

# Be a Hero or Be a Headline

## It's Our Choice



**Playing is Learning!**

We will all remember that on September 11, 2001, occurred the most horrendous act of terrorism in the United States to date. Images of Public Safety workers, and others, performing incredible acts of bravery and heroism, are etched in our mind's eye. For the purpose of this article I will be focusing on the policing segment of the Public Safety community. In no way is this article inferring any slight or lessening those accomplishments and actions of firefighters, emergency workers, medical specialists and others. It is merely addressing something that is specific to the police of our country.

### BEING A HERO

It almost seems like we, and others, became heroes on a national scale overnight. As the acts of terror and all of their continuing repercussions played themselves out on live television, so too did the acts of bravery. Entering fatally damaged structures, helping thousands of people, carrying on while covered with dust and grime and fighting back tears and unspoken emotions. These are but some of the images the public saw. Balancing the close up view of the terrible destruction was the good fight being waged by police officers and others. The evil done to America shook us while the images of police officers, public safety workers, civilians and others, working together, made all of America proud.

With the nation reeling from this attack, many people would stop police officers on the street or come by police stations just to say thank you. Soon after, the cooperative efforts of law enforcement and the intelligence community identified those responsible and the leader referred to as "the Evil One" by President Bush. This bolstered the national confidence in police and we continued basking in the glow of our country's gaze as we worked to make it safe. I know I felt very proud and grateful that those we serve would hold memorials, build monuments and praise who we are and what we do after the tragic events of September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2001. We were seen as heroes.

### BEING A HEADLINE

We in policing should also remember September 10<sup>th</sup>, 2001. Not so much for what occurred on that particular day, but for the perceptions and feelings about police officers in our country that existed the day before our country changed forever. We made headlines all right, but for very different reasons. Our headlines were about police scandals and alleged acts of brutality. You could barely go for more than a day without reports about officers engaged in biased policing, better known as "racial profiling" as dubbed by the media. Instead of being seen as heroes, we were seen as headlines, bad headlines alleging acts of corruption, misbehavior and criminal acts. As much as we would like to forget those times, it is exactly what we must remember. Remember, and never let happen again. When someone in policing becomes a headline it tarnishes all of us, not just that person. Make no mistake; the number of bad apples in our profession is very small indeed. But that fact will likely be on the back of page 15, if reported at all. We all get painted with the same broad brush whether it be as a hero or a headline.

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How we got here is simply a walk through the media headlines of the past years. Rodney King, the OJ trial, the events in Cleveland, the Louima abuse case in New York, LAPD's Rampart scandal and many, many more. It is no wonder we were considered headlines rather than heroes. So how do we prevent policing from going down the same path again? Personally, I like having the smiles and waves in my officer's direction now, rather than what we had.



### **PUBLIC EXPECTATIONS**

We are involved in a complex profession with enormous power and authority to meet our responsibility of maintaining order. Among others, we have the ability to take away one's constitutional rights, personal liberties and even employ lethal force. Our communities trust us to wield this authority wisely, fairly and without bias. Rightfully so, these same communities hold us to a higher standard. They want to know that those they entrust with their very safety and well being, those they give the awesome authority to preserve the basic rights and freedoms that are America, are equal to that challenge. It is the people of our profession who are to be held accountable. As they should be.

### **POLICING IS ABOUT PEOPLE**

In policing, we have been, and always will be, engaged in a people business. People call for help, people answer that call, people dispatch others, and those people dispatched, arrive to help those people who originally called. It is a circle of trust that cannot be broken. Technology is a benefit and has enhanced our ability to do our jobs. We should seek out, develop and utilize current technology to our best advantage. But, without the best people, technology simply does not matter.

So it begins and ends with our people. They make us what we are, and what we can become. A hero or a headline.

### **SELECTION**

Only the best candidates should be given the opportunity to become part of this special group. This means a selection process that will yield only the most qualified, but also the most acclimated to our profession. Stringent background investigations with zero tolerance for those persons who display traits and characteristics that are incompatible with our profession and would lessen the trust from the communities we serve. In California, as in many other states, validated psychological and medical testing are required. I would also strongly encourage the use of a polygraph for entry level candidates. There have been some instances where background investigations would not have uncovered what would be disqualifying information. It came to light by use of the polygraph.

### **TRAINING**

Now that we are certain we have a candidate that passes such a background, they are sent off to a basic academy for initial training. Given the selection process, we should already have someone with a strong foundation of core values such as integrity, honesty and others. The basic academy should build on, and strengthen these core values, exposing candidates to what ethical challenges they may face in their careers. But, in my view, it is really after the academy where we need to focus on keeping our officers viewed as heroes, not headlines.

