The Factor of WOW in Procedural Justice and Police Legitimacy: Promoting Public Trust and Confidence through WOW Service and Servant Guardianship

Creating a customer service culture

I participated in implementing the pillars of procedural justice and police legitimacy over the course of the past 10 years in each of the divisions I have been responsible for in my capacity as a captain for the Kalamazoo Department of Public Safety (KDPS). As simplistic as it sounds, it is true: procedural justice and police legitimacy work. Treating everyone with dignity and respect, regardless of their lot in life, is paramount in our profession.

After a traffic stop data analysis report was released with findings that Black motorists were more than twice as likely to be stopped as White drivers in Kalamazoo, I was transferred to the Operations Division of KDPS with the goal of enhancing the trust with the community we serve. In the aftermath of the traffic stop analysis, it was readily apparent that we would need to focus on and implement two main principles or initiatives if we were to be successful in enhancing our relationship with the community that we serve. First, we had to be firmly committed to creating a customer service culture. Our historical culture had swung too far into the enforcement arena.
Second, we needed to accomplish this cultural transformation through initiatives grounded in procedural justice and police legitimacy. I held meetings with my immediate staff daily, the shift commanders monthly, and each of the shift commander’s platoons quarterly, and I have met with officers and sergeants on an individual basis. These meetings have continued for the past two years. At each of these meetings we emphasize what our “why” as the uniformed patrol division is—to serve. We identified one goal: Reducing crime by providing “WOW service” while treating everyone with dignity and respect. But make no mistake, our why is to serve. A key point needs to be stressed that our why—to serve—was not reserved for our external customers. As an organization, we needed to improve our internal procedural justice and legitimacy as well. And we made a conscious decision to improve service to our employees internally in the same capacity that we asked them to improve service with community members externally. This is one of the core elements of procedural justice. We cannot build trust with those we serve if we are seen as an occupying force controlling a geographical area. I have always felt that our profession should take on the guardian servant mindset, rather than one of a warrior. We need to demonstrate by our actions that we a part of the community, a part of the neighborhood, and that we truly care about those that live there. We needed to get back to face-to-face policing so that individual officers met with individual resident in non-enforcement contacts. If there is a bond of mutual trust, respect will be gained and legitimacy created.

The how of wow—face-to-face policing

There have been five significant initiatives implemented and emphasized over the past two years to address procedural justice and legitimacy, which have all focused on what I like to describe as “face-to-face policing:”

1. **Walk and talk canvassing.** Operations Division sergeants began this initiative in March 2014, and it has been received so well internally that in January 2015 we added an officer to the mix. I select a geographical area within our city wherein we have a sergeant and an officer walk door-to-door for two blocks of a residential area meeting the residents face to face. Our day-shift and night-shift participate in this program, walking a total of four blocks per day. The geographical area is moved every 7–10 shifts to a different part of our city. We completed walking the entire residential area of our 25.11 square mile city in 15 months. In June 2015 we started all over again. Our goal is to complete it in 13 months this go around!

It has allowed our officers to meet community members they would not have had the opportunity to otherwise meet as most do not have regular police interaction. It has demonstrated to the officers that there are outstanding individuals living on every block within our city who appreciate their efforts and our profession as a whole. There are incredible stories relayed by officers and sergeants in regard to contacts and conversations they have had with our residents. A suggestion from officers that we implemented was creating a ‘door-hanger,’ printed in English and Spanish, if no one is home. We leave the door-hanger that indicates we were in their neighborhood and ways that they can follow up with us.

