

Us versus Them Mentality

The Mollen Commission summarized how powerful the link between the code of silence, the us versus them mentality and police corruption is, when they wrote: “The Commission found the code of silence and the “us vs. them” mentality present wherever we found corruption. This helps explain how groups of corrupt officers can openly engage in corruption for long periods of time with impunity.”¹ It is not difficult to find cases that demonstrate this fact.

Identifying some of the serious scandals that have occurred during the relatively recent past confirms the commission’s conclusion. Serious law enforcement corruption can exist in plain view for lengthy periods, in large degree, due to the “us versus them” mindset and the code of silence. Examples include:

1. Atlanta area – Six officers were convicted of federal corruption charges in 1995. An additional five officers were suspended, but not arrested, in an FBI undercover sting.
2. Chicago area – Undercover sting investigations by the FBI and the Chicago Police Department internal affairs unit resulted in three officers being arrested for conspiracy to commit robbery and the sale of illegally confiscated drugs in 1997. A separate scandal involving a tactical street unit led to the indictment of seven officers in 1996. The officers allegedly used their positions to extort and rob drug dealers.
3. Cleveland area – Forty-four sheriff’s deputies and corrections officers from five different law enforcement agencies were charged with cocaine trafficking related offenses in 1998. Once again, the arrests stemmed from an FBI undercover operation.
4. Detroit area – Nine officers are arrested in 1991 after an investigation determined they had conspired to aid in the distribution of cocaine and money laundering.
5. Los Angeles – As members of a drug unit, twenty-seven sheriff’s office deputies and one police officer are convicted of skimming millions of dollars of drug money in 1994. By the year 2000, twenty-four LAPD officers and detectives were either fired, arrested or are under investigation for planting drugs on suspects, falsifying reports, making false arrests and an unjustified shooting.
6. Miami – In terms of the number of officers involved, the Miami Police Department experienced the notorious Miami River Boys scandal. It is the largest scandal on record.

¹ Commission Report: *Commission to Investigate Allegation of Police Corruption and the Anti-Crime Procedures of the Police Department*, Milton Mollen, Chair, July 7, 1994, 60.

More than 100 officers were arrested, terminated or disciplined in the drug scandal that included several murders.

7. New Orleans – Officers were paid to protect a cocaine supply warehouse containing 286 pounds of cocaine for six months. As a result of this and other crimes, including murders and bank robberies, over a dozen officers are convicted of crimes.
8. New York City – In 1992, six officers were arrested for narcotics offenses committed over a four-year period. In an unrelated scandal, thirty officers were charged with drug-associated crimes that continued for more than six years.
9. Philadelphia – Ten officers were arrested between 1995 and 1998 in Philadelphia’s 39th district. The offenses ranged from burglary of homes, robbing drug dealers, to theft of drugs and planting drugs suspects.
10. Savannah – Ten officers were convicted of drug related crime following an FBI
11. undercover investigation in 1994. Officers had protected some drug dealers, while stealing guns and drugs from other dealers.
12. Washington, D.C. – An FBI undercover operation resulted in the arrest and conviction of twelve officers in 1994. The officers had unknowingly assisted an FBI undercover agent posing as a drug dealer who had brought hundreds of kilos of cocaine into their jurisdiction.²

Some officers acquire the adversarial perspective that people who are not officers do not understand them, are unfairly critical and are their adversaries. This distorted, inaccurate view first alienates them from the very people they are sworn to protect. It sometimes continues to grow in severity to the point that it is used to justify committing unethical or illegal transgressions.

The “us versus them” mentality manifests itself in two ways: an adversarial relationship with administrators and alienation from the public. Workplace cultures that are riddled with non-supervisory employees who display an “us versus them” mentality toward administrators, do not occur by accident. Specific behaviors prompted and nurtured its development. Opposing leadership actions can counteract this type of culture.

