

YOU CAN'T "MANAGE" YOUR WAY OUT OF RAMPART

Pressures from above and a drive to succeed can distort officer behavior

By Julius (Jay) Wachtel. New York City. Washington, D.C. New Orleans. Los Angeles. What do these four cities have in common? Police misconduct. Since inception of the first regularized force in the U.S., in New Amsterdam, later New York City, cycles of what criminologist Lawrence Sherman termed "scandal and reform" have plagued the police in urban America.

On each occasion, civilian and police investigating commissions conducted thorough probes. And after much chest-thumping and self-flagellation, each pointed to the same list of "usual suspects": poor hiring practices, lax supervision, ineffective internal inspection mechanisms, the absence of executive leadership, and so on.

Assistant Attorney General Bill Lee's recent ultimatum to the City follows this tradition: "Serious deficiencies in LAPD policies and procedures for training, supervising, and investigating and disciplining police officers foster and perpetuate officer misconduct." Other than for his rankling insistence on external oversight, Mr. Lee's dicta that more management is better management mirrors the conclusions of LAPD's own, exhaustive Board of Inquiry report, at present the mea culpa to beat.

Why is the needle still stuck on the same track? What has been the benefit of extending police training so that rookies now endure academies lasting six months or more? Of spending hundreds of millions to support the National Institute of Justice? Of millions spent on police executive training at the FBI Academy and elsewhere? Of the proliferation of college criminal justice curricula, where it is now possible to earn everything from an A.A. to a Ph.D.? And yes, of raising police salaries from mere subsistence to a level that allows a majority of police to enjoy the perquisites of the middle class?

Adopting ever-more stringent standards seems sensible. Sometimes we need to rearrange the deck chairs. But how far should we go? Install a Sergeant in the back seat of every patrol car? Um, no, he might get co-opted. How about a Lieutenant instead? Better yet, let's clone the Chief and...

As every parent knows, merely tightening the screws cannot, in the long haul, overcome the forces that impel misconduct. This is equally true for policing. Thirty years ago, political scientist James Q. Wilson's landmark study, "Varieties of Police

Behavior" suggested that police work is shaped by the environment. Simply put, we get the style of law enforcement that the community - or at least its politicians and more influential members - expects.

So-called "aggressive" policing could not have taken place in New York City in the absence of a demand to stem street crime. Abuses at Rampart did not start with a conspiracy between rogue officers. They began with a problem of crime and violence that beset Pico-Union. Into this web of fear and disorder we dispatched officers - members of the ineptly named CRASH - whose mission it was to reclaim the streets for the good folks.

Did we supply officers with special tools to help them accomplish their task? Of course not, since none exist. Yet our expectations remained high. Police officers gain satisfaction from success. Their work is also judged by superiors, who are more interested in numbers of arrests than in narrative expositions, the latter being difficult to pass up the chain of command and virtually impossible to use in budget fights at City Hall.

Officers who volunteer for specialized crime-fighting assignments want to do more than take reports - they want to make a difference. For some, the poisonous brew of inadequate tools and pressures to produce can have predictable consequences. Their dilemma is characterized by criminologist Carl Klockars as the "Dirty Harry" problem: given a lack of means, how to achieve good ends. Harry solved this problem by adopting bad means. Real officers on a crusade have rationalized virtually anything that promised to secure the desired outcome, including brutality and planting evidence. As their moral decay progressed, many even justified clearly self-serving behaviors such as stealing money and evidence.

What is to be done? By all means, apply whatever management remedies are available. But for a long-term solution, look to the environment of policing, and particularly to the self-induced and agency-generated pressures that can spur vulnerable practitioners to cross the line.

For example:

* Examine the mission. If it cannot be done - and done well - with the resources at hand, reconsider the approach. Emphasize conventional tactics, particularly uniformed patrol, and lobby forcefully for lasting remedies such as economic, social and educational investment.

* To reduce the pressure to breach ethical boundaries, set realistic objectives. Quantitative measures can corrode officer ethics and distort the nature of their work. Instead of just counting "numbers" employ qualitative measures of performance. It may be less convenient than checking boxes on a form, but in policing there is no satisfactory alternative.

* Don't exaggerate. Chiefs and command staffs must insure that they and their fellow decision-makers in City government are educated about policing and have realistic expectations about what the police can accomplish.

Yes, critical self-study is a good thing. But failure to attend to the forces that drive police work only promises to deliver an even thicker set of "mea culpas" the next time around.