

# Self-Accountability: The Ultimate Leadership Tool

By Neal Trautman, Ph.D.

As a leadership tool, discipline not only fails to prevent bad behavior, the perception that it is unfair causes employees and administrators to become divided by the “us versus them” mind-set. Furthermore, research now confirms it is a major source of real or perceived unfairness within most agencies.<sup>1</sup> These types of perceptions are what often generate the anger and frustration that countless officers use to rationalize their defiance and misconduct.

There are 17,000 law enforcement agencies in America. Most do not have systemic corruption, in that serious transgressions have not become part of their culture. Yet, the majority of departments have pessimistic, cynical employees who believe that disrespectful treatment of employees by their leaders is common. Some officers come to view their administrators as adversaries. Some sworn personnel grow to be disillusioned and dissatisfied, even though they were enthusiastic, passionate recruits a few years prior.

For any organization to achieve and sustain a culture of integrity, a more effective model of discipline must be implemented and maintained. Administrators have to embrace a new paradigm of self-accountability for all employees; one in which top leaders are not exempt. In other words, the goal should be to achieve self-accountability, rather than merely holding officers accountable after indiscretions occur. Although “disciplining” employees for a policy violation is both common sense and tradition, there are several other approaches that can ultimately result in the ultimate level of integrity, self-accountability.

The whole paradigm of workplace discipline and accountability should be transformed for all professions. As an example, just the word “discipline” creates negative reactions among some officers. Many people perceive it to be the same as punishment and for some, it is the reason they have become cynical. How ironic that a leadership technique intended to promote ethical behavior sometimes destroys the unity and teamwork so essential for integrity. Merely using the phrase self-accountability in lieu of discipline is beneficial.

There are significant reasons for encouragement however. Historic research on integrity and corruption has occurred during the last several years. We now understand of how to prevent the “us versus them” mentality, while establishing a outlook in which employees actually want to hold themselves and others accountable for their actions.

The new self-accountability paradigm requires five sequential accomplishments be achieved.

**First:** Administrators acknowledge and correct the flaws of the current discipline system.

**Second:** Administrators openly hold themselves accountable for honestly addressing any other obvious ethical problems.

**Third:** Statistics that indicate levels of integrity are continually tracked and supportive meetings to address the data are held.

**Fourth:** Make a self-study training program on corruption a consequences of misconduct.

**Fifth:** Transform the view of administrators being adversaries, to where employees want to hold themselves and fellow workers accountability for their actions.

---

<sup>1</sup> Trautman, Neal, National Institute of Ethics, Research conducted in 2001-2002 in which 810 officers from 18 states to identify what circumstances causes officers throughout the nation to rationalize their own misconduct. Findings revealed the number one reason for anger and frustration among officers was the perception that administrators play favoritism; 2<sup>nd</sup> was communication is very poor; 3<sup>rd</sup> was staffing levels are low; and 4<sup>th</sup> discipline is unfair and inconsistent.

There is strong evidence that corruption within law enforcement will increase in both severity and frequency during the next several years. This is probable because most agencies have hired officers they would have never hired ten or twenty years ago. Nothing is going to change the character of people after you hire them. If you have hired a thief, he or she will probably steal while wearing your uniform. If you hire a man who has always been a bully, he will continue to abuse and intimidate people with a badge on his chest.

I have spoken with thousands of formal leaders as a presenter of seminars throughout the last decade. Most agree that because fewer applicants applied during the late 1990s and that many of those who did apply had a poor work ethic, they hired people they should not have. It should not be surprising that people who do not have enough personal integrity to be part of law enforcement will commit misconduct. Consequently, transforming to a more effective model of self-accountability must become an immediate priority, for the pending increase of corruption may be diminished if we reform ourselves now.

### **The Five Requirements for Self-Accountability**

#### ***First Requirement:***

##### **Correct the Flaws of the Current Discipline System.**

The initial step for reaching self-accountability is to identify the faults of your current discipline process and correct them. Answering questions like the following is a good assessment method.

