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Strengthening Police Organizations Through Interpersonal Leadership

By Peter J. McDermott and Diana Hulse, Ed.D.

Law enforcement responsibilities require police to assume leadership positions in their organizations and communities. In response to citizens' expectations, officers strive to prepare themselves to fulfill these roles effectively. Police can demonstrate their leadership skills in many ways, such as facilitating block-watch groups, leading meetings and task forces, serving as team or divisional commanders, and conducting investigations. In all of these instances, officers find themselves face-to-face with various communication styles and personal needs.

To this end, the authors have assembled resources from literature on task groups, which comprise one feature of the broad methodology of group work and represent common choices when people come together for decision making and problem solving. Current definitions of task group leadership fit nicely with the work police do every day.[1] When leading in these situations, officers must manage conversations and relationships and focus on the point of the group. The designated leader must understand group dynamics and know how to effectively apply that knowledge.

To provide a basis for discussion, the authors focus on one common type of task group in police work—debriefing meetings. They outline the purpose of these meetings and present needed leadership skills for working effectively in such settings.

TAKING THE LEAD

Content and Process

Leaders must learn how to balance content (the purpose or objective of the group) and process (interactions and relationships among its members). As a debriefing meeting occurs in the aftermath of a critical incident, its purpose, or content focus, is to bring together everyone involved in the event and gather information. Objectives include identifying the response to the incident, evaluating the steps taken, and determining necessary procedures for addressing future events. Debriefing meetings can last 30 minutes to 1 hour, several hours, a full day, or longer depending on the scope of the incident.

Officers may misunderstand and dislike debriefing meetings and consider them poorly run and a waste of time. Consequently, such personnel do not readily arrive to the groups with much positive anticipation or goodwill. Why? Perhaps the officers dread a preponderance of content requiring them to suffer through an agenda and do not recognize any value to themselves. However, successful debriefing meetings do not focus on information and facts alone; their productivity rests largely on the leader's expertise in cultivating relationships among participants, inviting them to take action and contribute resources, and knowing how to intervene when issues interfere with the group's work.

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Process often becomes overlooked by members who do not consider it as important as the content or "getting the job done." However, leaders should recognize the primary significance of attention to process. If leaders take the time to observe how participants listen to each other, engage one another, and work together and then use their observations of these dynamics to facilitate the meeting, they will increase the likelihood of positive outcomes. As a result, the organization will gain the information it seeks, and members of the debriefing meeting will believe that they have contributed to this effort. They will feel invested and consider their time well spent. If leaders do not understand and appreciate the need to include attention to the process of how the debriefing meeting unfolds, they likely will fall into a trap of focusing entirely on the content or goal. In doing so, they will not gain access to the valuable resources provided by participants. These leaders certainly will miss opportunities to intervene when necessary to address dynamics that hinder group productivity.

What sorts of issues do debriefing meeting leaders need to remain aware of? For example, what will happen if one or two people monopolize conversations or redirect the discussion away from the topic at hand? What should leaders do to encourage quieter members? What can they do to keep the conversation on point or move to a different topic when necessary? How could leaders interrupt dialogue aimed at defending one participant's position to the detriment of discussing all of the relevant issues? How should they address nonverbal behaviors (e.g., eye rolling, grimaces) that convey negative reactions to what a member says? How can leaders manage the timing and sequence of the meeting? How could they wrap up a session and plan for future meetings?

These questions represent myriad issues that can surface when people come together with a range of individual goals, needs, and styles of

communication. To this end, leaders must know how to attend to verbal and nonverbal skills, focus, paraphrase, reflect, summarize, and clarify. In addition, the authors introduce three skill sets that can help leaders define purpose and identify goals, build connections and relationships, keep the group moving and on course, consolidate learning, and effectively end the meeting.

Important Skill Sets

Rounds

This activity involves leaders asking members to respond to a stimulus designed to build involvement and gather information.[2] Leaders strive for several goals: ensuring that the meeting has a clearly communicated purpose, everyone has a voice, and the round is conducted in a timely manner. With these goals in mind, a debriefing leader can begin by stating "Our purpose today is to evaluate the incident that occurred last week. To accomplish this purpose, I want everybody's input, and I would like to start by going around the room to ask each of you to briefly introduce yourself and state your responsibilities in this particular event." This action illustrates a balance between process and content by focusing on the purpose of the meeting and inviting input from everyone present. The leader activates the concept of voice—important for laying the foundation for collaboration. As members hear themselves speak, they identify their roles and responsibilities and clarify and reinforce their reasons for involvement in the group. While participants check in during this round, the leader begins to observe the ways that they communicate and interact with each other.[3]

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Rounds also prove helpful (as a checkout) at the end of the group when members discuss the meeting's accomplishments and what next steps to take in moving forward. For example, near the end of a debriefing session, the leader can go around the group again and say something, like "As a result of our conversation today, I would like each of you to summarize your major learning points related to your responsibilities in this matter and what you plan to do to prepare for future incidents." In this round, the leader invites input from everyone and emphasizes the importance of transfer of learning. The closing phase of a meeting serves as a critical time to ask members to reflect on next steps. What are participants taking away with them? Who will do what and by when? Attention to transfer of learning brings the group full circle to the concept of voice—helping members verbally express themselves in a climate characterized by collaboration and cooperation.[4] Rounds give leaders a structure for inviting voice and encouraging meaning; that is, members more easily can understand and value their contributions in the group. Everyone in the meeting benefits from the mutual construction of knowledge provided by all present. However, managing these various conversations in a debriefing meeting can prove difficult.

