



*Discrimination:*

## Police resistance to change, part two

By David M. Johnson

### Communities are key to police reform

Too many police departments don't look for racism until pressed by interests outside their organizations; therefore, community action and oversight are critical to beginning the process of eliminating racial profiling. Unfortunately, many police departments operate in communities that support or are indifferent to oppressive police practices.

"Law and order" interests, often fueled by racial prejudice, sometimes trump citizens' accusations of racial oppression by police and encourage practices such as profiling. On the other hand, most significant police reforms occur only after community outrage and protest.

For example, the Rodney King incident in LA and the shooting of four young black men on I-95 by New Jersey State Troopers put racial profiling and police brutality on the front page, stirred widespread interest in police practices, and led to examinations and reforms that extended well beyond those two organizations.

Our so frequently revisiting the presence of racism in policing should remind us that the job of protecting civil rights is never finished and that changing institutions with the power to oppress – such as police – does not come without struggle. Those oppressed should not rule out any legitimate effort to cause change, but, whenever possible, they should favor those strategies that build greater policy-community partnerships and collaborations, which are the cornerstone of the current "community policing" movement. Police are less likely to oppress

those whom they know, trust, and care about, and with whom they work.

### Lawmakers react to community

Local, state, and federal lawmakers have great power to eliminate racial profiling by enacting laws that protect rights or criminalize specific police misconduct, set police standards, and provide resources such as training, education, and oversight. Commissions impaneled by state legislatures have enhanced police professionalism and diminished oppression and corruption by setting standards for licensing, hiring, and training and by overseeing and guiding police policy and practices.

Legislatures often impose one-size-fits-all remedies, such as requiring diversity training in every police academy or requiring all law enforcement agencies to collect racial data on traffic stops. Efforts such as these, while aimed in the right direction, often don't cause significant change. They assume that problems such as profiling are the same in all organizations when they are not, when, in fact, levels of recognition and understanding of and participation in profiling vary tremendously, from those that don't get it or condone it and openly profile, to those who do understand and work to prevent it.

In many communities – for example, those in rural areas with few interactions with people of different races – data collection may not accurately show the existence or potential to racially profile. A few days of training won't significantly

change human behavior learned over a lifetime, and having mounds of data means little if police don't know what to do with it once they have it.

Legislative oversight should be flexible when enacting police reform. Sometimes, they need to swing the proverbial "two-by-four" and impose reforms on police resisting change. Other times, they should provide resources and support to reform-minded police leading the change.

Police need more help learning how to change so that they can craft and implement long term strategies – which usually include methods such as training and data collection – appropriate to the circumstances in their organizations and communities. Lawmakers can fund organizational consulting services and leadership development efforts that school police leaders in organizational change and support their efforts to change.

### A different police leadership

Police leaders receive little schooling in organizational change and are themselves often obstacles to reform. Without sufficiently understanding issues, such as racial profiling, but needing to respond to community pressure, they resort to "quick fixes," which usually fall into one or all of three categories: write a policy prohibiting profiling; punish those caught profiling; or give training in how not to profile.

Unfortunately, these strategies often fall short of expectations because they don't treat profiling as the complex issue it is. The roots of racism are deeply embedded in the police culture, as is resistance to

**continued**



### *Discrimination:*

## **Police resistance to change, part two**

*By David M. Johnson*

change, and won't be remedied by quick fixes. Only long-term organization and individual development will lead to significant change.

Police leadership is generally insufficiently prepared to lead significant organizational change, including eliminating

racial profiling.

Police leaders promote

through the ranks and don't receive much exposure outside the police culture. In fact, the police culture is generally suspicious of outside interests and insulates itself from outside influences. They learn on the job by doing and by watching other police leaders around them.

Periodically, they may attend police supervisory, management, or executive workshops, usually short on theory and heavy on operational skill building. Conformity is valued more than creativity and progressiveness. Police organizations are heavy with transactional leadership (getting things done) but have very few transformational leaders (visionaries). To change, they need both.

Sergeants – the first-line supervisors – probably exert the most influence on officer behavior of any leaders in police organizations. They can also be the greatest source of resistance to change. Methods for selecting sergeants vary, but often, they are promoted based on their success as police officers and their abilities to conform to the culture rather than for their leadership potential. Their success at "working

the streets" and their seniority are more important than their competence as change agents. Therefore, they are little differentiated from the officers they supervise and tend to identify with and support officer behavior at the expense of organiza-

tional goals, values, and initiatives.