1. Do you use “progressive discipline?” If so, is there a standardized written policy for the “progression?”
2. Do your employees really have a clear understanding of exactly what is expected of them?
3. How do you know your rules and regulations are fair, clear, realistic and communicated?
4. Have you ever confirmed your policies and standards are perceived as reasonable and fair?
5. Do employees feel they can and should voice dissatisfaction with any policies they believe are unfair?
6. Do employees actually understand the consequences of violating policies?
7. Is there an appeals procedure that is considered fair?
8. Are employees asked for their opinions when policies are established?

Leadership driven by constant negative feedback creates an organization in which wrongdoing should be expected. Wherever this exists, it must be acknowledged, confronted, and resolved. By doing so, leaders will be replacing the superficial and futile tradition of mere negative reinforcement, with having the legitimate potential to achieve the ultimate solution to misconduct, self-accountability.

#### ***Second Requirement: Administrators Openly Hold Themselves***

##### **Accountable for Addressing the Obvious Ethical Problems of the Department.**

Ignoring apparent ethical problems is glaringly hypocritical and thwarts any desire to achieve self-accountability. It is unlikely that non-supervisors will want to hold themselves accountable when they know their leaders are not doing the same. The truth is that some chief-administrators just want to get to retirement.

Many administrators are instantly resentful and defensive at the mere inference that they are, or have ever been indifferent to ethics and integrity. Actions speak louder than words, however. The reality is that most workplaces are filled with employees who have never had any ethics training. Furthermore, the vast majority of workers in America feel far more stress from rampant backstabbing, internal politics, hidden agendas and blatant unfairness, than they do from simply doing their job.

At first glance, it may seem illogical that an upper administration would not be deeply committed to maintaining a high level of organizational integrity. After all, employee misconduct leads to civil suits, negative publicity, ineffectiveness, devastating morale, and the person at the top sometimes gets fired. In a number of case studies, it was ego that prevented the top person from acknowledging serious problems until it was too late. Research has found many situations where hiding ethical failings had literally become a tradition, with leader after leader ignoring severe problems so it will be “the next guy’s” predicament.

Leadership's arrogant indifference to twelve potential problems usually serves as the most fertile breeding ground for misconduct. Being indifferent to these internal flaws can be devastating. When neglected, the damage often spreads like cancer.

However, if these same areas are high priorities to an executive, they provide the best solutions for corruption. When administrators begin to openly address their ethical problem areas, they become role-models for self-accountability. The criticisms that cynics could use to demean leaders turn into powerful reasons that officers should hold themselves accountable for their own actions. The following is a list of the areas most critical for sustaining integrity. It can literally be used as a checklist.

## **Major Solutions for Law Enforcement Corruption**

### **Recruitment**

You will not change the character of someone after they become your employee. If recruitment and hiring are not high priorities, it is a wise decision to do so.

### **Hiring**

The best predictor of future behavior is past performance. Background investigations are the most critical element of workplace hiring procedures.

### **Field Training Officers**

When new workers spend time with senior employees who are cynical, apathetic, dishonest or degrade leaders, peer pressure usually prompts the "new hires" to acquire the same beliefs. Field training officers replicate their views and values on new employees every day.

### **Political Interference**

The four primary ways that mayors, city managers or other elected officials interfere with law enforcement are: forcing officer hiring standards to be lowered, interfering with promotions, causing discipline to be unfair and not providing the resources which administrators need to carryout their responsibilities.

### **Leaders Who Role Model Misconduct**

No one should expect non-supervisors to want to hold themselves accountable for their own integrity when they see managers or administrators routinely being unethical.

### **Anger and Frustration**

Angry, cynical employees literally become blinded by their bitterness as they commit wrongdoing. Research by the National Institute of Ethics indicate that the three most common reasons for anger and frustration among officers are favoritism regarding discipline, favoritism regarding promotions and lack of manpower.

### **Ignoring Personal Needs**

Many devastating events could have been avoided if officers had felt their departmental employee assistance program was confidential enough it could be used. Thousands of sergeants have missed or ignored obvious signs that an officer they were responsible for, was about to self-destruct.

