The Police Tribe

A police officer said to me, "Ninety-eight percent of the people in the world are sorry S.O.B.'s and the two percent that are good are cops." He didn't include anyone above the rank of sergeant in the two percent and only about half of them were included. An extreme statement? Yes! A unique attitude? No! That officer succinctly stated a common conclusion of a prevalent value system in police–the tribal value system.

Ethics in law enforcement has become a popular topic in police literature and courses, and I am glad. Ethical behavior by police is important–more, it is crucial. But I am concerned about the approach taken in the articles I have read and the seminars I have attended. The approach has followed a legal model. Authorities make pronouncements about how officers "shall" or "will" behave and what they "shall not" or "will not" do. The language is in the imperative voice with an expectation that officers will follow these ethical imperatives because they have been officially stated. The motivation for following is similar to obeying the law.

Laws must be obeyed and ethical principles should be heeded, but the two are not the same. The legal model assumes that there is only one system of values, the authority based system, and that assumption is false. Notice the change in wording from "ethics" to "values". The two are not the same, but they can't be separated. People's ethics reflect their values.

There are several value systems by which people decide right and wrong, and the authority value system is only one means by which people build ethics. Each system exists in all people at varying degrees in different circumstances and times in their lives. For example, one system may predominate at home and another at work. Likewise, the values most affecting a rookie are not the same as the predominant values in an officer of ten years.

The concept of values emphasizes a living process through which people come to their ethical conclusions. The things important to people change throughout their lives, and as a result, their ethical understandings change. The legal model of ethics assumes a static authority value system in all officers in all phases of their careers and is weak because officers do in fact change. Authoritative pronouncements will not and cannot determine the ethical standards and behavior of officers. If the current dialogue in ethics is going to have any real effect, we must deal with the realities of police–who they are and where they live.

I want to focus on the tribal value system–the one that allows an officer to believe that almost all people are bad, as expressed in the first sentence. This system dominates in almost all officers at some point in their careers. Keep in mind that very few people are aware of different value systems in them vying for dominance. They are just aware of struggling with right and wrong without being able to articulate the process going on in them.

Tribal Values

New officers come into law enforcement with different backgrounds and value systems. Since the nature of police work is enforcing laws, it is safe to assume that the authority system is strong in them. However, they soon feel the power of the tribal value system. Phrases such as "the police family", "the police brotherhood", and "the blue code of silence" reflect the tribal system.

Briefly, there are three universal characteristics of tribal values. First, tribal values focus on an identifiable group. Membership in the group provides emotional support and security. Second, members are expected to observe a certain way of life in which they find emotional identity. Third, the tribe needs an enemy. An enemy provides strong motivation, with emotions going deeply to the level of survival, that keep the tribe in existence. Lets look closer at how these characteristics fit police.

Identifiable Group

Obviously, police officers are an identifiable group. Go into any crowd and you can pick out the police officers–they are the ones wearing uniforms, badges and guns. Even out of uniform, many people can spot officers by their demeanor. Officers identify with their work more like a calling than a job. Ask a woman where she works, and she might reply, "I work for Sears." Ask an officer where she works, and she will reply, "I am a police officer." Officers identify strongly with an identifiable group, and people tend to treat and to react to officers differently.

Way of Life

An identifiable group has identifiable behavior, and new officers soon realize how strong beliefs are about the way an officer should behave. If an officer doesn't fit the mold, he will be pressured to conform and even ostracized if he doesn't. I remember an incident when I was a patrol officer with several years of experience. I was on the day shift. I wrote one ticket a day on the average more than the other officers in my district. A couple of senior officers called me to meet them in the field and firmly explained to me why I should write the same number of tickets as the rest. The emotional pressure to conform is strong because officers

find emotional identity and security in being officers. This emotional identity is another reason why an officer says, "I am a police officer."

I once counseled a deputy sheriff from a large jail who had recently completed his rookie status. One thing that came up several times was the conflict in him as he saw fellow deputies treat prisoners in ways that he initially thought was illegal and wrong. He was struggling with accepting these actions that were contrary to his understanding of the law and his beliefs about right and wrong. His ethics were based on an authority value system when he entered law enforcement. But now he was seeing that deputies live in hard circumstances that don't seem so black and white. He was dealing with a conflict between his ethics and the need to protect the brotherhood of deputies. There was a code of silence among the deputies about what was acceptable behavior even though it did not fit the rules and regulations.

