

The BJA Executive Session on

Police Leadership

2013

The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership was a multi-year endeavor (2010-2014) with a goal to develop innovative thinking that would help create police leaders uniquely qualified to meet the challenges of a changing public safety landscape.

In support of an integrated approach to creating safe and viable communities across America, the project directors recruited 20+ principals from a range of disciplines. The principals, in turn, led national field teams of practitioners focused on the work of policing and the organization of the future.

To gain new insights on leadership, the *BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership* engaged police chiefs in documenting their own paths and invited leaders to participate in various audio and video forums to tell their stories and discuss the future of policing and police leadership.

Please visit our website, <http://bjaexecutivesessiononpoliceleadership.org/>, to learn more about this project and to access a broad array of interactive, multimedia resources.

The principals were supported in their work by a team that included project co-directors Darrel W. Stephens and Bill Geller, project strategist Nancy McKeon, and BJA Senior Policy Advisor Steve Edwards.

Policing in the 21st Century: Leadership Challenges and New Realities Communications

by

Darrel W. Stephens

Introduction

Police leaders have always faced difficult challenges in the effort to create and maintain safe communities. From the widespread civil disobedience of the 1960s and '70s to the Occupy Movement that began in 2011, and from gang warfare to Internet predators, the police have always needed to adapt to changing political, social, and economic circumstances.

Some changes have been transformative in shaping contemporary policing strategies. Advances in technology, improved education and training, and increasingly sophisticated analytical modeling have all had significant positive impacts on the profession. Other changes have presented daunting challenges for police leaders. Managing communication in the hyper-connected world of social media is testing most agencies' abilities to balance transparency and investigative integrity. And, as departments wrestle with the most significant funding cuts that current leaders have ever seen, a growing

number of police observers suggest that current policing strategies in America are simply not sustainable because of the cost (Gascon and Foglesong 2010). As the police grapple with a diminished ability to deliver services, communities and businesses have turned to private security to improve their sense of safety. This trend leaves high-poverty neighborhoods, where crime is concentrated, even more vulnerable because police cannot be as attentive and cannot afford to fill the gaps.

The leadership challenges these issues present led the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) to create the Executive Session on Police Leadership. Its focus is on developing the quality police leaders that America's communities need in the 21st century. One way of developing policing leaders is to identify the challenges they are likely to encounter and provide them with insight that might help address these challenges more effectively. The Executive Session has developed a series of brief white papers to describe the challenges and realities. This paper addresses communications.

The Changing World of Communications

On the world stage, the most significant impact of the spread of communications technologies will be the way they help reallocate the concentration of power away from states and institutions and transfer it to individuals.

Eric Schmidt
Jared Cohen
The New Digital Age

The past 20 years have brought revolutionary changes to the world of communications. Newspapers and television news have experienced significant losses of public confidence: in 2013, a Gallup survey found that only 23% of the American people have a great deal or a lot of confidence in the information provided by these institutions (Mendes 2013). The public has increasingly turned to cable television, the Internet, and social media for news and information. Social media giants like Facebook and Twitter that were not around 10 years ago today have 1.1 billion and 500 million users, respectively (Smith 2013). The recent sale of the venerable, family-owned newspaper, *The Washington Post*, to the entrepreneur founder of Amazon, the world's largest online retailer, is a dramatic example of the sea change taking place in the field.

These changes have created a paradox for police leaders—there have never been more low-cost avenues for communicating with the public and employees, yet the complexity of reaching target audiences has increased dramatically. Before the Internet, email, and social media, the police had to rely on the news media as their primary way of connecting with the public. A press conference or news releases were the customary vehicles for sharing information with reporters who then shaped articles for print and electronic broadcasts. Although traditional media relations continues to be a focus for many police agencies, it is being supplemented or even supplanted by unmediated communications directly from police to its target audiences via email/text blasts, websites, and social media venues like Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube. Some police agencies have begun positioning their public information functions as departmental news bureaus, developing news websites and drawing the public to these sites through various social media applications. Boston, Milwaukee, and Seattle have all created news websites to help keep the public informed about crime and policing issues. The Boston news website, “BPD News,” was an important source of information on the investigation of the terrorist bombing at the

2013 Boston Marathon. Its effective use of Twitter immediately following the incident and during the subsequent investigation, manhunt, and capture of the suspects earned the BPD considerable accolades.

