

Police and Communities of Color: How that gulf can be bridged

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In recent years, there has been abundant evidence of a growing distrust between citizens and elected officials. From the national level to local boroughs, there has been a detachment from the normal processes of citizenship that led to dangerous aloofness on even the most mundane civic affairs. Voting participation is lackluster nationally, abysmal in local elections. Grassroots political organizing is left to the hyper-partisans, and citizen volunteerism is becoming rare on so many fronts.

In fact, many citizens stir from their apathy only on issues which provoke their anger: e.g., the “Tea Party” rebellion, or conflicts between police departments and communities of color. This is especially true in cases where a police encounter leads to a civilian death. As we have seen in communities like Ferguson, Missouri, events quickly escalate into a conflagration.

My first professional encounter with police deadly force occurred many years ago when I was a young Urban League executive. A 19 year old Black housewife, in the midst of a life-and-death struggle, was shot dead by a white policeman who mistook the knife she used to fend off her husband as a threat to his own safety. The city of Rochester NY, which had experienced a major riot a decade earlier, was thrown into an immediate uproar around the question of whether this horrific tragedy could have been avoided if that officer had exercised other options at his disposal.

After a grand jury absolved him of any criminal liability, the Mayor (whom I would succeed nearly 20 years later) appointed a task force to review a whole range of police procedural issues, including training, hiring and use-of-force protocols. About two dozen public safety and citizen representatives were appointed, and we were given authority to review everything and to propose a full range of recommendations. This was viewed as an appropriate method of citizen engagement in that era. However, there was little or no opportunity for the affected communities to participate, except through their proxies: social service administrators and ministers.

After a year of deliberations, the Task Force identified nearly 100 areas for change, and almost all of them were recommended unanimously. That was remarkable, considering that the major police unions, as well as command staff, were prominent committee members. The Mayor and City Council codified all of our recommendations. All of this transpired in the mid-1970's, with the historical backdrop of urban riots and the rise of a conservative “law and order” mentality across the nation.

By the time I came to office in 1994, 14 other Black men and women had died after deadly encounters with the police. Good relations between the police and the African-American community were beyond comprehension, and communications were practically non-existent. Several officers had been charged with federal civil rights abuses, and the chief had been imprisoned in an unrelated scandal.

Reversing this dire situation was a top campaign pledge. A new chief from out-of-state, with a distinguished record of engaging the community in police reforms, was hired. Community-oriented policing protocols were immediately implemented, over the strenuous objections of one union president who said that policing was not “social work”. Thinking back to that tragic shooting 20 years before, it was absolutely imperative to begin real dialogue, and to work on real solutions to the myriad problems of violence and quality of life which plagued much of our community.

African-American residents were the most skeptical about engaging in these activities, but once they realized their oft-ignored concerns were finally being taken seriously, there was a willingness to participate. At first, it was primarily older residents who joined these efforts, but the focus on youth concerns soon produced significant breakthroughs with that cohort.

These changes transcended rhetoric and “feel-good” activities. We undertook major structural changes, such as decentralizing police services into neighborhoods which had been traditionally neglected. Six NET offices (Neighborhood Empowerment Teams) were strategically situated around the city, each co-staffed by a civilian administrator with code enforcement personnel, and a police lieutenant with assigned patrol officers who could easily be dispatched to neighborhood hotspots.

A “Youth Summit” was held six months into my first term, with high school student leaders. Adults were present to help facilitate, but the agenda and the deliberations were directed by the students. A major foundation earmarked thousands of dollars that the youth could use to fund their priority suggestions. Recreation centers were refocused to provide a broader array of services. Each of the 17 centers had a youth council that worked with the adult staff to plan and implement services.

Our first new comprehensive city plan in 40 years actively engaged thousands of citizens, who focused less on land use procedures, and identified eleven specific action agendas that would lead to neighborhood and city-wide revitalization. The city was divided into 10 sectors, for planning and program implementation purposes, each with an oversight committee comprised of residents, business and civic representatives who self-selected. Budget planning was aligned with spending plans. City Hall and residents collaborated, rather than fought. All of these activities were formalized in a structure called NBN (Neighbors Building Neighborhoods).

In 12 years, we didn’t achieve everything we set out to do, but I am absolutely convinced that our efforts to restore trust between the Police department and ALL of the citizens it was sworn to serve was the foundation of every other effort to fully engage our citizens in determining the city’s future. Restoring that trust required a willingness to reach out, listen earnestly, and act on what we were hearing. Restoring trust required admissions that both sides of the divide must work to overcome doubts and suspicions.

Most importantly, restoring trust meant that the Mayor, City Council and the bureaucracy had to be willing to share power with its citizens on the issues which most impacted their neighborhoods, and citizens had to be willing to engage in the hard work of collaboration, with government leaders and their neighbors, if meaningful change had any possibility of success.

Even in communities which have no recent history of such collaboration, the paradigm can be dramatically changed, if the key players are willing to work hard to establish trust and collegiality. Plus, there must be a willingness to acknowledge the failure of past efforts. Identifying those factors that have prevented past collaborations insures that they will not be repeated.

For those communities, six basic principles must be embraced:

1. Elected leaders must sincerely solicit the involvement of citizens in community improvement initiatives. This initial outreach will communicate the right signal that this is a serious effort.
2. If the first approaches are not successful, the leaders must continue their outreach until a breakthrough is achieved. No initiative should proceed until all of the key parties have signed on.
3. Citizens from all sectors of the community must be engaged. Officials cannot choose who they want to collaborate with.
4. As painful as it might be, time must be devoted to airing old grievances –on both sides. Unless this is done, these old grievances will continue to crop up and make current deliberations less successful. Once those concerns are aired, they can be put to rest. The parties should agree that from that point, they will look forward and not to the past.
5. Start the dialogue with a “blank sheet”. Neither party should come into the process with a pre-conceived agenda. The success of these efforts will depend on each party feeling that they have made important contributions to the final outcome.
6. Successful community collaborations will occur when the power relationship between the parties is view as equitable. Elected officials should not fear sharing power with their citizens, their neighbors.