

Circle of Safety: Leadership's Role in the Law Enforcement Environment

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ENVIRONMENT

Whenever I hear about a corporate scandal, like what happened at Wells Fargo, where millions of customer accounts were opened illegally by employees to help drive their numbers, I immediately want to know about the leadership environment in which these people were operating.

It's too simple to simply dismiss abhorrent, unethical, or illegal behavior as isolated events or "a few bad apples." Though that is true some of the time—we do have psychopaths and sociopaths in our world who act independently and outside of any leadership environment or culture of norms—most of the poor decisions or severe lapses in sound judgment are not such outliers. We can't dismiss thousands of employees from Wells Fargo, for example, as bad apples. The vast majority were good people working in a bad leadership environment.

The fact is, human beings are social animals. We respond to the environments in which we live or work. We can take a good person and put them in a bad environment, and that person is capable of doing bad things. Likewise, we can take a person who may have performed bad acts, change their environment to something more positive, and that person is capable of turning their life around and becoming a remarkable, productive member of

society. It's not just the person; it's the environment. Which begs the question—what kind of environment are police working in today?

The anthropological reason our environment matters boils down to trust and cooperation. As human beings, we are neither the strongest nor the fastest animals on the planet, yet we have to eat and survive in an angry, aggressive, unpredictable world. Trust and cooperation are the solution. If I trust someone in my tribe, it means I can fall asleep at night. If I don't trust anyone in my tribe, it means I can't fall asleep at night. That's a pretty bad system if survive and thrive is the name of the game. The problem is trust and cooperation aren't instructions—they are feelings. We can't order people to trust us. It doesn't work that way. Trust and cooperation are our natural, human reactions to the environment in which we live or work. If we feel safe among the people with whom we live or work, the natural responses are trust and cooperation. If we do not feel safe among the people with whom we live and work, cynicism, paranoia, mistrust, and self-interest prevail.

I'm sure, as you read this, there is a temptation to try to relate the cynicism, paranoia, mistrust, and self-preservation instincts among many populations across the United States to the environments and neighborhoods around them. That is interesting and worth investigating; however, I'm interested in the environments, work cultures, and leadership climates in which our police are asked to work.

Circle of Safety

The most positive kind of work environment can best be described as a Circle of Safety. There is so much danger and unpredictability in the world that it is essential that police are able to work in cultures in which they feel safe among their own—to work among colleagues and leaders around whom officers feel they can be vulnerable. Vulnerability doesn't mean being weak. Quite the opposite. Vulnerability is feeling safe enough to raise our hand and say to our colleagues or superiors, "I made a mistake," "I don't feel equipped for the job I'm being asked to do," "I'm scared," "I don't think I can do this alone," or "I'm struggling at home, and I fear it will affect my work,"

without any fear of humiliation, punishment, or damage to our careers for saying anything. Some of you are already grimacing simply reading those words—but consider the alternative.

If an officer feels ill-equipped, for any reason, to do their job with complete confidence, and they feel forced to lie, hide, or fake that feeling for fear of humiliation or retribution, the odds increase astronomically that it will show up in a very unhealthy way later on. If officers feel they have to hide mistakes—I'm not talking about extreme examples like an accidental shooting or excessive use of force—then the risk is high that those mistakes will either compound or linger until something extreme does happen. When people feel they work in an environment in which they can be totally accountable for the little mistakes they make and feel they can admit insecurities, fears, and anxieties, the result is a culture of trust and cooperation. In this type of culture, rank and file rush in to help at the slightest hint of vulnerability. This is different than rushing in to help hide mistakes, dismiss training gaps, or put a positive spin on everything. This is the kind of trust and cooperation offered because we see each other as human—not just police officers.

It may sound a bit “hippy-dippy” to many people. But consider how average police officers feel when they come to work. Do they feel fulfilled by their work? Do they come to work inspired every single day? Do they feel valued and valuable to the system within which they operate? The answers to these questions matter.

The biological underpinnings of a fulfilling career are not born of metrics. Few, if any, officers will say they love their jobs, then cite the number of arrests they made or citations they wrote. Most won't even cite a crime they prevented or a criminal they took off the street. Though those accomplishments feel good in the moment, those feelings don't last for years. The only thing that makes us truly love our work is how we feel about the people with whom we work. If we feel trusted and trusting; if we feel we can be our true selves; if we feel we can share our missteps and shortcomings and expect only support and encouragement when we do, then the result is an overwhelming feeling of gratitude for those people. People who have that feeling routinely turn down better paying job offers. Money is a short-term high. That feeling of belonging and an opportunity to let down our guard

among the people with whom we work is the ultimate goal if any of us want to wake up in the morning and say, “I love what I do.” Put simply, it’s not the job—it’s the relationships.

No one on the outside will trust police officers until the officers trust each other. No one in the general population will love police officers until they love each other. And no one in the public will ever be willing to express vulnerability to the police until officers are willing to express vulnerability to each other. The reason is simple—how police officers feel directly impacts how they treat the public. If police officers feel safe, so too will the people they swear to serve.

The Role of Leadership

I stayed at the Four Seasons in Las Vegas. It’s a really wonderful hotel. What makes it a wonderful hotel are not the fancy beds, however. Any hotel can buy a fancy bed. What makes the Four Seasons so good is the people who work there. When I passed hotel employees in the hall and they said “hello,” I got the distinct feeling that they wanted to say hello; they weren’t instructed to say hello. It is the people who make the guests feel genuinely welcome that makes the Four Seasons so good.

