

The 7 Habits of Unsuccessful Departments

Voiceover

00:00

Welcome to *The Beat*—a podcast series from the COPS Office at the Department of Justice. Featuring interviews with experts from a varied field of disciplines, *The Beat* provides law enforcement with the latest developments and trending topics in community policing.

Jennifer Donelan

00:16

Hello, and welcome to *The Beat*. I'm your host, Jennifer Donelan. Sometimes there are developments that cause law enforcement agencies to pause, to take a critical look at how they police or the level of service they offer and the policies and practices that they follow. Often, police leaders consider measures such as response time, or murder rate, arrests, or other numeric data as their indicators of success or the need for improvement, but there are other perspectives on what leads to good policing. Today, we're going to be speaking by telephone with Dr. Joel Shults about his perspective on what contributes to success in policing. Dr. Shults, thank you so much for joining us.

Dr. Joel Shults

00:59

My pleasure.

Donelan

01:00

Dr. Shults, you are a retired police chief who had a 30-year career in uniformed law enforcement and criminal justice education. You've been an academy instructor, police chaplain, deputy coroner, investigator, community relations officer, college professor, and police chief, among other duties. You earned a doctorate in educational leadership and policy analysis from the University of Missouri, the graduate degree in public services administration, and a bachelor's in criminal justice administration from the University of Central Missouri. In addition, if that was even possible, you've also served as a military police officer, conducted observational studies for more than 50 police agencies across the country, and served on the Colorado POST Curriculum Committee as a subject matter expert. Wow. I don't know how you found the time, but you are also the author of *The Badge and the Brain*, which meshes brain science as proven law enforcement methods for safer police operations. Dr. Shults, welcome to *The Beat*. We are so excited to hear from you.

Shults

02:03

Great to talk with you.

Donelan

02:04

Before we get started, I'd like to ask a question that we ask of all of our guests. How did you get started in policing, and what ultimately attracted you to the profession?

Shults

02:13

I did a ride-along with one of our local police officers in my hometown and that was just happenstance. My best buddy in high school, in our small community, about 15,000 in Central Missouri, his dad was the mayor and so I'd hang out city hall, got to know some of the cops. One of the officers said, "Hey, you ought to do a ride-along sometime." So, I hopped in one Friday night on a midnight shift and, man, I was hooked. It was just fascinating. I couldn't get it out of my head, out of my heart.

Donelan

02:47

That is amazing. You are one of the lucky ones who really just walked into your career and said, "I found it." We came across an article that you wrote that seems like a really good place to begin our discussion. With a nod to Stephen Covey, you penned an article titled, "The 7 Habits of Unsuccessful Departments." Can you tell us what led you to look at issues in policing from that angle?

Shults

03:06

Yeah, Stephen Covey wrote a book called *7 Habits of Highly Successful People*. I think that came out back in the 90s, was when I first read it, early- to mid-90s. And he's passed on, but his principles have been continued to be taught and learned and modeled all across the country and around the world. As a spin-off of that, Chuck Remsberg, who was a journalist, who's responsible and has a decades-long career in police training, instrumental and seminar training fields and street survival textbook that the officers are familiar with. He wrote an article for policeone.com called "7 Habits of Successful Departments," and I have a little bit of a cynical outlook on life sometimes, and so I thought, "You know what, I could play a '7 Habits of Unsuccessful Departments.'" And so I wrote that down and it's a very interesting that this was just recently republished because I originally published in 2010 and the issues have not changed. The responses that I got from the article last November are the same things I was hearing 10 years ago, so it's still rolling.

Donelan

04:14

And that's why we are so lucky to have you here, and there's a reason to our listeners, there's a reason why I ran down his entire resume because again, this particular session isn't about browbeating or Monday-quarterbacking individual departments. But what Dr. Shults has done is really taken all of his experience, which is considerable as you just heard, and really come up with the particular areas for

improvement, potential improvement, or different ways to look at things. So let's take a look at the "7 Habits of Unsuccessful Departments," starting off with the first one. The first habit of unsuccessful departments is "serving the wrong customer." Explain that.