**Lack of Self-Accountability** Once administrators openly acknowledge obvious ethical problems and begin to resolve them, everyone can be held accountable to an Oath of Honor: *I will always have the courage to hold myself and others accountable for doing what is right.*

### **Code of Silence**

The phenomenon commonly referred to as the code of silence exists within virtually all organizations, for it refers to the bond of loyalty. It is natural and expected for people who spend considerable time together,

have the same responsibilities or share similar adversities to become loyal toward each other. The challenge is to mold the culture to where loyalty to honor and integrity truly becomes more important than peer pressure and loyalty to another person.

### **Poor Employee Retention**

Keeping the best and brightest employees has never been more difficult, as employers actively compete against each other to hire the most qualified and continually try to steal the best away. Valid studies repeatedly confirm that the most effective way to retain good workers is to treat them with respect, appreciation and fairness.

### **Poor Promotion/Transfer Selection**

Ensuring that the individuals selected as first line-supervisors or those placed in critical positions is vital to the future of the agency. Sergeants serve as the first line of defense against wrongdoing, for they either condone and ignore minor transgressions, or confront and stop them. Personnel selected to be drug agents, evidence custodians, school resource officers or assigned to work in high crime areas will face additional temptations and dilemmas.

### **The Lack of Courage**

The most pervasive and destructive type of employment misconduct occurs when administrators intentionally ignore the obvious ethical problems within their organization. The second most devastating and frequent form is when officers self-servingly convince themselves that somehow they deserve the benefit their misconduct brings them.

### **Not Knowing Integrity Needs**

Employee misconduct can take many forms. Rudeness or disrespect to citizens, use of excessive force, racial profiling, theft from citizens and supervisors who treat employees with a lack of dignity or respect sometimes occur. Multi-million dollar civil suits, harsh political criticism of administrators, blistering media accounts, terminations of administrators, and embarrassment for law enforcement agencies are typical consequences. The only right way for any law enforcement agency to honestly address integrity is to first assess its needs.

When a true *Integrity Needs Assessment* is conducted, everyone benefits. The National Institute of Ethics can professionally assess the integrity of any law enforcement agency. This ensures the findings are valid and counteracts unfair critics and cynics.

### ***Third Requirement:***

#### **Leaders are Held Accountable by Tracking Statistical Indicators of Integrity.**

This requires that CAT (Constant Accountability Tracking) or a similar process be established. The CAT program is a process that holds sergeants and lieutenants directly, fairly and regularly accountable for the levels of integrity of the officers they supervise. This is done by constantly tracking citizen complaints, complimentary letters and phone calls from citizens, internal commendations, internal grievances, confirmed violations of policy, use of overtime and sick time, use of force, requests for transfer to and from sergeants and lieutenants and resisting arrest cases.

Monthly meetings are held for the purpose of divisions presenting the integrity indicator levels to upper administrators. The administrators who hear the presentations at CAT meetings must create a helpful atmosphere, rather than degrading supervisors who present unfavorable data. This is contrary to the demeaning and ridiculing of supervisors that sometimes occur at meetings within departments that hold similar meetings to track crimes rates.

***Fourth Requirement:***

**Use Education as an Element of Accountability.**

We can improve how employees are held accountable for wrongdoing by seeing that the concerned officer(s) complete a self-study training program about the type of misconduct he or she committed, as part of the consequence. Studying recent research or case studies that document the evolution officers go through who are now in prison has the potential to “reach” adversarial officers who would never be saved any other way.

