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What's the Problem? - Police Tactical Psychology Bulletin

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The Tactical Psychology Bulletin

Mental Tools for Police Success

By

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What's the Problem?

An obvious fact is that police officers are problem solvers. Sometimes the most obvious things in life are also those we don't spend much time reflecting upon. Police officers are problem solvers. If we break down this claim, we have the subject "police officers," the verb "are," and the object "problem solvers." This is slightly different than "Police officers solve problems." In this case we have the subject "police officers," the verb "solve," and the object "problems." The first of these announces an identity, but the second describes a task. Both identify a relation between the police officer and the problem in a slightly different way. But when we reflectively compare the two, one is psychologically personal to the officer and the other is objectively descriptively functional about the police officer's role. Identity versus function is the difference, but both are really "true."

When we consider the process of "becoming a cop," we find a mixture of cognitive, behavioral, and affective changes that occur through a fairly standard system of teaching, testing and practicing. We see an identity formation that begins with one's initial regard for police and step-by-step choices that constitute a journey toward that achieved status. Much of this journey is full of words and rituals that amount to completed tasks and met goals. It is even through that rookie year that we find the "police-trained" person being fashioned into a police officer through daily interactions with his or her peers, the citizens, and navigating each incident to varying degrees of acceptability. If all of these interpersonal rituals and problem solving tasks are accomplished, one actualizes the goal of becoming a police officer. There is somehow an embodiment of a police officer that occurs that goes beyond the training, the oath, and the uniform. There comes a point when one "is" a police officer and not just employed by the police department to perform law enforcement tasks.

If we think about our identities as people, we find that there are many sub-identities or "profiles" that are more or less interwoven and overlapping with one another. How well one navigates his or her world depends on the situation and how well the individual matches his or her profile(s) to the situation. For the police officer, we find that effective officers have different versions of the police officer they are. The more flexible and quicker to adapt the officer is to his or her present conditions are vital influences to the way events unfold. Posture, gesture and words are synthesized to create the messages we send, but more importantly, they are the way we experience others. Some situations warrant command presence while others require an empathetic approach. As problem solvers, our approach needs to match the problem with which we are presented, but our defining of the problem is co-requisite to our actions. In other words, we come to understand a situation often times as we live-it-out in the moment which means we co-constitute the problem into its definition. Seattle police sergeant and philosopher, Jonathan Wender (2008), calls this process in policing "problematizing," which is to say we are problem solvers that seek to solve problems. That sets the foundations for our part in defining dysfunctional situations as "problems." Further, if the problem is not a clear cut issue, we tend to mentally approximate it or simplify it into an acceptable pre-defined problem. We place the situation into a category of problems in which it best fits in order to apply the prescribed solutions we have at our disposal.

Psychologically, we become problem focused meaning, we understand our world in terms of "normal" as a "lack of a problem." Sometimes, the removal of or solving of a problem is regarded as the aspiration. Such perspectives begin to bleed into our personal lives and the non-operational aspects of our professional roles. Because the cultural milieu is that of "problem solver" as normal, these dynamics can be a real blind-spot in the way we understand situations and even the way we are motivated. It becomes nearly like an instinct to notice

things that are out of place. The “red flag syndrome” is the development of our most primal self-preservation qualities that helps us stay out of trouble. Police officers become hypervigilant because it is functional for two main reasons. First, it is the mode on which crime detection relies, but more importantly, it is the way we detect unfolding threats to our lives. The “problem” is that whether the situation is a threat to our lives or simply our sense of “who” we are, the same physiological mechanisms are active in this which influences our mood, emotions and cognitions. Yes, our attention becomes more geared toward threat-searching mode and our thoughts become more characteristically defensive and reactive. When in a lethal encounter, our minds orient toward those aspects of our experience that are meaningful to understanding and responding to the threat; our survival, in other words (Broomé, 2011).

