outcome is favorable or not. The critical point is that published information is thorough and honest. Throughout this Capstone, different methods and skills learned throughout the National Command and Staff College curriculum will be used to recognize ways to resolve these problems.

### **Breaking News! Media Loves the Police**

According to Malcolm X (year 1963), "The media's the most powerful entity on earth. They have the power to make the innocent guilty and to make the guilty innocent, and that's power. Because they control the minds of the masses" (p. 115). It is imperative to understand the relationship that is present between law enforcement and the media. This relationship cannot be taken lightly. It is forever changing. While both agencies are here to serve the public, their relationship has always been controversial. The controversy arises because police want to give out as much information as possible but are sometimes limited due to the situation or investigation. News agencies, on the other hand, are constantly trying to obtain as much information as possible because they believe the public has the right to know all that is going on. The problem that we wish to address is how to bring in the news media as part of the team rather than excluding them.

The media plays a vital role in the reporting of crimes and the actions taken by the police. The press needs LEO for public information, protection, and stories. The LEO needs the media for dissemination of information, requests for public assistance on crimes and to educate the public with police procedures. These interactions provide the press with a more intimate view of law enforcement in action. These events offer a unique opportunity to see LEO in a new light and a chance to build new relationships with them. The media has played a part in influencing how members of law enforcement conduct themselves. Research indicates most of the public knowledge about crime and justice is derived from the media (Roberts & Doob, 1990; Surette, 2007). We must remember that both sides serve the public and that we are on the same team.

The issue that our Capstone wishes to address is the relationship between law enforcement and the media. Crime, justice, and media must be studied together because they are

inseparable, wedded to each other in a forced marriage where they cohabitate in a fascinating, if raucous relationship (Surette, 2007). This is currently a significant issue facing LEO at all tiers and parts of the United States. We should start approaching this relationship with clear and open communication. This will be done through the use of timely and accurate information given upon availability. While law enforcement strives to give out as much information as possible, this can affect investigations or fluid situations. Building strong relationships with the media will aid transparency, develop better relations with the community, and explain to both the intricacies of police procedures. We feel that this is best done through the use of a Public Information Officer (PIO). A research conducted by the sage journal about the functions to communicate with a variety of audiences particularly the media. The results of a 2000 survey of PIOs shows that indeed, whereas most describe their role as media oriented and reactive, some PIOs also use management oriented, proactive techniques that are consistent with established public relations models. These findings suggest that PIOs perform a wide array of traditional public relations activities and that they have been instrumental in moving law enforcement from a closed to a more open system of communication. The paper is organized in the following manner. First, we introduce the role and responsibilities of the Public Information Officer. Then, how the PIO will interact with the media, next, discuss the role of leadership involving the PIO, and finally, how to utilize a PIO to form better relationships with the media.

### **Public Information Officer**

A PIO is the voice of the department to issue any statements, news releases, or public safety information to the media. We believe that the PIO should be a direct point of contact between the administration and the news media. When choosing a PIO, It is vital to locate someone who is well spoken, knowledgeable of police procedures, consistent, and accessible to

all involved. The people that should be included in these interactions would be the administration, the PIO, the public, the media, and the officers involved in the incident. While there are situations where the officers should not be in direct contact with others involved, they will always be in connection with the administration and the PIO.

### **Interactions between Media and Police Agencies**

There have been and may always be many problems in the interactions between media and police agencies. One of the main problems we have identified, through our own experiences, is that in the media's haste to get the story out, they do not always verify or substantiate their facts before reporting. Because of this, a false narrative is sometimes created with the limited facts they were given. When dealing with the media, it is incumbent on the PIO to not only give timely information, but to check his facts, and give the media accurate facts. By doing his/her due-diligence the PIO will give the media accurate information so that the media is able to report an honest story. Any negative spin put on the story by the media is at no fault to the LEO. This statement stemmed from the collective knowledge from four officers with a combine experience for approximately one hundred years on dealing with the media.

