



Training Key® #476

Police Ethics: Problems and Solutions - Part II

This is Part Two of a two-part *Training Key*®. In Part One, we examined the nature and importance of police ethics and discussed some of the factors that may have contributed to a decline in police integrity in today's world. In Part Two, we present specific suggestions that may help law enforcement personnel and their agencies resolve some of the problems previously discussed.

In Part One of this *Training Key*®, we noted that the generally lowered moral standards in our society and the increasing failure of individuals to accept responsibility for the consequences of their own acts have produced a “what’s wrong with that?” mentality across a broad spectrum of the population. Today, it is not an exaggeration to say that morality has become a relative concept rather than a time-honored, commonly accepted code of conduct. It has been said that U.S. society — if not Western society — lacks a moral consensus and, in many sectors of our society, immorality has become commonplace, even accepted as the norm.

Obviously, the police are not to blame for this state of affairs; it is a phenomenon of modern society as a whole and the result of many social factors beyond the scope of this document. But it is naive to think that police and policing have not been affected by these changes. The ethical standards of law enforcement personnel have been affected by the changing moral standards of our society just as the profession has been changed by innumerable other social dynamics. Scholars clearly agree that the police, as other professions, inevitably reflect the communities and the culture from which they are drawn and in which they must work. But the norms and standards of conduct of modern society are not always consistent or compatible with the level of integrity that is expected of, and necessary for, police officers.

Like the problems that affect the moral fabric of our society, there are no quick fixes to the problem of police integrity. The issue is far too complex for easy answers, and those who cling to simplistic solutions will surely be disappointed. However, the law enforcement community can take concrete steps that can have a significant effect upon the problem. In addition to their complexity, some of the measures that must be taken may not always be met favorably by law enforcement person-

nel. However, if meaningful inroads are to be made to positively improve police ethics and provide continuous support for ethical decision making, some difficult decisions and actions are necessary. Each police agency, as well as each police executive, supervisor, and officer, must interpret and apply these concepts in a manner that is compatible with the department’s particular circumstances. Each of these steps is an integral and essential part of the overall effort. Therefore, these elements should be considered as part of a comprehensive program to improve and fortify ethical conduct within the law enforcement agency.

Individual Responsibility

Developing and maintaining a high standard of integrity in a police department ultimately hinge on the commitment and will of the individual officer. Personal integrity and a conscious decision to do the right thing even in the face of sometimes overwhelming pressure to do otherwise are where the rubber hits the road in the ethical decision-making environment. Affirmations of integrity and formal adoption of a code of conduct, code of ethics, statement of values, or other declarations are important. But these are meaningless unless these precepts are internalized and practiced on a daily basis by all members of the agency. A moral and ethical working environment requires that everyone, from the chief to the newest probationer, accept and integrate the precepts of moral and ethical behavior into his or her daily life and recognizes personal responsibility in meeting those responsibilities.

Every member of the department must make a conscious decision (a) to determine what is or is not appropriate conduct and (b) to accept the responsibility for ensuring that, in any given situation, that individual, and his or her fellow officers, will do what is right. Without each person’s accepting the need

for high ethical standards and committing to accepting personal responsibility for seeing that high standards are maintained, this effort cannot succeed. Thus, regardless of what specific steps are taken by a law enforcement agency to raise the level of that agency's integrity, acceptance by each officer of that department of personal responsibility for his or her own actions is vital to achieving that end. The importance of this factor will be emphasized frequently in the discussion that follows.

Zero Tolerance for Corruption

Experience has made it quite clear that if the necessary standards of police integrity are to be achieved, there must be a policy of zero tolerance for corruption in any form within the agency. Many authorities have come to recognize and subscribe to what has been called the slippery-slope concept of corruption — the unpleasant reality that even seemingly trivial matters such as accepting a free cup of coffee can establish improper precedents and examples and serve to create a climate that can undermine the integrity of individual officers and the department as a whole. Accepting a free cup of coffee, a free meal, or other items can help create an attitude that such things are incidental perks of the job. It is not a significant leap from this attitude to one that views these same perks as entitlements of the job.

Once an officer develops this attitude, it is not difficult for the officer to begin to expect more of the same, even to demand these things if they are not automatically offered. It is difficult to convince some officers that there is any harm in accepting what appear to be minor favors from those with whom they come in contact on the job and who may even be attempting to express genuine gratitude. Yet the progression down the slippery slope from the trivial to the tragic is all too easy, as has been demonstrated.