Shults

04:51

Yeah, thanks Jennifer. Number one is number one for a reason. What I have seen in my observations—and as a police officer dealing with a variety of chiefs and leadership—is there's a great expectation for the police officer on the street to treat our client—the customer, our citizen—highly professionally, highly relationally, to be a good listener, to engage with the citizenry for not just response but prevention. And that ought to be reflected in the relationship between the leader, whether it's the first-line supervisor, particularly an executive... If the chief and his or her folks are not treating their officers the way that they want their officers to treat the public, then there's a tremendous disconnect. And because many chiefs, after you get to, you know, 30 or 40 officers or above and up to 100, the chief doesn't have that much interaction. And so, they need to vicariously serve that citizen by serving the police officers that work under them, and to me, that's their primary responsibility and their primary customer is that uniformed officer. The investigators and technicians and civilian staff, they're doing them a service, so leadership and their relationship with their employees should be highly reflected and highly modeling.

Donelan

06:13

Chiefs understand this. They're role models, but I think that they look outward a lot of times. And it sounds like what you're saying, and what they really need to keep understanding, is that they are also role models internally as well. And good behavior begets good behavior. And that just makes a lot of sense to me. It seems like common sense. Treat people well, and they will continue that on. At least, maybe set an example.

Shults

06:35

Well we get tied up in discipline and worrying about our officers' behavior and making sure that they do the right thing, everywhere from making sure their shoes are shined to making sure that they are compliant with use of force policy, and it can be overwhelmingly negative in the outlook of the executive. And so again, to move a little bit more in a direction of the relationship leadership is something that would give us pause to think about and kind of parade ourselves on that aspect as well as running a tight shift.

Donelan

07:05

Let's move on to the next one because this one I find so interesting and I think that by default this can happen a lot of the time, especially when it comes to this particular issue. Your second habit of unsuccessful departments is pretending to do community policing. And this seems to me, and if you could please explain to our listeners, this seems to me that you're saying that you're doing something, but you're not actually doing it effectively.

Shults

07:27

Yes, and this just arose partly out of my doctoral dissertation which was on community-policing training, and in doing a lot of research and essentially becoming an expert in community policing, I found that for one thing, the title and the concept and the definition has never really been filed down to a fine point. So a lot of people think they're doing community policing, but here's a sign: If you just have a chief who says, "Okay, we're going to do some community policing, so I'm going to point Officer Rodriguez to be our community-policing officer," or, "I'm going to have a meeting with the community, and I'm going to sit behind a table and set up some chairs in the community center and invite people to come in and give me their ideas," that can be a component of community policing, but we can't just do those things, and checkmark "Yeah, I did community policing," because community policing is a cultural attitude that is infused throughout the agency. It is a practice that every officer and every employee engages in, in collaborating for problem-solving, and it's something that's reflected in every policy, in every mission statement, so it really ought to be part and parcel of who the department is rather than just a final label on an officer that says, "Oh, yeah, this is our community-policing officer."

Donelan

08:47

Walking the walk on a large scale, really digging into it, grass roots, and that, makes a lot of sense. Your third habit of unsuccessful departments—in a way it's almost two-fold—the third habit is assuming integrity. But I think you also talk about assuming delinquency too. Can you go into what the third unsuccessful habit is?

Shults

09:05

Well, what I've found is that employee evaluations and discipline which is often interpreted as punishment can sometimes end up being the focus of supervision and leadership. And so we get to the point where we're always ready to pounce on every kind of misbehavior, every kind of variance, but then, on the other hand, do we really test for that? Do we just wait for something bad to happen, or do we do some proactive preventive things to make sure that the expectations are there and measuring those expectations?

We know, for example, that somebody who's working undercover narcotics or in a vice capacity where they might be exposed to drugs or cash or other types of temptation, we drug test those officers, so what are we doing to test the integrity of relationships for school resource officers? What are we doing to sit down and ask officers, "Are you behaving on social media? Are you in any inappropriate relationships that could be scandalous or harmful for the department?" So even having an annual review, or semi-annual review, where you have some of these concerns written down, and just ask the officers, as a reminder, and also as a way of monitoring their behavior, and sometimes it's easier to discipline or dismiss a delinquent employee if they've lied on all of these forms than having to go through the whole investigation. I'm not saying to shortcut discipline, but it's kind of like we can go back and find out he lied on the application and that's it.

