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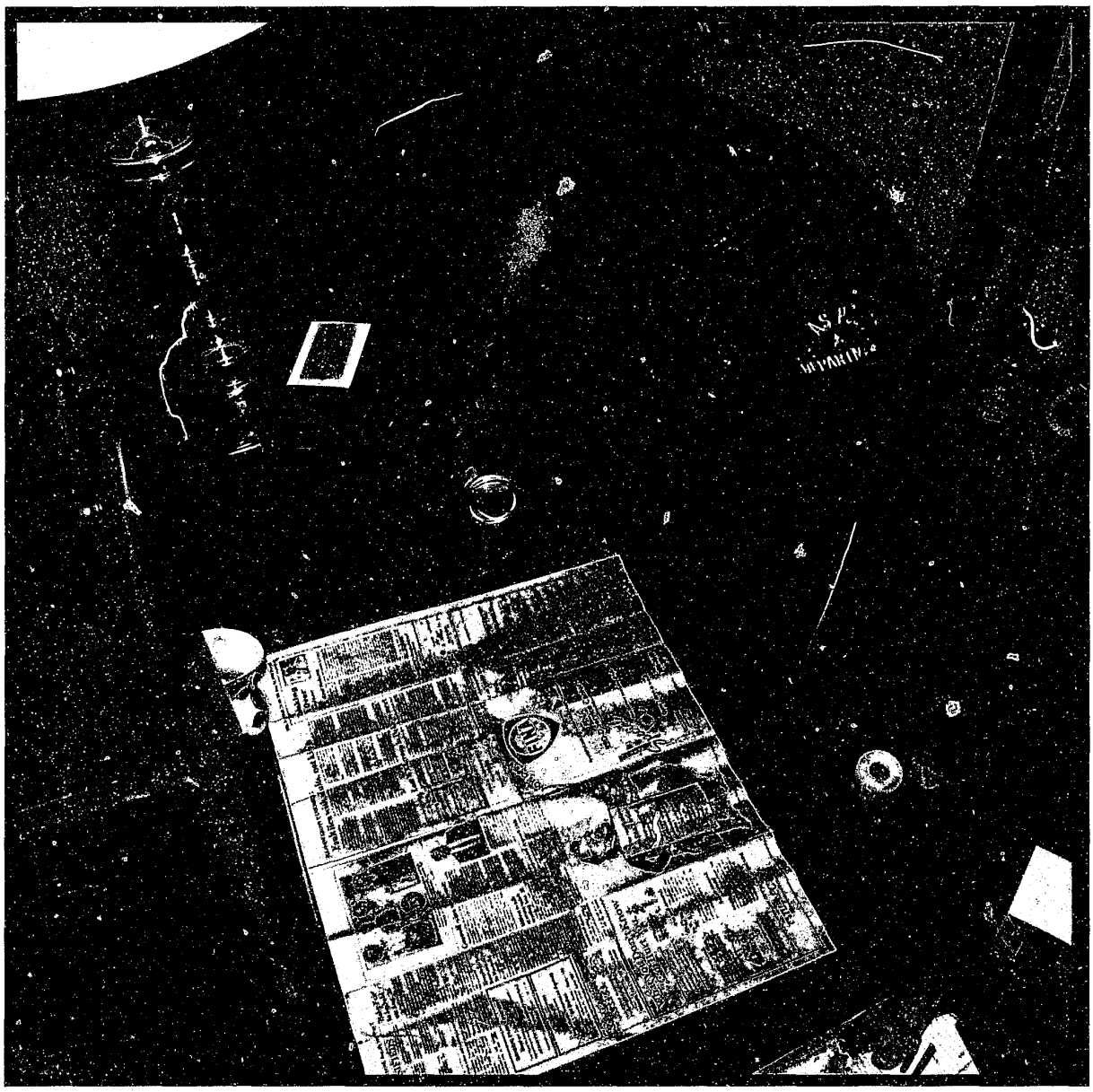

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Director

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153705

Police Ethics Training

A Three-Tiered Approach

By TIM R. JONES, Ed.D,
COMPTON OWENS,
and MELISSA A. SMITH

Recent, well-publicized incidents of police misconduct, use of excessive force, and large-scale corruption have increased public concern over ethical police behavior and the accountability of police agencies. Although, historically, police administrators have attended to these issues, ethical concerns have become critical to the operation of contemporary agencies for two primary reasons.