Another aspect of this problem is the image that is created among the public that may be exposed to officers who accept favors or gratuities or who otherwise reap personal and unofficial gain by virtue of the position they hold. Such acts, as witnessed by or which become known to the public, can serve to create a negative image of the department and its personnel — an image of police exploitation of the public rather than public service and one of misuse of office as opposed to dedication to duty. Such negative and often unfair images can have long lasting effects and can serve to undermine the public trust in all officers within the agency, not just those involved in illicit activities.

Agency Values

Developing an agency values statement that all personnel can subscribe to is an important part of an overall program of building ethics, preventing corruption and brutality, and establishing a commitment to efficient and effective service. Most patrol officers function largely in an unsupervised manner. Policy, procedures, and rules used to govern and structure police actions can never, by themselves, be fully effective in regulating officer conduct. Conduct, as previously noted, is governed more by personal beliefs and attitudes than it is by threat of sanctions imposed by law, or through department rules or regulations. Values are not rules or regulations but are statements of underlying moral and ethical precepts and beliefs. They are or should be the foundation from which rules and

regulations, as well as many policies and procedures, flow. But unless an agency defines and clarifies these principles and police officers understand, accept, and internalize them, the rules and regulations that flow from them will have limited meaning.

For example, it is important to ask whether, in the case of the use of force, an officer does the right thing because he or she is afraid of being caught and subsequently prosecuted or disciplined, or because he subscribes to an underlying belief in fair and just treatment of all persons. An officer who understands and subscribes to these basic values is far more likely to do what is proper on a consistent basis in this and other critical decision areas than is the officer who acts only from fear of being caught.

What are these values? Values must be agency specific and emphasize the importance of certain characteristics or qualities that are required of officers. But many value statements have common themes that stress personal responsibility for action and dedication to duty, honesty, reliability, fairness, integrity and loyalty, and respect for other human beings. One police agency identifies eight essential values, as follows:

1. Human Life: We value human life and dignity above all else.
2. Integrity: We believe integrity is the basis for human trust.
3. Laws and Constitution: We believe in the principles embodied in our Constitution. We recognize the authority of the Federal, State and local laws.
4. Excellence: We strive for personal and professional excellence.
5. Accountability: We are accountable to each other and to the citizens we serve who are the source of our authority.
6. Cooperation: We believe that cooperation and team work will enable us to combine our diverse backgrounds, skills and styles to achieve common goals.
7. Problem-Solving: We are most effective when we help identify and solve community problems.
8. Ourselves: We are capable, caring people who are doing important and satisfying work for the citizens of (this jurisdiction).¹

Each of the above values is given greater clarity by the use of defining statements. For example, under the heading of "Human Life," the agency makes the following affirmations:

- We give first priority to situations which threaten human life.
- We use force only when necessary.
- We treat all persons with courtesy and respect.
- We are compassionate and caring.

In establishing a values system for a police agency, several issues should be kept in mind.

First, management must avoid attempting to impose values on its personnel by executive order. To the greatest possible extent, all members of the department, regardless of rank, should be involved in the process of formulating that department's values. It must be the result of an organization-wide effort that incorporates input from all levels of the department. The perspectives and attitudes, the concerns and problems, of everyone in the department should be solicited, and every member of the department should be involved in its creation, if not personally, at least by representation. Inevitably, there will be disagreements among personnel, and a substantial de-

gree of discussion will invariably revolve around defining and explicating specific values. Nevertheless, involvement and discussion at all levels will enhance support for the values once it is constructed, and will also clearly signal to those who have not previously lived up to the proper standards that it is not just management but also their peers within the department who expect them to conform to these attitudes, beliefs, and values. Involving the entire department in values development will heighten their ultimate acceptability and, as such, will allow all officers to serve as role models.

Second, developing a values statement should form the cornerstone of the department from several perspectives. For example, only when an agency has a clear consensus on the principles and beliefs that are most valued by them can they realistically establish specific goals and objectives for their agency. Values also underlie nearly all decisions regarding agency policy and procedures and are the essential first building block in developing an agency manual. By the same token, training must be based both on agency policy and procedures and upon the underlying goals that drive those procedures. In turn, supervision and personnel performance evaluations must flow from the standards of performance identified and defined in the agency's training procedures and agency policies, procedures and rules. By taking the time to examine, analyze, and formalize the central ideals, beliefs, and values of a police agency, the agency can chart a clear course for all of these interrelated functions.