So, as I said in the article, all that's in reviews of all aspects of policing for subject discretion and part of the operational structure. And so it's ongoing and we can't rely on trust, so I don't want it to become a punitive environment where there's always a Sword of Damocles hanging over the officer's head because that's not good for morale, that's not good for operational integrity. But to let people know what the standards are and that you're continuing to measure and monitor those standards because trust is never a good policy. Reagan said, "Trust but verify."

Donelan

11:09

Again, setting the example as a standard. Makes a lot of sense. Let's look at the fourth habit of unsuccessful departments. You call it, "exotic training," and you describe it as a default training strategy of scheduling by brochure. Can you go into detail about that?

Shults

11:25

Yes, another frustration in my career, again working with mostly small agencies under 35 officers, training is such a huge need and is a huge financial burden. Even though there are free trainings available and free online trainings available, you still have to have an officer away in order to engage in that training. So there's a cost there for every kind of training. And so for agencies that are large enough to be able to pull cops off the street and have them engage in training, then they can have maybe their own academy, their own cadre of staff, their own training director. They can line out the schedule for state mandatory trainings, of trainings that have some public relation value to say that they've done it.

You know, there's a little bit of theater in all of these issues we're talking about, but for most departments, where you're scrambling to try to get officers in seats or behind the monitor, listening to podcasts or a webinar, whatever, it just seems... my experience is that so much of it is willy-nilly. So they'll get an email that says, "Hey, you want to do this," or get a brochure in the mail, "Hey, you want to do this one," like, "Hey, you know that might be kind of good and Officer Smith is off that day, so we can bring her in on overtime and, you know, I know so-and-so is interested in homicide investigations, so we've got this underwater homicide evidence collection class coming up, so we'll send her to that training," and it's just not a comprehensive, well-scheduled, highly efficient process.

And the other deficit that I see in department training programs is that we're not measuring where our competencies are and where our inefficiencies are. In other words, if we're going to get better, if we're going to sharpen the spear, then we need to know from the district attorney, what problems are we having in our reports? What is causing cases to be dropped? What's causing embarrassment during jury trial? What's causing us to have to plead out cases rather than go to trial? Go to our victim advocates and say, "What are crime victims saying about the way that they've been treated by the police?" Do a citizens' surveys and all these kinds of things to come up with a comprehensive training needs assessment around which we can start building training opportunity.

Donelan

13:33

Also, with scheduling by brochure, well, you can't send an entire department. You can't send a large number of people, you know, budgets are budgets. You know, I often see people go to the trainings, and they benefit from them, but the knowledge doesn't necessarily trickle down when they get back home. I think pointing out a way to really gauge the need in the community and within your department and then attacking that makes a lot of sense. Now, let's look at your number five habit of unsuccessful departments. This one, extremely concerning right now, we've seen this center stage, national spotlight on the very sad occurrence of what we have seen with officers committing suicide. Mental health in law enforcement is a big subject right now, and it needs to be. One of the unsuccessful habits that you list is bootstrap counseling, and I've often wondered have we moved away from those days where we just don't talk about certain things because that means you're not tough enough for the job. Can you explain more on why you're concerned about bootstrap counseling?

Shults

14:27

Well what I mean by bootstrap counseling is, and you know the old saying, "Well, just pick yourself up by the bootstraps," John Wayne it, you know, shake it off, inhale, it's just part of the job, and that kind of thing. And we're moving in a healthier holistic wellness direction, but culturally, from the line up through leadership, we're not really there yet. We still do a six-hour, eight-hour, 16-hour block on stress management, which often officers find irrelevant. We still are seeing so much death in some places.

The post-crisis intervention, Kumbaya circles where we make everybody talk about it, if that's not done well and the best practice, then that can actually be damaging. We still restrict our post-event counseling for people directly involved. I think, for instance, a former student of mine and a colleague with a major state agency in the Mid-West was involved in chasing down a suspect on foot. There were several officers involved. He had a long gun, and the officer had a scope on him, and the individual committed suicide, put a gun to his head. And my colleague, former student, watched that up close on the magnification of his rifle scope. So, because he wasn't right there, and because he didn't have to fire the shot, he wasn't considered somebody that should go to some mandatory counseling or check in.

So our policies are still kind of... we're trying to do it. We're trying to look like we're doing it. We're trying to check the boxes, but we're a far piece away, and there's lots of impediments, both real and imagined, for an officer who's feeling depressive or who's feeling anxious or who's feeling like they're spinning out of control and they don't have a place to go. Well, they can be confident that they can be heard, that their issues can be resolved, and that they can maintain the career that they love of policing.

