



Strengthening Recruit Training

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Policing exists to prevent crime and disorder, and, in so doing, it underpins our democracy; yet, done in a manner that violates the public trust, it can also undermine our democracy. The vast majority of police officers embrace our mandate – that we prevent crime and disorder, that we protect and serve – with a profound sense of gravity and responsibility. To stand between the predators of society on the one hand and the innocent on the other is a deeply felt obligation both personally and professionally. Yet, that fundamental reason for being begets a stunning range of interactions: to stop and to inquire; to help and to direct; to refer and to counsel; to arrest and to search; and, yes, sometimes to confront and to struggle. When these interactions are perceived as arbitrary, as contrived, or as unfair, distrust and animosity are the inevitable result. Citizens feel betrayed by those sworn to protect them, and police officers feel betrayed by those they protect. An antagonistic cycle repeats itself and deepens the rift between community and police. The tragedy of this state of affairs is that community and police are and should be inextricably linked. Each needs the other.

How do we find a way to prevent crime and disorder without finding ourselves at odds with the very people we are sworn to serve and protect? By ensuring that every officer – from new officers to command staff – is part of building trust with the community, and building collaboration that fosters community-police problem solving as a norm throughout all departmental operations.

Training is one essential component to achieving this. Training is determinative of action. Training shapes character. Training at its best can therefore impact the interactions that form the essential core of policing. Equipping police to build collaborative problem solving and relationships of trust requires training that adheres to the following four principles: 1) Training techniques should connect with “real world;” 2) Trainees and trainers should collaborate with the community to enhance the classroom setting; 3) Recruits should be exposed to experiences with the community before they complete their basic training and deepen that experience during field training; and 4) New officers should be trained to maintain community-centric policing after they graduate from the Academy.

Training techniques should connect with “real world.”

Prerequisite to imparting specific learning objectives in training, departments must master effective teaching techniques. Training must deliver on its essential purpose to develop and enhance skills so that participants can realize self-actualization. This provides them with the skills needed to manage the complexities encountered in the field. Training should be interactive, immersive, and encourage an atmosphere in which recruits play an active role in assessing each other’s performance to reinforce investment in the learning process.

Instructors should guide conversations using their own experience, but should also be open to students' perspectives and ideas as well. Even in lectures, every aspect of training should be tailored to engage students and to underscore the message that every police officer is expected to be a problem-solver and is essential to the department's mission.

These types of training techniques are essential for preparing officers for "real world" encounters. Many officers become fearful, withdrawn, and sometimes aggressive among unfamiliar people and places. Training should seek to familiarize them with the environments that they will encounter in the field, and techniques to connect to those they encounter so that they can build critical relationships with the community and mitigate the likelihood that they will resort to force.

To help eliminate fear of the unknown, we at the New York Police Department recently completed construction on a state-of-the-art Police Academy. This facility provides a range of technologically advanced classrooms suitable for lecture-based instruction as well as simulated urban settings for scenario-based training. The facility allows police officers to immerse themselves in scenario-based training that establishes mental maps for ready application in real-world encounters. The NYPD will also be employing body-worn cameras in training so that students can view a real-time, first person perspective of their peers going through the scenario-based training. The exercises will also be filmed so that police officers can see how they perform from a third-person perspective. These first and third-person perspectives will help officers develop objectivity. By better being able to "see" each other, the officers will see how the public may interpret their actions. It also serves to inoculate them against a phobic response to being filmed, which should be seen as a common function of their professional life. Immersing officers in realistic training environments is key to ensuring that they adhere to the principles taught in training in the field.

Just as important as exposing police officers to real world-like environments in training, training should impart how to interact with the vast array of people they will meet in the real world in a manner that best contributes to the department's vision for public safety. To help cultivate positive interpersonal dynamics with all members of the public, training should incorporate three fundamental principles:

1) All interactions should be conducted with respect and understanding, rather than with an impersonal and mechanical demeanor. Officers should know that securing the right kind of identification, determining the right kind of report to prepare, or undertaking enforcement actions can leave the impression that officers are merely agents of an impersonal bureaucracy rather than human beings invested in addressing human concerns. To counter this, they should purposely undertake such actions in a manner that counters any possible perception that they do not care about the community or its members.

2) Related to this, people should be treated as individuals in all interactions. As Commissioner Bratton has noted, officers need to see members of the public for who they are rather than what they represent, and, in so doing, members of the public will see officers in the same way. They will see past the uniform to the men and women

underneath, men and women who are members of the very communities they live in and help keep safe.

3) Absent exigency, police officers should begin interactions with a clear statement of greeting, specifying the purpose of contact. They should end on a positive note when possible.

Trainers must build resiliency and capacity in sound judgment, decision-making, and discretion in a systematic way through exercises such that police officers develop into problem-solvers skilled in resolving an array of potential conflicts besetting the community. As an essential corollary, trainers must cultivate solid, rapid decision-making to mirror the rapidly evolving dynamics of street encounters such that police officers approach their duties with confidence rather than uncertainty.

