

Obstacles to Community Engagement*

Although we are always concerned about the quality of the relationship between law enforcement and the community, those concerns become more acute from time to time. This is especially so when we try to engage communities in order to involve them in policing efforts. A number of barriers interfere with such efforts. Many involve perceptions of the police that exist at an individual level. These, in turn, may vary for people whose experiences with the police are not confined to American policing. Other barriers relate to reactions to the role and authority of the police. Moreover, at a group level, efforts at engagement are hampered when law enforcement agencies reach out to those who may be ideologically wed to a position of rigidity that interferes with the goal of achieving consensus.

In our interactions with the community, we often assume that the only experiences that individuals have had with police agencies are those that typify American policing. This assumption, of course, is erroneous in the cases of millions of immigrants and foreign nationals who reside in or visit the United States. Regarding these people, it is worth remembering that policing in other parts of the world can differ markedly from policing in the United States.

In many parts of the world contacting the police is likely to make an already-bad situation somewhat worse. In some countries, the problem may simply be that the police are only "open" on certain days and at certain times of the week. In other places, the police operate on a fee-for-service basis, meaning that you may report your victimization, but you will have to reimburse the police for the gasoline, wear and tear on their vehicles, time, and so forth in connection with reporting and investigating the crime.

In fewer (but still many) parts of the world, calling the police is likely to make a bad situation much worse. Whatever the legitimacy of the aforementioned fees, in many places the "fees" are in fact obligatory bribes. Failure to pay them can result in arrests, beatings, or worse. Against this background, it should not be surprising that many people, based on their histories, choose not to contact the police-wherever they might be.

Negative views of the police are not confined to current and former foreign nationals, however. Many Americans hold negative views of the police because of stereotyping. That is, based on what happens in Los Angeles (e.g., Rampart Station) or New York City (e.g., Abner Louima), people may generalize and assume that all law enforcement officers are similarly disposed. Stereotyping is most likely to occur where people have little actual contact with the police themselves. This is so because, actual experience generally trumps preconceived ideas that are not based on actual experience.

Stereotyping is not the only obstacle to quality relations between law enforcement and the community. The very nature of police work is such that it erects such obstacles. Generally, law enforcement officers do not come into people's lives when things are going well. Like meeting a funeral director, the circumstances under which you meet a law enforcement officer are not likely to be pleasant ones (though hopefully, they are not quite as unpleasant as the contact with the funeral director). Consider the circumstances that are most likely to bring you into contact with citizens- citations, arrests, accident investigations, death notifications, and so on. Your involvement in their lives occurs at difficult times. Moreover, in light of the human tendency to avoid personal responsibility, they may think their circumstances are your fault, rather than their own.

Another barrier that impedes effective relations with members of the community relates to the authority with which you are vested. My own experience has been that, whatever authority I have possessed has been resented by those against whom that authority is exercised. Whether as a peace officer making an arrest, a professor catching a plagiarist, or a parent catching a toddler's misbehavior; the exercise of my authority has not been universally well received.

A final impediment to the establishment of good relations with the public exists at the group, rather than individual, level. For a variety of very good reasons, when law enforcement agencies reach out to the community they often do so through groups representative of community concerns and composed of community members. At first glance this seems like a very reasonable and appropriate approach and in many cases it is. However, great care must be taken to ensure that the groups brought to the table are willing to engage productively in the process.

Many very well meaning and important groups simply make very poor community partners if the goal involves sharing perspectives and reaching consensus. This is so because, frankly, many groups establish their identity through zealous adherence to a particular ideology. Consider, for example, bringing the American Civil Liberties Union to the table on a proposal that would expand police investigative powers. Without knowing anything more specifically, can you guess what their position will be? How much of a change in that position would you anticipate after a single meeting with them? Two meetings? Five? Twenty?

If you are thinking that this phenomenon is confined to the political left, it is not. A similar analysis of the position of the National Rifle Association on a proposal that would limit the accessibility of firearms that are currently available is likely to lead to a similar conclusion. This is not to say that either the ACLU or the NRA is wrong in their respective ideologies, but rather, that we should not be surprised to see them adhere to a particular position. After all, adherence to that position is what has made these organizations what they are.

As we continue in this era of community oriented policing our concerns about community engagement will remain and, indeed, intensify. Successful effort in this regard -depend not only on perceptions at the individual level which may vary as a function of experiences with police here and in other countries, but also on group-level variables such as willingness to work collaboratively through perspective taking and consensus building. Our success will depend on our ability to address all of these both effectively and simultaneously.

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