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Surviving the Circus: How Effective Leaders Work Well with the Media

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It is no secret that many police officers who would not pause before entering a darkened building to pursue an armed offender blanch at the approach of a twentysomething news reporter armed with a pad and pencil. The men and women who lead law enforcement agencies cannot afford to be so shy. For police leaders, the ability to communicate clearly is a necessity; communicating effectively with the public is an *absolute* necessity. The news media represent police leaders' most valuable tools for reaching that public.

The truth is that law enforcement executives' lives are better if they enjoy a good working relationship with the local media. That does not require that they "kiss up" to anyone. It also does not mean that they must like every reporter they encounter. It does require that they make an earnest effort to work constructively with the media and ensure that the other members of their agencies do the same.

An effective working relationship with the media starts with establishing credibility. Police leaders' reputations for integrity are their most precious assets. Personal integrity includes the responsibility for telling the truth—that includes being truthful with reporters. Police leaders really can survive the media circus—even when they find themselves in the center ring.

Finding Common Ground for Mutual Benefit

Contrary to the opinions of some, law enforcement leaders and journalists actually can work together effectively. But police leaders and journalists looking to nourish mutually beneficial working relationships first have some baggage to overcome. In the "bad old days," many reporters tended to see cops as often brutal, frequently lazy, and not very bright. Police bosses were seen as evasive, if not outright liars. They were viewed as cynical and secretive.

For their part, police viewed journalists as bleeding hearts who were predisposed to believe a crook over a cop. Reporters were seen as self-appointed police experts who knew nothing about real police work or the dangers cops faced. Some law enforcement officers saw reporters as hating all authority figures. In that atmosphere, it is hardly surprising that law enforcement leaders and reporters viewed each other as enemies. In that environment, misbehavior on both sides was hardly a rarity.

In reality, police and reporters have a lot in common. Both law enforcement agencies and the media are highly visible, powerful institutions. Both professions attract ambitious, strong-minded employees who possess a strong sense of justice and a desire to help others. Both professions are frequently criticized by the public they serve and are highly sensitive to that criticism. The professionals of both can be

highly defensive and feel that they are poorly understood by their critics. Both professions are sometimes secretive about their operations and their methods for gathering information. Professionals in both endeavors see themselves as vital to the public welfare.

As successful leaders in both law enforcement and journalism can relate, both sides can win in the police-media relationship. Getting along is much more rewarding than fighting. Each field of work has a lot to offer the other. Reporters often view law enforcement agencies as their best sources for the type of news in which the public is interested. Peace officers are great sources of interesting information. The law enforcement community has the exciting, attention-grabbing visuals that electronic media require. Simply put, maintaining a good relationship with local agencies can make reporters' jobs much easier.

Nurturing a positive working relationship with the media can prove equally beneficial to law enforcement leaders. Through the press, they can tell the public of the good work done by their personnel. With a positive police-press relationship in place, agencies can educate their communities' residents to protect themselves and can warn them of imminent danger. On the other hand, hostile media can make the police leaders' jobs much harder. Although ethical law enforcement leaders would never curry favor with the press solely for selfish purposes, the fact remains that supportive media can make it a lot easier for chiefs to do—and keep—their jobs.

Interview Guidelines

Law enforcement leaders can take several measures to encourage a favorable state of affairs with the media that cover their agencies. Perhaps the foremost of these measures is to ensure that the agency's message is delivered accurately to an interested public; the most effective means of disseminating these messages is through media interviews. Giving an interview while remaining in complete control should be the goal of every police leader. This can be accomplished by following some basic guidelines.

Potential interviewees should keep in mind that they have something interviewers want: information. Interviewees should have their own objectives in mind and produce the sought-after information when the opportunity presents itself. In that way, they can be sure to put the information *they* want in front of the public.

Next, leaders should determine if they are the appropriate individuals to answer reporters' questions. If, for example, the questions are anticipated to be of a highly technical nature, leaders may be better served by having a staff member with the appropriate specialized knowledge standing by to assist in answering questions.

Police leaders should attempt to see themselves in their interviewers' shoes. What would they want to know if the roles were reversed? It is also acceptable to ask interviewers what questions are going to be posed. This way, police leaders can then gather the facts they need and prepare themselves to answer the queries. Nevertheless, an interviewee should always expect surprise questions. This does not mean the interviewer is being devious; it may simply mean that the interviewee's responses have created additional questions in the mind of the reporter.

If there is any time at all to do so, police leaders should practice out loud answering the questions they are expecting. If there is not enough time for a full-scale rehearsal, interviewed subjects can at least practice their answers mentally.