Organizational Climate Supportive of Ethical Behavior

Formulating a code of conduct is an essential first step in establishing an ethical work environment. Beyond this, the police agency must establish a climate within the organization in which integrity is not only possible, but is actually nurtured and rewarded. There are several aspects to this.

Avoid conflicting signals. Police agencies must be careful to guide their agencies in a manner that is at all times consistent with values and policies and procedures that have been developed. There is no such thing as situational ethics when it comes to basic principles of right and wrong. This is not to say that some allowances should not be made in the case of rule infractions where unusual situations dictate. What it does mean is that the basic principles of an agency should be regarded as applicable to all officers and not subject to negotiation. The department must make certain that officers adhering to the proper standards are rewarded, and that officers failing to adhere to those standards are censured. Any failure of command and first-line officers to observe this basic principle indicates to departmental personnel that the agency's values are selectively applicable, and violations of the code of conduct may not be reasonably enforced or may even be ignored under certain situations.

Recruiting. It goes without saying that police agencies should always try to hire the best possible people for the job, and much has been said and written about the need for, and difficulties involved in, that effort. In the present context, however, it should be noted that it is vital that the recruiting process do more than just bring in persons who score well on psychological tests, pass a medical examination, and lack a criminal record. The use of psychological and personality profiles has become a standard recruiting tool, but, unfortunately,

these tests are more useful for screening out those who are clearly unqualified than in identifying those who are the best qualified for police work.

Obviously, more is needed. The recruiting process should stress the importance of hiring (and retaining) not just those who survive screening tests and background checks, but also those who have demonstrated in the past their interest and involvement in activities that reveal a concern for the community and its people. The world of policing is changing, and the coming years are, inevitably, going to bring a demand from our society for a police force that is more sensitive to the needs of the community and those who live in it. Therefore, when recruiting new officers in the years to come, a willingness to serve the community in ways that go beyond traditional conceptions of criminal apprehension will be (indeed, already is) an essential trait of a good police officer. A background that reveals a recruit's motivation to participate in constructive group activities is perhaps one of the better indicators of suitability for the job of being a police officer in the society that we see developing around us today. Past interests and activities of an applicant will often prove to be a far more accurate indicator of the values, attitudes, and overall character of the applicant than any psychological screening test.

Such activities might be of many different types — even a history of participation in approved extracurricular activities in school may be some indication of the way that the applicant thinks, how he or she will relate to people, and how well the new recruit will fit into the new world of policing that we will face in the remainder of this decade and in the next century. Many activities will provide this indication. Past exposure to and demonstrated ability to communicate effectively, solve problems, work effectively in and to develop groups, creativity in facing unusual problems or circumstances, good people skills, self-motivation, and related skills are among those that will receive greater emphasis as police agencies continue to reach out to the communities they serve and involve them more intimately in their crime prevention and control activities.

Training. Most recruit training today pays very little attention to instruction on the ethical standards expected of police officers by their departments and the public whom they serve. In some instances, this lack of attention to ethics is excused on the grounds that (a) there isn't enough time to cover such "minor" matters and (b) you cannot teach someone to be ethical. Neither of these objections is valid. Every police recruit should leave the training academy with a clear understanding of what is expected of him or her in terms of professional ethics and personal morals. Integrity is not a "minor" matter; it is one of the more vital subjects that can be offered in any police training course. Furthermore, an academy graduate who knows exactly what conduct is or is not acceptable is far less likely to make ethical mistakes and is one who understands clearly where the line in the sand is drawn and that there is no tolerance for those who cross it.

However, this training, to be effective, must be more than a mere review of the code of conduct of the department. Ethics training in police recruit classes must be reality-based and must involve more than just a simple discussion of integrity. The training must be candid and involve a free discussion of the potential problems and pitfalls that challenge police officers on the job. It must include discussion of the temptations that they will face, the stresses of police work, the effects of a

career in law enforcement on personal life, and related matters.