Police leaders at every level are often prison-

ers of the police culture. Fred Miller of the Kaleel Jamison Consulting Group said that it took a flying fish to discover water; unfortunately, there aren't many flying fish in policing. Because they promote through the ranks and have so little exposure to other organizational cultures, they mostly are not conscious of the police culture and do things the way they've always been done.

### **Several things needed for success**

David Noer, who has studied and written about leadership and learning, offers a different formula for police leaders appropriate to the challenge to change. He said that successful leaders of the future will do several things well. They will facilitate transitions, not be victim to them. They will lead by communicating vision, mission, and values and not by controlling through policies, procedures, and rules. They will structure and prepare their organizations so that each part, whether a division, workgroup, or individual can participate as autonomously as possible to accomplish the mission,

move toward the vision, and live according to the core values. They must prepare themselves through introspection and personal development so that they lead and not obstruct. In other words, they must develop their transformational side. What Noer recommends is contrary to traditional police leadership styles, which aren't very forward thinking and which try to manage by control.

### **Changing the police culture**

The roots of racism and resistance to change are deep in the police culture. Eliminating racial profiling and other forms of racism will not result from quick fixes, such as policy statements, data collection, and training. Reformers must look much deeper and change many different parts of the system. Here are some places to look.

### **The paramilitary organization**

Most police departments call themselves "paramilitary" organizations. Their definitions of "paramilitary" vary, but, generally, they ascribe to their departments' characteristics found in the armed forces: they wear uniforms, use military style rankings, follow a "chain of command," insist on obedience, think of discipline as conformity and control, and use punishment to enforce rules and mold or change behavior. Conformity is highly valued; rules and regulations make them feel safe. Believing they are engaged in war, police look for enemies to defeat; too often, their racial prejudices tell them who those enemies are.

**continued**



*Discrimination:*

## Police resistance to change, part two

By David M. Johnson

Police should create or adopt organizational models built around police-community partnerships and collaborations that are more inclusive, that encourage creativity, and that put protecting citizens' rights first.

### Recruitment and screening

Most police organizations keep hiring – and promoting – the same people – those best at the "cops and robbers" role and with similar educational backgrounds. While police departments often require applicants have a college degree, many look only for those with academic credentials in "police science." To shortcut the recruitment process, they favor applicants with previous law enforcement experience. The limited diversity of academic backgrounds and narrow perspectives of the police role make changing the culture difficult.

In their recruits, organizations evaluate qualities such as decisiveness and assertiveness, but not self-awareness or ability to learn and change.

They ask: "Is this person prejudiced?" when, instead, they should ask: "Is this

person aware of her/his prejudice and able to change?"

Hiring processes are designed to fill police officer positions, but don't consider candidates' leadership potential, despite the fact that from the ranks filled by these new applicants will come future supervisors, managers, and executives. Those who become supervisors, managers,

and executives are promoted because they are successful conformers; in other words, they are the people they replace.

Recruitment and selection criteria should include knowledge, skills, and abilities related to human, social, and organizational theory, self-awareness, learning, and change. The police culture won't change unless different skills, values, and interests are introduced.

### The police academy

Most police academies are built on some form of military model; some are run just like boot camps in which punishment is used to mold and change behavior. They emphasize traditional police practices and require students to conform to the culture's norms and values.

Academies are technical schools that teach process (how to drive, shoot, investigate, and arrest) and little theory (sociology of crime and poverty or why people, including the students themselves, behave as they do).

While many weeks are committed to teaching "defensive tactics" (arrest techniques, using weapons,

and self defense), only a few days might be given to human interaction and diversity training. Human interaction training more likely teaches methods to control people rather than understanding human behavior, especially their own, so that they can devise creative ways of working with people.

Diversity training more often

gives interesting information about people of color – not about white people – than helps students understand their own experiences and racial baggage. Students often leave academies with harsher views of people than when they entered and with the attitude, "It's a dangerous world, and it's us against them." Unwittingly, many academies unnecessarily heighten fear and teach new officers inappropriate and unproductive ways of interacting with people.

### Socialization

Field training programs, in which new officers work with officer-trainers, sometimes for several months, introduce new officers to their departments. Through training, peer pressure, modeling, and evaluation, they are taught to conform to organizational models of success and to adopt organizational views, usually those from the dominant culture. They are taught the boundaries of behavior and speech, which too often discourage challenges to the status quo. If they are different – and difference includes much more than just physical appearance – they often must abandon important parts of themselves to fit in. The pressures to conform don't end with field training but generally continue throughout officers' careers, and they themselves often become enforcers of the status quo, teaching conformity to those newcomers who follow them.

