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POLICE, PRESS, AND PUBLIC RELATIONS

Raymond E. Clift

Raymond E. Clift is a Captain in the Traffic Division of the Cincinnati Police Department. In recent years he has been active in public relation work with civic groups and schools. This work and his present article have been based on his fourteen years of police experience which has been supplemented by special training at Northwestern University Traffic Institute and with the International City Managers Association and augmented by a legal background. Capt. Clift is a member of the Ohio Bar. In his present article he discusses clearly and concisely the varied aspects of public relations in the police service.—EDITOR.

Of the many activities in police departments today few are more important than those which aim to better the press and public relations for the police service. These activities are at the very root of police efficiency. They engender the kind of public co-operation without which the police service could not function. In times past this fundamental truth was not recognized, but everywhere today we see police administrators diligently working to improve relations with the public they serve.

Maintaining good relations is a vital duty in every business and is not one that takes care of itself—no matter how agreeable to the public the business might be. Telephone companies, and other quasi-public service corporations, for example, devote considerable thought to their public relations. Yet the only thing these companies do that is disagreeable to their customers is to occasionally mail them a bill. How different this is from policing! In law enforcement, there is a constant restraint on the people, and this the people do not like. Moreover, there is frequently the job of making people do things they do not especially want to do. Neither of these tasks is possible for the police without the public's willingness to cooperate.

Other advantages accrue to the police from good press and public relations and not the least of these is the increased pleasantness of the police job. It is a soul satisfying experience to the officer when he finds the public supporting him in his work. When this support is in evidence in a department, good men are attracted to it and this, in the long run, redounds to the benefit of the public in an all around improved police service.

Policing, in striving to raise itself to the level of a profession, will succeed in doing so in direct proportion to the amount of public relations work that it conducts. No subject is more important to police officers today than this vital matter of developing good press and public relations.

RELATIONS WITH THE PRESS

Good press relations have not always existed in police departments mainly because of the policeman's failure to appreciate the true position of the press. Some administrators have not recognized, for instance, that newspapers are probably the most potent influence in American life. No great power, nor even a moderate expression of democratic government, is possible without the public enlightenment that flows from a free and outspoken press.

In some instances, police departments have resented the "noseyness" of the press, but even this resentment is not well founded. Newspapers live on news, and it must be timely news—not cold statistics. Moreover, there is an urgency in newspaper work that requires the "quoting" of officers, another thing of which many policemen disapprove. Writers would be exposed to many libel suits were it not for the fact they merely repeat what is told them by public officials. Furthermore, the public would not want to read what a newspaperman had to say about an incident since he was not in a position to know, whereas the policeman was. These are just two of the reasons reporters are sometimes unusually inquisitive about the details of a case.

Now and then, police officers are especially irritated by the over-zealous reporter who is out to make a "scoop." This individual taxes the patience of everyone, particularly when his conduct impairs the progress of a difficult case. However, for every such person there are hundreds of good newsmen who forego the pleasure of being first with the story out of consideration for the welfare of the community. These men do not violate the confidence reposed in them by their police friends.

Far from being a hindrance, the newspaperman often is a real asset to policemen in many branches of the service. Numerous crimes have been solved by the press receiving a "tip" and turning it over to detective headquarters. Traffic safety likewise has been greatly facilitated by the newspaper taking the lead. Even the recruit patrolman will admit he has been aided around obstacles by the seasoned and friendly newspaperman.

The above views are familiar to the policeman who pauses to think about them. They are the things that should make evident the valuable and enlightened police ally that exists in the person of the press. It carries the torch willingly in all crusades aimed at the betterment of the community, and, in its zeal to suppress crime and punish the offender, the press is as much like the law enforcement branch of government as anything could be.

RELATIONS WITH THE PUBLIC

The matter of maintaining good relations with the public involves much more than trying to please an indistinguishable mass of people. It involves trying to satisfy all those elements of divergent likes and dislikes in the society. Each of these groups must be considered separately if the police department is to have a wide acceptance of its services by the citizenry.

One of the first of such classes the department must consider is the *minority group or groups*. Whether people in this category are Negroes, Asiatics, or Indians, or whether they are in a minority because of religious preference, they require careful consideration by the police and other public authorities. This is not to say they are to be singled out and catered to, but only that they are to receive their equitable share of service from the public agencies.

