

2017

Communication Trust Building Program for Law Enforcement and Community



Lessons Learned from the
National Coalition Building
Institute's EPIC program for the
We Are Mantua! BCJI project.

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Few could argue that the function of policing has changed over the past three decades. The community policing movement of the 1980's brought attention to the importance of police-community engagement (Skogan, 2006). In his review of community policing as an innovative practice, Skogan (2006) noted that often, the only contact police officers have with the community comes in situations that are stressful and negative in nature. This fact does not promote a healthy relationship between the two groups. In fact, communication between members of the police and community is often one-sided, with contact only occurring when police are called by members of the community to respond to a critical incident (Schneider, 1999).

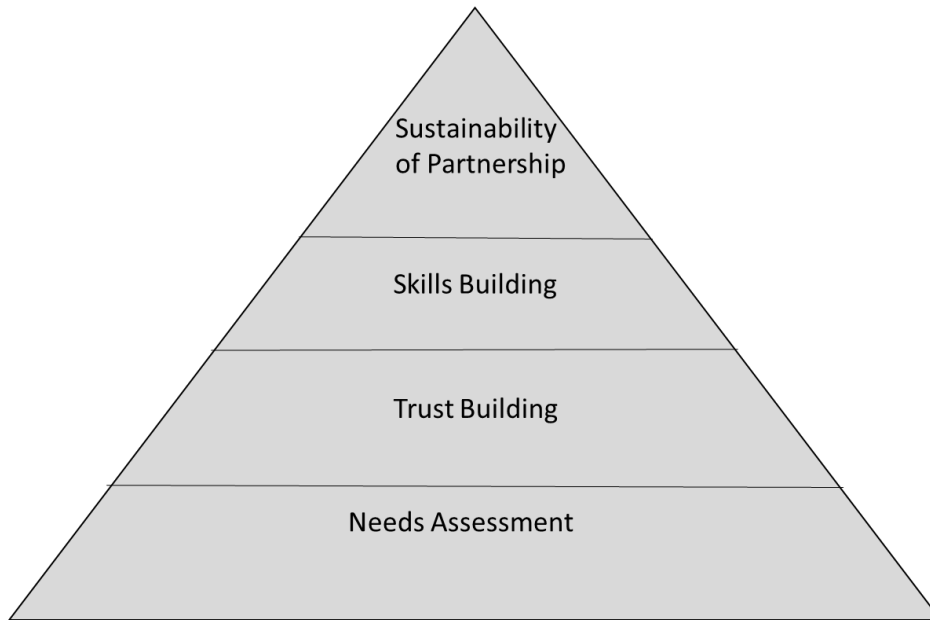
Research has demonstrated that poor communication between police and the community often obstructs the effectiveness of policing. This is especially true in poor and minority communities (Schneider, 1999), causing many residents to express less confidence and satisfaction with police than in wealthier communities (Skogan & Steiner, 2004).

Some research has suggested that developing effective patterns and practices of communication was imperative to community engagement and mobilization (Schneider, 1999). To change the nature of the interaction, police must begin to engage the community in settings that focus on discussing priorities, exchanging information and ideas, and planning for joint problem-solving initiatives and activities (Mastrofski, 2006). It is this more informal interaction between the two groups that is thought to be critical to developing trust and cooperation. To accomplish this goal, police activities need to be supported by organizational structure and officer training (Skogan, 2006).

The organizational structure and officer training is exactly what the National Coalition Building Institute (NCBI) training program is intended to provide law enforcement organizations and community leaders. In doing so, the intent is to facilitate positive communication and develop sustainable partnerships. This outline will explain how the NCBI model is used to develop these goals.

Understanding the success of the multi-faceted approach to the NCBI model

In the Mantua EPIC (Enhanced Police Community Interaction) project NCBI used an implementation model that recognized building trust and a structure of positive interaction does not occur with the completion of one event or training cycle. The benefits of NCBI's program will be discussed and outlined in this document. The diagram presented below depicts an approach that started with the development of a strong foundation and then added components that were designed to accomplish very specific goals. In the end, it was the process that helped to develop trust and effective forms of communication between members of the community and the police who serve them. The model design is described below.



