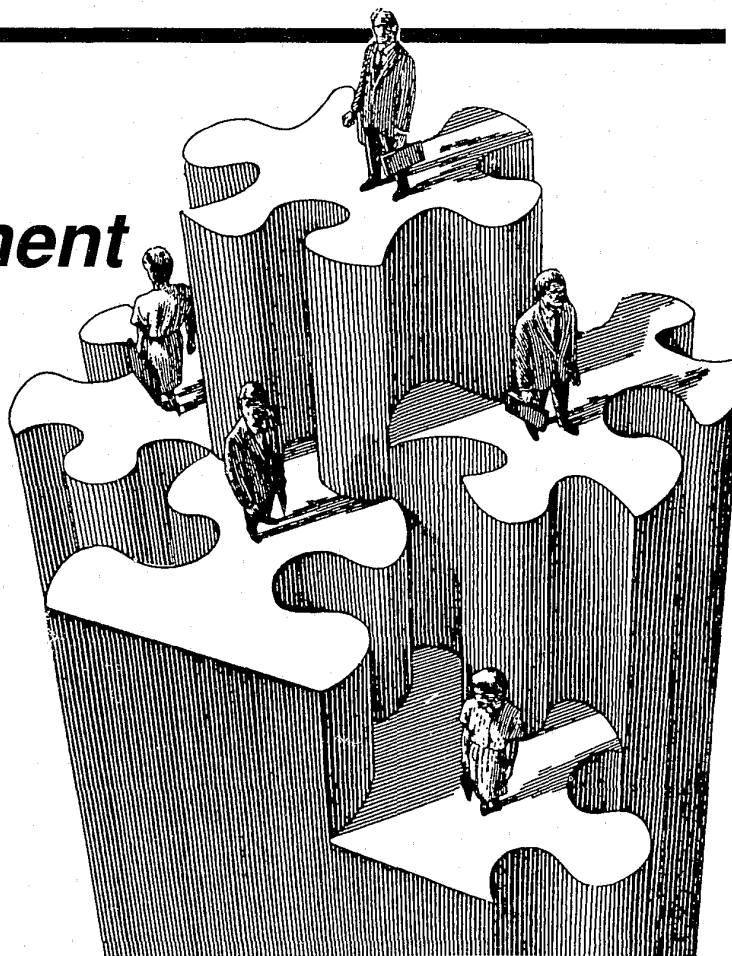


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Plateauing in Law Enforcement

By
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Burnout is a very familiar concept to law enforcement officers. It occurs when the pressures of a demanding profession become too much for an individual to handle adequately. The effects of burnout can be manifested in alcohol/drug abuse, excessive sick leave absences, strained relations with colleagues, or other self-destructive behavior. Feeling helpless, some officers may even turn to suicide as a final way out.¹

Though not as well documented or defined, another phenomenon that may be even more widespread than burnout is the problem of plateauing

in law enforcement. While the effects of both burnout and plateauing may appear similar, the causes, and therefore, the potential cures of the two problems are very different. Provided here are the fundamental differences between burnout and plateauing, the unique causes of plateauing, and finally, suggestions for plateaued officers to overcome this serious, but not insurmountable, problem.

Causes of Plateauing

Consider this scenario: A police officer graduated from the police academy about 10 years

ago. Fighting crime and helping others were the officer's primary purposes in life. The streets were a war zone, and there was always a battle or challenge ahead.

Then, eventually, the challenges ended. A lot of hard work and personal sacrifice had gone into achieving rank and seniority. But now, the red lights and sirens don't make the adrenaline flow as before. The car accidents with injuries are just a lot of paperwork. Going on a drug raid just means having to wake up early. The officer's current rank is stagnant, and the paperwork and citizen complaints are overwhelming. The

job is not hated; it is just dull. There seems to be no way out. Seemingly, it has all been done, and the job has become routine. A major aspect of life has stabilized, as it ultimately must. The officer, feeling significantly dissatisfied, is plateaued.²

Characteristics of the plateaued officer may depend on the type of plateauing being experienced. Content plateauing, for example, may occur when career goals have been achieved. If an officer had set a goal while in the police academy to eventually become a homicide lieutenant and that goal has been met, then eventually the challenge ends and boredom may set in.

Structural plateauing may occur when the promotions end. This results from the "99% Rule." In essence, each department can have only one chief; thus, 99% of the staff have to be subordinates. If motivated officers are forced to realize that the position of chief administrator, or other prized posts, may not be attained, then they may become plateaued. A sense of despair may contribute to the effects of plateauing.

When work becomes the most important aspect of law enforcement officers' lives, they may be plateaued in life. This type of plateauing may have deeply rooted causes stemming from professional and personal relationships, or other factors.

In any case, plateaued officers may become frustrated and lose the sense of challenge that was once a prime motivating force. When individuals reach this point, the continuing effects of plateauing, if left unchecked, may act to remove any realistic sense of public appreciation or duty.