He was confronting the tribal value system, also called the emotional value system, and was experiencing strong emotions as his ethics changed to fit the tribal system so that he could belong to his tribe, deputies. He disclosed many internal conflicts–some of which had been resolved satisfactorily and all which were emotionally charged.

His emotions became much stronger as he began to talk about what he would do if a deputy were to bring drugs to inmates, "I would get him immediately. The inmates would be in danger." Then his entire countenance became more intense and his emotions became the strongest that I saw. His face contorted with fervence as he said, "A guy like that would do anything. Deputies would be in danger. A deputy could get killed." He told me that his brother deputies felt the same way.

Tribal values were dominating. When he began to talk about such despicable behavior by a deputy, he was upset and expressed concern about the safety of his wards. But the real basis of his anger was expressed when he described the danger to deputies. Such a deputy endangered the tribe–the most important entity in tribal values. All deputies felt the same. This strong attitude was a tribal value with strong emotions.

Enemy

Every tribe must have a common enemy to provide strong motivation to live and work in concert. Members form an "us versus them" attitude. They feel that their very survival is at stake–strong motivation indeed. This fear in each member is a strong reason why members submit to behavior demands of the tribe and change their ethics to allow them to stay in the tribe.

Without question, police officers have an "us versus them" attitude. Most people just assume that criminals are the enemy, but sadly, criminals are not the only enemy. Police administrators, city administrators, the media and the general pub-

lic are enemies for many officers even more than criminals. Officers see more threat from these sources daily than they do criminals. In addition administrators, media and citizens discourage officers from viewing criminals as enemies. After all, they are citizens fully protected by the Constitution and the laws of the land. Officers should treat these errant people as fellow citizens–even friends–who have just made a mistake.

Don't confuse issues. The issue is not whether or not officers should have tribal values that require an enemy. The issue is that officers are indeed strongly influenced by tribal values–now what are administrators, media, citizens and even the police themselves going to do with this reality?

Administrators, Tribal Enemies

For any group to accomplish meaningful goals over time, the members must have guidelines they will follow. Administrators should make policies that police will follow allowing their efforts to be coordinated with other community efforts and resulting in a more effective war against crime. Administrators who provide policies and standards by fiat are doomed to failure for a couple of reasons. One, administrators are the enemy. Officers question anything that comes from them. When the Soviet Union was considered the "evil empire," Americans certainly wouldn't establish defense strategies according to suggestions from Russia. As long as officers perceive administrators as enemies, they won't heed their policies. Two, any decrees contrary to tribal values will not be followed. Orders based on an abstract chain of command don't stand a chance against tribal values. Abstract logic typically loses to emotions in determining people's behavior.

In several surveys, police have consistently reported that their main stresses and problems come from their own administrations, not criminals or the justice system. People usually consider others who cause them problems to be enemies. By analogy, ranchers in America are vehement in their war against wolves. They strongly resist conservationist efforts to allow wolves to live. Do they inherently hate wolves? No! Most ranchers have canines around their home and barns who are trusted allies. The canines, the wolves, causing them problems by attacking their herds are the enemy. If wolves didn't cause them problems, then ranchers wouldn't care about them.

If administrators want to effectively lead officers, then they must stop acting like an enemy–an enemy according to officers' perceptions. Administrators need to help officers feel like they are an integral part of the larger tribe, the entire work force of public servants. Even if administrators are never accepted in the same tribe as officers, they can be friends or allies of the tribe instead of enemies.

Administrators, Tribal Allies

Obviously there are many avenues to follow in building relationships and trust in people. I want to point out a few that are particularly relevant to police.

Personal Contact

Police officers need personal contact with administrators if they are going to have confidence in policies that seem to run counter to hectic situations in the field. For example, a new policy about family violence based on solid evidence might work after being implemented faithfully over time. However, officers in the midst of flying objects and words among family members are hard pressed to see the effectiveness of a new policy that is abstract to them and doesn't seem to deal the present situation. Officers are much more likely to follow policies from someone they know and trust than policies handed down through an abstract chain of administrators whom they believe don't care about them.

Administrators need to admit that police officers are alienated from them more than other employees. Since administrators are the leaders, they need to take the initiative in building trust and confidence. As administrators meet with officers sincerely and personally, they will appreciate the resource they have in officers and will better understand the unique needs of police. They will see the faces of friends when they set policies affecting the safety of officers and the security of their families.