Training officers to avoid using force when possible in encounters requires more than messaging, it requires purposeful training. De-escalation should form a bulwark of police interaction. Trainers must focus on options designed to resolve encounters short of intrusive force when and to the extent circumstances allow for it, especially when circumstances involve subjects who appear resistant. They should cultivate a capacity to assess quickly whether backing away makes strategic sense in a given set of circumstances. The tactic can be a powerful one particularly when navigating encounters involving the mentally ill. Police must understand the wisdom in backing away when no immediate threat is present so that professional assistance from pertinent experts can be secured. In any case, training must underscore that avoiding force whenever possible is a primary objective.

Trainees and trainers should collaborate with the community to enhance the classroom setting.

In order to foster respect for the community, demonstrate departmental leadership's regard for community trust and collaboration, and to ensure that community-centered learning objectives are accomplished and given local context, community members should be involved in shaping the training curriculum. In New York City, we have established a Training Advisory Committee, comprising members of the community who serve as advisors to the Training Bureau on the content of courses. The Training Advisory Committee does not merely proffer suggestions that are considered by the Bureau; rather, it is an essential component of ensuring that our training results in police officers that are able to meet the expectations set forth by departmental leadership and our communities.

The Police Academy at all levels must include training that inculcates understanding of different cultures, mores, and the histories that underlie much of the present distrust between community and police. Community members should play a robust role in creating training on and teaching recruits about cultural norms and how to distinguish norms from suspicious behavior. Given the vast diversity of communities in the United States, many cultural norms are unknown to training directors and to those who develop curricula. Training should provide students with local and national context about the present state of

police-community relations, and should include representatives from local communities who can bring to the classroom information about their communities.

Recruits should be exposed to experiences with the community before they complete their basic training and deepen that experience during field training.

Many recruits have little or no experience interacting with members of communities that do not resemble their own. Training needs to teach officers how to overcome unfamiliarity with diversity so that it does not manifest itself in reticence that prevents officers from forming essential problem-solving relationships with community members or aggression that harms such relationships. Departments not only need to foment positive relationships between line officers and community members, but they need to begin such relationships before recruits leave the academy. If recruits are not taught early about the importance of respecting cultural diversity, of legitimacy in the eyes of the community, and of community interaction towards problem solving, they will assume that these items are not fundamental aspects of their day-to-day duties or departmental goals. Furthermore, by bringing recruits into the community during training, recruits can then contextualize a variety of discussions that they have in the classroom.

Training *in* the community should be an essential developmental component of field training. Many police officers have little understanding of local conditions, residents and businesses in areas to which they will be assigned. They do not know the priority problems of the area that the neighborhood relies on the police department to address. These new officers, absent knowledge of the neighborhood and those who live and work there, have limited information about the neighborhood upon which to base their decisions. Officers must realize the importance of listening when community members talk about their lives and issues. This can be immensely helpful in identifying issues and problem solving. People must believe they are actually “heard” and not just being placated or ignored.

Relatedly, trainers must teach recruits what it means to have a “felt presence” in the community. Having a “felt presence” includes acknowledging people on the street in such a way as to indicate that the officer radiates positive energy in the area. Tendering small courtesies such as “hello” or “how are you?” constitutes an effective beginning to achieving this end. “Felt presence” is the starting point of the department’s relationship with the community, as without it, the community does not feel that the department is invested in its wellbeing.

The NYPD has redesigned its Field Training Officer (FTO) program with an emphasis on understanding the neighborhood context in which our officers work and the importance of connecting with those in the community. A crucial component of this new FTO program is the involvement of and collaboration with Community Partners. The Community Partners are volunteers that are neighborhood residents, community leaders, and business people. Upon graduation from the Police Academy, Community Partners orient the new officers to the neighborhood, introduce them to residents and business owners, and walk with the officers during predetermined intervals of their tours. Each Probationary Police Officer is also assigned to work under the guidance of a Field Training Officer, linked, in turn, to a

specific group of Community Partners in a specific neighborhood. This intensive engagement with the community inculcates collaborative problem-solving abilities and leaves a lasting impression about the importance of relationships with the community to carry out all manner of operations.

New officers should be trained to maintain community-centric policing after they graduate from the Academy.

When recruits graduate from the Police Academy, they are often confronted with supervisors and veteran officers who tell new officers to “forget that Academy stuff.” Without a prior understanding of why some veteran officers might be cynical about collaborative problem solving or community-centric approaches, new officers may feel pressure to subscribe to an “us versus them” mentality. This can undermine the development of relationships of trust.

To counter this, training should contextualize such remarks from seasoned officers that may come across as doubting of techniques imparted in training or community-focused messages underscored by departmental leadership. By doing so, training can serve to inoculate recruits from cynicism that can ultimately lead them to become defensive or even aggressive in the community, and to ensure that they become part of building the collaboration necessary to enhance trust and solve neighborhood problems.

Conclusion

If police are to mend the rifts between them and the community, they must recognize the importance of training and make it an organizational priority. A solid, substantial, skill-building training curriculum serves to found the confidence and flexibility that keep communities safe and officers safe. The right kind of training equally serves to establish a sense of equity in policing diverse communities invested in rich but different mores. Setting police-community relations on a sound footing is possible, and necessary. Training is an indispensable prerequisite in meeting this goal.