We feel that the underlying causes of these issues are quickly identified though not so easily remedied. The leading causes is merely a lack of relationship between the media and the different police agencies. Because of this, LEO's have been vilified or even targeted by various media outlets. "Reporters have changed the way they talk about police officers. They bring more attention than ever to anything negative done by someone in the law enforcement profession while leaving positive stories out of the lineup. CNN contributor, Elliott McLaughlin is one of the reporters who talks about this in his article entitled 'We are not seeing more police shootings, just more news coverage' (<http://www.cnn.com/2015/04/20/us/police-brutality-video->

social-media-attitudes/). We, as LEO's, are also at fault for pushing media out to try to protect these targeted members of our agencies. This has too can be done to protect the integrity of our open investigations. This creates a perception of unwillingness to cooperate with media further damaging the relationship we have. In an effort to sensationalize their news story, the media may report the news inaccurately. This is where it is vital for the PIO to give accurate information. By the press providing inaccurate reports, it hinders any assistance the public may provide to solving a crime. One of the ways we can combat these issues is by providing a constant feed of accurate information to the media. This will allow us to build rapport with the media and strengthen the relationship between them and our agencies.

With the various venues of news reporting, including social media, information is released at such a pace that it cannot always be verified. Therefore, it gives a false impression of the facts. The instant transmission of this information makes it almost impossible to keep up with all of the emerging news stories. In our current day and age, it is not only the media with cameras and microphones but also every citizen with a phone in hand. This emphasizes that officers need to work at a new standard. The officers are left in a constant state of situational awareness knowing that any action can be recorded or misconstrued from when the recording started. With the higher standards put on officers, we hope to be able to hold the media to a higher standard of verifying their facts before putting out inaccurate information or stories.

We realize that the relationship between news media and LEO's will always be relevant to the media itself, the law enforcement agencies, and the citizens that both groups serve. Because of this, we feel LEO's should invite the press in to see exactly what is involved in the day to day activities. This interaction between the agencies will help those in media to understand the situations that many of the reported stories originated. It may also be helpful for

LEO's to go to the press and see what goes into the stories being published. It is also essential to include the media in the community relations events that the LEO's are involved in. We feel that building a good relationship with the press is paramount because the news is not going anywhere. This being the case LEO's should seek feedback from the media to understand better what they are looking for and how much information they are willing to receive during the first initial encounter. The media also must realize that all information cannot be released to them at that point and time.

The media affects all LEO's day to day functions regardless of size, type or location. The involvement of the press has even changed the tactics employed by LEO's in their interactions with citizens, changes in our investigative procedures and how information is transferred to the media. The focus of the media has put additional pressure and scrutiny on the actions of law enforcement. "Most U.S. police officers see significant challenges on the job in the wake of high-profile incidents involving law enforcement. Among those challenges is a widespread feeling among officers that police are mistreated by the media, according to a recent Pew Research Center Survey" (<http://www.pewsocialtrends.org/2017/01/11/behind-the-badge/>). This constant pressure is seen in the morale of the agency surrounding major events and incidents. By focusing on perceived negative actions of law enforcement on or against the public, it creates discourse between officers and those that they serve. This can, in turn, affect the agency as a whole as well as the community in general.

Just as officer's train with their firearms, officers should also be trained in dealing with the media. Anytime there is an interaction between a LEO and the public, and the media will naturally want to get a story. In their effort to get this story, the media may try to pressure the first officers on the scene. This is where training by the officers come into play. The

professionalism shown by these officers towards the media creates a legacy for future interactions. We feel it is essential for every officer to follow the examples set by these PIO's in how to interact with the media. Officers must understand that the media has a job to do, which is to report the incidents to the public. We all must remember that our actions speak louder than our words and we must stay professional at all times. Leaders must be proactive in their interactions with the media to set the example for other officers to follow and to show the progressive policies and values of their agencies (Nash, 2018).

We feel that the adaptive leadership style is the best way to approach our interactions with the media. Adaptive leadership requires you to anticipate the situation as best as possible and to be proactive to address it. Some of the characteristics of an adaptive leader are good performance under pressure, willingness to learn new skills, proper use of intelligence, open minded, encourage others, and knows the procedures used by their agencies (Spain, 2018). Because of the importance of this leadership style in addressing our interaction with the media, it is vital to mentor new officers and PIO's to develop this leadership style in themselves.

