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Perspective

The Wellness Window

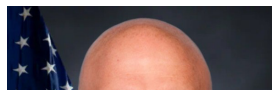
Jeffrey S. Katz



Change is difficult. Periods of change are often looked at positively with the benefit of hindsight, but we frequently celebrate the progress without fully appreciating the discomfort, uncertainty, and loss experienced by those who marshaled us through the often-painful transition. Even objectively positive change involves some loss.

The policing profession is experiencing a revitalization. Law enforcement needs to acknowledge the difficulties we have grappled with over the past decade while simultaneously recognizing that overcoming these trying times is within our power. Effective

leadership and thoughtful discussion about the state of our profession are



essential in our current moment and future success. This requires the confluence of three key concepts: *trust, leadership, and wellness.*



Trust

Trust is the glue that holds society together. Without trust, no one would get on an airplane flown by a stranger, order food from a restaurant, or walk unarmed through a neighborhood. It is essential in the workplace too. Unfortunately, our training as law enforcement officers often leads us to be skeptical of people's motives, intentions, and words.

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When trust is lacking among colleagues, we do not acknowledge our vulnerabilities or ask for help. If a team is dysfunctional, the primary reason is usually an absence of trust.¹ Without care and attention, we can find ourselves in a predicament where that essential trust is absent in our organization's work culture. This could lead to significant consequences for both our agencies and the communities we serve.

Leadership

Leadership is an elusive construct. This field of study suffers from a conceptual crisis that

study suffers from a conceptual crisis that severely limits our understanding of leadership in contemporary organizations.² There are many definitions, models, theories, or unique takes by which experts attempt to explain the process of effective leadership in action. Adding to the confusion are memes and anecdotes floating across social media that oversimplify the contrast between leaders and managers. Ultimately, leadership is like beauty—impossible to define in concrete terms—but we know it when we see it. We are also acutely aware when it is lacking.

There is no leadership without followership. As the old quip goes, “A leader without followers is just someone out for a walk.”³ Nevertheless, many make the deeply personal decision to gain influence by proving sufficiently worthy or powerful. This process is known as “status conferral,” whereby a relationship of influence is granted to someone once they are perceived as either worthy (prestige) or of sufficient power (dominance).⁴

Ideally, influence is best garnered through a sense of respect and bestowed upon those who have demonstrated the competency, character, and temperament to inspire others to commit themselves to a shared vision. Instead, some choose to rely on their positional power, which is often sufficient to yield compliance within organizational hierarchies. However, this type of sway is less effective than influence gained through building trust, and it does not serve a leader well in the long term.

Historically, there have been more people than

historically, there have been more people than available jobs.⁵ A reduction in global birthrates has reversed this equation,⁶ creating an environment by which employees vote with their feet, abandoning organizations—and even professions—when leadership falls short of expectations. This poses a particular problem in policing, where the command-and-control model that has been the mainstay in our profession is proving both ineffective and impractical in our current climate. Indeed, a central component of our modern policing revival is realizing that a new people-centric leadership paradigm is necessary to traverse our contemporary operational landscape.

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This paradigm shift should not be oversimplified; however, it is essential to pay some fundamental deference to the needs of those in our care and charge. As leaders, one way we can demonstrate this esteem at the most foundational level is to ensure our personnel are suitably trained and equipped for success as they go about their essential work in our communities.

Wellness

In basic police training, significant emphasis is placed on officer survival, shooting, self-defense, emergency vehicle operations, use of restraints, contact and cover principles, and other related topics. Many agencies provide firearms and order routine proficiency training, issue and mandate the use of bullet-resistant vests, and require personnel to use seatbelts while operating an agency vehicle. These surface-level officer survival practices fall short of the standard of

suitable training necessary for our employees' success.

Consider this reality: the average life expectancy for a police officer in the United States is 57, a full 22 years fewer than nonpolice members of our communities.⁷ Officers are almost four times as likely to die by suicide than to be killed feloniously.⁸ As part of this policing revitalization, it is time for a serious conversation about the types of training we provide to promote officer safety.

The window allowing us to see this link between wellness and officer safety opened with the 2015 release of the Final Report of the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. This comprehensive study of modern law enforcement practices generated several key insights crafted to inform the policing profession's evolution. One of the six underlying themes embodied in the document is "Officer Wellness and Safety." Specifically, the report noted:

The "bulletproof cop" does not exist. The officers who protect us must also be protected—against incapacitating physical, mental, and emotional health problems as well as against the hazards of their job. Their wellness and safety are crucial for them, their colleagues, and their agencies, as well as the well-being of the communities they serve.⁹

This advice took a while to catch on. The push to consider law enforcement wellness began gaining momentum—for good reason—in 2020.

Beginning in the spring, 2020 was marked by intense turmoil and stress and was perhaps the most challenging time experienced by many during their policing careers. By March, COVID-19 was upon us. The pandemic would kill 221 police officers between March and December 2020.¹⁰ Death, destruction, and overt efforts to demoralize law enforcement personnel beset the policing profession during and since the protests stemming from the killing of George Floyd in May 2020.

Across the United States, there were reflexive criminal justice reform efforts designed to “protect the public”—particularly communities of color—from the police. For example, in Virginia, the legislature passed a law prohibiting officers from stopping cars operating at night without headlights, among other minor infractions that police used to justify pretextual stops.¹¹ In that case, the governor amended the legislation before signing it into law.

Droves of police officers left the profession in 2020. A staggering 68% sought employment outside of law enforcement.¹² Moreover, in 2019, for every officer who joined a department, 0.86 would leave, allowing for the maintenance of staffing and even modest growth over time. In 2020, the trend reversed. For every officer hired, 1.29 walked out the door—and many did not leave quietly. Coupled with an accelerated reduction in the available workforce, police departments are facing an existential personnel

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departments are facing an existential personnel crisis.¹³

At the risk of triggering negative memories, I have highlighted this background to contextualize why we are in a phase in the policing profession where executives must genuinely focus on the wellness needs of their people. Cultivating trust is a nonnegotiable ingredient in the police leadership toolbox. Recall that with an absence of trust, people will not ask for help, acknowledge a mistake, or allow themselves to be vulnerable.¹⁴ Organizational cultures barren of trust will, at best, have lackluster participation in wellness initiatives. Why would someone avail themselves of a department's wellness program if they genuinely do not believe they can be vulnerable, seek help, or admit a mistake?

Despite several companies and subject matter experts being willing to sell you a one-stop solution, agency wellness is not served by a mobile phone application, prominently displayed poster with Employee Assistance Program (EAP) resource numbers, or single course on suicide awareness. It is a sad irony that the most unhealthy and toxic command-and-control cultures—where staff suffer the most mental strain—are the ones least likely to take advantage of even the most well-resourced program.

Conclusion

First responder wellness starts with a healthy and trusting organizational culture and way of doing business. It prioritizes people who, as a matter of