

The BJA Executive Session on

Police Leadership

2016

The BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership is a multi-year endeavor started in 2010 with the goal of developing 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://bjaleader.org>, to learn more about this project and to access a broad array of interactive, multimedia resources.

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

Acting with Integrity: The Foundation of Trust

by
Darrel W. Stephens

Many discussions of police integrity focus on misconduct. While that focus is necessary and appropriate, integrity is much larger and more encompassing. A reputation for integrity is earned through an on-going complex set of interactions that involves every individual in the department and the department itself. What we do today and tomorrow will form the basis for how we are judged and whether or not we have integrity and are worthy of trust.

What does it mean to act with integrity today and tomorrow? To me, integrity is built on five key behaviors that apply to both the organization and the individual.

- **Keeping Our Word.** Police organizations and individuals in them make commitments every day that create expectations. “I will check on the problem. I will follow up on your complaint. An officer will respond immediately.” When we make these promises, our intent is to keep them. At times, something beyond our control happens that makes it difficult to

keep our word - in the press of daily work we forget or some other higher priority comes along. An important aspect of maintaining our integrity is keeping our word – if something interferes with that, it is imperative we take the time to circle back and explain why we did not or are not able fulfill the commitment.

- **Doing Our Best.** Every assignment, every call, every project and every investigation requires that we handle it to the best of our ability. I am not sure we can say that our police organizations or officers always strive to do our best. Often doing our best means maintaining high standards and a positive attitude in the face of discouraging or disruptive circumstances. On the second or third time we encounter the same situation it becomes frustrating and more difficult to do our very best. People who never seem to be satisfied or may have unrealistic expectations of the police might not receive our best work because we have come to believe it won't matter. Or in those cases that we decide the issue is just not important – we do enough to get by. All of these situations affect how we are viewed and contribute to impressions about our integrity and competence.
- **Acknowledging Our Mistakes.** Police work is very challenging and complex when one takes into account the range of things the police are expected to do involving people in high stress circumstances. At times we make mistakes. How those mistakes are handled influences our integrity. It is not unusual to see organizations and individuals blaming someone else for their shortcomings rather than take responsibility. A key aspect of integrity requires that we acknowledge our mistakes, provide some explanation for the mistake and do what we can to correct and avoid repeating it in the future. Internally, leaders need to create an environment in which individuals are comfortable admitting mistakes.
- **Doing the Right Thing.** Although a cliché – it is important that every effort be made to do the right thing even when it is difficult to do. Sometimes it is not even clear what the right thing might be – you are faced with a situation where something must be done and none of the options are particularly good. In many cases it is clear what should be done – it just takes courage to do it. The integrity of police leaders is very much tied into whether or not we try to do the right thing and how we guide and support our officers as they face challenges every day.
- **Practicing Transparency.** Organizations and individual leaders with integrity conduct themselves with openness and honesty in all of their dealings with the public, employees and other institutions. This is particularly important for the police. There have been continuous calls for greater transparency in the way police handle misconduct and accountability issues. Although heavily influenced by state law, the police can be more open than in the past while respecting privacy. More departments are publishing annual statistics on internal investigations of complaints and misconduct. Video footage of police interactions is being released more frequently and police policies are available for public inspect on the web-

sites of a large number of agencies. These steps help demonstrate and support integrity. There is a sense in which transparency begins at home and leaders must demonstrate the behavior they wish to see throughout the department.

Police have made enormous contributions toward making our communities safer and better places to live. While we must deal with past misconduct, police leaders should also bolster the spirit and resolve of their departments by focusing on the power of acting with integrity in every interaction every day. Keeping our word, doing our best, acknowledging our mistakes, doing the right thing and practicing transparency will go a long way toward ensuring that the police enjoy the trust of those we serve into the future.

This paper was developed by the “Leaders on Today’s Issues” initiative of the BJA Executive Session on Police Leadership.

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