POLICE COMMUNITY RELATIONS - A MEDIATOR'S PERSPECTIVE

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Efforts by President F. W. de Klerk to curb the use of excessive force by police, bring to mind the difficulties faced by public officials in the United States of America who coped with similar issues during the civil rights protests of the 1960's and 1970's.

Police-Community Tensions

"Police brutality," as it was called in the USA, was - - and to some extent still is - -a central issue in virtually every community where black citizens campaigned for improved civil rights. The issue was broader than the police response to protest marches and rallies. It encompassed (1) verbal and physical harassment of black individuals on the streets and in their cars, (2) unnecessary use of deadly force to apprehend suspects, (3) beating of suspects after arrest, on the street, in the police station or in jail (4) failure to provide medical treatment to prisoners injured during the course of arrest or detention and (5) circumstances surrounding deaths of inmates in jail.

Related issues which exacerbated police-community tensions in black neighborhoods included allegations of discourteous behavior of police toward citizens, slow response time by police answering complaints, mistreatment of prisoners, failure to investigate or respond to citizen complaints of police abuse, and failure to hire and provide equal advancement opportunities to people of all races.

Trust levels between police and citizens were so low in some places that whenever a weapon was used to apprehend black criminal suspects or whenever a suspect was injured during arrest or died in jail, there was a widespread perception of police misconduct in the black community and often among white citizens. Police stood accused even before the facts of the incident surfaced.

Problems of police misconduct were most serious at the

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local level. Every municipality in the USA has its own police
department which is typically controlled by an elected mayor.
During the period of civil rights protests, mayors often prom-
ised to deal firmly with the excessive use of deadly force and
other complaints against police, but they soon learned that it
was difficult to translate their promises into action. It was
not enough to make strong public statements condemning police
misbehavior and ordering the police chief to straighten out
the problem. Even police chiefs found it difficult to change
police behaviors which had heretofore gone unchallenged by the
system.

At the time, police departments had few if any blacks and
they were seldom found in command positions. This was true in
cities with large black populations as well as those with
nominal ones.

Racial bigotry was clearly a major cause of police mis-
conduct, but the reasons ran deeper. Racism, which is so
prevalent among people of all colors in the USA as elsewhere,
is not always rooted in bigotry. It can be based on ignorance
and its flames are easily fanned by fear.

The reality of life for the black population in the USA,
the propensity of people to stereotype other groups of people,
and the nature of police work and the people attracted to it
all contributed to police-community tensions in the 1960's and
1970's. The mass of the black population was under-employed,
under-educated and lived in segregated ghettos characterized
by poor housing, overcrowding, lack of public services and
high crimes rates.

White police assigned to black neighborhoods saw the
ugliest and most violent side of ghetto life and little more.
They typically lacked understanding or interest in black cul-
ture and were unaware of the reasons for underachievement of
ghetto residents. They were inclined to attribute high crime
rates to blackness, rather than to unemployment, squalor and
lack of opportunity. Resentment in the black community to the
way police responded there, further exacerbated tensions.

To compound the problem, many police in the USA resented
being assigned indefinitely to high-crime neighborhoods. They
could not obtain transfers and saw no escape from their daily
confrontations with the life-threatening violence of ghetto
life. And no matter how hard they worked or how well they
performed, the situation did not improve. Social agencies,
courts and jails provided no significant help. These officers
felt abandoned and angry. Their own police department offered
little if any understanding or support for their predicament.
These may be contributory factors to the high rate of alcohol-
ism among police officers in the USA.

Thus, police responded to calls in black neighborhoods
with apprehension, fear, at times with bigotry, and often with
an inner rage and sense of mission which they felt gave them
license to enforce, judge and mete out punishment. One result

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was the excessive use of deadly force, a more common one was
the general disregard for individual rights which carried over
to police confrontations with black citizens in other parts of
the city.

Strategies for Response

Although not many mayors or police chiefs tried to deal
with the problem of police misconduct in all of its dimen-
sions, these public officials knew that they had to make some
radical changes in a relatively short time. They developed
two distinct strategies to accomplish this. First they de-
manded accountability from within the system through a combi-
nation of (1) strong leadership at the top, (2) promulgation
of new policies and procedures, (3) improved management con-
trols within the police department, (4) better supervision
down to the sergeants on the street (5) training which was
responsive to the problems being addressed and (6) monitoring
of police behavior and community reactions. The second
strategy involved consultation and negotiation with a cross-
section of community leaders to ease tensions, improve trust
levels and give credibility to the changes being made.

Police Fire Arms Policies

At the heart of the police brutality issue was an unam-
biguous policy on the use of deadly force, often called a fire
arms policy. A model policy might include an introductory
statement attesting to the high value placed on human life and
stating that police would use the minimum force necessary when
apprehending suspects. The policy would then prescribe:

(1) the factors an officer should take into account be-
fore using deadly force. These would include such things as
the seriousness of the crime, the apparent age of the suspect,
the likelihood that the suspect was involved in the crime,
whether the suspect was believed to be armed, whether the
suspect was likely to be a danger to the public, whether the
use of force presented a danger to bystanders, whether it was
likely the fleeing suspect could be apprehended later, etc.;

(2) the weapons an officer was permitted and required to
carry while on duty and other weaponry which was to be stored
in the police vehicle;

(3) the ammunition the officer was authorized to carry;

(4) when it was appropriate to draw a fire arm from
a holster;

(5) when it was appropriate for an officer to fire a
weapon;

(6) any report an officer was required to file following
the firing of a fire arm;

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(7) mandatory psychological counseling for police offi-
cers who fatally shot a person in the course of duty. In some
cases, police would be relieved of all responsibilities for
several days after a shooting in recognition of the traumatic
impact of the incident on the officer.