First, some law enforcement officers may believe that citizens will tolerate, if not support, aggressive and legally questionable crime-fighting tactics in order to quell the rising tide of violent crime. Second, police departments increasingly emphasize community-oriented or neighborhood-focused policing.

Overall, providing a comprehensive array of police services in a neighborhood setting demands a high level of officer discretion and flexibility. At the same time, officers must adhere to the law and remain accountable to the public.

To accomplish this, ethics training must become an integral part of academy and inservice training for new and experienced officers alike. This article discusses the need for ethics training and provides an overview of the program designed and implemented by the Huntsville, Alabama, Police Department.

CONTROLLING POLICE BEHAVIOR

Traditionally, law enforcement agencies have promoted internal control through their paramilitary structure. Police administrators have attempted to supplement this organization with written policies and procedures to regulate officer conduct. When these policies are general and imprecise, they become functionally useless; if too numerous or detailed, they fail to

serve as a workable guide for action in many instances.

More recently, tort liability claims have been touted as a remedy for misconduct and a device to ensure accountability. But to date, civil judgments or threats of civil sanction against police agencies have resulted in very few structural changes within policing, and if used, represent an after-the-fact assessment of blame. Civil liability simply does not constitute a valid strategy for preventing officer misconduct.

In spite of their rigid paramilitary structure, well-worn operating policies, and increased tort liability claims, police departments across the country continue to document cases of police misconduct, ranging from petty misfeasance to serious malfeasance. Indeed, the day-to-day operating realities of police work, which provide for substantial discretion and freedom of judgment for the typical patrol officer, may lead to these ethics violations.

With the advent of community-based policing, traditional methods of control and accountability may be even less effective than before. Community policing decentralizes police authority; officers must determine the best responses to problems. They also work closely with citizens.

As a result, community policing exposes officers to more opportunities for corruption. They may face residents with money, power, and influence or simply may become overzealous when they see citizens' problems ignored by other agencies.[1]

These problems indicate that police executives will have to manage through values, rather than merely by adopting new policies and procedures. They also will have to institute community reporting and review mechanisms, rather than relying on centralized command and control systems.

MANAGEMENT THROUGH VALUES

Management through values[2] represents one possible response to this new environment of police services. This management technique is based on the premise that policing styles reflect a department's values and that, in turn, these values powerfully influence the actions of the department and its officers. Community policing itself reflects a set of values. It demonstrates concern for the quality of police service and for the relationship between the police and the community.

Thus, organizational values—explicitly stated and frequently pronounced—become important management tools for police executives aiming for superior officer performance. Policy statements written by these enlightened executives not only state the values of the agency explicitly but they also provide explanations of the reasoning behind

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the derived policies. In sum, everything officers need to function and learn in the police environment—including case materials, class discussions, tests, and field officer programs—must reflect the agency's official values.

Implementing the management-through-values strategy emphasizes instilling professional ethical standards throughout the law enforcement organization. This greater institutionalization of ethics for police operations requires that police executives take the following actions:

- Prescribe, with substantial officer input, a formal code of ethics that provides clear standards of conduct for all officers
- Organize training programs in ethical policing to ensure that every officer understands the department's code of ethics and the enforcement apparatus associated with it
- Identify recurring ethical issues and expected ethical behaviors through discussion with executives from other agencies
- Reinforce acceptable behavior with rewards and punish unacceptable behavior with discipline, and
- Incorporate evaluations of ethical conduct into performance appraisals of all department employees.[3]

Obviously, implementation of management through values requires that all officers, from the chief to the recruit, receive more training in police ethics. A three-tiered approach can supply adequate training in this area.