When dealing with the media, it is essential to understand their position. It is paramount for the PIO to gather facts and listen carefully to the questions asked. Sometimes the PIO has to explain that there are facts that can't be given out at this time. For the sake of the privacy of the victims and their families, as well as the integrity of the evidence, some of the facts may need to be withheld for a short time. As soon as possible, the agency will make available all the facts that they can. These facts will show the integrity of the investigation and the honesty in the facts given to the media for them to construct a report (Nash, 2018).

The virtues of the magnanimous leadership are essential to the developing these relationship goals. As a Magnus Leader, we must focus on our self-control, our humility, and



our gratitude. The self-control to remain professional at all times for our communities and our agencies. The humility to know that we are here to serve the public as well as the media. The gratitude is critical to show that we appreciate the cooperation from our media and our communities as they assist in our investigations (Hoina, 2018). LEO's must remember the importance of remaining engaged with our media and communities to build strong bonds of mutual respect and trust while we protect the safety of the citizens that we serve.

To change the way the media and police interact falls back on the leadership (Long, 2018). The head of the news organization and the police department should have a meeting quarterly. These meetings could be used to establish trust and build relationships. As stated earlier, we feel that a consistent output of information will allow the media to trust during the times where information needs to be withheld. We would also suggest initiating training programs on the policies within the agency for all officers to better educate them on how to interact with the media and the importance of following proper protocols for the release of information. We stress the importance of establishing a PIO for the release of this information so that as new intel is gained only one consistent narrative is presented to the public.

The moral compass and emotional intelligence of the officers are both present in the area where the media is concerned (Snyder, 2018). As a police agency that deals with extreme situations regularly, the PIO has to display situational awareness in the incident. He should be able to hold his emotions in check while communicating accurate facts for the news media to present their story. By having the PIO put out these facts, whether favorable or unfavorable, it shows courage and taking responsibility. By following the standard reporting procedures, it should stop any conflicts that arise between the media and the police.

The news media perceives that LEO's intentionally withhold vital information. This causes conflict between both organizations which cannot be resolved, but that can be managed. The press has an unfulfillable expectation, in regards, to the amount of information that should be released regardless of how it will affect the investigation. Forgiveness and understanding is the key to restoring that relationship. To show that the LEO's want to enhance their relationship a collaboration should be formed by partnering the PIO and selected reporters. In turn, this will build a partnership between the organizations and help with the understanding of both parties involved.

When LEO interact with the media, the key is to maintain a professional because the relationship is paramount. We feel that it is crucial that PIO access their styles to help them be authentic in their interactions. We identify the importance of the PIO's ability to read people and access the situation correctly. It is also vital for the agency to look ahead at future trends to prepare themselves for any upcoming obstacles. LEO's must remember to maintain a professional culture in all their interactions. With the emergence of new technology, officers are always being recorded in one form or another. Due to this, officers must maintain their constant state of professionalism. What we do, what we say, and how we say it, always must be considered because we never get a second chance to make a first impression.

### **Role of Leadership**

We feel that multiple leadership styles are employed with our relationship with the media. Authentic leadership. The first one we would like to address is authentic leadership. It is essential for authentic leadership to be built on trust. The fundamental characteristic of authentic leadership is understanding the purpose, having strong values, having self-discipline and understanding the importance of establishing trusting relationships. We were taught the

authentic leadership principles were the thought process, emotional intelligence, inner drive, and deep core values. We believe all of these directly affect the relationships we should have with the media. We understand that our relationship with the press is built on integrity. Dr. Normore explains that, "integrity is the foundation of a successful leader" (Normore, 2018).

**Servant leadership.** The second leadership style is servant leadership, which as a PIO, it is his duty to work with the media whenever a critical situation arises. An essential part of this job can listen effectively. This will help both the media and the agency to come to an understanding. Also, the PIO should have a vision and be able to anticipate the questions that are going to be asked. And even though not all information can be given out, a good PIO will be able to feel the frustration the media has and empathize with them. The PIO should be aware of the changing circumstances and be open to updating the press as soon as possible. You want the media to get the information quickly and understand the importance of their work. Through the use of servant leadership, LEO's can put the media and the community first. This echoes the lesson learned that leaders always eat last. Servant leaders understand the importance of empowering others and the use of teamwork between the media and agency (Spain, 2018).