As officers realize that administrators do care about them, they will have more confidence in policies. It is hard for officers to consider someone an enemy who has sat down with them, talked sincerely and taken steps to protect them and their families.

Real Dialogue

Police work is unique. Not all problems and stresses in police work are unique, but having all of them in one occupation is. Officers should have a real, meaningful and strong voice in establishing all the policies they are expected to heed. Who better knows the actual interactions with citizens on a day to day basis than the officers interacting daily? Is anyone more aware of crime and criminal problems than the officers answering calls every hour? All officers should be a crucial part of the process of setting policies that affect them and their service to the community. In short, the concepts of task quality management are particularly appropriate to police.

Complete Care

Administrators and the public want officers to protect them fully, even when the safety of officers is at risk. That is their job, isn't it? Yet too often the policies of communities do not provide for the care of officers and their families–especially when officers are seriously injured or killed. The military understands how important it is to care for its members.

The military provides complete care and services for its members and families. A person in the military can do a good job and expect reasonable promotions, pay increases and retirement security to match service and seniority. But more important than proper reward for dedicated work, is total care for supreme sacrifice.

A military member knows that if he is killed while defending his country, his family will be cared for. He doesn't have to worry about these mundane matters. He can give full attention to serving and fighting for his country without being distracted. Not so for many police officers in America.

Many families live at poverty level after an officer is killed or permanently injured in the line of duty. Many officers have to live with this concern on their minds at all times. They often can't give full attention to duty because they are worrying about part-time jobs and ways to ensure the security of their families if the worst happens.

Administrators need to find out what the real world needs of a police family are when an officer is killed or permanently injured. They need to devise policies with input from officers and families that will meet real world needs. When administrators demonstrate such real concern for officers, then officers will accept them as friends–not enemies–and will be able to give full attention to serving the public.

Allow Mistakes

People cannot do any job without making mistakes. Police officers are going to make mistakes that hurt and affect peoples lives. They must be allowed leeway to make mistakes. Judgement about an officer's actions should be based on the action itself–not the consequence.

For example, a clerk can make a minor mistake and a supervisor might be embarrased when a letter goes to a superior with a typographical error. A police officer can make a similar mistake and a rapist might go free on a technicality in court proceedings. Another example, a clerk can become frustrated in the pressures of a moment and throw a pen in his hand. The result might be that a pen or some other object in the office is broken. A police officer can become scared and flustered in dangerous circumstances and swing a flashlight in his hand. The result might be that a person goes to the hospital.

Though the mistakes of the clerk and the officer are basically the same, they won't be treated the same. In the example of throwing and swinging, the worst that will happen to the clerk is that he will have to replace the broken object, whereas the worst that will happen to the officer is that he will be convicted of criminal charges and be sent to the pen. The reason for the difference is that policies and people judging officers' actions focus on consequences rather than actions.

There is no argument that the consequences of an officer's actions are usually more important than the consequences of a clerk's actions. There is also no argument that both of them are humans and will make the same mistakes. Mistakes are inevitable and officers should not be punished for being humans.

Policies need to distinguish between mistakes in the heat of the moment and premeditated wrongs. They need to work with deeds of exuberance as opposed to actions of wrong intent. Police officers must act, and often they must act without time to consider their actions and all options.

For example, if a citizen drives up on a robbery in progress, he doesn't have to do anything to stop it. In fact, it is commonly accepted that if he calls the police he has fulfilled his obligations. If an officer drives up on a robbery in progess, he must take action. He doesn't have the luxury of time or the option to do nothing. To top it off, he better not make mistakes, because he will be attacked by the media, condemned by the public and decimated by imperative policies.

All of these attacks can happen to officers when they are merely being who they are and cannot help being–imperfect humans sent to do tasks that often are impossible and sent with the foreknowledge that they can't possibly keep from making mistakes. Yet many people in administration, the media and the public would rather sacrifice officers than officially deal with the realities of police work. It seems easier to them to live behind the illusions of a legal model of ethics with its imperatives than to live in a real world. This issue of mistakes needs to be official, because officers suffer emotionally as long as it is handled unofficially.

If leaders want to positively affect the behavior of police officers, they must acknowledge the reality of the police tribe and lead accordingly. Police officers struggling to be at peace with their actions and beliefs must recognize the struggle among competing value systems within them. When all people deal with the reality of police as humans instead of the illusion of them as automatons, the war against crime and the safety of citizens will take a giant step forward.