

Ethics: Life's Performance Evaluation

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Abstract: The professionalism of an officer and his department is established through the values and principles he chooses to live and work by. The quality of the individual, the family, the dependent, and the community depends on his code of ethics. The purpose of this paper is to illustrate the importance of high ethical standards in a law enforcement officer's work and in his every day life.

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There is a Law Enforcement Code of Ethics. This document is important, not only for the guidance it offers, but also because it is a standard by which we measure our performance and our attitude. When every officer abides by the set code, law enforcement becomes a profession.

"Code," according to Webster's New World dictionary, means "a body of laws" or "any set of principles of rules of conduct."

"Ethics," according to Webster's, means "a system of moral standards or values." An individual's code of ethics, like God, is ever present. His values, his principles, his standards, and his ethics, they are all the same; they personify who he is; they identify what he is.

In law enforcement, however, these standards must (uniformly) parallel every officer in the department.

Let us begin with recruitment. In recruitment do your personnel department and your administrators know exactly what qualities they are seeking in the applicants?

Some administrators want to hire the "Rambo" type and others desire the public relation profile.

Do the tests, the interviews, and the background investigations reveal the values, the principles, and the ethics of an individual? With some exceptions, law enforcement agencies do not have the ability to attract and retain people of highest character. One reason being low compensation. A salary comparison is, rehabilitating drug users sweeping streets in Washington, D.C., earn \$10 per hour.

Law enforcement may also be an unattractive career. I will discuss this a little later.

The departments and agencies share some of the fault because we often fail to

screen the applicants carefully. In personnel selection, the experts recognize that while using all available selection techniques, it is still difficult to predict or recognize dishonesty.

We also, many times, fail to confront in training the various ethical dilemmas that may be faced by law enforcement officers. We all are aware that law enforcement provides a convenient opportunity for illegal enrichment, and I will also address this later.

The primary responsibility of any and every law enforcement officer is the protection of the people of the United States through the upholding of the law. He should certainly know and understand the limitations of his authority. Our officers represent the state and the department, but they also represent the sportspersons. We understand that no person or group of people have absolute power.

All officers have a duty to be familiar with the law. He should know and understand the principles of the laws he is sworn to uphold.

The law often is complicated so he should not hesitate in seeking aid or advice from supervisors.

Most important in dealing with police ethics are the responsibilities of the administrator. The personal ethical standards of supervisors and administrators have great influence in establishing an agency's attitude toward dishonest police behavior. If an officer suspects that administration supports or simply condones dishonesty, his own definition of what compromises proper conduct may shift to accord with his concepts of agency norms. Supervisors may create atmospheres that support corruption by showing favoritism, failing to communicate with officers and administrators, and by their procedures and attitudes in investigating complaints on the officer. An additional reason police officers will misrepresent departmental policy and procedures is, they simply do not understand them.

Department heads should establish policies and outline in detail proper and improper police practices. Procedures must be established and understood. The procedure manual should be current and updated regularly. The policies should be stressed in training, reviewed often and publicized in the department.

The enforcement officer's personal code of ethics is the bottom line. Violation of any law or disregard for public safety or property on the part of any officer is wrong. It is self-defeating in that it instills in the public mind a like disposition. An example would be speeding in a state car, or, in fact, any traffic violation. Certainly the violation of any hunting, fishing, trapping, or boating laws would rank high in creating negative public opinion. Unethical behavior or at least questionable behavior involving game wardens may include hunting and fishing on first days of season or during restocking. Also to be identified as questionable conduct is hunting in or near roads, occupied dwellings, or any location with public exposure. In his work, if he illegally searches a car or building or is lax or disrespectful for the law, it will reflect on the officer and his department. Courtroom testimony and his presentation of evidence has strong ethical implications. The employment of illegal means, no matter how worthy the end, is certain to encourage disrespect for the law and its

officers. If dishonest officers are tolerated, eventually you are going to correct their misconduct or you are going to lower yourself to their level—often it is the latter. If the law is to be honored, it must first be honored by those who enforce it.

His private conduct is also important because he has a special identification by the public. Wherever he goes, privately or officially, he is the officer. An officer, who as a private citizen seeks to gain special privilege, reflects on the individual and the agency. He should so conduct his private life so he will be regarded as an example of stability, fidelity, and morality. The public quickly loses its positive concept of man and department, when there is a departure from the truth and morality expressed where the officer is in uniform and the lack of these character traits when he is in the “day off” attire. If being “one of the boys” is more important than the oath of office and the pledge to the code of ethics, the stage is set for the determination of the officer image. That negative image will take longer to overcome than we can imagine, in fact new men coming on are often judged by the failures of officers who preceded them.

I said earlier I would discuss the unattractiveness of a law enforcement career. Consider the fact that the officer is exposed to crime, death, hurt, profanity, accusations, threats, people ignoring him, people talking about him, making fun of him, insulting him, and he remains underpaid and he works ridiculous hours. Regardless, in his conduct toward the public, he should be neither overbearing or subservient. No citizen has an obligation to stand in awe of him, nor a right to command him.

The officer’s conduct in arresting and dealing with law violators is significant. He must use his powers strictly in accordance with the law, and he should never prosecute the violator or hand out punishment. On the other hand he must enforce victimless crimes, some of which some people do not want enforced. A considerable number of the most serious and persistent kinds of unethical conduct are connected with failure to enforce laws simply because an element of the community does not want them enforced. Illustrations are gambling, prostitution, liquor, and traffic. For game wardens, enforcing crow season is an example, or charging a farmer who shoots a deer on his property out of season. Many times I have heard someone comment that they didn’t like a particular game warden, but they would add that they would give him credit for being fair. Turning your head to avoid facing these laws may make the warden liked by some people; but what is of greatest value, being liked or being fair?

And we must talk about theft. Stealing, and there is no other name for it, most certainly should be discussed because every group of law enforcement officers has frequent opportunities to enrich themselves by taking money and/or other materials. Since drugs have become so prevalent, many officers have been exposed to circumstances with huge sums of money, often illegal and in unknown amounts are in their presence. Drug catches valued in the millions of dollars are not uncommon. Businesses, buildings, and camps found open in the middle of the night by officers often present temptations. Merchants inviting the officer to take fishing or camping equipment, guns, and other expensive merchandise because it is covered by insurance

is not uncommon. Agency and department supplies and equipment will tempt some law enforcement officers. Money collected for one reason or another should be handled according to policy at all times.

My final discussion is on gifts and favors. The officer should guard against placing himself in a position in which any person can expect special considerations. More important, he should in those instances in which the public can reasonably assume that special consideration is being given. Examples are:

- Free coffee
- Half-price meals
- Liquor
- Hunting and fishing rights on private property
- Discounts (state-private)

What is the difference between gifts and favors and bribery and dishonesty? Anything received by a law enforcement officer other than your paycheck is a gift, or favor, which could be dishonest or considered a bribe.

Practices that seem relatively harmless may establish an atmosphere where it becomes impossible to resist something more serious. Someone may come to you with the details of a serious violation which results in arrest and conviction. Would you be led later to show the informer special consideration?

In closing, let us mention attitudes toward the profession. Every officer should appreciate the responsibilities and importance of his office and he should hold police work as an honorable profession rendering valuable service to his department, community, state, and country. And, we must remember it is unrealistic to expect absolute integrity as long as we are dealing with a human being. However, that does not mean that we should not reach for it. Each officer must feel pride in his work. The agency should feel pride in its officers.