Such courses must also help recruits understand their role as police officers. The training should help the recruits understand the role of police work in contemporary society, as that role (and that society) is now developing. It must also emphasize to the recruits that, whether they work alone in the field or with other officers, they are ultimately individually and personally accountable for their actions, not only to the department but to the courts and to the public whom they serve.

Although many applicants may deny this, many recruits join the police force based upon preconceived and usually erroneous notions of what police work is all about. Much of this is gleaned from television and movies, and it is often a source of major disappointment to new recruits when they discover that police work is largely service-oriented rather than the characteristic apprehension of major criminals so often portrayed in the media. Thus, the realities of police work must be explored with new recruits; myths must be dispelled, and recruits must be made to understand the true nature of the job, including its problems and frustrations.

Realism about the functions, duties, responsibilities, and problems in police work will do much to diminish the skepticism, cynicism, and frustration that we so often see developing in new officers when they go into the field and, hopefully, make officers more prepared to confront the stress and corrupting temptations of the job.

Policies and Procedures. Once officers are on duty with the department, clear and consistent policies and procedures are essential to let these officers know what is expected from them, what the acceptable limits are on their discretion, and what means and methods are or are not permissible in performing the job. Such policies and procedures, well-drafted and evenhandedly enforced, are essential to establish acceptable behavior patterns. They also help to develop performance criteria against which personnel can be evaluated, held accountable, and, if necessary, disciplined.

Supervision. Supervision, particularly first-line supervision, is a critical element in maintaining proper ethical standards among police officers. Supervisors must (a) believe in the standards set by the agency, (b) observe them personally, and (c) enforce them consistently and fairly in their departments. If first-line supervisors such as sergeants and field training officers (FTOs) have not themselves accepted the values established in the department's code of conduct, no effort to improve standards of departmental integrity can succeed. The implications for careful selection and training of first-line supervisors are obvious.

In this respect, the role of the FTO deserves special note. In the past it has not been uncommon for FTOs to provide instruction consistent with their personal philosophy and way of doing business. Under such circumstances, the recruit may be instructed — by word and deed — that some things are acceptable that may not be consistent with training received in the recruit academy. For example, this may include instruction that may not be consistent with principles of use of force taught in the academy. Obviously, such an attitude on the part of the old-timer undermines the value of academy instruction — not just in the area of use of force, but in related areas concerning ethical conduct, the role and significance of individual rights under the law, and the proper role of police in relationship to citizens in a democratic society.

Consequently, FTOs must be the first and most enthusiastic proponents of ethics and integrity in police work. In many instances, FTOs are chosen for their record of productivity and effectiveness (arrests, tickets, etc.). The importance of these skills cannot be diminished, and new officers should be properly indoctrinated into law enforcement using the most talented officers as mentors and instructors. But while these things are important, it is also important that the attitudes of the prospective FTO, as demonstrated during his or her service in the department, be scrutinized before an officer is assigned as an FTO.

Discipline. Holding personnel strictly accountable for their actions is the backbone of accountability. But the system of discipline must be rationally based, reasonable, and consistently and fairly administered. Perhaps even more important, the system must not only decree punishment for infractions, but must also provide rewards for positive behavior. Discipline without positive reinforcement is destructive and demoralizing. Those officers (of any rank) who violate the department's ethical standards should be disciplined; those who demonstrate the ability to do what is right should be held up as positive examples for the entire organization.

Police Culture. "Police work is not just a job, nor is it a vocation; it is a way of life."²² Much has been written about the influences that the culture of policing has on police officers and police conduct. Innumerable scholars and observers of the police profession have held that, more than any other factor, the attitudes, beliefs, behavior, and actions of police officers are determined by the working environment within the police organization and on the street. Their reaction to that environment — both good and bad — defines what sociologists like to refer to as the police subculture.

New officers often find themselves thrust abruptly into this closed environment of police work, where officers all too often become isolated among themselves. The result can be development of a us-against-them mentality and the isolation of line personnel (including first-line supervisors) from the department's management and from the public in general. Observers of police behavior and organization point to several aspects of this subculture that are extremely negative in their effects and threaten the willingness and ability of police officers to do the right thing.