All minority groups seem to suffer from an inferiority complex. Since they are made up of individuals who are "different" from the majority, such a complex is perhaps but a natural development. However, it is a particularly tragic thing when this feeling arises because of race, and only slightly less unfortunate when a person's religion is the reason.

Police officers are wise who ignore the man's color and creed altogether. Understanding as they do that the minority group dislikes being set apart from the rest of the class, they treat all alike before the law. It is only in emphasizing this equality that the police, or any other agency, can win and hold the support of minority groups.

Labor groups must be carefully handled by the police, especially when there is industrial strife in existence. Being unfamiliar with police practice, workingmen are prone to think of the officer as a "tool of management." Many state police organizations were not graciously accepted by the people because of their fear the men would become police strike-breakers.

In order to offset the labor man's allegation of biasness in strike difficulties, police administrators select only their best men for these details. Young or inexperienced officers, for instance, are never placed on these assignments. Moreover, it is never the object of the police to show any interest in the argument of either side, but only to make clear to all concerned the necessity for a strict observance of the law in the protection of life and property.

When labor difficulties are detected at the outset and handled skillfully by the wise police administrator, good relations result

for the police in all ranks of labor. However, let the converse be true and a battering of heads at the struck plant is often the only way police can maintain order. Needless to say, this kind of roughness is the worst kind of public relations for the police body.

The segment of the public that is today receiving major attention from the police in the development of good public relations is the *juvenile group*. In almost every department there is now growing up the Youth Aid Bureau, or some other similar group, designed to cultivate the friendship of children and cut down the growth of juvenile delinquency. In each instance, where the bureau has been created, authorities boast of an improvement in their juvenile record.

The schools are the chief places wherein good relations with children are developed. Representatives from the youth bureaus, as well as from other branches of police departments, make many visits before these groups. Policemen detailed at school crossings provide convincing evidence for the children that the officer is a friend rather than the proverbial bogey-man.

Boys Clubs, Big Brother Organizations, and Teen-Age Canteens are relatively common examples of how the police have attempted to take care of the excess energy of youth. Members of police departments take active roles in these organizations. In some instances, as in Cincinnati, The Fraternal Order of Police bears all the expense of outfitting the groups. Authorities feel this directed recreational activity for young boys and girls is an insurance against waywardness of youth.

In all work with juveniles, the police are guided by the thought they are not only preventing delinquency today but are cultivating the friendship of citizens of tomorrow. With this friendship being built upon the spirit of helpfulness and respect, there is every reason to believe the police will not be the objects of ridicule in the future that they have too frequently been in the past.

The *churches* are still another place wherein the police carry on effective public relations work. Good men and women of the church-going type are truly the pillars of society, and no community improvement program could very well function without them. The police capitalize on this public spiritedness in many cities.

Serious-minded and interested in the moral tone of the community, church groups welcome police campaigns against all forms of vice. They invite officers to explain these programs.

They are easy for the police to meet since church groups are in assembly more than any other class in society.

No public degradation can long exist in a community where truly religious people are opposed to it, nor can a good police department go unrecognized by these people. However, while church folk support the efficient police department, they frequently conduct withering campaigns against the inefficient and corrupt forces. The zeal with which they attack a wrong makes them a vital force in the community at any event.

Business people come in for a great deal of attention in the development of good police public relations. Knowing the value of dollars and cents, these men and women expect to see results from the tax money they have invested in the police service. Apprehension of criminals gives them some satisfaction but, like others, what they really expect is the prevention of crime in the first instance.

Smart police administrators give the business houses all the protection possible. The numerous burglar alarm systems backed by police are an evidence of this, not to mention the number of patrols in the business areas. Frequent visits, at unannounced times, to the large business houses on his beat are an especial part of every patrolman's duties. Business executives deeply appreciate this service and are chagrined when, for some reason, the officers do not appear.

People in traffic are a very important group to meet in promoting good relations for the police. Everyone is in this class at some time or another, either as a motorist or pedestrian. Moreover, every person who uses the highways is bound to contact the police one or several times in his life. The reception he receives when he makes these contacts goes a long way in determining the entire public's reaction to the law enforcement branch.

One thing it has been especially difficult for the police to comprehend is that the average traffic violator is not a criminal in any sense of the word. It is true that traffic violations often cause the most grievous harm to the community, yet this does not make the offenses criminal. A vast majority of traffic infractions are nothing more than pure carelessness on the part of the violators.

