The trust coach Vo. 4: The fatal cost of failed trust: Rebuilding trust in the police

The month of July 2016 saw a remarkable heightening of tensions between the police and black communities in the United States. The media has reported multiple police-related deaths of black men in highly public and questionable circumstances. These events continued an apparent trend of disturbing police actions with black casualties. The deaths triggered a series of protests and reprisal shootings targeting police officers, several officers were killed or wounded during these attacks. There have been a number of incidents in the months following this involving more unnecessary deaths, numerous protests, and heightened tensions.

To say that many of the police forces in North America face a significant lack of trust from those they serve is a profound understatement. This lack of trust in turn has led to additional unnecessary deaths and violence for police and citizens alike and there are now calls from many quarters to fix a problem that has evolved over decades. While there seems to be a general consensus that something needs to be done, there appears to be few concrete solutions. In this issue of *the trust coach* I will attempt to clarify the trust issues at work in these situations using the model I've developed and propose some possible solutions. The hope is that someone in a position to actually implement some of the suggested changes eventually reads this and uses it as a blueprint to start resolving this terrible problem.

A review of trust dynamics

Trust is the willingness to make yourself vulnerable to another. This definition includes elements of uncertainty and vulnerability. I believe that people ask themselves two fundamental questions when they decide whether they will trust someone or not. How likely am I to be harmed (perceived uncertainty), and if I'm harmed how badly will it hurt (perceived vulnerability). This combination of uncertainty and vulnerability give us a level of perceived risk in any situation. If our perception of the risk is *lower* than the threshold we are comfortable with then we trust. If the perceived risk is *higher* than our tolerance allows, then we don't trust.

There is an interaction between uncertainty and vulnerability which means that if uncertainty is high then perceptions of vulnerability need to be low for us to feel comfortable. In deeper relationships, where we are fairly certain about how the other person will act (low uncertainty), we can tolerate significantly higher levels of vulnerability. This means that to build trust in a given situation, we need to understand where uncertainty and vulnerability are coming from and then take steps to reduce them.

When diagnosing the policing crisis described above, we could generate a long list of sources for uncertainty and vulnerability along with proposals to reduce them, but there isn't space for that in this newsletter. Instead I'll offer some examples and how they might be addressed, while acknowledging that this is a discussion starter rather than a complete solution.

The citizens' perspective

A lack of trust in the police on the part of citizens is understandable given that there are consistently high levels of perceived vulnerability and uncertainty. There is a long history of unease between minorities and law enforcement in the US and it seems to be getting worse. Unfortunately an inability to trust the police and the justice system can paralyze a community and even a society.

Vulnerability on the part of citizens

Citizens are extremely vulnerable to the police. They have the power, authority, and capacity to impose significant consequences when they deem it necessary. They also have significant discretion about when and how they use the authority they have. Society grants the police this authority and autonomy so that they can serve and protect us from those who would do us harm. These high levels of vulnerability to the police mean that we can only tolerate relatively small levels of uncertainty and still feel comfortable.

Uncertainty on the part of citizens

There are several sources of uncertainty when it comes to police in North America. Much of this will focus on the United States but also applies to Canada. Understanding some of the sources of uncertainty should prepare us to propose some suggestions for reducing it.

- Low salaries mean that police departments can`t be as selective as they would like. They are forced to accept applicants from a much broader range of skillsets and attributes. The increase in coverage of mistakes and inappropriate actions means that all officers are likely to be judged by the actions of those with the least experience or ability.

- Police officers are human beings and prone to be as flawed, biased and imperfect as the rest of us. The police tend to be judged as a collective - when there are officers whose behaviors reflect inappropriate beliefs or stories, it impacts the perceptions of the entire police force.

- There is a long held and heightened sense – especially among certain minorities -- that the law doesn't apply equally to all. There is a perception that minorities and the poor are subjected to greater scrutiny and disproportionately punished by the current legal system.

- There are regional differences in the make-up and training of police forces that increase uncertainty. A policeman in Texas is likely very different from a policeman in Washington State. Different populations to draw from, different attitudes, different training and selection criteria. These differences are to be expected but can still provoke some level of uncertainty.

- There are a remarkable number of different agencies (e.g., local, regional, national, and various specialized agencies) all tasked with law enforcement in the US. .It can often be unclear who is responsible for what. Each of these agencies have different mandates and different recruitment and training techniques along with different corporate cultures.