**Toxic leadership.** The last leadership style we would like to discuss is the toxic leadership (Watt, 2018). While this is bad in most situations, it can be catastrophic in our relationship with the media. Toxic leaders only care for themselves and operate through the use of dominance, coercion, and manipulations. If these become part of our interactions with the media, all trust could be lost. Damage done by toxic leaders often goes unnoticed until it's too late. Toxic leaders damage the relationships the people they work around and with. If allowed to interact with the media they could tear down the whole department, through the media in the eyes of the community. Toxic leaders should be avoided at all cost, with any interaction with the media.

### **Organizational Subsystems**

All organizations have subsystems that need to be managed. One skill that is important to maintain is the adaptive decision making. According to Ellis, Normore and Javidi (2016), many of the situations that LEO's participate, fall under VUCA. VUCA is defined as volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity. Volatility is defined as nature, speed, volume, and magnitude that cannot be known. Uncertainty comes into play because issues and events are unpredictable. Complexity is relevant because "policing is the epitome of inculpable variations of cause, effect and emigrating factors." Ambiguity is the lack of clarity about the meaning of an event. VUCA merely is defined as chaos. We need the media to be understanding that because of this, LEO's need time to process the incident before information can be given out. Adaptive decision making must be employed by both the officers and PIO, in regards, to these situations.

### **Progressive Law Enforcement**

Progressive law enforcement is a factor in our media relations. The media does not always understand the risk management involved in LEO's incidents. In the past, it was easy for the press to place blame on officers when the situation is not understood. LEO's focus on the implementation of risk assessment with safety since preservation of life is paramount. LEO's use decision making training to help with risk management. These trainings include shoot don't shoot, defense driving, use of force, and defense tactics. It would improve the media's understanding of LEO's actions if they too went through similar training.

Because the PIO plays such a vital role in the agency media relations, we believe it is critical to focus on session planning for this position. Agencies should look for officers that display excellent communication skills, humility, empathy, and integrity while searching for possible replacements. Allowing current PIO's to mentor such officers will allow for a smooth

transition into this position. Cross training is another way to maximize the effectiveness of those set in a PIO position. Agencies can also look into the media itself as an outlook for possible training or to acquire a PIO.

Members of the media are fundamentally curious people. They investigate a story to uncover the facts. Some of the stories they research relate to crimes being investigated by the police. A good media person should have the mental awareness to ask positive questions and realize that not all questions can be answered. On the other hand, the PIO should have the same psychological awareness. They should be ready to answer questions openly and honestly when able. The media and the police both have to realize that these sorts of stories will emotionally drain an officer and be physically demanding (Harrington, 2018). These stories often weigh heavily on the LEO's. The PIO must understand this while he goes about his business of collecting information to give to the media. The PIO should also understand that some officers already have a dislike for the press. The PIO has to connect with these officers to ensure he has the right information.

With all the information provided so far, we hope to have established a starting point on how to build a better relationship between the police and the media. Studies have concluded that improved media relations could positively influence the effectiveness of law enforcement agencies. A study by Buhrmaster 2005, provided six tips for improving police/media relations. The suggestions included seeking media exposure, an open door policy, looking good in front of the media, open lines of communications, developing empathy, and satisfying the needs of media. We feel that by addressing these six tips, we will start the process of building a better relationship between the police and the media.

### **Conclusion**

The process of working with the media starts with realizing the vital part the media has with reporting the news honestly and accurately. To make this work, the law enforcement agency has to have a PIO who is properly trained and is not afraid to give the media honest and accurate information whether it is favorable or unfavorable to the police. The PIO is the voice of the department and must be professional at all times.

The PIO should know that the media wants information quickly but accurately. But the media should also realize that it takes time for the PIO to gather this information. By giving the PIO time to gain the facts it can be reported honestly and accurately. If any negative spin is put on the report it is due to the media.

By establishing a relationship built on integrity, the media and the PIO should help eliminate any negative reporting by the media. An easy way to establish integrity is to allow the media to see and participate in the training that police agencies provide to their Officers. This will provide insight into police procedures while showing them that we have nothing to hide. Also, when doing special events for the public make sure the media is invited. Let them see we have a human side to the men and women behind the badges. We are hoping that this Capstone will show that relations between the media and law enforcement can be improved upon to the point that mutual trust can be obtained.

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