Day after day, working as a problem solving police officer can shape one as a “problematizer.” Life simply involves always having problems with which to deal. Even in police departments, like any other human organization, if there were no problems there would be no need for management or administration. So even leaders in our agencies that might day dream about a time when the department would run like a Swiss watch, it is an impossible dream and one that would essentially put them out of work. Police officers too, would have no work if there were no problems in the world, right? Too much problem focus can turn into pessimism and depression over time. Too many unfulfilled expectations, unwelcome “surprises,” and the endless battle against wrong-doing can turn cops so negative that it pollutes their whole world.

The solution is to become solution-focused rather than problem-focused (Selk, 2008). This isn't to say that one should take a stab at being a “mind-over-matter” positive thinker. In fact, a problem with trying to implement rote positive thinking is that when inevitable suffering or tragedy strikes, the person's positivity psychophysiological falls like a house of cards. We don't like people to lie to us, so why would we deceive ourselves? Accurately understanding our situation and responding in a relentless pursuit for a solution overcomes the self-deception of simply looking for a silver lining in every cloud. Sometimes life sucks. But solution-focused people are empowered by understanding how much control or influence they have

over conditions and therefore what they can do about them.

It is important to self-assess your own orientation by reflecting about your interactions with others. Would your loved-ones and closest friends say you are a pessimist or tend to see fault in things and people? This is called “negative perfectionism” which begins by being driven to be excellent, but over time becomes defeatist. Be honest with yourself and those closest to you. If you are a negative perfectionist, pessimist, and fault finder, you are problem oriented.

Situational awareness applies to home life, office life and other areas as much as it does to street encounters. The difference is that the street has a potential for time constrained life-threatening consequences. The other areas may have issues that are urgent, important, or both. But typically, none of these other domains rise to actual “emergencies” unless they warrant a call to 9-1-1. Another trap for cops is the opposite of over-reacting and that is underreacting or not appreciating how the civilians in our lives “see” emergencies when we interpret them as non-crises. The point is, the officer must assess what is going on and where is it potentially going and how quickly in the physical world while also paying attention to how different aspects of situations are merely symbolic. Many wars are fought over land and resources (physical) but justified by ideology (religious or otherwise.) The questions are, what do you have to do, who says so, and what are the benefits? If the problem cannot be solved, can the situation be satisfactorily dissolved or defused until it can be solved another time? Even withholding action to wait for a better time or more information is a tactical decision.

How often do we find ourselves resisting change, avoiding action, or emotionally blowing up over “the principle of it?” We must pause and reflect. Is this a moral/ethical principle, safety principle, professional principle, or merely a pet-peeve? How often do we find ourselves fighting battles we really cannot win instead of looking for smarter solutions and pathways to excellence and growth?

Returning back to the first issue, we need to stop looking at “normal” as a problemless condition and really seek excellence in our health, wellness, relationships, careers, and lives in general. You are not necessarily well simply because you are pain free, lack a seasonal cold/flu, or are

not taking medications. Wellness is an approach to life that is forward trajectory while being powerful in-the-now. Live your life in a way that is healthful and growth producing in all aspects. Solve the problems that you have to solve, but don't incessantly look for new ones. Plenty of problems come your way all on their own. You can start regarding your taking quiet time, learning, exercise, eating well, prayer, cultivating relationships, and so forth as improving your life rather than doing preventative maintenance against problems. Also, focus your attention on the victories both great and small. Acknowledge yourself and others for every little thing done well and you will find compliments flowing like a river. This also begets compliments and acknowledgements from others. Law enforcement can be a very thankless job. However, you can influence and shape your own world into a more positive place with being more focused on what is going right and what can be grown than the things that need to be "fixed."

Just think! It feels much better when we get a new or improved thing than when we have to send out and pay for the old one's repair. So is life. Seek solutions, growth, and positive attitudes and actions toward the world and you will always win. It is about the process and not the outcomes that will lead to a stronger more resilient you.

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