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Sergeant Childers serves in the Lubbock, Texas, Police Department.

Differentiating Burnout and Plateauing

Burnout should not be confused with plateauing. Burnout is defined as a complex process that affects several major areas of human functioning—physical, intellectual, emotional, and social.³

Physical fatigue is usually one of the first symptoms of burnout. This usually takes the form of a general listlessness that carries over from work to home. Intellectual burnout, for the officer, is demonstrated by a negative attitude toward the job. Officers develop an attitude of cynicism, along with an inaccurate sense of public appreciation. Emotional symptoms most common to police burnout are anger and frustration, which cannot be effectively expressed. This may lead to depression, characterized by sleep and eating disturbances and a feeling of pessimism at work and at home.

Socially, the emotional insulation and isolation result in officers

having difficulty maintaining satisfying interpersonal relationships. The ultimate social symptom of burnout in law enforcement may be alcoholism. The dream of protecting and serving is falling apart, and relationships with colleagues are strained. Drinking may be viewed as the only way to escape a world that is crumbling.

Plateaued officers, however, are not so psychologically or physiologically involved in the problem. They generally understand the importance of maintaining societal control for the safety of all. Self-esteem and a sense of self-worth remain strong, and indeed, may even become exaggerated. Because the condition is not nearly as complex as burnout, the possibility of solving the problems associated with plateauing are high.

Solutions for Plateauing

Simply examining life and future goals may lead to a resolution

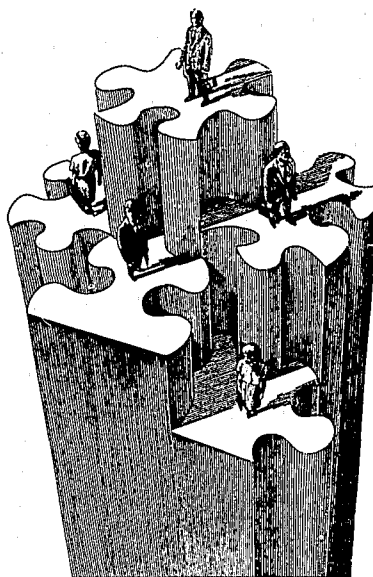
of plateauing. Officers may have to evaluate personal and professional priorities and realign career goals and objectives.

Seeking new challenges is often a key to overcoming plateauing. This may include completing a bachelor's or master's degree or taking courses at a local college or university.

Creating challenges at one's current level may include experimenting with different techniques of policing. One might try new patrol procedures to reduce armed robberies or attempt to motivate a squad by aiding and encouraging them to reach their goals. A change in duty assignments may resolve the plateauing effect. When an opening becomes available in another division, plateaued officers should strongly consider transferring. Learning a new job and applying new ideas can be challenging as well as rewarding.

For some, a career change may be the only way to eliminate plateauing. This solution should be thoroughly researched. Consulting career counselors or persons in another field of interest may be helpful. However, this option should only be considered when other alternatives will not work. Once the decision is made, it may be difficult or impossible to "get back the badge."

Police administrators can help decrease the occurrence and severity of plateauing by including education of this concept in the basic academy training program. Allowing lateral transfers and voluntary shift transfers, when feasible, can also often reduce the effects of plateauing.



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First-line supervisors have a great impact on officers and can greatly affect to what degree they become plateaued. Merely educating new officers about the concept will help. Because plateauing may occur several times throughout a career, guiding young officers toward more specific goals may be very helpful in preventing the effects of plateauing later in a law enforcement career. Simply rewarding officers for jobs well done will help sustain the challenges and promote a realistic sense of self-worth. Provid-

ing desirable task assignments is another method to maintain challenges and reduce boredom.

Conclusion

While not as complex or as deeply rooted as burnout, the problem of plateauing can be a serious one that should be addressed by the law enforcement community. Plateauing leaves an individual bored and frustrated and can significantly undermine an officer's ability to perform effectively. When the specific causes and effects of plateauing are understood, possible solutions can be provided by either the officer or the department. Unlike burnout, the effects of plateauing can be reversed through relatively minor administrative action, such as a lateral transfer or a new duty assignment.

Plateauing can be reduced and the effects eased, but by no means can it be eliminated completely from law enforcement, or any other field, for that matter. For severe cases, counseling may provide the only effective solution. All alternatives should be evaluated carefully before a decision is made. For the officer, just recognizing that plateauing has occurred is the initial step toward a solution.

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Footnotes

¹ I. David Welch, Donald C. Medeiros, George A. Tate, *Beyond Burnout* (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, Inc. 1982), p. 6.

² Judith M. Bardwick, *The Plateauing Trap* (New York: American Management Association, 1986), p. 3.

³ Supra note 1, pp. 102-105.