Police should develop systems of socialization that encourage integration rather than assimilation, creativity rather than conformity, and that make it safe to question the status quo and to change.

**continued**



*Discrimination:*

## Police resistance to change, part two

By David M. Johnson

### Training vs. development

Police organizations rely heavily on training (how to do things such as drive cars, investigate crime, use firearms, and apply control holds on arrestees) but spend little time – sometimes no time – on development and education (why things are as they are and why people behave as they do). Diversity training usually stays at an intellectual level and doesn't encourage self-examination.

The police culture generally derides as "touchy-feely" any discussion of emotions or beliefs; in fact, police are often told to leave their emotions and beliefs at home because they will only interfere when doing their jobs. (Suppressing their emotions also contributes to poor health, alcohol and substance abuse, and a host of other maladies among police, whose average life expectancy is much shorter than that of other Americans.)

Officers get into trouble for their lack of people skills, not their lack of technical skills, and their emotions and beliefs are almost always involved. Eliminating racism must be a personal exercise, which can't be accomplished through training alone. Officers are unlikely to stop profiling until they understand their own experiences with racism, both as its targets and oppressors, and their beliefs about race; therefore, organizations should regularly and frequently offer human interaction training and personal development experiences that help officers understand racism both intellectually and emotionally.

Police executives and managers often don't participate in "diversity" or "anti-racism" training. Police

leaders don't see themselves as part of the "problem," and officers and supervisors often resent the message that they are the "problem," which increases their resistance to examining the issue and changing.

### Audits, assessment, and oversight

Very few police departments are subject to outside oversight of their policies, practices, or employees' conduct. They insist on policing themselves – usually through internal affairs investigative units (IA's) – because they don't trust most forms of outside review or those who would be reviewers. In addition, almost none have internal systems that routinely audit or assess policies, practices, or employee behavior; in fact, few are skilled in audits or assessments. Usually, they are forced into self-examination only after some crisis, such as a shooting, a lawsuit, or complaints of racial profiling.

National attention to racial profiling has led to a "data collection" movement that requires officers to record racial information about people they stop and the circumstances of those stops. Those data are expected to show the existence or extent of racial profiling so that changes can be made to stop the practice. Instead of viewing it as just one form of assessment or audit that can help them better manage their organizations, mostly, police leaders see data collection as a threat to their control.

Until police organizations adopt processes to audit their policies, systems, and practices and routinely assess employee attitudes, actions,

and behavior, they will more likely be victims of change rather than its managers. Without appropriate oversight, their decisions and practices will be suspect. By collaborating with their communities, they will find some "flying fish" who reveal parts of the police culture needing change. What they don't see they can't change.

### Police unions and associations

Police unions and associations, with the exception of those representing officers of color or women, have been mostly silent on the issue of racial profiling. When they do speak, they usually deny the presence of or minimize the extent of profiling, and they fight efforts – such as data collection – to eliminate it. They are more likely to defend officers accused of racism than to support efforts to uncover and eliminate racist practices. Unions and associations define their roles fairly narrowly as advocating for and defending their members, right or wrong.

### It's about human rights

At the beginning of their careers, most police officers commit themselves to a police code of ethics grounded in the protection of human rights. Once "on the job," though, they may never again examine what "protecting human rights" through their work means; their mission becomes, simply, "to catch crooks." But efforts to catch criminals must always be tempered by education, understanding, and direction so that people's rights are not sacrificed in the name of community or police safety.

**continued**





*Discrimination:*

## **Police resistance to change, part two**

*By David M. Johnson*

Will racial profiling by police ever end? It seems not to come easily. If it is to end, it will be done in one organization at a time with the insistence, encouragement, help, and support of communities and legislative bodies to whom police are accountable. Those departments most successful at eliminating police oppression are those with reform-minded leaders who understand that the journey is in their interest and who have embraced change and individual and organization development and put protecting citizens' rights first. ■

### **References**

Noer, David M, "Leading the Liberated." From Issues and Observations, Volume 16, Number 2/3, 1996, Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro, North Carolina.

Fry, Louis W. and Berkele, Leslie J. "The Paramilitary Police Model: An Organizational Misfit." From Human Organization, Volume 42, Number 3, Fall 1983.

*David Johnson is a white male who retired in 1999 after thirty years in policing, first with the Berkeley, California, Police Department and then with the Walnut Creek, California, Police Department. He has worked in a variety of capacities to help law enforcement organizations eliminate discrimination and oppression in all its forms. He is now a consultant and lives in Minneapolis, Minnesota. He can be reached by email at: dmjohnson13@qwest.net or Phone 612-377-9616.*