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**POLICE BRUTALITY AND THE PREJUDICE REDUCTION MODEL**

by Eric Jackson

Dr. James Fyfe, noted educator and law enforcement authority, stated during a police conference April 1992 that characteristics of the police subculture may be responsible for some of the apparent increase in the frequency of police brutality complaints. He stated that many police officers feel they are soldiers in the war on crime.

Fyfe said this is a war they cannot win, and the realization of this leads to frustration and anger. The very language of the police could lead to incidents of police brutality he said.

If Fyfe is correct, law enforcement has a serious problem. Changing a subculture's attitudes, prejudices, and language is not a simple task. If America has learned nothing else from decades of effort expended on desegregation, it has learned that changing the language, attitudes, and prejudices of different cultural groups is a prodigious task. However, a program developed specifically to deal with prejudice may offer a way to attack this problem if police officers and administrators are open minded.

The National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) based in Washington, DC, has a prejudice reduction model and training program that might address the problem of police brutality. The relatively simple model has been effective in reducing prejudice and related problems in some environments. Since there is reason to believe police misconduct is often prejudice based, the NCBI model might be an effective tool for addressing the problem.

Fyfe alluded to prejudicial behavior in his remarks as the keynote speaker of a police executive conference on the use of force by police officers. He stated officers' use of terminology such as scumbag, barfbag, puke and other colorful labels discounted the people being discussed. It reduced their stature to something less than human, and brutalizing them became relatively easy.

Officers weren't beating solid citizens, they were beating scumbags and pukers. Discounting, disrespectful language is an excellent indicator of prejudice.

Fyfe asserted the prejudicial behavior compounds the feeling of frustration many officers feel. They feel out-gunned, out-financed, and out-numbered. These factors lead officers to feel impotent, frustrated, and frightened and he believes officers feeling this way are likely to use unnecessary force.

Based on Fyfe's assertions, William Geller, assistant director of the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF), suggested that change must come from within the subculture. He indicated change agents were needed to bring this about.

The problem with Geller's assertions, as some in attendance at the conference quickly pointed out, is that becoming a change agent within the police subculture is very difficult. A change agent may find himself on the outside looking in very rapidly. The police subculture is an insular society. Police officers feel if you are not one of "us," you must be one of "them."

Traditional methods of modifying police officer behaviors would aggravate the “us versus them” mind set. Issuing directives, confronting inappropriate behavior, or refusing to interact with someone could lead to hostility between fellow police officers. For example, suppose an officer wanted to change the way some of his coworkers acted toward the public. The officer could challenge actions or prejudicial language. He could say, “I don’t appreciate that sort of talk! Don’t talk that way around me again!” He might try to step between another officer and a suspect who was about to receive a little “street justice.” Or, if he was a supervisor he could issue a directive prohibiting certain types of language or actions.

The result of the officer’s efforts would probably be ridicule, exclusion and secrecy. He probably wouldn’t hear any more offensive comments. They would all be made behind his back! Other officers would feel he was untrustworthy and unreliable, and he might even find himself at risk.

The attraction of the NCBI model is its subtlety. It helps change agents do their job without confrontation or open disagreement. It recognizes the problems with becoming one of “them,” or at least a “them” lover.

The model is designed to help alter attitudes by getting an individual to begin thinking about his or her behavior. The goal

is not to change the person. It is to help the person change himself or herself.

Another positive aspect of the NCBI model is the timing of the intervention. Reportedly, some agencies are working on training programs to help control officer behavior in the field. One program of this nature is designed to train officers to respond to verbal or tactile cues provided by their partners. For example, an officer being sucked into a heated debate with a suspect might hear his partner utter a key word or phrase. Or, the second officer might touch the officer in a specified way. Whatever the signal, the idea is to let the officer know he is nearing or crossing the line between acceptable and unacceptable behavior.

While this approach may work, an officer who is primed for an overreaction may be difficult to distract. An officer dragging a suspect out through the driver’s window of a car after a 10-mile, high-speed chase might have a hard time remembering what a key word or phrase signified!

The NCBI prejudice reduction model is designed to alter attitudes and perceptions before a sensitive situation is encountered. It is used in the squad room, in the police car, or at lunch. It may be used by anyone at any time to assist someone to understand his behavior may be inappropriate.