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## LEADERSHIP AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Policing is one of the most complex and challenging professions in the world. One of the most difficult challenges is just navigating through our careers. With all of the ethical dilemmas and potential erosions of integrity, there is but one answer and that is good leadership. In this instance it must be agency wide and top down. Every executive, manager, supervisor and field training officer, no matter what size department or how it is organized, has the responsibility of setting the example and then holding everyone accountable. **Especially** those in the positions just outlined. More is expected of leaders in, or out of the policing field. Doing the right thing, for the right reasons, at the right time and with the right people should be something that is emphasized and modeled at all levels. I also believe that leadership does not just come from a title. By definition and task, police officers are leaders in the community. Internally, leaders exist at all levels of the organization and should be nurtured and encouraged. The agency wide expectation should be set and be clear that it will not let any other member of the organization become a headline. We are all responsible for each other. Too many times officers see one of their co-workers going down the wrong path and do nothing to stop it. Just as officers should be focused on preventing crime and disorder, so too should they be focused on preventing another co-worker from getting into trouble. Every member of the policing community must have the ethical courage to confront their co-worker and save them from themselves. I would suggest that such an action also makes one a hero. By doing what is described, you very possibly could be saving a career life and the reputation of the profession. While fragile, that is very valuable indeed.

I would be remiss if I did not also point out that we **MUST** give recognition to the good work and performance that the vast majority of our people do the vast majority of the time. None of us in this business do enough to recognize and publicly acknowledge the continual high quality of work done by our people. As supervisors, managers and executives, we need to do this better. There is no better way to prevent poor performance or behavior than to publicly support and acknowledge good conduct and exemplary performance.

## DOING THE RIGHT THING

I have no illusions that even if we do all the things described, there will be police officers that get themselves into trouble. When that occurs, everyone has an obligation to take the right steps to deal with the event in a professional and expedient manner. The right steps may even include a line level officer, who, becoming aware of the misbehavior, and, having done their best to prevent such an occurrence, now must move it to the supervisor level.

As stated, the responsibility to handle such events exists at all levels of the organization. There can be absolutely no covering of the facts. If mistakes are made, we deal with them appropriately. This includes protecting the rights of all persons involved including the accused employee. It is very important to remember, an allegation of misconduct does not connote wrongdoing. It should, however, prompt a fair and impartial investigation to determine the facts of the event. It is our responsibility to our community, the public we serve and the policing profession to thoroughly investigate all incidents such as this. On the other hand, we should also keep in mind that we have an equal responsibility to the police officer who is the subject of the investigation to get all of the facts.



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Once the investigation is concluded and facts determined, an appropriate resolution must be reached. In most cases, the data indicates that the vast majority of complaints are unfounded, not sustained or the officer is exonerated. But, if the complaint is sustained and the allegations prove to be true, we in this profession have an obligation to hold the employee accountable. This is not a bad thing and accountability is not a bad word. This accountability must be fair and meet the circumstances. Honest mistakes or unintentional violations of policy should be handled as such. Intentional acts of a more serious nature should also be resolved at a level equal to the facts of the event. Fair and compassionate resolution to these events underscore this process is not personal but simply a matter of business.

We need to provide the tools and create the environment that best helps and supports our profession, and most importantly, the people in it, to be successful. Well written, current policies that are updated regularly give our employees direction and guidance to follow. Expectations of performance, behavior and conduct should also be clear and understood. But no expectation, policy or procedure is worth anything unless they are followed or met. It is the obligation of all employees to follow them and be willing to be held accountable. Supervisors and managers have the additional obligation to carry out this accountability when necessary. A policy that is not followed or is not enforced is no policy at all. As stated before, that accountability must be fair, consistent, appropriate for the circumstance and professionally administered.

#### **SIMPLE, HONEST ANSWERS**

Having said that policing is among the most complex professions in the world, I believe the answer to remaining heroes is, on its face, simple enough. Hire the best people, train them well, support and foster integrity, demand ethical courage and establish high, but reasonable expectations and standards at all levels of the organization. Then, hold our people accountable at all levels of the organization as well. Those involved in policing should be role models to our communities and to each other, no matter what position or title we hold. When mistakes are made and we fail to keep one of our own from self-destructing we acknowledge the mistake. We take corrective or, if appropriate, punitive steps when necessary and do so in a professional manner. We need to tell the public that when such acts that make our entire organizations and profession headlines are alleged and factually proven, they are unacceptable to the rest of us and will not be tolerated or condoned. We also need to remind the same public that these acts are very few compared to the profession as a whole. I am proud to be a part of the policing community and one member of a distinguished profession. One that guards our community's constitutional rights while maintaining order and peace. It always has and will continue to do so.

Most of all we need to remind our people, our most valuable resource, that it is they who have the challenge to be a hero or the choice to be a headline.

Personally, I like being in the company of heroes.

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