Current Realities

The choices the public has for obtaining information have exploded over the last 20 years. While cable television was the first to provide 24/7 news programming, the World Wide Web and mobile technology have put that news directly into the hands of citizens, offering instant access and the ability to not just consume news, but to create and share news. Research by the Pew Internet Project found that 85% of adults (18+) in America used the Internet in 2013—up from 14% in 1995 (Pew Internet 2013). Internet use is essentially the same for whites (86%) and African-Americans (85%), while use among Hispanics is 76% (Pew Internet 2013). Mobile devices are nearly ubiquitous, as 91% of adults have cell phones, 56% have smartphones, 31% use tablet computers, and 61% use laptops (Pew Internet 2013). This trend underscores people’s expectations for information on demand, the ability to receive almost real-time updates, and the desire to actively participate in the exchange.

Strategic communication is at the core of effective leadership. Through a leader's use of verbal and written symbols employees are motivated or deflated, informed or confused, productive or apathetic. A leader's ability to carve off the verbal fat and get to the meat of an issue, idea or plan will find success at every turn.

Reed Markham

This increasingly complex and demanding communications environment creates both enormous opportunities and challenges for police. Diverse audiences with wide-ranging interests and varying levels of engagement coupled with the expectation that information can be meaningfully conveyed in 140 characters or less puts considerable pressure on police to reinvent their communication functions. The complexity of the issues—crime, safety, resources, policies, costs, use of force, misconduct, and others—requires well-crafted strategies with thoughtful and concise messages delivered using the most appropriate vehicles—news media, website, social media, email, regular mail, video, audio, in-person meeting, special events, or other means. Messages on complex issues delivered through the appropriate method in a world where instantaneous communications are expected can be a daunting task for police leaders today.

Challenges for Police Leaders

The goals of the police—whatever they might be—cannot be achieved without a broad, integrated approach to communications. Establishing and communicating a clear sense of what happened in a critical situation becomes exponentially more difficult when people clamor for instantaneous updates and when various sources, both official and unofficial, prematurely release (often incorrect) information to a waiting public. For example, a study of the 7.8 million messages sent via Twitter in the first 100 hours following the 2013 Boston Marathon bombing found that just 20% of the tweets contained factually accurate information (Gupta, Lamba, and Kumaraguru, 2013).

Internal employee communication is as important as external communication. In fact, some might argue that one cannot have good external communication if internal communication is lacking. The challenges include:

- Staying on the right side of the “digital divide.” Police leaders must understand the digital world and the range and uses of technologies their employees and the public are using.
- Developing policies and practices that take advantage of the new communications tools while ensuring employees understand the parameters for using the tools, both officially and personally.
- Developing and maintaining relationships with the traditional news media as they continue to evolve and change in response to shifts in news production and consumption. While the traditional media is not often the best way of reaching a diverse community, it can have influence on political leaders and public opinion.
- Developing a strategic communications plan and properly resourcing the function. Police leaders must think and act strategically to take full advantage of today’s communications opportunities.

Developing Police Leaders

Developing future leaders requires thought and investments on the part of the individual, managers, and employers. Individuals should establish career goals and try to position themselves for work, education, and training opportunities that move them toward achieving those goals. Managers should be looking for situations that provide opportunities for challenging work assignments that give employees experience that will enhance their skills. And employers have an obligation to provide continuous training for employees. The importance of effective communication offers opportunities for developing future leaders. Aspiring public police leaders could:

- Participate in the development or updating of the department’s communication plan.
- Help develop appropriate policies for the use of social media by the department and employees.
- Reach out to the news media representatives to develop relationships and to understand the communication challenges they face.
- Participate in workshops and training on improving skills in dealing with the news media and effectively integrating social media into the public information function.
- Establish a presence on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn.

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The author is Darrel W. Stephens, Executive Director of the Major Cities Chiefs Association and retired (2008) Charlotte-Mecklenburg, NC Chief of Police. Darrel is also the Co-Director of the BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership.

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