

Perspectives on public safety



Five dimensions for better policing

“In any enterprise requiring the collaboration of intelligent people – and that means just about any enterprise worth doing – the ‘underlying cause’, or motivating principle, should never remain a guarded secret or a vaguely articulated cliché.”

– Alan Axelrod, “Eisenhower on Leadership”

As a chief of police, I strive to bring clarity to my jurisdiction’s law enforcement mission. I don’t want our ideology to be a vaguely articulated cliché. In my experience, many police departments fall victim to expressing their organizing principles and mission scope as vaguely articulated clichés. In those jurisdictions, the result is often what political scientist Steven Teles terms the “kludgeocracy.” These are:

“...systems in which every solution is basically an inelegant patch put in place to solve an unexpected problem and designed to be backward compatible with the rest of the system. This creates a very complicated program that has no clear organizing principles, is exceedingly difficult to understand, and is subject to crashes.”

I can’t think of a better description than “kludgeocracy” for the organizational ills afflicting many contemporary law enforcement enterprises. Of course, most people outside law enforcement likely consider our task straightforward: make arrests and write tickets. However, the task is only simple if the goals stop at the end of the of the police cruiser’s hood. The reality is that our profession’s goals can be far more comprehensive. As an example, consider this draft mission statement for my department:

“The Marion Police Department delivers core law enforcement services, in a relational tone, and with a professional character consistent with the expectations of our community.”



We are a genuine and legitimate contributor to the safety and security of our citizens, and thereby a vital part of our shared and flourishing society.”

Note that I don’t want us to do everything. Rather, I want us to perform our department’s core tasks relationally and professionally. I want us to be genuine contributors to the safety of our citizens. I want Marion to flourish because of the department and the community’s shared efforts.

Here are the five dimensions for better policing, I believe will bring this vision into reality:

1. The essence of policing should remain an analog endeavor.
2. Wisdom makes for better policing than worldview.
3. Irenic policing genuinely contributes to a flourishing society.
4. Core competency is the root of professionalism.
5. Legitimate policing is whole community shaped.

Ultimately, I want our citizens to have the confidence to know that the police department is not only doing what the Code of Virginia requires, but so much more – internally and externally.

1. Analog endeavors

To understand what I mean by “analog endeavors” it’s helpful to paraphrase author Neil Postman who observes that in our technology driven society we are surrounded by throngs of zealots who only see what new technology can do and are incapable of imagining what it can undo. This is what concerns me as well – all the things technology makes impossible.

Don’t mistake my concerns about technology as a Luddite desire to tear it all down! The amazing benefits we all reap from medical technology are a prime example of how it can make our lives better. Rather, my concern is that technology not be back fed into the essence of policing. At its core, policing is a relational endeavor which demands making connections in the real world. Or, to put it in the language of audiophiles – it is analog, not digital. As such, I am immediately critical of processes which introduce barriers to real world relationship. So, when I am confronted by a proposed process, I ask a simple question: Does this (action, technology, or equipment) discourage the building of relationships on the ground? If it does, we should avoid it.

I’ll admit, these days the task becomes increasingly difficult as technology is not merely integrated into our culture, it literally BECOMES our culture. The ubiquity of it, however, doesn’t change basic truths. Twitter, for example, is not a real place. What is real is the anguish and pain experienced by people who call the police for help. Also real is the hope and relief first responders can bring. We don’t

always bring succor perfectly, and at times not even admirably, but I maintain that hope and relief would never be found by interacting with a digital law enforcement kiosk.

I realize that my commitment to the “analog” approach is likely only feasible in smaller jurisdictions. This is fine with me; I work and live in a small town. I’m not concerned with going viral. I’m concerned with my neighbors, all 6,000 of them. So long as I’m the chief of police in my community, I won’t waiver in my commitment to actualizing their experience with our department through people hand-selected for the task. I have yet to hire someone for their demonstrated technical prowess. Rather, I hire individuals for one quality – character driven, relational, humanity.

2. Wisdom over worldview

This dimension is perhaps best summarized by the axiom to “Never confuse the map, with the terrain.” A good map, even one drawn to scale, can never convey the nuances of interaction between the traveler and terra firma. The elevation may be calculable, but not felt. The undergrowth indicated, but not experienced.

Worldview thinking is like understanding the world as though it were a map instead of a place. This way of thinking is resistant to learning, self-contained, and in many instances just plain lazy. It’s a quick and easy way to appear as if you understand your neighbor, without actually having to do any of the work of getting to know them. Worldview thinking is why so many of us are so willing to do battle with our neighbors, on almost any topic, at any moment. If this way of thinking were an animal, it’s habitat would be social media!

Wisdom, however, is “the soul’s attunement to the order of reality.” So, policing from a perspective of wisdom means that we ask what we don’t know about a particular person, situation, or problem as opposed to asserting what we think we know. After the events in Minneapolis in 2020, wise policing led me to sit with our friends at Mt. Zion Church for over four hours to hear and experience their perceptions of our community and the role of our agency within it. This led me to what I hope were informed, tone-literate, and empathetic responses. Wise policing led me to deeply consider what it means that the demographics in my community differ from those in most of our nation. Wise policing is why I write a bi-weekly column to better ensure that my community knows exactly who I am in my own words. Wise policing is the best kind of policing, and it’s the kind every small community should have.

3. Municipal irenicism

“Let us not think that because we are less brutal, less violent, less inhuman than our opponents we will carry the day. Brutality, violence, and inhumanity have an immense prestige that schoolbooks hide from children, that grown men do not admit, but that everybody bows before. For the opposite virtues to have as much prestige, they must be actively and constantly put into practice...”