Drawing Out, Cutting Off, Holding, and Shifting the Focus

These four key skills help leaders in a debriefing session handle the needs, preferences, and styles of members and maneuver through complex dynamics. Leaders use drawing out to make sure that everyone has their voice heard.[5] Cutting off refers to interrupting one individual from talking, thus including all participants, and ensuring that rambling or extraneous conversation does not occur.[6] This skill enables leaders to hold the focus on a topic of importance or to shift from a subject that

has had adequate coverage to another one important to the meeting.[7]

A leader has heard from everyone in the opening round and wants to ask for further information and clarification by turning to Bob, the head of the communications. "Bob, can you go back to what happened when you got the call and walk us through the steps you took." As Bob begins to speak, several other participants jump in with statements, like "Well, he took too long to respond." This represents a point at which meetings can reach a fork in the road. The leader needs to interrupt and say something, like "I realize that everyone here has opinions about how things worked or not. The point of this meeting is to get to the bottom of these issues; however, we need to do this in an orderly fashion, and I want to get back to the question I asked Bob. I will make sure we hear from everyone before the meeting ends." This statement illustrates how leaders can interrupt off-the-point remarks and return to the stated focus. Leaders, especially those who do not want to appear rude, may find this skill awkward. However, if they do not interrupt such comments, the meeting can turn into chaos quickly. When Bob has finished his report, the leader must have skills for shifting the focus to the next one. Leaders want to keep an eye on sequencing and timing so that all pertinent topics get addressed in a climate of respect and collaboration.

Here and Now

This concept runs as a thread through the execution of leadership skills. It captures the essence of process and represents a valuable tool for leaders. As members provide verbal input, leaders want to monitor nonverbal behaviors and watch for signs that may negatively affect the work of the group. For instance, in the previous example, while Bob provides information in response to the leader's question, several members grimace, scowl, or roll their eyes. Ignoring such behaviors at this point can cause the dynamics in the room to escalate into a tone of negativity that will hurt efforts for collaboration. As a whole, the group will become stuck, and potential positive outcomes from the meeting will be compromised. Despite the desire to allow Bob to speak, the leader will want to say something, like "I need to stop the meeting for a moment. I notice that John and Mary are giving strong signals that they are unhappy with Bob's report. At this point, we need to clear the air. We can't move ahead until we address what is going on in the room right now. John, what exactly bothers you about Bob's report?" With this intervention, the leader has identified an issue that requires immediate attention. Leaders must have a comfort level with giving feedback to have success with this type of intervention. In the exchange with John and Mary, the leader can begin employing rounds, cutting off, drawing out, holding the focus, shifting the focus, and encouraging the use of "I" statements—crucial to ensuring that meeting participants own their viewpoints.[8] These statements reduce the likelihood of vague and ambiguous language that further can fuel contentious conversations. In this example, the leader could coach John to say, "I did not agree with Bob's actions," as opposed to "Bob did something wrong."

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CONCLUSION

Leading debriefing meetings, as well as all task groups, can prove challenging. However, with interpersonal, feedback, and leadership skills, police officers can increase their positive impact while meeting their daily responsibilities. Important concepts and skills can be taught, modeled, and transferred to all members of the organization.

A human endeavor, effective police work with individuals and in group settings requires strong interpersonal skills. Everything that officers do requires competence in verbal and nonverbal communication. This concept also holds true among medical professionals who understand the value of effective communication. At least 8 medical schools in the United States and 13 in Canada use the multiple mini interview (MMI) as part of the admissions process. In combination with standard criteria, such as grades and test scores, the MMI requires applicants to participate in nine brief interviews designed to ascertain their command of social skills. As the dean of Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University's Carilion School of Medicine states, "Our school intends to graduate physicians who can communicate with patients and work in a team."[9] The authors suggest that changing a few words could read, "Police training intends to prepare personnel who can communicate with the public and work in a team."

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The emphasis on human relations invites police organizations to place interpersonal skills training front and center of their curriculum. A commitment to the role and significance of effective communication in police work sets the stage for a new generation of well-trained personnel. In this new generation, police departments can create an organizational culture that values interpersonal and leadership skills and supports a strategically focused training curriculum to teach and evaluate these abilities. As a result, all members of the organization will master and demonstrate a set of skills that moves police work a step closer to the reality of civility and effectiveness.✦

Endnotes

[1] Diana Hulse-Killacky, Jim Killacky, and Jeremiah Donigian, *Making Task Groups Work in Your World* (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall, 2001), 6.

[2] Robert L. Masson, Riley L. Harvill, and Christine J. Schimmel, *Group Counseling: Strategies and Skills,* ed. E. Jacobs (Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole, 2012), 198.

[3] Hulse-Killacky, Killacky, and Donigian, 20.

[4] Jonathan J. Orr and Diana Hulse-Killacky, "Using Voice, Meaning, Mutual Construction of Knowledge, and Transfer of Learning to Apply an Ecological Perspective to Group Work Training," *Journal for Specialists in Group Work* 31 (2006): 192.

[5] Masson, Harvill, and Schimmel, 183.

[6] Masson, Harvill, and Schimmel, 168.

[7] Masson, Harvill, and Schimmel, 153-157.

[8] Hulse-Killacky, Killacky, and Donigian, 57-58.

[9] Gardiner Harris, "New for Aspiring Doctors, the People Skills Test," *New York Times*, July 11, 2011.

Peter J. McDermott welcomes readers' questions and comments at pete06422@yahoo.com.

Mr. McDermott retired as captain from the West Hartford and Windsor, Connecticut, Police Departments and as an instructor from the Connecticut Police Academy.

Dr. Hulse is a professor in and chair of the Counselor Education Department at Fairfield University in Fairfield, Connecticut.