“I met a 71 year-old female who had lived on N. Church Street her whole life. She was able to tell me the entire evolution of the neighborhood. She relayed how the police used to walk the
neighborhood in the 50s and 60s. She loves us. After about 30 minutes of talking on her porch, she pointed out a drug house a block away. Last week we set up on it and sure enough, we recovered crack cocaine and marijuana and made some arrests.” – eight-year veteran officer during a get-together in my office

2. **Customer service follow-ups.** Our sergeants are expected to follow up on calls for service that officers assigned to them have responded to. These follow-up contacts occur between 72 hours and two weeks after the original call for service was received—no later. This contact is to gauge the service that the officer provided the community member. Were they treated with dignity and respect by our staff? This initiative began in February 2014. For the first three months, we made contact with community members who had called us for service. Then in May 2014, we requested that sergeants make contact with community members who had been arrested by our officers. To date, we have made contact with more than 500 community members, including more than 130 arrestees, gauging our service to them. Our main emphasis on why we were making the contact was asking the questions: Did we provide WOW service; did we go beyond their expectations; and were community members treated with dignity and respect?

“It has reinforced to me how much my officers are doing. They are actually damn good! And it gives me the opportunity to relay these stories back to them on how they treat people really is so powerful in how we as officers are perceived.” – 17-year veteran sergeant during get-together in my office

3. **Door-to-door specific incident information.** Incidents that draw more than normal attention within a residential area include multiple patrol units, lights and sirens, foot chases, physical arrests, incidents involving use of force, incidents involving community sensitivity, and finally, if your mother lived on the block, would she want to know? All of these meet the criteria for this initiative. This initiative began in January 2014. When something occurs that officers or command staff feel residents should be informed about first-hand from us, we engage in a door-to-door effort to inform people about what occurred. We send multiple officers or sergeants to go door to door meeting with the residents and explaining what occurred in their neighborhood. The feedback from our community members has been tremendous. They have contacted politicians, city hall leadership, and, again, created a positive buzz by relaying the stories in-person and via social media.

“We beat the press in getting information out to the people that it matters most to. And we know the information we give them is accurate. I love it!” – 22-year veteran sergeant during get-together in my office

4. **Downtown mall meet and greets.** Our city is divided into seven geographical areas served by neighborhood public safety stations. Our downtown area is like many others with well populated residential apartments and lofts as well as businesses varying from restaurants, night clubs, and apparel shops to a large upscale hotel. We have an officer assigned to the downtown area 24/7. We were motivated to find a way to provide WOW service to our business community in the same manner that we had to a neighborhood
with the walk-and-talk initiative. I analyzed our capacity and decided that we would rotate an officer, for one hour each, from our neighborhood stations to the downtown business district to be ambassadors of our city while they are meeting and greeting business owners, employees, visitors and residents who they make contact with. We began this program on May 1, 2015. It has been so well received by our officers and downtown community that there is no plan to discontinue it.

“I never knew how many people visited our downtown. Every time I have had the chance to do the meet and greets, downtown is so alive with people enjoying it. I also really like hearing how much we are appreciated when I talk with the business owners and employees. Many of the visitors comment that officers aren’t as friendly in their hometown. We must be doing something right.” – 7-year veteran officer during get-together in my office

5. **Empowered to serve.** Since November 25, 2013, this message has been reinforced to officers and command officers alike. They are empowered to serve. We trust their judgment. They will be supported. Our officers and command officers have far exceeded all of our initial expectations. The stories have been inconceivable at times and have touched our hearts in emotional ways. Internally I have put the expectation to the command staff in the Operations Division to recognize and praise officers for their performance. We establish a daily activity report (DAR) for command officers that mirror our internal expectations. In 2014, we issued 136 written commendations. In the five years prior to that, the highest number awarded was 34. The past two years we have identified officers to receive the All-Star Award, which is a city-wide award, for their efforts that were based on service, procedural justice, and police legitimacy.

Conc**lusion**: It works

Our profession needs to return to face-to-face policing. Our profession needs to re-commit to treating every single person, regardless of their lot in life, with dignity and respect. This is not a program, not a fad, not a temporary public relations gimmick. Our profession needs to better understand procedural justice and police legitimacy if we are to continue being one of the noblest professions that there is.

To view stories from community members and officers, go to [Downtown Kalamazoo Cops Facebook page](#).

For further information, please contact Captain Jim Mallery by malleryj@kalamazoocity.org or by phone at 269-365-8391.

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