First, training at the academy should introduce recruits to police ethics and the department's code. Second, regularly scheduled ethics awareness sessions at roll call or during more formal inservice training should complement the initial training. Finally, police administrators should receive more extensive training in a formal classroom setting.

"A discussion of the core ethical values of policing, such as honesty, fidelity, and personal integrity, is a key component...of the training program."

THE HUNTSVILLE PROTOTYPE

The Huntsville Police Department has designed and implemented a police ethics training program. It began in 1992 with an effort to provide ethics training to police recruits at the academy. In 1994, it evolved into a three-tiered approach, providing comprehensive training for all police officers, supervisors, and administrators. The program consists of different levels of training, each with a curriculum targeted to a specific group of police officers.

First Tier: Recruit Training

Training police recruits is a vital component in establishing ethical policing. Police professionalism requires that recruits develop a fundamental understanding of ethical principles during their basic police academy experience. In fact, ethics training is so basic to police professionalism that, by necessity, it should be the first subject introduced to recruits at the academy.

As with any other skill, police ethics can be taught, and students' understanding and retention of professional standards and ethical principles can be tested and measured. Further, the principles should be reinforced and tested throughout the academy curriculum.

The Alabama Peace Officers Standards and Training Commission (the State law enforcement

certification authority) mandates a minimum of 2 hours of instruction in police ethics. This basic course acquaints inexperienced police officers with ethical problems that they may confront. The course also equips recruits with the ability to recognize basic ethical issues and principles that they can use when they encounter ethical dilemmas. Students discuss definitions and examples of official misconduct and corruption and thoroughly explore the effect of each on officers, their employing agencies, their profession, and society. In addition, students analyze the ethical principles underlying the Law Enforcement Code of Ethics,[4] an integral part of this phase of the training program.

The State-mandated course provides the basic outline for Huntsville's expanded ethics training program for recruits. Students receive an additional 2 hours, which provide them the opportunity to reflect more deeply on the principles of ethical policing.

Exercises reinforce the discussion that takes place in each class. For example, with the assistance of a discussion leader, recruits conduct an "ethics audit." That is, as a group, they identify possible ethical problems that they anticipate encountering on the street. These may include issues pertaining to law enforcement, order maintenance, or discretionary judgment.

In another particularly useful exercise, the participants answer the question, "What would policing be like if all police officers acted ethically?" This exercise emphasizes the need for ethical behavior in any effort to professionalize policing.

Second Tier: Inservice Training

Institutionalization of ethical policing requires ethics training for police personnel of all ranks and experience levels. More important, however, each tier of the training curriculum must address the specific ethical issues confronting the particular group receiving the training. For example, training for experienced police officers should include issues

"Institutionalization of ethical policing requires ethics training for police personnel of all ranks and experience levels."

faced by patrol officers, investigators, and undercover agents, to name a few. Such training might cover making prudent decisions, implementing aggressive or proactive patrols, and acting ethically in undercover operations.

Inservice training for veteran officers uses the same basic recruit format but incorporates a few additional features. The training program begins with a discussion of the limitations of external controls on police behavior. For example, although the written law guides officers in enforcement activities, it gives them no direction in order-maintenance activities. In these cases, police officers must use their own discretion. By discussing the limits of the law and other external methods of controlling police behavior, the officers begin to view police professionalism as an internally driven ideal, reflecting not only skill and competence but also a finely tuned sense of professional ethics.

A discussion of the core ethical values of policing, such as honesty, fidelity, and personal integrity, is a key component of this phase of the training program. The seminar focuses on the importance of discretion, the professional responsibility to use discretion wisely, and the moral choices required by individual autonomy.