**Research Findings**

An example of research findings that are easily accessible is the research conducted by the National Institute of Ethics that analyze all the officers who were “decertified” in America from 1990 through 1995. The average age of a decertified officer was 32. The average years of sworn years of service was 7.2. The average number of different agencies they had worked as a sworn officer in those 7.2 years, was 3.6 different agencies. The Top Ten Offenses officers were decertified for, are:

1.	False Statements/Reports	19.92% - Vast majority are falsifying overtime cases.
2.	Larceny	12.12%
3.	Sex Offenses Other Than Rape	9.48%
4.	Battery	9.15%
5.	Driving Under The Influence	5.08%
6.	Excessive Use of Force	5.05%
7.	Fraud/Forgery	5.03%
8.	Drugs Other Than Cannabis/Cocaine	4.64%
9.	Weapon Offenses	4.02%
10.	Cocaine-Possession or Sell	3.08%

**Case Studies**

Although the “rotten apple” theory is often used by administrators to hide the organizational problems that actually caused their scandal, the police phrase “the slippery slope” does accurately depict the evolution of how most fired or arrested officers destroy themselves. There are many excellent case studies that demonstrate how an officer’s initial cynicism evolves into bitterness so strong it is used to rationalize committing violations that continue to worsen until termination or arrest occurs.

Questions can be developed so those completing the self-study program spend considerable time focusing on topics such as how the destroyed officers became blinded by their own cynicism. The value of holding people accountable for relatively small infractions and the fact that greed related offenses send most officers to prison, can also be stressed.

***Fifth Requirement: Take Steps that help***

**Transform an Adversarial Culture into one of Self-Accountability.**

**Step One - Address Obvious Internal Problems**

The fact that employees have witnessed their top leaders’ self-accountability by acknowledging and addressing problems that have caused constant bitterness will serve as both inducement and justification that other employees must now hold themselves accountable for their actions. Role modeling is the most powerful way to alter behavior in virtually any setting. When officers have seen that the supervisors and administrators commit unethical acts with no consequences, it should be expected that others would attempt to do the same. All levels of leadership must consistently, openly role model their own self-accountability to have any possibility that others will do the same.

**Step Two - Demand Honorable, Respectful Leadership**

To achieve all of the advantages that self-accountability has to offer, officers must honestly care about the work they do and those they are sworn to serve. While great cops care about those things naturally, research confirms that how employees are treated has an enormous influence on the behavior of even the best officers.

Said another way, workplace cultures are the result of conditions that are produced by leaders, they do not happen by accident. Either the leaders or other people with influential personalities create the cultures of various units within an agency. For the culture of any shift, unit, squad or division to be filled with honor and integrity, trust, respect and honesty has to have been constantly demonstrated by its leaders. It could not have been developed any other way.

### **Step Three - Promote Self-Accountability rather than Discipline**

Achieving self-accountability among workers is much more effective than using the tradition model of discipline, for the first is preventative and discipline is “after the fact.” More than anything, self-accountability is a matter of attitude. It is the consequence of having pride in ones work, to a large degree because one’s work is appreciated.

Synonyms for the word discipline are control, regulation, authority, obedience and punishment. Even the phrase “being disciplined” usually generates something negative in the mind of many people. This is the opposite of what leaders should strive for if they are to be proactive and in reality, have a possibility of achieving real integrity.

### **Step Four - Conduct Powerful Career Survival Training**

Conduct at least a four-hour block of internal training for all employees. Instead of referring to it as ethics training, change the entire tone of the session by calling it “Career Survival” training. Just the phrase “ethics training” can prompt some officers to find an excuse not to attend. Many others will assume it is going to be a dry, boring lecture and not walk into class with a positive attitude. Speaking of walking into the classroom, it is absolutely crucial that the top administrators attend the first session, or have a separate one just for the agency leaders.

A suggested outline for the four-hours of internal career survival training includes:

- Introduction (Getting everyone to retirement and how important the training is) 20 min.
- Competition (Form groups that compete while answering research questions) 30 min.
- Break 10 min.
- Video case study about officer who goes to prison 50 min.
- Break 10 min.
- Videotape simulation training (Anger, lust, greed and peer pressure dilemmas) 50 min.
- Break 10 min.
- Continuum of Compromise© Dr. Kevin Gilmartin 30 min.
- Why all employees must hold themselves accountable for their conduct 30 min.