Donelan

16:33

The stigma attached with speaking with the actual experts. I mean, that is, I think, one of the major obstacles because you've talked about it, and you've written about the real need here. I mean, these folks are experts. Even if they've never spent a day on the job, they haven't faced a suspect with a gun, they are still very good at what they do. I mean, they are experts in their field, and they're the ones who can help you navigate through the emotional and psychological issues that one might be facing on the job.

Shults

16:58

Yeah, that's one of the cultural impediments to officers speaking out because there's still an idea among many cops that say, "Well, I'm not going to go to a shrink that doesn't know what it's like to be a cop. He doesn't know what it's like to have a gun in his face," and we have to begin to create an understanding of what it's like, and to be able to be a good consumer of mental health services. Be confident that the confidentiality is going to be there, and a confident psychologist or other licensed counselor is going to know how to deal with the issues that police officers bring. Now, I think trauma is a specialty and PTSD is a specialty. So I would encourage officers to do a little bit of background check.

The profession is out there to help, and you know, you've got good docs and bad docs. You've got good cops and bad cops. Find somebody that you're comfortable with. And I've just heard testimony after testimony of police officers that have been through counseling, some with ex-cop counselors and some with non ex-cop counselors, and for the most part, they've been very pleased. So it's a very positive outcome and a very positive development the closer we get to having police officers who are confident in trusting somebody that can help them improve personally, relationally, and professionally.

Donelan

18:15

And it gets us on that road, hopefully, to saving some lives. You know, I think the profession needs to get real about this and lose that stigma because at the end of the day, we've got to deal with the traumatic side of this in the profession. Now, let's look at the sixth habit of unsuccessful departments: line-led culture. What do you mean by that?

Shults

18:33

What I mean by that is that if we don't have leadership that sets the cultural tone, then somebody is going to fill that vacuum. I'll give an illustration. I worked for one chief who was just super rule-based, dictatorial, and everybody was just, their whole shift was revolving around, "don't make the chief mad." And so we ended up with shift supervisors, with sergeants, and to some extent lieutenants, who would do everything they could to keep the chief from knowing what unhealthy things were going on amongst the patrol officers. And so we had some choirboy-type parties that happened. The chief never knew about that, but the old guard was okay with that. They kind of liked having their folks relying on them. And so, it's all about leadership and it's all about a vacuum of leadership and role modeling.

So, I know another chief who's frequently involved in extramarital affairs, and so he naturally would not say anything about inappropriate relationships. There are some relationships that can really cause PR issues and morale issues and policy violation issues. And none of those were ever attended to, so that just became part of that police culture, and nobody ever, you know, clucked their tongue or said, "No, that's probably not a good idea," or "That's not somebody you should be in a relationship with." And so that became the infused culture.

And I've worked and been privileged to be around some departments where the head of the agency established ceremonies and rituals, and sayings and phrases, and it infused that culture with some very positive, forward focused, public service ideals that were part of every police officers' expectation and the peer control that happened because, you know, "This is our department. This is our reputation. This is important to me personally as well as professionally." That's where you have a really nice, shiny department that the public trusts and everybody within that department is trusting as well. So that has to come from the top.

And I mention in that particular thing, positive and rich symbol ceremonies and traditions. I worked in a department where a colleague showed up with sergeant stripes one day. "Oh, you got promoted? I didn't know anything about that." And then I know of departments that, if you're going to be a sergeant, then there's a banquet, pinning ceremony, and families there, the press is there, and it's a big deal. It really sets the tone. Those are kind of at the center of things that I'm talking about. And as I say in the section here, values of hardened and cynical officers can dominate an agency if not countered.

Donelan

21:15

If there's a void, someone or something is going to fill it, whether you like it or not. Let's move on to your final habit of unsuccessful departments. This one I find really interesting because I think that in particular positions of leadership it can be really easy—because you're so busy, you're pulled in so many directions—that this particular issue you're about to discuss is one that's easy to forget because it's just moving so fast. So the seventh habit that you described is unshared leadership, and it makes me think of a quote I read the other day about leaders who stop listening to those around them will find themselves surrounded by people who have nothing to say. Is that hitting it on the target?