Wise and ethical police leaders will always tell the truth, and nothing but the truth, during a media interview. They will remain mindful that their credibility is a precious asset not to be wasted. If they do not know the answer to their interviewers'

questions, they will say so and offer to get the necessary information, if available, as soon as possible.

Interviewees should strive for a professional yet relaxed demeanor. If the interview is conducted on camera, they should avoid looking careless or sloppy but should also avoid a ramrod-straight posture that makes them look like robots. They likewise should avoid distracting mannerisms such as cramming their hands in their pockets or rattling their keys or pocket change. They should also make eye contact with interviewers throughout, rather than stare into the camera.

Media-savvy law enforcement officials will keep their voices at a normal, conversational level during a taped or live interview. There is no need to shout or otherwise speak abnormally. They will also keep their comments direct, concise, and brief, realizing that their words likely will merit no more than 15 seconds on the broadcast news. They will have very little time to get their point across, so it is vital that they choose their words well.

Police leaders should not hesitate to correct themselves, either during or immediately after the interview, if they realize they have answered a question incorrectly or provided inaccurate information. Accuracy is vital.

Dealing with Difficult Questioners

Although most newsmen are honest, hard-working people who are simply trying to do a difficult job well, occasionally some will be less than above-board with their tactics. As a result, smart law enforcement leaders should be on the lookout for the tricks of less-than-straightforward interviewers.

Convoluting questioners will pose queries that are so long, multifaceted, and outright confusing that law enforcement leaders may have no idea what they are answering. The solution for interviewees is simply to ask questioners good-naturedly to slow down and repeat questions one part at a time. In this way, interviewees can complete their answers to one question before moving on to the next.

The wise leader also will remain on the lookout for *interrupters*. These reporters have the nasty habit of injecting their own opinions or comments before interviewees can finish answering a question. The best response interview subjects can give in this situation is to continue to talk, over the interviewer, if necessary, until they have finished answering. It may sound rude, but it may also be necessary for the speakers to get their important points across without interference.

Misinterpreters may also pose a problem for law enforcement executives. These individuals may lead off an interview by presenting false information or may later sum up comments incorrectly. Interviewees' response should be to correct misinterpreters immediately, even if the interview is live. The danger of leaving bad information in front of the public is too great to do anything less.

The *dead air ploy* can also take in the unaware. Reporters trying this stunt will silently and expectantly stare at their subjects when the latter have finished responding to a question. The hope is that the interviewees will become uncomfortable with the silence and talk some more, perhaps in the process revealing something they had not planned to say. The solution is as simple as it is effective: when finished with a reply, interviewees merely stop talking and stare back at their questioners. After a couple of rounds of this contest, interviewers often get the message and allow the session to proceed in an up-front fashion.

Finally, *ambush interviewers* present a special challenge. These characters may

jump their prey in the station house parking lot or just about anywhere else where their quarry does not expect them. Their goal is to obtain an unrehearsed, emotional, and perhaps controversial response from their victims. If law enforcement professionals respond in an unprofessional manner, the ambushers have gotten what they want. Wise leaders refuse to be provoked into responses that will almost certainly guarantee them a spot on the evening news. Instead, they remain calm, courteous, and in control. Interviewees should respond just as they would in any other interview; that is, as professionals. Doing so will make them look good even as it disappoints their tormentors.

A final piece of interview advice is in order for police leaders. Many public figures have seen their careers unravel after an inappropriate comment was picked up by a camera and/or a microphone they thought was turned off. Intelligent leaders will eliminate inappropriate and off-color remarks from their vocabulary. They also will treat every microphone and camera in the area as perpetually live and act accordingly.

Handling Bad News

As any law enforcement executive will admit, media duty is a lot more fun when the news being reported bathes the organization and its leader in a favorable light. The reality is, however, that sooner or later bad news visits every law enforcement organization. Whether emanating from a "bad" shooting, a pursuit gone sour, or some other episode of police misconduct, bad news will happen eventually. How law enforcement leaders handle it will go a long way in determining how well they and their agencies survive the crisis. Following some commonsense guidelines for handling bad news will help take some of the sting out of the disaster as well as help it pass more quickly. Survival steps include the following.

For more information on working with the news media, see the December 2007 issue of the *Police Chief*, which offers five different perspectives on the relationship between law enforcement agencies and the media outlets that cover them.

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Tell the Truth: This is not the time for police leaders to lose their reputation for credibility. Wise leaders will say nothing at all rather than lie. A reputation for truthfulness, once lost, is difficult to reestablish.

