Why Officer Demeanor Matters

Richard R. Johnson, Ph.D.

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One could easily argue that the field of law enforcement is currently experiencing a legitimacy crisis in the United States. Gallup Poll data, the most reliable source of data we have, has shown that for the last several years, citizen confidence in their local police has been rather low. In the first quarter of 2016, only 58% of persons surveyed indicated that they had confidence in their local police. When asking only African-Americans, only 28% indicated that they had confidence in their local police. Compare this to 1968 when 77% of all Americans had confidence in their local police. Today, 40% of whites, and 73% of African-Americans believe that the police treat blacks and Hispanics less fairly than they do whites. Furthermore, 44% of all Americans currently rate the honesty and ethical standards of police officers as "low" or "very low."[1] Clearly about half of Americans have less than favorable opinions of the police today, and these negative attitudes are even stronger among African-Americans.

Source: Gallup Poll Data
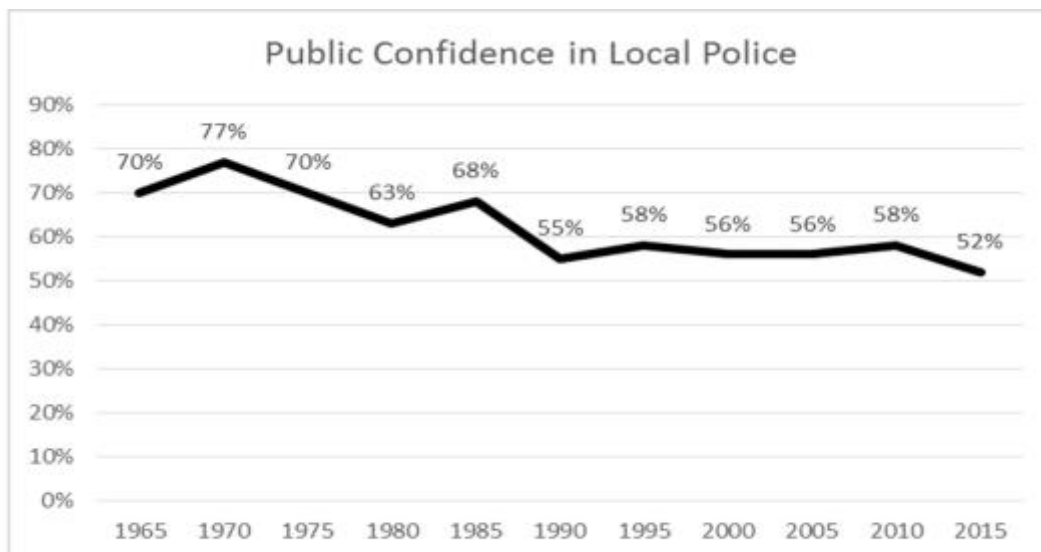
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What can be done to reverse this trend? This was the question we at the Dolan Consulting Group asked when we developed our *Winning Back the Community* course. We examined several decades of research related to citizen satisfaction with the police, reading through more than one hundred published studies. These studies have consistently revealed five factors that contribute to the development of citizen dissatisfaction with the law enforcement profession, which we cover in our *Winning Back the Community* course. The strongest predictor of dissatisfaction, however, is having personally had a prior negative contact with the police. Every published study of citizen satisfaction with the police has found this to be true, and the quality of prior police contacts makes up 50% of an individual's attitude toward the police.[2]

What is a Negative Contact?

After learning that a negative police contact had such a significant impact on citizen confidence in all police, we sought to determine what constitutes a negative contact. We were able to find several studies that looked at citizen satisfaction within the context of specific types of police-public interactions. We located and reviewed four studies that examined citizen satisfaction with traffic stop encounters.[3] We also reviewed two studies that involved non-crime calls for service, and five studies that surveyed the satisfaction of crime victims after they reported their victimization to the police.[4] All eleven of these studies showed similar results. Across all studies, the following were the characteristics that reduce citizen satisfaction with police-citizen interactions:

- The officer yelled at me or spoke in an angry tone
- The officer was verbally abusive
- The officer swore at me or called me a derogatory term
- The officer was sarcastic or seemed uninterested in my problem
- The officer remained silent and didn't try to answer my questions
- The officer called me by my first name or by a nickname

Across all of the studies, the factors that increased citizen satisfaction with police-citizen interactions included:

- The officer was courteous and polite
- The officer introduced himself and explained the reason for the interaction
- The officer called me "sir" or "ma'am," or by my title and last name (i.e., "Mr. Johnson")
- The officer listened to what I had to say and empathized with me
- The officer tried to help and explained the reason for his or her actions

No matter whether the person surveyed was a driver stopped for a traffic violation, a complainant in a disturbance call, or a victim of a crime, the results were the same. What mattered most to all of these citizens was how the officers spoke to them. Whether or not the officer was polite, spoke in a respectful manner, verbally showed sincere concern, and empathized *were all more important* to the citizen than response time, whether or not they received a ticket, whether or not their assailant was apprehended, or whether they got their stolen property back.