Many national commissions that were convened to investigate serious police misconduct have confirmed that organizational cultures do not develop randomly. What they become is

⁶⁴ United States General Accounting Office, Law Enforcement : Information on Drug-Related Police Corruption, a report to the Honorable Charles B. Rangel, House of Representatives, May, 1998, 36-37.

usually the result of the behaviors that leaders have demonstrated, emphasized, role modeled, rewarded and disciplined.³ After visiting hundreds of law enforcement agencies as an instructor of ethics seminars, it has been my experience that the “us versus them” culture is much more prevalent than one where harmony between leaders and officers is the prevalent tone.

It is imperative that administrators within any organization clarify the core principles they want to guide the daily activities of every unit, squad and division. Although many strategies and policies come and go, core values such as honor, integrity, fairness, equality, respect and honesty is what will determine what type of cultures those various divisions will have.⁴ When leaders consistently, sincerely display such values, the only way the “us versus them” form of culture should logically be able to take hold is when a department has hired recruits with a firmly established negative mindset.

An example of how extreme this same attitude can become when pitted against citizens is found in the transcripts of a commission investigating a New York City scandal. An accused officer stated “The beating spree spared no one there that night: the good, the bad, the young, the old. The victims were all perceived as one: they were the “them.”⁵ Once this attitude spreads throughout a group of officers they become detached from logic and reasoning. For all practical purposes, they find themselves working in a world where the police are pitted against the people they earlier swore to protect and serve.

³ William Weisz, J., address before the National Executive Institute Association of the Federal Bureau of Investigation, Sun Valley, Idaho, June 15, 1996.

⁴ Kim M. Ward, and Ernest L. Crist, *Strategic Planning: A Leadership Tool In Preventing Corruption, Misconduct to Corruption, Avoiding the Impending Crisis*, U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, June, 1998, 18-20.

To a large extent, the code of silence and the “us versus them” phenomenon bond together. The grave consequences for violating the bond are an indication of how solid the union becomes. In some agencies, officers who betray “us” and report misconduct to “them” are ostracized and harassed; become targets of complaints and physical threats; and are made to fear that they will be left alone on the streets in a time of crisis. Such brutal enforcement fuels corruption because it makes corrupt cops feel protected and invulnerable. As former New York City police officer Bernard Cawley testified at the public hearing:

Question: Were you ever afraid that one of your fellow officers might turn you in?

Answer: Never.

Question: Never?

Answer: Because it was the Blue Wall of Silence. Cops don't tell on cops. And if they did tell on them, just say if a cop decided to tell on me, his career is ruined. He's going to be labeled a rat. So if he's got fifteen more years to go on the job, he's going to be miserable because it follows you wherever you go. And he could be in a precinct; he's going to have nobody to work with. And chances are if it comes down to it, they're going to let him get hurt.⁶

There are several valid reasons that the most vital works associated with the code of silence are those regarding the organizational culture of a law enforcement agency. A case in point is text of Sissela Bok, *Secrets*. Bok comments on the fact that it is the very nature of the police to have secrecy. “Police officers maintain secrecy about mistakes in arrest, excesses in interrogation, and illegal actions by fellow officers. Indeed, rookie officers are often told that one of the most fundamental rules for police officers is that they must never betray other officers, least of all by testifying against them.”⁷

⁶⁷ Commission Report, Commission to *Investigate Allegations of Police Corruption and the Anti-Crime Procedures of the Police Department*, Milton Mollen, Chair, July 7, 1994, 48.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 52-53.

⁶⁹ Sissila Bok, *Secrets*, Prentice Hall, 1991, 162.

The research of G. P. Alpert, J. R. Greens, and P. Styles, as presented in their paper “Values and Culture in Two American Police Departments: Lessons From King Arthur,” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, in 1992. The authors expound on the fact that when the desired values are not sincerely embraced and role modeled by the organization’s administrators, officers are not likely to exhibit behavior consistent with the desired values.⁸

The work of these researchers also explores the issue of ingraining desired values. Achieving these objectives is absolutely crucial to developing an organizational culture that prevents the code of silence from developing or continuing, rather than promoting it.

70 G. P. Albert, J. R. Greens, and P. Styles, “*Values and Culture in Two American Police Departments: Lessons From King Arthur*,” *Journal of Contemporary Criminal Justice*, 1992, Volume 8, Number 3, 183-185.