Community Policing and Politics

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Police executives are becoming increasingly aware of the political nature of their roles. Community policing in particular provides a new challenge in the political arena because of its emphasis on significant changes in traditional police administrative and operational practices.

This article explores political issues associated with community policing, the characteristics of political processes, and tools for managing political transactions.

CRIME, COMMUNITY POLICING, AND POLITICS
Crime and crime prevention have long been important issues to politicians and the constituencies they represent. The intensity of political interest in crime and policing can be attributed to a number of factors:

- Crime is an emotional issue which draws on insecurities about safety and security.
- Crime touches most people, directly or indirectly, at some point in their lifetimes.
- Nearly everyone, regardless of political allegiance, race, ethnicity, age, gender, or lifestyle, supports taking action to control violence and crime.
- Citizens are willing to make sacrifices to increase their protection from criminals.
- Crime, especially atrocious or senseless crimes, can generate morbid public curiosity.

While there is much agreement on the need to control crime, there are many views on the best way to achieve this end. In recent years, politicians have increasingly viewed community policing as the most effective means to deal with crime while at the same time providing better public services. Yet, few fully understand the concept.

POLITICAL AXIOMS
Because community policing requires significant changes in law enforcement philosophies and practices, and because crime and crime prevention are such hot political issues, police administrators must be prepared to respond to elected officials and their own employees. Several axioms which may help in maneuvering through the political terrain are suggested below.

Axiom 1
New issues or controversies tend to generate emotional rather than logical responses. Community policing may generate initial opposition because it challenges traditional policing at many levels.

Axiom 2
A superficial understanding of new programs and initiatives often takes precedence over in-depth knowledge in the political arena. Politicians who may only vaguely understand the community policing concept will jump on the bandwagon without recognizing its complexity or the depth of change it requires.

Axiom 3
Ideas that require substantive explanation and thoughtful consideration are difficult to "sell." The media,
politicians, and public are accustomed to receiving information encapsulated in simple "sound bites." Ways must be found to describe community policing without losing the subtlety of the concept.

**Axiom 4**
A new concept or initiative needs an easily identifiable "hook" or gimmick to gain a political foothold. Readily understood symbols or icons that represent more complicated endeavors can increase public recognition and support. Focusing on a small part of the community policing effort--such as foot patrols, bike patrols, or neighborhood watch programs--may enhance political backing for the larger project.

**Axiom 5**
To gain maximum support, new initiatives should be tied to public needs which are current and high-profile. Administrators may "package" new programs as responding to particular high priority issues, rather than focusing on the broader implications, as a way to generate support.

**Axiom 6**
Sharing credit, even if unwarranted, can build political support. Key policymakers can be credited with leadership roles in order to solidify their sponsorship.

**Axiom 7**
Evidence of progress or success must be provided in the short-term to maintain political commitment. The political maxim to consider here is "no demonstrable success, no demonstrable support."

**Axiom 8**
There is a direct relationship between public concern and political maneuvering. Public backing for institutional responses to problems is notoriously fickle and must not be taken for granted because it ultimately governs political action.

**PROCESS OF CHANGE**
The process of implementing substantive change in the field of law enforcement requires political maneuvering, negotiating positions, bartering political influence, sharing information, assessing new directions, and responding to the diverse needs of a citizens, elected officials, and employees. However, the basic dynamics of the political process remain the same whether a police executive is dealing with a citizen's group, city council, or collective bargaining unit. Some fundamental principals of managing change in a political environment are described below.

**Stimulus for change.**
A leader with vision must take the first step in challenging the status quo and must make that effort both vigorous and widespread.

**Administrative commitment.**
An effective administrator provides on-going, consistent support for reallocating resources, amending policies and procedures, and experimentation with new ideas.

**Change must be grounded in logical, defensible criteria.**
The support of politicians and employees depends on solid evidence that change is necessary and will be effective. Change consumes resources, both in terms of material and human assets, so it must be well grounded in logic and evidence.

**People at all levels must provide input.**
Diverse input will not only lead to new insights, but will also encourage a sense of investment and responsibility among team members.


**Allow Sufficient time.**
New initiatives require time for experimentation, evaluation, and fine tuning. Enough time must be allotted to gauge the initiative's true effects.

**Effective communication.**
Politicians, employees, and citizens must be kept informed and their reactions should be taken seriously. Lack of communication can destroy an initiative, but is easy to avoid.

**Change takes time to implement.**
Major organizational and behavioral changes like the shift to community policing require resocialization--a long-term endeavor. Instilling patience and outlining a realistic time frame can reduce frustration and impatience.

**Expect resistance.**
No new idea can garner universal support. Listen to those who raise valid objections or provide valuable suggestions; you may eventually gain their backing. Recognize, on the other hand, that some who resist will be motivated primarily by emotional or personal issues. In these cases, administrators may:

- Continue to encourage changed attitudes,
- Ignore or avoid resisters,
- Place employees in assignments where they can do no harm,
- Try to further solidify relationships with political leaders or employees who do support the initiative, or
- Wait obstructionists out until they lose their influence.

**Be flexible.**
Success is never guaranteed when implementing new ideas; even failures provide lessons. Both within the police organization and broader political system, the "freedom to fail" is required to encourage creative new ideas.

**Change involves risk.**
Questioning orthodoxy in bureaucratic organizations can be threatening; therefore, administrators must recognize their own risks as well as those of their political supporters and employees.

**Change challenges the conventional wisdom.**
Forcing the reevaluation of entrenched traditions can be politically unpopular and may generate counteroffensives. Astute leaders prepare to defend themselves and their supporters against personal and professional attacks.

**Personnel evaluations should reflect change.**
Those who make a personal commitment to making change work must be rewarded through positive reinforcement, creative freedom, recognition, awards or commendations, or financial incentives.