The police perspective

The police need the trust of the general public if they are to be effective in maintaining law and order. Low levels of trust in the police can lead to citizens refusing to offer information or aid, assisting and harbouring those that break the law, and attacks on law enforcement officials.

When the police are faced with situations where their trust is low they may feel threatened and respond with more force than is warranted. We've seen a number of incidents recently were people have been caught on video telling the police they aren't armed or a threat. The failure of trust in these moments have led to a number of shootings.

Vulnerability on the part of the police

Police officers are often placed in harms way during the course of their duties but that is not the only way they are vulnerable. Officers also face the prospect of causing harm to others, whether it's those they are sworn to protect or their friends and colleagues on the force. Mistakes made by officers can lead to significant punishment which can include public outrage, losing their jobs, or even jail. Recent events – with attacks on police, a number of officers being killed and calls in some quarters for further acts of retribution – have likely significantly increased perceptions of vulnerability among the police.

Uncertainty on the part of the police

Police officers are often confronted with chaotic situations where they need to make split second decisions. The stress of these situations is compounded when the police arrive fresh on a scene with little knowledge of what led to the situation and little or no knowledge of the people involved. In these situations officers are forced to read the situation and respond.

As a result, the police are constantly confronted with situations that are extremely uncertain. They interact with an incredible range of individuals that they know little or nothing about including the mental state or circumstances surrounding the people with whom they interact. There are often relationships involved that the police aren't aware of when dealing with others. The police often don't know

So what do we do?

In a country of over 300 million people, with many of them armed, it is inevitable that wrongful deaths will occur. We are unlikely to eliminate all wrongful deaths on both sides of this issue any time soon. We can, however, take constructive steps to increase trust levels, reduce the number of fatal shootings, and change the narrative for all parties when incidents do happen.

We need to find ways to reduce perceptions of uncertainty and vulnerability for both the police and the general public.

Approaches to reducing perceived uncertainty for citizens

- Increased interaction with police officers in more neutral settings. Open houses, community events aimed at making people more familiar with police officers.
- More officers living in the communities they police.
- Increased pay and benefits for law enforcement so that the various levels of police can attract more applicants and be more selective about who they hire.

- Increases in and standardization of training efforts across North America. A more standardized set of responses would reduce uncertainty.
- Standardization of recruitment techniques and standards so that different jurisdictions had similar personnel.
- Significant increases in transparency for law enforcement. This should include keeping and posting statistics for stops, arrests, sentencing and incidents along with demographic information like race, gender, religion, and socio economic status.

Approaches to reducing perceived vulnerability for citizens

- Increased research and use of non-lethal approaches to dealing with potentially dangerous subjects.
- Increased funding for legal aid (so there is a greater chance for adequate defense for those arrested)
- Clearly communicated laws so that everyone knows exactly what the rules are along with defined consequences for violations of those laws. This would hopefully lessen the perception that we don't all receive the same treatment from the legal system.

Reducing uncertainty for the police

- Having more social interaction with the community in settings that aren't high risk so they can get to know the community.
- More officers living in the communities they police
- Civilian liaisons who can inform officers about the community and those that live there.
- Community information sessions that inform citizens of the best ways to approach the police or respond to police requests.

Reducing vulnerability for the police

- Improved body armour and equipment
- Ongoing and increased research into non-lethal restraints.
- Increased use of drones and robotics to move police out of the direct line of fire.

Conclusion

The intent of this newsletter was to provide a structured framework and a systematic approach to a very complex problem. I have provided what I believe is a starting point for rebuilding trust between the police and the communities they serve. Clearly this is not a complete solution but merely the start of a conversation aimed at making things better. Perhaps an objective third party or group can be found that is acceptable to both sides in this dispute to help move things forward.

Those who read my second newsletter will recognize that this is a rational actor perspective and that emotional states haven't been accounted for. There are powerful negative stories and strong emotions on both sides. A concerted effort will need to be made to help change the narrative held by everyone and to address these profoundly negative feelings. The responsibility for changing this narrative does not reside solely with the police. Community leaders and those with a voice that can be heard need to

take up the challenge of improving the perception and stories we hold. One of the key take aways from this newsletter should be that building trust is all of our responsibilities in this case.

It has taken a long time for things to get as bad as they are. It will take time for them to get better. During that time there will be more incidents that provoke anger and suspicion. As a society we need to learn how to respond in a way that doesn't continue to make the problem worse.

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