NCBI's Approach to Communication Skills Training for Law Enforcement and Community Leaders

I. Needs assessment

The first step in their approach to police-community engagement was to conduct a needs assessment. Before any training was designed or delivered, the NCBI team reviewed the environment (community), occupation (law enforcement specific) and individual needs for training. The best way to assess community and departmental needs was to dedicate the time to get to know the community, its strengths, and challenges. Understanding how narrowly or broadly the term “community” was defined allowed the model to be targeted specifically for those who would benefit the most by creating a more comprehensive and lasting change in police-community relationships.

The needs assessment process entailed learning about factors that influenced police management and practices as well as factors that influenced or drove community concerns. To better understand the nature of the police organization, NCBI staff spent a lot of time with members of the police department to develop an understanding of how the department functions and what its members believe the critical community issues were. In the Mantua project, an NCBI staff member spent over 40 hours interacting and conducting ride-alongs to gain a better understanding of the challenges and concerns of the department.

Aside from the information gained about the department, this extensive work was completed in an attempt to gain support for the training process. Through this extended contact, police developed a more detailed understanding of what the training is intended to accomplish. This detailed understanding helped break down the defensiveness typically seen among police officers. This process was very successful because the officers who NCBI staff spent time with were

observed to be much more interactive in the initial stages of the project than were those officers with whom little contact was made. Some examples of the types of interactions and dialogue NCBI staff had with police officers included:

- Ride-alongs
- Precinct visits
- Interviews
- Discussions concerning what the project is about

No less significant was gaining a commitment from the community. Members of the NCBI team spent just as much time visiting with members of the community to try and determine what the residents felt were the issues that needed to be addressed in order to enhance police-community relationships. In Mantua, NCBI ran a series of focus groups with members of the community to try and develop a deeper understanding of how the community views its relationship with the police department. This also proved to be a successful way to identify leaders in the community who were interested in developing a new relationship with police. Examples of interactions with community leaders included:

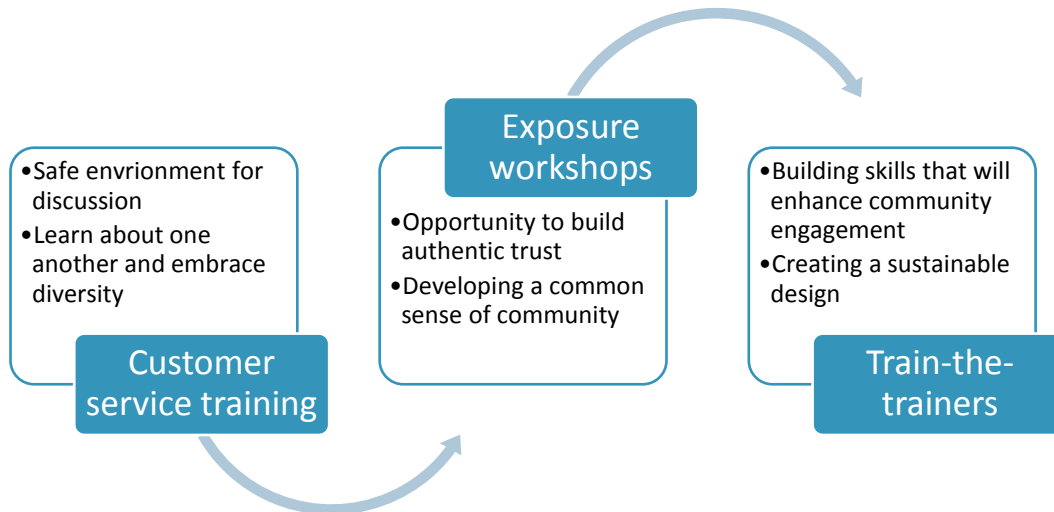
- Meeting with community organizations
- Visits to places and events in community
- Visits to community leaders' homes

The time dedicated to the needs assessment allowed the NCBI team to offer a training design that was unique to the community. Trust-building is not the same in every community and the concepts and problems that drive one community may not necessarily have the same importance in another. This initial phase lead to:

- the identification of what law enforcement and community members needed
- recognition of the uniqueness of the police department for which they were delivering training
- support of the training process
- a willingness to engage in all phases of the training program

II. Trust-Building

Trust-building was the second step in the NCBI model. This was a multi-phase process that was intended to build trust within and between the law enforcement officers and community leaders. NCBI did this by treating trust-building as a process, not an event. They provided multiple opportunities over extended periods of time for trust to develop and grow. The types of training offered are presented below.



