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Contents

Personnel

Crime Problems

Records

Management

Operations

The Legal Digest

Police Cynicism: A Cancer in Law Enforcement?
By Kenneth R. Behrend, Chief of Police, Lewiston, Idaho

The Firesetter: A Psychological Profile (Conclusion)
By Anthony Glen Rice, Special Agent, Behavioral Science Unit, FBI Academy, Quantico, Va.

Avoiding Jargon in Personnel Records
By John L. Waltman, Criminal Justice Instructor, Auburn University, Auburn, Ala.

The Use of Deadly Force
By James Q. Wilson, Henry Lee Shattuck Professor of Government, Harvard University, Boston, Mass.

Stadium Security: A Modern Day Approach to Crowd Control
By Joe Shirley, Director, Stadium Operations and Security, Atlanta Braves, Atlanta, Ga.

Entering Premises to Arrest—An Analysis of the Warrant Requirement (Part 1)
By Daniel L. Schofield and Joseph R. Davis, Special Agents, Legal Counsel Division, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Washington, D.C.

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What is cynicism? Where does it come from? How do we guard against it? Are there law enforcement personnel who are cynical? The answers to these questions are of primary concern to all peace officers, regardless of rank.

Cynicism, like cancer, does not respect rank, status, or position. It can frequently grow within individuals or within our organizations without us realizing its presence. Other parallels can be drawn between the disease and the cause and effect (police cynicism). If both are detected in the early stages of development, they can be cured. If left to nurture to their potential, they can and frequently do become terminal to our careers, our lives, or both.

Cynicism can be defined as a means to display an attitude of contemptuous distrust of human nature and motives. When we hear the term “police cynicism,” it frequently creates visions of something evil, dark, foreboding, and diabolical. It corrupts and destroys the entire image of a police officer or organization.

Numerous studies have been conducted on this topic, and excellent research material is available based on sound empirical data. However, this article approaches the subject from a police administrator’s viewpoint, with the hope of providing useful information to other police officers, as opposed to an academic or clinical review of the subject.

Cynicism, if allowed to exist in law enforcement and perhaps is more widespread than many of us realize. The symptoms are frequently overlooked, and people are generally not referred to as “cynics” until they exhibit the advanced stages of the problem. It should be realized, however, that before reaching the advanced stage, there is an incubation period that produces early warning signs as to the presence of attitude disorders that can culminate in cynicism. The ignorant, stunted, and frustrated found in the law enforcement profession provides an ideal breeding ground for the disorder.

Young officers entering law enforcement frequently have deep feelings of commitment and a sense of entering a field of endeavor which is worthwhile and meaningful to society. Many of them notice a gradual change in their relationship with friends or even relatives. How often has it been said, “Now that Jim is a cop we gotta be careful or he will arrest us.” As seemingly innocuous as this may be, it may cause the officer to withdraw and minimize his association with past friends. Conversely, he usually increases his association with other law enforcement personnel. This result is that the officer unknowingly starts a slow withdrawal from society. As contact with peers increases, both on and off the job, the main topic of discussion becomes the
The virus of cynicism has been nurtured, and if allowed to remain untreated or unchecked, can become terminal for the officer's career and perhaps even to his life.

The foregoing is a graphic description of one form of cynicism. There are other forms which can flourish, and cynicism is not restricted to entry-level personnel. Take, for example, the older, experienced officer who is frustrated by the American system of criminal justice and becomes disillusioned with what he sees as roadblocks to prosecuting criminals—prosectors who refuse to accept cases, state trials which are never heard, the courtroom with defense attorneys, plea bargaining, and court decisions that appear to protect the criminal at the expense of society. All of these elements have a tendency to break down the officer's regard for the system and can cause him to withdraw from the established norm and move toward a cynical or distrustful attitude.

Another common form in which the hydra-head of police cynicism may materialize is the officer who becomes frustrated after numerous attempts to be recognized, to have his work praised, or to receive a promotion. After repeated tries to grab the golden ring, he becomes frustrated with the system, withdraws from competition, exhibits feelings of bitter contempt, and ridicules others who continue to try. His world becomes one of existing and trying to provide a defense against the system he sees as threatening; he withdraws from the system and finds fault with it at every opportunity.

The administrative ranks or the top police administrator himself are not immune to cynicism. The administrator may develop a cynical outlook, combined with the frustration of attempting to deliver police services demanded by the community while being restricted by inadequate resources, can cause police administrators and line law enforcement organizations to assume a cynical attitude toward governing bodies and the community at large. The administrator complains that he is not furnished the resources he needs to accomplish the tasks expected of him. Being aware of what is in his agency's terms is an asset in identifying the symptoms and taking corrective action or instituting procedures which will minimize its occurrence. The administrator places the fault of his plight on citizens for their inability or unwillingness to support his budget requests and on the governing body for their lack of sensitivity to his needs. The agency withdraws from the community under the leadership of the administrator and becomes sought after by self-righteous, apathetic—incapable of the delivery of quality public service.

