Today's generation of police managers, myself included, grew up in a policing mindset that saw us molded as functionaries of the criminal justice system, a part of that system, but apart from the community at large, a far cry from our original mandate. Because the criminal justice system's sole product is crime in the pure sense, so, too, did the police product become so narrowed. Indeed many of us proudly refer to ourselves as law enforcement officers, but I believe a better way of policing cries out.

I believe that better way is to be found in a return to the basic concepts and philosophy that spawned public policing in the first place. In its simplest terms, this means pushing out the edges of what we do and how we do it. We must wean ourselves from the criminal justice system so that it becomes one of our customers and not our sole customer. It also includes getting our heads around the idea that we can have a greater impact on crime by coming at it indirectly and by marshalling the energies of others, as opposed to trying to influence it directly by working on our own as we have in the past. It means a return to our original mandate, that of peace officer, in the broadest sense, versus law enforcement officers, in the narrow sense. In my view, our mindset must be constructed around the fundamental philosophy of community policing - but what is it?

Many in policing apply community policing to everything they do outside of fundamental patrol work. This is a critical mistake. Until it becomes the fundamental of police work, it's going nowhere. Most seem to see it as a "new thing" in policing. My position is that it is neither new, nor is it a "thing." I believe it's nothing more than a re-emergence of the founding philosophy on which Sir Robert Peel built his public police in 1829, not an add-on to the conventional model. Unfortunately, that is what most police departments have tried to do with it - stick a new box on the edge of an organization chart, put a few people in it, and announce the birth of community policing.

A criticism leveled at community policing is that it seems to be all things to all people. In conventional policing, we have always tried to keep things nicely packaged and pigeon-holed; the process has overshadowed the task. In my view, community policing does have a solitary definition, a single philosophy, which can be found in the genesis of modern policing, in item seven of Peel's principles:
"To maintain at all times a relationship with the public that gives reality to the historic tradition that the police are the public and that the public are the police. The police being only members of the public that are paid to give full-time attention to duties which are incumbent on every citizen in the interests of community welfare and existence."

To understand Peel’s thinking and his reasons for forming the new police in the first place, we need to know that the Industrial Revolution was then in full swing in London, bringing with it rapid, uncontrolled growth and a whole new strata of society, the factory worker. I believe what Peel intended was to position the new police as social catalytic agents, not the aloof, law enforcement, trade-craft journeymen we have fashioned ourselves into. He wanted his police to be of the people, for the people. He wanted the community, literally, to police itself, with certain members paid to do it full-time, in uniform, while the rest did it part-time, as they went about their daily work.

George Kelling and others captured Peel’s thoughts in modern terms:

"Assigning the police responsibility for the maintenance of order, the prevention of crime, and the apprehension of criminals constitutes far too great a burden on far too few. Primary responsibility rests with families, the community, and its individual members. The police can only facilitate and assist members in the maintenance of order, and no more."

It is my contention that what Peel was describing in 1829 has come to be known today as community policing. In his day, the only description needed was "policing." In our time, we’ve gone through a litany of "adjective" policing - team policing, zone policing, proactive and reactive policing, hard and soft policing - terms that have only served to confuse. If it weren’t for this, we wouldn’t have to use the word "community" to isolate what we’re talking about.

"Police others as you would have others police you." If I weren’t Irish, I might leave a definition of community policing at that. However, if a conventional police agency is to adopt the community policing way of doing things, then there first has to be a re-tooling of the heads of the brass before you can re-tool the feet of the grunts. A thought critical to an understanding of community policing is: "Effectiveness is doing the right things. Efficiency is doing things right." No matter how well we do things, if they are the wrong things in the first place, we’re spinning our wheels.

Another thought is embodied in the words of Ralph Waldo Emerson. "Go often to the home of thy friend for weeds choke the unused path." Conventionally, the only paths we walk are those to the bad guy’s house. Weeds choke the path between us and the common people. And traditionally, police have decided, unilaterally, what is important. Over the past several decades, we have done to people in terms of policing. Over time, a space has developed between what we think is important and what the public thinks is important. Community policing would have us do with people.