Trust-building Training Design

Customer Service Training

The first training event, which was called “Customer Service” training, was only for police officers. The customer service approach to the training was intended to address within the framework of police work and their work within the community. It was important for officers to know that strong customer service was not contradictory to their traditional function and did not compromise their safety. The training emphasized the fact that there were noticeable and identifiable advantages to providing members of the community with good “customer service”.

There were a number of reasons that the police received this type of dedicated training. First, officers were assembled together to learn about each other and their diversity in a safe, comfortable environment. The training format was designed to recognize the unique environment in which police officers work and function. The officer-dedicated training allowed them to share their experiences and learn something about one another. One officer commented that one of the best parts of the officer-dedicated training was that it allowed him to “learn about the life experiences of fellow officers”. All too often officers work side-by-side without knowing much about these life experiences.

Secondly, the officer-dedicated training was also an important step in establishing some level of trust between the officers and training staff. In many instances, police-community interaction is negative and is only generated after a critical community incident has occurred. That tends to create an environment where officers bring some level of defensiveness to their interactions with the community. That defensiveness can become a barrier to building authentic trust between the groups. The non-threatening environment that was created in this training module was intended to reduce any defensiveness the police may bring to the process based on their prior experiences.

The final advantage to providing the police-dedicated training was that in this format, the officers could each see how their interaction with the community would be structured. Again, this was done in an attempt to reduce any level of defensiveness that may have existed regarding their

interacting with the community. It was important for the officers to know that the empathy they showed in their contact with the community needed to be seen as genuine. Allowing the officers to realize and explore this fact among themselves was beneficial to the overall success of the trust-building process.

To demonstrate the success of the customer service training, there was never an instance when there were more community members at an Exposure Workshop that followed than police. There were a number of officers who attended each and every Exposure Workshop. This alone points to the success of the initial stages of the community-engagement model

Exposure Workshop

Once the Customer Service Workshop was completed, those who wished to continue were encouraged to participate in workshops where they interacted with community leaders. These training modules were called “Exposure Workshops”. The workshops took place on a number of different occasions and members of the community and police department were encouraged to attend as many as possible. These training sessions created opportunities to build authentic trust within each group and between one another. The extended contact between the police and members of the community allowed each group to see the other as people rather than objects.

By creating a safe environment for dialogue, law enforcement and community leaders saw each other as individuals with similar interests, desires, and concerns for one another and their neighborhood area. One officer commented that he learned that “we all have something in common even though we are from different walks of life”. This commonality is important in establishing a new style of communication and interaction.

In the Exposure Workshops, getting the officers and members of the community to realize that it was possible to communicate in a much more functional manner was an important accomplishment. This was done through a series of guided exercises where members of the department and community began to recognize, appreciate, and celebrate each other’s diverse backgrounds. Additionally, through group interaction and activities the members of each group developed a sense of empathy for the other. This dramatically transformed the environment where sharing was encouraged, stereotypes were broken, and trust began to develop. That accomplishment was not lost on those who participated in the training. One participant commented, “In a classroom full of all races and ethnicities we were able to communicate and get along. It’s a shame it can’t be like this everywhere.”

As was noted previously, the NCBI team believed that trust-building was a process and not an event. In the Exposure Workshops there were a number of interactive training components that were designed to assist in building trust among one another. Examples of training components designed to build trust included:

- “Stories from the streets” – Each member of the group had the opportunity to tell a story about an experience of discrimination in their life. Often these stories detailed an adverse condition that was deeply moving in some way. The sharing of stories allowed

- the members of the group to develop a sense of empathy and understanding toward each other.
- “First Thoughts” – This exercise was intended to break traditional stereotypes and work through the unconscious bias that police and community members had toward one another. This was an important step in preventing these stereotypes from interfering with positive levels of communication.
 - Role-plays – In these exercises, the participants learned how to effectively shift the attitudes of people who make oppressive jokes, comments, or slurs.
 - Caucusing – As each group learned from one another the things they never again wanted others to say, think, or do towards their group, they more easily understood how to be an effective ally.