Never Say "No Comment": Responding to a question with "no comment" makes law enforcement leaders sound like gangsters in front of a congressional committee. There are better ways of saying essentially the same thing. "I can't answer that just yet because the investigation is still in progress" is one alternative.

Keep Consistent Media Rules during an Incident: When organizations that are normally open and accessible to the media suddenly alter policies to allow no one to speak, they send a signal that they have something to hide. Indeed, a recent experience may convince law enforcement managers that media policies need revision. But rules should be revised only after the current incident is well in the past.

Do Not Hide: When normally accessible police leaders shove others out front during a crisis, they earn the mistrust of the news media and, very likely, the hostility of their own people. Leaders should remain highly visible both inside and outside their organizations during difficult times. They should be the individuals speaking for their organizations.

Convey a Sense of Normalcy: To maintain confidence in a law enforcement agency, both the media and the larger public must see the agency and its leaders carrying on "business as usual," even during difficult times. For one thing, that means continuing to convey the story of the good work that the organization's members are doing. Leaders must scrupulously avoid portraying their agencies as going into a "sandbagging" mode.

Do No Harm: Police leaders should follow the same advice that guides medical professionals: "first, do no harm." One way they can make it worse is by lying. Another is by dribbling out the bad news and making the media "work" to get it. A third is by making the negative event a bigger story than it really is by overresponding to it, "hunkering down" for a siege, or launching a verbal attack on the news organization reporting the story. Media-savvy leaders keep things in perspective and recognize that Monday's "big deal" is often largely forgotten by Friday.

Stay Calm and in Control: Law enforcement executives who lose their self-control and melt down in front of media reps have practically guaranteed themselves time on television channels 2 through 12. Such a performance will benefit neither them nor their agencies. It is vital that leaders maintain their professionalism and self-control even in the face of extreme provocation. It is worth remembering that bad news will pass, and sunnier days are ahead.

Fostering Positive Media Relationships

Law enforcement leaders well-versed in using the media as a means to praise and protect their agencies follow some commonsense guidelines for governing their personal relationships with the press. They will, for instance, maintain good relations with their primary media contacts whenever given a reasonable chance to do so. That means they may have a social cup of coffee with reporters even when there is no pressing news. They are willing to trust their media contacts—up to a point. But they will never forget that even their friends in the media will "burn" them, on occasion.

Likewise, intelligent leaders are cautious about going "off the record" with even their closest media confidantes. They realize that once they say something, the reporter is under no legal obligation not to use it. Media-wise leaders follow a simple rule of thumb: "If you do not want to reveal it to the whole world, do not provide it to the media."

Experienced law enforcement professionals know that it is generally better to get along than battle unnecessarily. That simple advice also applies to their personal relationships with the media. Recall the old saw that it does not pay to pick a fight with someone who buys ink by the barrel. At the same time, police leaders should not hesitate to complain loudly but professionally when they have evidence that they or their agencies have been skewered by unfair media treatment. But shrewd leaders pick their battles well. They know not to air a grievance just because they do not like the news that a media organization is reporting. They reserve their criticism for inaccuracies, editorializing, or other examples of poor journalism disguised as legitimate news stories. When they do complain, they offer specifics rather than just an emotional tirade. They know that a calm, reasoned objection is more likely to get results than one that can be dismissed as the emotional response of a justly stung "offender."

Police leaders should also realize that it is not all about them. They should maintain a sense of modesty when dealing with reporters. They should know that their media contacts are seeking the insight and information they possess; the media are not out to make them famous. They should understand that when they are gone, the media will lavish equal attention on their replacements.

Finally, wise law enforcement executives use the full services of the media when they have good news to spread. They do not wait to be contacted by reporters about the exceptional work done by their employees. They instead take a proactive approach with radio, television, and print media by contacting media sources via news release, press conference, an offer of a personal interview, or all of these methods of disseminating information. They do not overlook the growing value of the Internet for getting out the good word, either. They are quick to go to the media when they need the public's help with a case or to spread important information, such as crime prevention advice, both quickly and widely. They know that maintaining a

positive working relationship with the media will make it possible to count on the media's good offices when the chips are down and they need quick access to the public.

Conclusion

Working with the media is not complicated. Collaborating positively is a lot more rewarding than fighting with each other. Police leaders and reporters have a lot to offer each other. Each can help the other succeed. Together, they can really achieve that rarest of scenarios: a win-win situation. But best of all, the taxpayers benefit, from learning about the threats to public safety and what their law enforcement officers are doing about those threats. The ensuing free flow of information benefits all involved. ■

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