The first and perhaps best line of defense against allowing police cynicism to infect you or your agency is to establish a training session for the line personnel at which the term and the symptoms that identify it are discussed. Some agencies have made available competent professional assistance to conduct periodic training sessions which use self-analysis, group settings, and other recognized techniques to reveal latent tendencies in participants. The administrator may receive training in the meaning of the term and the symptoms that identify it. Some agencies have established a training program which, as stated earlier, is encouraged, the officer has an opportunity to discuss his concerns with others in his agency, and the feedback he receives can be a valuable experience for him and important to the organization as a whole in measuring the community's perceptions of the police.

Individual counseling or instruction remains an option for an employee who may be experiencing difficulty in defining his role in society as a police officer. In short, there are many useful or advanced cases, it is still important for the police officer to receive counseling or instruction relative to society. They expose him to other viewpoints and values that are usually different from those of a police organization and help the officer understand his role in relation to society.

When demands for service permit, a "stop and talk" program is an excellent method of placing an officer in touch with the community. The program encourages a one-on-one dialogue between a law enforcement officer and a citizen in a nonenforcement setting and exposes the officer to the side of society from which he normally drifts in his daily duties. Usually, his contacts are with victims, witnesses, suspects, or traffic offenders and are conducted in an official capacity. If a stop and talk program is encouraged, the officer has an opportunity to contact citizens on their terms and the feedback he receives can be a valuable experience for him and important to the organization as a whole in measuring the community's perceptions of the police.

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The first and perhaps best line of defense against allowing police cynicism to infect you or your agency is to establish a training session for the line personnel at which the term and the symptoms that identify it are discussed. Some agencies have made available competent professional assistance to conduct periodic training sessions which use self-analysis, group settings, and other recognized techniques to reveal latent tendencies in participants who harbor the potential of future cynicism. Considerable skill and knowledge are prerequisites to conduct successfully such a training session. However, most departments possess qualified personnel who can discuss the subject in meaningful terms. By educating our personnel that cynicism is a reaction to conditions that can strike anyone and expose the officer to the side of society, the administrator may receive training in the meaning of the term and the symptoms that identify it. Some agencies have established a training program which, as stated earlier, is encouraged, the officer has an opportunity to discuss his concerns with others in his agency, and the feedback he receives can be a valuable experience for him and important to the organization as a whole in measuring the community's perceptions of the police.

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Practically all law enforcement agencies use some form of performance evaluation forms. The existing systems differ widely, and some serve a multiplicity of purposes, such as determining merit increases, promotion, evaluation of job performance, and other factors. Some systems are designed with the total objective of improving job performance. In either case, the system can be remodeled to provide a vehicle for periodic feedback to an officer concerning his relationship with the community and his commitment to the department's mission.

Occasional, informal "rap sessions" between the top administrator and members of his organization are another tool that can be used to provide information, dispel rumors, and establish the philosophy of the administration. Such sessions are voluntary and informal in nature, with rank being set aside while items of general interest are discussed. The administrator has an opportunity to establish rapport, dispense his philosophy, and receive feedback on individual attitudes at the same time. Through the informal session, the administrator has the opportunity to present an experienced, well-oriented viewpoint on the role of the police in society, as well as concerning individual lifestyles through his opinions and comments. An administrator may believe his time is too valuable for such a limited participation; however, it must be remembered that it is a communications process and the administrator is receiving as well as giving. In addition, word will rapidly spread in the organization concerning what the chief thinks about a particular subject.

Creating an environment that encourages officer involvement in community events and programs is another method of insuring officers are exposed to the community they serve. Every community hosts social events, sporting events, community projects or appoints boards, commissions, or committees which serve the community. By encouraging officers to assume an active role in community events, a two-fold purpose is accomplished. Officers stay in touch with the community, and an opportunity exists to expose citizens to department members. Additionally, another benefit is derived from such a practice. Through their association with other people, officers develop friends and acquaintances who are not members of the criminal justice system. Such contacts are valuable to an officer in maintaining a healthy perspective of his role in the community. The same purpose is accomplished by encouraging and supporting the enrollment of police officers in service clubs and civic organizations. The concept behind these endeavors is to break down the barriers of provincialism and encourage law enforcement personnel to be an active part of society, as opposed to the smaller arena of circulation available when contacts are restricted to other law enforcement personnel. Assuming such a role places officers in touch with the positive elements of society, instead of continual exposure to a small, negative, and sometimes violent segment of society.

Police administrators should review the internal policies and procedures of their respective organizations to insure the philosophy of the organization advocates an awareness of community values and does not foster an isolationist attitude with respect to the department and the community.

The internal integrity of the promotional and other "systems" within the agency is also of paramount importance in creating an atmosphere that prohibits the spread of cynicism. Employees must respect and believe in each system's design, particularly the promotional system. The opportunity to compete in a promotional system that is viewed as fair, impartial, and identifies the best-qualified applicants is a prerequisite to avoiding deep frustrations which can result in prejudices, disenchantment, and a predisposition toward cynicism.

Police cynicism is not viewed as an evil, diabolical corruption of police personalities and organizations when we understand what it is, its causes, and its treatment. Instead, it becomes a human reaction to stress that can invade our attitude just as cancer can invade our body. However, action can be taken to safeguard ourselves and our organizations.

Recognizing and understanding cynicism is the first line of defense against its continual growth. Establishing an organizational philosophy that advocates close ties to the community can minimize the opportunity for cynicism to develop. When detected in the early stages, corrective measures can be applied to insure that the attitude of the organization is in concert with delivering quality public service.

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