To understand how the model can be used in law enforcement, it is necessary to review its use in other environments. Simply stated, the NCBI prejudice reduction model and training attempts to open an individual’s mind to the diverse nature of every population.

Once the concept of a diverse group or society is introduced, the training focuses on the recognition that everyone has been the subject of discrimination and prejudice. The final phase of the training is to introduce the intervention model.

One training technique is role playing. A participant (Person A) is asked to think of a word, phrase, comment, joke, or form of communication that is offensive. A training partner (Person B) then communicates the offensive item to Person A. For example, a person that refers to himself or herself as African-American may be offended by the use of the word black. If this is the case, Person B might say something that refers to people as black.

The first time this occurs, Person A is encouraged to respond the way he or she would really like, i.e., as bluntly, vehemently, reproachfully as possible. After Person A has vented, Person B again uses the offending phrase. This time Person A is asked to respond in a manner that won't put the other party on the defensive.

The idea is to open up a dialogue that allows the two parties to communicate effectively about a sensitive issue. The goal is to modify behavior, possibly on both sides of the issue, through reasoning and enlightenment.

Training police officers in this technique may be a challenge. Officers seem to have an aversion to role playing, and recognizing diversity as a positive factor will be very difficult for some. However, all officers don't need to be trained in this technique, just those who want to make a difference. These officers can become the change agents, and they can do so without alienating themselves from the rest of the department.

To expand on this point, consider two examples of conversations that might take place between an NCBI trained officer and one who needs some attitude adjustment. In the first instance, consider the following conversation in the locker room between Officers Smith and Jones:

Smith: "Well, another night in the trenches. Say, when are you going to get a real gun? Don't you know it's a war out there? That pea shooter you're carrying doesn't stand a chance against an Uzi or Mac."

Jones: "You know I hear that war talk a lot these days. I wonder if we're really in a war?"

Smith: "What do you mean, of course we're in a war. It's us or them!"

Jones: "Maybe, but tell me one thing. What are the rules in a war."

Smith: "You gotta be kidding, there are no rules. It's kill or be killed."

Jones: "That's why I worry about this 'war on crime' talk. It's not really kill or be killed here. There are still rules, and sometimes I worry we'll forget that, and get ourselves into trouble."

Smith: "You may have a point. I never really thought about it that way,"

Or, maybe the conversation took place on patrol and went something like this:

Jones: "Look at that scumbag. He looks like a real puke to me."

Smith: "Have you noticed how we have a tendency to classify people in this job? We seem to put everybody in categories – puke, scumbag, whore, whatever."

Jones: "Whatta you mean?"

Smith: "Take that guy back there. He looked pretty unsavory to me too, but we really don't know he's ever done anything wrong. He might just be bumming around on his day off."

Jones: "You're not going soft on me are you?"

Smith: "No, I'm just wondering if we make trouble for ourselves by putting everyone in a

category. Remember that woman we found passed out in her car and we thought she was just a doper or drunk? Thank goodness we didn't deal with her that way. She was the mayor's wife, and she'd had some sort of reaction to some new medication."

Jones: "She sure looked like a derelict. I'm glad I noticed that city parking permit on the bumper. Maybe we do jump to conclusions about people."

In both of these contrived cases, a point was made in a few sentences. In the real world, these discussions might have gone on for days. In fact, critics of this model say they'd never take place.

They say no one would ever use it because it's too cumbersome. In a real situation, they say, the offended party would just confront the offender.

It would have been much simpler in the first example for Officer Smith to say, "Jones, you're nothing but a cowboy. Don't talk that war crap to me. That's the kind of talk that gets us into trouble". Of course, a response like that would have turned into an argument that raged the rest of the night. Or, Jones would have lost his trust in Smith. Either outcome is undesirable.

The point is, some people need to change their way of looking at things. The NCBI model seems to offer an approach to behavior and attitude modification that can help these individuals make the change. It is not a quick fix, but it is a relatively simple strategy for dealing with a very complex issue.

An added benefit is the effect it can have in other areas. The model teaches acceptance of diversity and improves communication skills. Both of these areas are important in society today.

The NCBI program may not work for all people and departments. Some departments may simply be too homogeneous, and if everyone thinks and believes the same way, there is no opportunity for change from inside. However, it can work for others.

Cops are not all alike, and some are interested in change. Any administration interested in addressing prejudice, citizen complaints, or accepting diversity should give this program some consideration.