The Exposure Workshop phase lead to:

- Multiple interactions with one another
- An atmosphere of understanding and trust
- The foundation to build a partnership between law enforcement and community leaders

III. Skills Building

Once a trusting atmosphere was created, NCBI then taught a number of important communication skills to members of the department and community. This took place in a three day Train-the-trainer’s (TTT) workshop. The training approach included hands-on, experiential activities to teach skills such as:

- Listening
- Empathy
- Reframing questions
- Resolving conflict
- Listening to heart felt concerns underneath controversial issues

These critical skills set the foundation for effective community relations. The training workshops provided a safe atmosphere for learning, practice, and re-learning with law enforcement and community leaders working side-by-side. Participants were guided through exercises by small group leaders and were given the opportunity to practice these skills under the observation and assistance of more seasoned trainers. The structure of guided practice and immediate feedback was designed to facilitate the teaching of effective communication skills to others (other law enforcement officers in the precinct and additional community leaders).

NCBI took great pride in teaching skills that were functional and could be used in a variety of community and personal situations. One law enforcement officer commented on the skills he learned by saying, “The program helped me become a more active listener. Now, rather than trying to bring a situation to a quick resolution, I think about the needs and listen to the stories of all parties involved to try and truly understand their views.” The same type of comment was typical

of community members as well. One commented, “During the trainings I learned how to communicate with different people and I feel that I am a more effective person in helping resolve community issues.”

The skill building exercises were critical to the next building block in the overall process, which was the development of sustainable partnerships. Allowing the participants to become comfortable with the types of communication skills and activities they learned translated into a willingness to continue this type of process once the training experience was completed.

A perfect example of how the skills were used was observed at a community meeting held several weeks after the training ended. One of the community groups organized a community meeting to discuss the possibility that a grocery store would be brought to the community. At the meeting, two members of the NCBI trained police team and two members of the community team held a “listening table” event. This type of police-community engagement activity was one of those taught during the TTT workshops. The event was well organized and close to 70% of those who attended the community meeting engaged the police-community team in conversation.

IV. Sustainable Partnership

This entire process lead to the ultimate goal: the development of a sustainable partnership between law enforcement and community leaders. In the end, it is the responsibility of the police department and community leaders to continue a pattern of positive dialogue, interaction, and community-engagement. The training environment was used to model, practice, and refine the activities so it would be possible to develop a design that can continue long into the future.



V. Program Evaluation

One of the unique aspects of the EPIC project was that there was a deliberate attempt to measure the effectiveness of the training. The evaluation team created a design that was intended to measure the effectiveness of the training process over 6 dimensions:

- Content validity
- Employee reactions
- Employee learning
- Application of training
- Business impact
- Return on investment

During the course of the one-year project, the evaluation team was able to draw conclusions in 5 of the 6 areas. A summary of the results appears below:

- Content validity – an analysis of the job description indicated that the training curricula were relevant to the essential functions, skills, and abilities of the officers.
- Employee reactions – the results from the employee satisfaction survey completed at the Customer Service workshops indicated a high degree of participant satisfaction across all areas of measurement.
- Employee learning – pre- and post-test assessments completed at the Customer Service and Exposure workshops indicated that participation in the workshops positively influenced student learning.
- Application of training – surveys completed at the train-the-Trainers’ workshop indicated that the participants were confident that they had the skills to reproduce the community-engagement activities they were taught. In addition, the qualitative observations of the research team during the Train-the-Trainers’ workshops and at the community forum led to the conclusion that the participants were able to apply the concepts to their environment.
- Business impact – The initial evaluation of the “listening table” exercise at the community meeting indicates that the goals of the training have been met over the short-term. There is demonstrated evidence of a change in the relationship between the police and members of the community.

This document was written and produced by Scott Home and Kerrie Baker from Cedar Crest College in January 2017, as part of a yearlong independent evaluation (2016) of the NCBI law enforcement/ community citizen program. They conducted visits, focus groups, and pre and post evaluations of a trust building program in the Mantua neighborhood of Philadelphia. The We Are

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