The research evidence is clear: citizen confidence and satisfaction in the police is influenced *most* by the quality of the citizen's recent contacts with the police. The research is also clear that what matters most in whether or not these contacts are perceived as negative or positive by the citizen is the demeanor displayed by the officer. Officer demeanor with citizens, therefore, is of paramount importance. While officers' displays of discourteous demeanor with the public are nothing new, the increased visibility of these poor interactions *is* new, and it is driving down confidence in the police nationwide. Due to the proliferation of camera phones and instant worldwide exposure via the internet, poor demeanor on the part of individual officers is instantly visible to everyone. The legitimacy of our profession may be suffering from a thousand little cuts caused by unnecessarily negative demeanor on the part of some officers.

Addressing Discourteous Officer Demeanor

While officer displays of discourteous demeanor have a significant impact on the public's confidence in the police, **research regarding citizen complaints has consistently revealed that officer discourtesy is the most common type of complaint filed**.[5] What can law enforcement leaders do to improve police-citizen contacts?

The first place to start would be training, as no officers should be held accountable for failing to do what they have not been properly equipped to do. **Have you trained your officers how to deal with verbally confrontational citizens? Since it is a fact that officers are required to use their verbal communication skills thousands of times more often than their use of force skills, and more citizen complaints each year result from officer communication than occur from use of force, why do we spend so little time training for verbal communication under stress?** Just like with our scenario-based Simunitions® or "Redman" training, officers should routinely be put through difficult communication scenarios and required to perform under stress. Physical presence and verbal commands are certainly part of the legitimate use of force tools available to officers, so verbal communication skills should be combined with other forms of scenario-based use of force training as physical force is not always the outcome of encounters with uncooperative citizens.

Verbal conflict training is crucial. Law enforcement-specific interpersonal communications training should be mandatory for all new officers, and made a part of continuous in-service training. The Dolan Consulting Group offers training in *Surviving Verbal Conflict* that teaches officers how to engage with difficult citizens and survive the encounter with their career, and the reputation of their agency, intact. In addition to formal training, short roll call training sessions can occur through the use of YouTube® videos. YouTube (sadly) has hundreds of example videos of police-citizen interactions that can be shown and evaluated at roll call. While most of these are examples of what not to do, there are a few examples of excellent officer demeanor and communication skills. These videos can be shown at roll call and then the shift supervisor can lead a brief discussion about what the officer did, what could have been done differently, and what their own agency's expectations would be concerning this interaction.

After training, next come clear policies. Clear policies need to be established that specify how officers are to communicate with citizens when representing the agency. Such policies could require that officers, unless prohibited by an emergency situation, identify themselves and state

the reason for the interaction with the citizen when detaining citizens or arriving at calls. Policies should outline the manner in which officers are to address citizens (i.e., "Ms. Smith" or "Ma'am") and what types of references are forbidden (i.e., "bro" or "cuz"). Again, the *Surviving Verbal Conflict* course can assist personnel in outlining policies dictating verbal communication standards.

Finally, there is accountability. Considering the impact bad officer demeanor can have on overall citizen confidence with the police nationwide, it is important that officers know these complaints will be taken seriously. Repercussions for violating agency policies on interpersonal communication should first focus on correcting the behavior. This can be accomplished through additional training such as the formal training mentioned above, or having the officer repeat the complaint scenario in writing and with a trainer until the officer demonstrates proficiency in being able to handle the encounter within policy guidelines. When dealing with a toxic employee who ends up being resistant to corrective actions and re-training, progressive discipline (sometimes to the point of termination) may be necessary.

Conclusion

To improve citizen confidence with the police nationally, and in each individual community, law enforcement agencies need to emphasize training in interpersonal communication skills, help officers hone these skills, create policies that require use of these skills, and hold officers accountable when they fail to utilize these skills. The cumulative effect of unprofessional officer demeanor is not unlike the principles of the "broken windows" theory. Broken windows theory suggests that small signs of physical decay, if left unrepaired, lead to apathy among the area residents. This apathy eventually permits further physical decay, which signals to criminals that social norms are loosely enforced here, emboldening them to commit more crime in the area. Just like this chain of events eventually snowballs from a single broken window or abandoned car to open drug dealing and street shootings, **perhaps a negative contact with the police is the first step toward the lack of support for the police that we are seeing today in so many communities**.

When a single officer engages in unprofessional demeanor with a citizen, the research shows that this negatively impacts the attitude toward all police for that citizen, and any citizens who witnessed the encounter (including on the internet or in the news). If no negative repercussions are experienced by that officer for the event, that officer is emboldened to repeat the behavior in more interactions with citizens, and the officer's peers are also emboldened to behave the same way when they see there are no consequences from their department. As this unprofessional demeanor spreads, it has a cumulative effect on the public as more and more citizens lower their impressions of law enforcement officers. If unprofessional demeanor is not addressed in a serious way, the law enforcement profession loses social capital among the general public and the media, and when high profile incidents occur – such as the lethal application of force – there is a lack of support and trust for the police.

References

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[2] See for example: Dai, M., & Johnson, R. R. (2009). Is neighborhood context a confounder?: Exploring the effects of citizen race and neighborhood context on satisfaction with the police. *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, 32(4), 595-612; Reisig, M. D., & Parks, R. B. (2003). Neighborhood context, police behavior, and satisfaction with police. *Justice Research and Policy, 5(1)*, 37-65; Wu, Y., Sun, I. Y., & Triplett, R. A. (2009). Race, class, and neighborhood context: Which matters more in measuring satisfaction with police? *Justice Quarterly, 26(1)*, 125-156.

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