When the policeman makes a wrong approach to the traffic offender, and treats him as a felonious criminal, he immediately sets up a wall between himself and the very backbone of the community. He materially worsens the biggest problem he has on his hands today, that of traffic control.

Running through stop signs, speeding, and parking where this is forbidden are not acts which should occasion a brusque handling by the police. They may warrant arrests, but they, nor any offense for that matter, should never become personal affronts to the police. Recognition of this thought and the proper application of it is the first step in building a greater friendship between the police and millions of motoring Americans.

RELATIONS WITH EMPLOYEES

The administrator's relationship with his police employees does not at first glance appear to be important in the overall public relations picture. When it is examined carefully, however, it becomes apparent that "selling" your own men on the good department they have is the initial step in any selling job they are to do. No man will let his department down when he is convinced it is the best outfit in the field.

One of the ways many chiefs keep the good will of their force is by letting the men in on "the know" of the department. Every policy and objective is made clear to them. This procedure is a slight departure from the old time system, in that it involves telling a man "why" he is to do a job rather than just "what" he is to do. But it is the better procedure.

Merely informing the employees of the department's policies, however, is not enough in the development of the proper employer-employee relationship. There remains the job of telling him how to apply the policies, as well as helping him in the application. This assistance brings a two-fold benefit to the administrator. It discloses the reactions of the public to him, and also brings home some of the difficulties of the enforcing officer. Recognition of the patrolman's problems is particularly important in the police service.

In addition to the above, it is a never-to-be-forgotten fact that contacts make public relations—and by and large it is the patrolmen who make these contacts. The skill and effectiveness with which they meet the citizenry determines the public's acceptance of the police service more so than anything that could be said or done by the chief himself.

EFFICIENCY AND COURTESY

All that has been said in the foregoing pages has its place in the public relations program, yet if there is not efficiency and courtesy present also, the whole program will fail. These are the acid tests. The public will not take note of the splendid

appearance of the uniformed force, nor the amount of money collected for the Polio Fund at the Police Ball, nor any other extra curricular activity of the department, so long as the real police job itself goes undone. Moreover, the citizenry will not accept a discourteous performance of this job.

The most common form of police discourtesy is encountered in telephone conversations. Public relations receives a jolt from which it is slow to recover when the telephone rings a number of times before a tired voice growls a "Yeah"? at the other end. This kind of reception is a slap in the face to the caller who has telephoned on what is to him an important matter. Police officials must constantly fight the discourtesy that exists through the use of the telephone.

The handling of complaints on the "beat" is another instance wherein police discourtesy and inefficiency frequently manifests itself. Realizing the "commonness" of most complaints, police officers are prone to pass them off as unimportant. This indifference, of course, does not help the complainant and only leads to other complaints—about the officers themselves.

Policing often requires firmness but it is a mistake for men to believe they cannot be firm without being discourteous. The public will "toe the line" willingly when it is treated civilly, but not otherwise. In developing the good will and confidence of citizens probably no other department leans so heavily upon the basic requirements of courtesy and efficiency as does the police service.

CHANNELS OF INFORMATION

The big thing that determines the success of the police service, as is true of many other departments of government, is the consciousness on the part of the administrator as to what the public wants and needs in the way of service. He cannot know what these needs are unless he hears from the public occasionally. Keeping the channels of information from the public open, therefore, is an important matter in efficient police administration.

In view of the above thought, it is plain that the police complainant performs an important service. Sometimes he drives police officials to the point of distraction, yet it is quite possible the administrator would never hear of errors in his department were it not for the complainant. Within reasonable limits, the citizenry should be encouraged to register its complaints. When these are acknowledged by the police officer with an assurance that something will be done about them, a good public relations

gesture is started. When something IS done about them, and the complainant advised, the action is complete.

As with the public so with the department. There is a need here for keeping the channels open between the chief executive and the lowest member of his command. Many instances of grave mismanagement come to light when this source of information is opened. Some administrators feel it is demoralizing to a unit to have this condition existing, but the experience of industry has quite conclusively proved otherwise. Suggestion or Grievance Committees performed a very important function during the last war and are still operating efficiently.

Police work is not greatly unlike all other businesses. It exists by and with the approval of the public it serves. For this reason, police officials should not be averse to criticism but should welcome all forms of it. Only in this way can the service adjust to the community and render the efficient police function the public has every right to expect.