The state-of-the-art for internal training does not include using part of your instruction time for moral theory, abstract thought and philosophical discussions. Instead, conduct realistic, blunt, interactive training with a goal that is said repeatedly; get everyone to their retirement. Every minute should be devoted to engrain the knowledge, skill and abilities they need to rise above the toughest moments cops face; ethical dilemmas. It is both ironic and sad that even though our hardest moments are instances of anger, lust, greed or peer pressure, the majority of all departments have still not conducted even one hour of training to give officers the skills people need to overcome them. Present good career survival training so those in your agency can go on to have an enjoyable second part of life.

The last thirty minutes of career survival training is the most critical. It is then that the instructor must be most convincing, in order to get the sincere “buy in” for workers to sincerely believe and act based upon self-accountability. What it all comes down to is that it is the responsibility of administrators to create and maintain an atmosphere of respect, dignity and appreciation for all employees. The obligation of workers however, is to hold themselves accountable for their own behavior.

Officers who lack self-accountability are not hard to spot. They write sloppy reports and seldom do anything by their own initiative. They complain about everything and the sincerity that once prompted them to apply for the academy has been replaced with anger and frustration. They just don't care anymore. It is the responsibility line-supervisors to stay involved and help subordinates with this kind of mind-set.

Research has shown that officers with the cynical, "I don't give a damn" attitude are much more likely than others to do things that will get them fired or arrested, because their bitterness allows them to rationalize their misconduct. Get the cynics in front of a passionate trainer who is armed with the state-of-the-art facts and skilled in how to teach with interaction and fun. The power of someone who deeply believes in taking their best shot at reaching even the most adversarial cop never ceases to be astounding. The goal of course, is career survival for everyone.

Other steps that help to transform an adversarial culture into one of self-accountability are:

- The chief administrator personally instructs the first Loyal to Integrity class, to other leaders.
- "Loyal to Integrity" pins/nameplates are acquired for all employees.
- All formal leaders are required to speak with those who directly report to them about integrity, loyalty and the code of silence.
- The chief administrator becomes directly involved in the quality of background investigations.
- The chief or sheriff attends FTO meetings to demonstrate the importance of the program.
- The chief administrator conducts annual confidential surveys to ascertain the level and source of anger or frustration among employees.
- Chief administrator demands ethical, respectful role-modeling of all leaders.
- All new officers literally sign their name to an Oath of Honor. The oath states "Honor, integrity and respect shall never be betrayed. I will always hold myself and others accountable for having the courage to do the right thing."
- Video or audio ethical dilemma simulation training that forces students to use an ethical decision-making process to decide what they will do when faced with unexpected ethical dilemmas is conducted for all new officers.
- The topics of integrity, honesty and loyalty to integrity are added to the FTO, DOR form.
- The topics of peer pressure and the code of silence are added to the master training topic list.
- FTOs receive training about the code of silence and the phenomenon of loyalty.
- FTOs always review written policies honesty, lying and not reporting misconduct with new officers.
- FTOs always give a written exam on integrity.
- Use of force, citizen compliments and complaint letters, internal commendations and confirmed violations of policies, along with overtime use records are tracked as a means to intervene. Intervention should occur when the statistics indicate an officer is either in need of positive recognition or assistance to overcome a problem.
- The reality and perception of consistent, progressive discipline is confirmed through a confidential survey. If the perception of officers is that discipline is not fair, corrective measures are taken.
- Officers who conduct internal affairs investigations must complete a internal affairs seminar.
- The organization must have written policies that protect whistleblowers. In addition, policies should mandate termination for anyone who does not report misconduct to a supervisor and IA, and for anyone who lies to IA. Additionally, supervisors must review the policies with subordinates.

Neal Trautman, Ph.D., is the Director of both the Global Institute of Law Enforcement Supervision at the University of Southern MS and the nonprofit National Institute of Ethics. He has authored ten books, was chairman of the IACP Ethics Training Cmt., co-chairman of the IACP Police Image and Ethics Cmt., President of the International Association of Ethics Trainers, and has instructed over 600 Integrity/Leadership seminars. He can be reached at (800) 273-2559. [www.ethicsinstitute.com](http://www.ethicsinstitute.com)