(8) the "investigation" or review of the firing incident
which would be conducted by a commanding officer following the
shooting incident, and the time in which the commander had to
complete the investigation and forward the report to the Po-
lice Chief.

(9) the disciplinary procedures which would be used in
the event of an alleged violation of the policy.

Training was a critical component in the effective imple-
mentation of a fire arms policy. Not only was it necessary to
have evidence that all officers received copies of and were
properly briefed about the policy, but training was also
specified in the handling and use of weapons. In addition,
officers received training - - usually through live simula-
tions - - in responding to a variety of potentially life-
threatening and other situations. This was intended to sharp-
en the officer's judgment in making the split-second decisions
often required when deciding whether to draw and fire a weap-
on.

After promulgating the policy and providing training
through a central training academy, commanders were held
accountable for monitoring and evaluating police behavior and
taking any steps necessary to assure its effective implementa-
tion.

Police officers on the street could be expected to resent
restrictive fire arms policies which they perceived as yield-
ing to community pressures and limiting their ability to pro-
tect themselves and the public. It often created morale prob-
lems. In some cities, the promulgation of a new policy would
result in a temporary slowdown in arrests or other police
actions. But these protests had little public support and
were short lived.

Police-Community Relations

Civil rights protests which resulted in injuries and
extensive property damage in the USA were virtually always
precipitated by incidents in which police killed or seriously
injured one or more black citizens. After order was restored,
coalitions of civil rights, civic and church groups often
mounted major peaceful protests with demands for change.
Excessive use of police force was usually only one of many
complaints about police on the protesters' agenda.

The protests frequently resulted in community leaders
coming around a table with elected city officials, the public
safety director, the police chief and sometimes other civic
leaders. At times they were brought together through the

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efforts of a mediator or conciliator from a government or
private agency; other times the mayor would convene the meet-
ing in response to the protesters. These meetings enabled
protest leaders to air their concerns directly to those with
the power to make changes; not infrequently these sessions
turned into negotiation sessions or mediations. At other
times the mayor agreed to appoint a commission with represen-
tation from the entire community to explore concerns and rec-
ommend remedies.

        Each city decided how to work out its own problems, but
some of the more effective remedies for reducing police-commu-
nity tensions negotiated by police, black protesters and other
community leaders in US cities included:

        * Human relations training for all police officers con-
ducted, in part, by residents of the black community. The
purpose of the training was to better familiarize police with
other cultures and to improve their interpersonal skills.
Involvement of black leaders provided a forum for police and
concerned citizens to share their perceptions of each others'
behaviors and their feelings in a controlled environment. It
tended to humanize the conflict.

        * Recommending changes in the police fire arms policy.
Police were responsible for promulgating the policy, alone or
in conjunction (under pressure from) with the mayor's office.
But when community leaders were consulted and provided an
opportunity to negotiate changes in the proposed policy, the
process had far greater credibility in the black community.

        * Revising policies and procedures for the handling of
citizen complaints so that (1) all complaints were reviewed
and, when appropriate, internally investigated in a timely
manner; (2) complainants were informed of the result of the
investigation or the reasons for not conducting one; (3) com-
plainants had some recourse if they were dissatisfied with
police handling of the matter, usually an appeal to a more .
impartial body which was created for this purpose and had
investigatory powers. Civilian oversight of police complaints
was at times a part of the process, but this was met with
strong police opposition.

        * Permitting citizen observers to ride in the back of
police cars on routine patrol;

        * Enlisting black churches and other community organiza-
tions to assist in the recruitment of candidates for the po-
lice department from within the black community.

        * Scheduling routine monthly meetings between black com-
munity leaders and police commanders to discuss their mutual
interests and concerns.

        * Setting up a telephone hot line between one or two key
community leaders and the police chief so that immediate com-

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rmits for Demonstration

Communication between city officials and community groups
anning protest marches was a sensitive issue in the USA at
mes of high tensions and low trust levels. But most cities
entually worked out procedures which satisfied both police
d protest groups.

Police justified their demand for permits by pointing out
eir need to make advance preparations for traffic controls
ar the route of march and security. They also wanted to be
rtain that the march was not conflicting with other sched-
ed demonstrations or public events along the same route.

Once protest leaders were convinced that police had a
na fide need for the information they were seeking and would
t deny permits for lawful demonstrations without good reason
- and the reasons for possible denial were specified in
lvance - - they did not object to applying for a permit.

Procedures were also established for protest leaders to
signate easily identifiable marshals to help keep protest
rches orderly. Police were instructed by their commanders
forehand that if there was a need to interact with protest-
s, it should be done, when possible, through a Marshall who
ght be able to (1) resolve the problem without the need for
police intervention or, when appropriate, (2) work with
lice to deal with the problem in a way that did not arouse a
der reaction than necessary. A ranking police liaison offi-
r might be assigned to accompany the chief Marshall during
e march so that if trouble was reported they could both
spond to help avert unnecessary crises.

While many US cities effectively dealt with tensions
tween police and the black community, none has fully re-
lved the problem. Even in cities with black mayors and
ack police chiefs, police brutality remains an issue. But
e problems in cities that have confronted the matter head on
d demanded police accountability, are dwarfed by problems in
ties which have not been willing to confront the issue.