In the lobby of this hotel is a coffee bar. One afternoon, I went to buy a cup of coffee and was served by a barista named Noah. Noah was wonderful. He was funny and charming. He was engaging and friendly and made me feel like I was his most important customer of the day. It was such a nice experience; I think I left him a 100 percent tip. As is my habit, I asked Noah, “Do you like your job?” (I use the word “like” not “love” on purpose. “Like” is rational, “I get paid well, I like the challenges... I like my job.” Whereas “love” is emotional. It’s a feeling of connection to something that goes beyond the work or the pay. I always ask the question to the lower standard to see what happens.)

“I love my job,” replied Noah. I smiled and asked a follow-up question: “What is it that the Four Seasons is doing that would make you say to me ‘I love my job?’” “Everyday,” Noah replied without skipping a beat, “managers will

walk past me and ask me how I'm doing. Ask me if there is anything they can do to help me do my job. Not just my manager," he pointed out, "any manager."

And, then, the magic happened.

"I also work at Caesar's Palace," Noah continued. "There, managers walk past to correct us, to catch us if we are doing something wrong. At Caesar's Palace, I keep my head below the radar. I want to just get through the day and get my paycheck. At the Four Seasons," Noah concluded, "I can be myself."

Noah is the same person in both places. The only reason he acts differently is because of the leadership climate. At the Four Seasons, the managers offer him a safe space to ask for help, share his concerns or even his mistakes. They remind him daily that they are there to support him to be his best self in his job. At Caesar's Palace, the managers are focused not on Noah but on the customer. They want to make sure Noah is doing everything right for the customer. They are focused on the numbers, and Noah feels it every time he goes to work.

This is the great misunderstanding about leadership. Leadership has nothing to do with being in charge; it is about taking care of those in your charge. Managers are not responsible for the customer or the results. They are responsible for the people who are responsible for the customer and the results.

Officers in leadership positions are not responsible for arrests, crime rates, or even the public. Those in leadership positions are responsible for the people who are responsible for arrests, crime rates, and how the public feel about the police. Just like a CEO is not responsible for the customer for the simple reason that CEOs rarely ever talk to or connect with customers. So, too, in a police organization—it is the officers on the beat every single day who connect with the public every hour and who will have all the impact on how the public feels about or treats the police. The officers on the outside must feel like the leaders on the inside care about them, their health, their personal growth, and their ability to do their

job, all in an environment in which they feel they can be themselves. If the police officers don't feel safe among their own, then the public will never truly feel safe among the police.

Where Good Leadership Comes From

Leadership is a human skill. A teachable, practicable skill, like any other. When officers are new and in junior positions, we give them tons of training—how to use their weapons, how to drive, what the law is, how to make an arrest. We give them tons of training so that they will be good at their jobs. As we promote officers, do we give them tons of training for the new job they will now do? Do we train them on how to lead? If we don't train officers in how to lead, if we don't teach them the skills of leadership, how can we expect them to do the job we need them to do?

Good leadership training is all about how to create a Circle of Safety. How to communicate effectively. How to have effective confrontation. How to listen. How to create work environments that foster trust and cooperation. What makes it more difficult than weapons training, for example, is that the results are not easily measured. We can easily test someone on their ability to use their weapon, understand the law, or perform an arrest. How do we test a leader on how to build an environment?

Good leadership is like exercise. No one can get into shape by going to the gym once for nine hours. However, if we work out every single day for 20 minutes, we will absolutely get into shape. The problem is, I don't know when. However, I'm 100 percent sure it will work. I know it takes more than a week, and I know that if you are doing something consistently but see no results in a year, you're probably doing something wrong. I just don't know exactly when in between those times that you will see and feel the results. Leadership is exactly the same.

A good leadership culture takes more than a week to get right. And officers will definitely feel and see the difference within a year. I cannot tell you exactly when, unfortunately. Good leadership, like being healthy or

brushing our teeth, is about the habit more than the impact of each single little thing we do. It is the consistency of behavior that builds a culture in which human beings can thrive.

The greatest challenge any law enforcement leader will face, sadly, is the pressure to show immediate results. This is why we default to more intense, easier-to-measure solutions like firings, re-orgs, and leadership shuffles. Outsiders (and sometimes insiders) often opt for something intense and sudden because it gives everyone the feeling that something is being done, that the issue is being addressed. Never mind that the impact will likely not last.

The real solution requires both the building of good habits and positive change. The intensity of a training program must be combined with a system that promotes good, daily leadership habits. The intensity of a change of leadership is only worthwhile if the new leader has the patience (and the support from outside and above) to do what needs to be done the right way—in a way that will last beyond their own tenure. Intense action is necessary for extreme cases—if an officer breaks the law or acts highly unethically, swift treatment is absolutely necessary. However, that’s not applicable to most cases or everyday challenges. The daily grind of policing can only be treated and cared for with the consistency model.

In time, a positive culture will start to grow. And when that Circle of Safety grows, officers will feel they can be themselves at work and among their colleagues. They will feel they can express themselves, their concerns, and take accountability for their actions. In time, the vast majority of officers will honestly say, “I love my job.” At that point, the public will feel safer too and commit themselves to working with the police, so we can all work to keep our communities safe... together. ♦



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