Supporting the theory that values guide the behavior of police officers, additional discussion centers on the values critical to the success of community policing. These values include:

- Respect for and sensitivity to all citizens and their problems
- Commitment to collaborative problem-solving with the public
- Respect for the community and the law as the source of the department's authority, and
- Commitment to furthering democratic values.[5]

Police officers and administrators must train for and adopt these values to ensure the success of any community-policing effort.

Third Tier: Police Supervisors Training

The Huntsville Police Department also implemented an ethics training program for police managers and supervisors, who play a pivotal role in the institutionalization of ethics in the department.

This particular portion of the training program helps police supervisors to manage through values and to lead through personal example.

As in the recruit training program, the first phase of supervisors' training begins with a discussion of the current police role, specifically detailing the aspects limiting the imposition of ethical policing—the numerous opportunities for misconduct, the existence of a police subculture that protects rule breakers, and the widespread use of discretion associated with the order-maintenance role. Supervisors address the issue of public accountability, emphasizing police professionalism and professional ethics within the context of community-based policing.

Because the objective in this phase is to get supervisors to discuss problems and issues of concern to them, this program relies heavily on the training leader to encourage participation. In order for police professionals to identify those principles of professional ethics that will help them to police and manage, the discussion leader must present realistic information about the nature of policing and professional ethics. This will provoke the thoughts of the participants and spur meaningful discussion.

As part of their training, police supervisors discuss:

- The role of the police in the community
- Enhancement of police accountability
- Police professionalism and "management through values"
- The code of ethics
- Principles of ethical decisionmaking, and
- The role of administrators and supervisors in institutionalizing ethics.

In addition, specially designed exercises accompany each discussion to encourage meaningful input from all participants. Oftentimes, the officers consider and write their opinions on a topic and then exchange ideas orally. Other exercises involve customizing a code of ethics to a particular police agency[6] and forming a simulated ethics committee to conduct ethics audits and to define the ethical principles needed in policing.[7] In a particularly effective and popular exercise, officers view and discuss videotaped scenarios or role-play similar scenes that highlight ethical dilemmas. Many Huntsville officers have volunteered to act in these vignettes.

> ***"With the advent of community-based policing, traditional methods of control and accountability may be even less effective than before."***

CONCLUSION

The Huntsville Police Department's ethics training program gives participants the opportunity to reflect on and to discuss important issues with other police professionals. They can share ideas and discover solutions to ethical problems they routinely encounter, the ethics expected of the profession as a whole, and the challenges of policing tomorrow's communities. A training program of this type should be part of an ongoing effort to instill, reaffirm, and institutionalize ethical policing in every law enforcement agency.

Ethics in policing now is more important than ever. As policing becomes more decentralized and community-based in structure, accountability to the public becomes a highly relevant issue that affects delivery of police services. Perhaps management through values will provide the method by which police can provide quality service and protection to the public, while remaining faithful to the rule of law and exemplifying the highest ethics of public service. ✦

Endnotes

[1] George L. Kelling, "Police and Communities: The Quiet Revolution," *Perspectives on Policing*, No. 1, Washington, DC, National Institute of Justice and Harvard University, June 1988.

[2] George L. Kelling, Robert Wasserman, and Hubert Williams, "Police Accountability and Community Policing," *Perspectives on Policing* No. 7, Washington, DC, National Institute of Justice and Harvard University, November 1988. *See also* Robert Wasserman and Mark H. Moore, "Values in Policing," *Perspectives on Policing* No. 8, Washington, DC, National Institute of Justice and Harvard University, November 1988.

[3] Ibid.

[4] International Association of Chiefs of Police, Alexandria, VA.

[5] Supra note 2.

[6] Colleen A. Fitzpatrick, "Customized Code of Ethics," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, July 1992, 20.

[7] Dennis M. Payne, Ph.D., "Ethics in Police Decisionmaking: Modeling the Corporate Method," *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*, August 1993, 5.