Shults

21:51

I think that's absolutely true. You're inviting conflict. You're inviting disagreement. You're inviting debate and you really are open to listening to other people, but when we talk about serving our first line officers, when we talk about community policing, when we talk about culture, all of those things are under the umbrella of shared leadership. Now one of those things that I don't think I talked too much about in the community-policing segment, that was an essential part of my dissertation research, is this idea of collaboration. And there's so much fake collaboration. I've had leaders that I've had say, "Yeah, I really want to hear your ideas," but when you mention that idea, they'll say, "Oh, we've tried that before," or you know, "Thanks." They'll move on and don't explore it, or they'll give a big defense about why that's probably not a good idea. So you really don't feel heard, and you don't see that anything that you've contributed ends up being a part of the department's policy, practice or procedure.

So really being a good listener, a good questioner, as a leader, and inviting people to the table so it's not just, you know, happenstance. You see Bob at the polls and you say, "Hey Bob, what do you think about that new policy?" It's an ongoing, very intentional invitation for people to submit their thoughts and ideas, and then you have to really give them due consideration. And so what that means for a chief, is that sometimes that chief has to mentally get out from behind the head of the table. You know, you tend to sit at the chair that everybody knows that's the head of the table, and either physically move somewhere different or mentally do that with them, "I'm not necessarily at the head of this table," and take off those stars and eagles from the epaulets mentally and say, "Okay, I'm not necessarily the smartest person in the room. I'm not necessarily the person that has all the ideas. What kind of ingredients might I be missing by listening to somebody else?" I'm fascinated by the variety of experiences.

A colleague, for example, who was a butcher in a butcher shop and a state trooper, he was assisting a wildlife officer on a poaching investigation. And he recognized the way that the steer had been cut and butchered in the field because it was somebody that he had dealt with as a butcher. So you never know what kind of information from your background, which may be totally unrelated to police work, that might be of great value.

Donelan

24:29

The art of listening, it's certainly an invaluable one. You know, we have learned so much from this and for someone who's listening to this, it doesn't matter where you are in your career, whether you're a chief or whether you're a sergeant, or whether you are in charge of school resource officers. To me there's so much here to learn from. Someone who's listening or read your article, what kind of recommendations would you make for a first step, for righting the wrong, so to say? If they find themselves saying, "You know what, we're doing that with our community policing. I don't think we're really doing the work. We've just put the label on it."

Shults

25:00

Yeah, I appreciate the opportunity to speak to that because it wasn't really embedded in the article. But I'd say if there's one thing a leader should do, and of course, defining leadership means you are person of influence, but one thing that a leader can do is to turn to an objective person that feels that they can be honest with you and ask the question.

And I go back to the time I was out of police work for a couple of years. And somebody asked me and my wife as we were standing together, "Is Joel any different now that he's out of police work?" And immediately was like, "No, I'm no different," and my wife says immediately, "Oh, yeah, yeah. He's different." So our level of self-awareness can't be self-contained.

So if we have a group of friends or somebody even outside of police work, somebody in another agency, somebody that can really be brutally honest and ask them these questions rather than just being in perspective then we sometimes get a swift kick in the pants to say, "Oh, well, I didn't realize how this looked or this was how I was thinking or this was what I was overlooking." So getting that objective outside assessment, I think, can be really, really important.

Donelan

26:06

Eye-opening. Important. And I think it takes a strong leader to be able to ask that question, to be honest about and willing to take those responses and then do something about it. That's what makes this all great. We all have area in which we can learn and grow. Dr. Shults, I cannot thank you enough for joining us today. If any of our listeners are interested in reaching out to you, how would they contact you? Is there an email address that you can possibly share with the audience?

Shults

26:30

Yeah, I have a very ego-rich email address, and it's J-Shults, and that's Shults, S-H-U-L-T-S, no Cs, no Zs. Jshults@joelshults.com. I've also got a toll-free number 1-855-5Shults. Again, no Cs, no Zs. I'd be glad to hear from anybody.

Donelan

26:49

Thank you so much. I believe you will probably get some feedback, and thank you so much again for joining us here. And thank you, listeners, for joining us on *The Beat*.

Voiceover: *The Beat* Exit

26:59

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Voiceover: Disclaimer

27:56

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