- French activist and philosopher
Simone Weil

To me, Ms. Weil’s final line is the most striking – virtue must be “actively and constantly put into practice.” Merely being less aggressive doesn’t do the trick, there must be an active propagation of actions tending towards peace – this is known as irenicism.



(L-R) Chief John Clair, Sgt. Kevin Testerman, and Ofc. Mason Wagoner.

Don’t misunderstand me. I’m all too familiar with the bare realities of life to embrace an uncritical or unrealistic belief in social cohesion. Rather, I submit that as a community we can, with deliberate effort, counteract the cultural tranquilizers of isolation, propaganda, and polarization. In this vein, I believe law enforcement can be far more humanistic and empathetic than mere “order-maintenance policing”, which is simply an attempt to achieve a false tranquility. Municipal irenicism is about socio-redemptive acts of reconciliation, mediated and facilitated by police officers in a deliberate way.

In our efforts to encourage equitable treatment of our neighbors, we need not completely abandon the mission of community policing: To bring criminal offenders to justice. Social and criminal justice, however, should not be mutually exclusive. Rather, the goal is to make peace, reconciliation, and justice the core components of a law enforcement agency that genuinely works to help our society to flourish.

I recently had reason to know my irenic outlook was well-founded, when one of our officers encountered a man with a hunting bow who was determined to either kill or be killed. At the risk of his own life, the officer took every possible action to avoid bloodshed. In response, we awarded the officer with the Virginia Association of Chiefs of Police Medal of Valor – for propagating peace and preserving life.



This was taken at a council meeting with we hired two new officers. Ofc. Michael Lester and Ofc. John Blevins.

4. Core competency

In my experience, working to avoid mission creep might be the most overlooked task that small police departments can perform to improve their department's culture. To the contrary, too many departments have a mindset that "expansion = success" thus making mission creep a core feature of their culture.

I've traveled in the chief of police "circles" for about 10 years and I've met chiefs from organizations both large and small, from across the nation. During this time, I've noticed one constant among all those chiefs – the amount of "bling" a chief tends to wear on his or her uniform is typically inversely proportional to the amount of people he or she supervises. In short, when the chief looks like a tin pot dictator, the department is usually small – really, really, small.

The same observation can be applied to small police departments organizationally – the wider they look, the less depth they have. It comes down to resources and staff. There's a tendency for small departments to try to "look" like large departments in capability even though they lack the corresponding capacity. This imbalance deprives the department of core mission delivery and leads to sloppy police work. The same small agency that has a motor unit, honor guard, marine unit, drone unit, and task force, will inevitably, cut corners on the simple tasks to create capacity for the extras. I'm committed to avoiding this dilemma by focusing on core competencies – the "shoot, move, and communicate" (as we would say in the Army) equivalent to police work.

As leaders, we're prone to forget that the public's perception of our department will mostly be formed during standard service calls. We must focus on the little things and ensure that we deliver good "fit and finish" to meet our community's expectations. All the flash is nice, but in the end, basic, tactically-sound, community-engaged, police work is the only thing that matters. For this reason, at the Marion Police Department, we reward efforts to solve the small crimes. I'm not concerned with how long it takes to solve a lawnmower larceny – this is exactly what we should be doing! The day in and day out



work of the patrol officer is the most important work we do, and it's enshrined in our general orders as a constant reminder to everyone, at every level:

"In the same ethos that makes "Every Marine a Rifleman", every member of this department is a patrol officer."

– Marion Police Department General Order 1.18.

5. Community shaped

To introduce the concept of community shaped policing, I'd like to paraphrase Samuel "Golden Rule" Jones (Mayor of Toledo, Ohio 1897-1904):

"The only law that can be enforced is the law that the public sentiment of the community will uphold."

Of course, there is plenty of room to argue with Mayor Jones' assertion, but I appreciate the sentiment. Most of us believe that the law is immutable in a certain sense, but let me ask the reader this question: Do you believe that every community has the right to shape the character of the enforcement of the law? I believe this to absolutely be the case which leads me to ask myself: Am I creating the type of police department I want, or the department that the community wants?

To be the police department our community wants, we need to visualize ourselves not as heroes capable of amazing victories (though, those will happen from time to time). Rather, we need to see ourselves first and foremost as shouldering the larger responsibility of building a flourishing society one person at a time. I believe this is what most of our community wants from its public servants: the daily implementation of common sense, on common ground, for the common good.

As a result, I'm building a tactically capable and responsive agency, which enforces the law (these components are immutable) but also one which stresses a high degree of good old fashioned customer service. This is what small towns are all about. We try to consistently get the little things right. "If you take care of the small things, the big things will take care of themselves," observed Emily Dickinson and I believe her.

To bring this point home, at our local "Officer of the Year" awards, we seek to give the award to the officer who brings the most positive impact to the agency and the community. Not the officer who makes the most arrests or writes the most tickets.



Coda: Bringing it all back home

One of the many lessons of the events of 2020 is that police departments must engage with all their stakeholders across the socio-economic strata. In many communities, we quickly lose sight of this basic tenant of our profession with long-lasting consequences. Small town police work is a relatively narrow enterprise. As such, we should focus on being the best at that work, and less concerned with creating



unnecessary mission diversity. I want my community to know that their relationship with their police department is not mediated by screens, social media, or hollow slogans. This keeps the focus on legitimate policing, which at its best is shaped by the community.

About the author: *John Patrick Clair is the chief of police for the Town of Marion.*