Probably the more significant among these effects is the silence, solidarity, and secrecy that are so often evident among police officers. The community of police work and the resultant camaraderie of police officers are important sources of positive support for officers and their families. However, the negative side of this support system can be a misguided sense of interpersonal loyalty that overlooks or even covers up misdeeds and wrongdoing. The tendency to transform mutual support and feelings of kinship into mutual protectionism is understandable, but when the code of silence is invoked in the face of unethical behavior, corruption, or brutality, the culture of policing takes on a sinister and destructive character. When officers instinctively tend to focus on protecting their coworkers, rather than on the wrong that has been done, they are abdicating their personal and professional responsibility as peace officers. Such action suggests that officers, in spite of their professed beliefs, do not believe that they are accountable to their agency, the law, or the public that has entrusted them with the power of their office. This is not the role of policing in

a democracy, and it suggests problems not only for officers involved but also for the police organization as a whole.

Police organizations should take whatever steps possible to direct loyalty, fidelity, and fellowship into positive efforts to maintain the ethical standards that are so essential to law enforcement today. These efforts are not always easy and may often require major changes in organizational styles as well as management and supervisory practices. All these are beyond the scope of this *Training Key*®. For purposes of this discussion, it may suffice to say that the police culture must be recognized as a source for positive reinforcement and support of police agency values and ethics. Ethics becomes an integral part of the police culture when officers understand the role and importance of ethics in their lives and their profession, internalize those roles, and hold their colleagues accountable to the same high ethical standards as they do themselves. Under such a system, all officers become examples to their colleagues.

Conclusion

In summary, the police working environment must be geared to encouraging — and allowing — all of its personnel to be examples of the best in the police profession. When the entire organization subscribes to an ethical, value-based system, all officers can serve as role models, both to their colleagues and to the community.

Authorities who have studied the police profession often advise that one of the better ways to accomplish this goal is to transform police agencies from the traditionally autocratic paramilitary forces of the past into more democratic organizations-broad-based agencies in which individual officers' talents and ideas are encouraged and used constructively, and in which management and line functions are working in a compatible and mutually supporting manner. This environment must be based upon mutually accepted, goal-directed efforts that are founded upon a value system that is clearly defined and firmly accepted as a result of the joint endeavors of all members of the department.

Endnotes

¹ Statement of Values of the Alexandria, Virginia, Police Department.

² Edward A. Thibault, Ph.D.; "The Blue Milieu: Police as a Vocational Subculture", in John W. Bizzack, Ed., *Issues in Policing: New Perspectives*, Autumn House Publishing, Lexington, KY.

questions

The following questions are based on material in this *Training Key*®. Select the best answers.

1. Which of the following statements is false?

- (a) *Personal responsibility for one's actions is the cornerstone of building and maintaining police integrity.*
- (b) *The "slippery slope" concept of corruption holds that even minor misconduct helps establish the climate in which wrongdoing can grow.*
- (c) *Minor favors from the public are gestures of gratitude that officers should be permitted to accept.*
- (d) *Conduct is governed more by an officer's underlying beliefs than by the fear or threat of punishment.*

2. Which of the following statements is false?

- (a) *Agency values statements are not rules or regulations.*
- (b) *Agency values statements are statements of underlying agency and officer moral precepts and beliefs.*
- (c) *All officers in an agency should be involved in the formulation of the agency's statement of values.*
- (d) *Development of agency values is the responsibility of the agency chief executive alone.*

3. Which of the following statements is true?

- (a) *Good character and moral integrity can be determined by testing recruits using psychological exams.*
- (b) *Ethics and integrity are not subjects that can be effectively taught to officers and prospective officers.*
- (c) *The development of clear and consistent agency policies and procedures is essential to let officers know what is expected of them.*
- (d) *The behavior and actions of police officers are generally influenced by the "culture of policing."*

answers

- 1. (c) The acceptance of even minor gratuities or favors from the public is not acceptable in that such gestures can come to be regarded as expectations or "perks" of the job.
- 2. (d) A police agency's statement of values must involve all officers in the agency to the degree possible if officers are to fully endorse, accept, and follow those values.
- 3. (b) Ethics and integrity can be taught and used to help persons build and maintain character and personal integrity in both their jobs and personal lives.

have you read...?

Building Character and Reducing Drug Corruption in Police Departments, International Association of Chiefs of Police, Alexandria, VA 22314 (1989).

This research study of drug corruption presents recommendations for police agencies in their efforts to stem the influence of corruption created by illegal drug trafficking.