As an example, a bank is robbed and a wino is mugged. In our criminal code, these crimes are equal - both are robberies. However, police reaction to them is not equal. On the Richter scale of police priorities, the bank job is an 8, while the wino doesn’t register. Why? Mindset, the evolution of what police think is important. That thinking has been predicated upon the actions of the criminal rather than the social damage of the criminal’s action upon the community. It has to do with such things as the amount of money involved, the status of the crime in the criminal code, and, in some cases, the status of the victim. Our conventional reaction is influenced more by its legal damage versus its community damage.

With the community policing mindset, we would ask: what is the community damage caused by the bank robbery? In terms of money, damage to the banking community is infinitesimal. All banks are insured and cover the cost of this insurance in the rates they charge their customers. Also, people in the banking community go home every night to suburbia where they feel safe from the type of people who rob banks. Bank robberies are
not crimes that fuel people’s perceptions that crime is rampant. In short, the social damage to the "community" most affected by this crime is slight and transitory.

Looking at the wino’s mugging, the damage to his community is considerable and his financial loss total - maybe that was his last $5. Worse still, the crime is perpetrated in the neighborhood where he lives, along with those who may have witnessed the crime or learned of it from others. Also, a person as opposed to an institution is the victim. Often, these people know who committed the crime and they may have been victimized before, but fear of retribution keeps them from reporting these crimes. These are the types of street-level predatory crimes that feed the perpetual fear of victimization people must endure. In this case, the social damage to the immediate community is significant and everlasting.

In its purest form, community policing requires we use community damage criteria as a central factor in our response to crime. It does not mean an abdication of one for the other, but perhaps the bank robbery comes down to a 6, while the wino’s mugging moves up to a 2. It does not change what we do as much as why we do it. It broadens our vision of what our work is.

Problem-oriented policing "walks the talk" of community policing - it’s how you get it done. Its engine is imagination and its motto is that there’s more than one way to skin a cat.

Traditionally, the only way we tried to prevent crimes was by catching the person in the act. We believed that if we caught enough people, we’d eventually lock up all the criminals or at least scare off the uncaught ones. In addition, if directly enforcing the law didn’t solve the problem, then, by definition, the problem was not a police problem - it belonged to someone else.

Problem-oriented policing accepts the reality that everyday police work goes far beyond crime in the pure sense and that the range of tools to use goes far beyond law enforcement. It embraces the medical model where you use the symptoms of an illness at the early stages, to reach beyond sickness and disease to promote health. That is why, today, as much money goes into preventive medicine as into active treatment medicine. Community policing recognizes that we must get beyond controlling the bad to organizing the good to help us control the bad.

The problem-oriented policing process is simple: (1) identify the problem, (2) examine it, (3) decide on the solution, and (4) monitor the solution and adjust accordingly. The main difference is that imagination and innovation greatly enhance the ability to get the job done.

Remember that community policing is a philosophy (why we do), whereas problem-oriented policing is a strategy (how we do). Problem-oriented policing is the medicine applied to the community sickness identified by the community policing philosophy. Like doctors, we need to know what the sickness is before we can apply the right medicine and we discover problems by examining the patient - the community. Solving the problem means getting help within the police, the community, or both.

Using the medical analogy, the doctor (police officer) talks to the patient (community) to identify the problem. Sometimes the solution lies solely within the patient (community) - a change of diet (owner removes abandoned auto). Sometimes the doctor (police officer) and the patient (community) work together - change of diet plus medicine (organize the neighborhood to shut down a "blight" establishment). Sometimes only the doctor alone (police) can solve the problem - surgery (heavy law enforcement). And sometimes we have to accept the fact the problem simply cannot be solved - incurable illness (poverty).

Well, you might say, Braiden still hasn’t told us how to do it and you’re right. But I have given you the ingredients to build your own, for that is the essence of it. What I have tried to do is help you get your head
around the ideas, but the imagination and innovation must come from each individual - to do otherwise is a contradiction in terms. Each must build his or her own model.

Editor’s note: This article is a condensed version of a paper published by Chris Braiden last December.