Creating Safe Spaces That Foster Trust & Empathy: Comparing Facilitated Police – Community Dialogue Programs

by
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INTRODUCTION

Over the last few years, America has witnessed a distressing cycle of repeated violence between police officers and African Americans. Seeing this troubling dynamic erupt in numerous towns and cities leaves Americans wondering whether racial divides can be reconciled. Since Trayvon Martin was killed by a volunteer neighborhood watchman in 2012, a stream of related tragedies made national news. Police shot Michael Brown to death in Ferguson, Missouri, and strangled Eric Garner to death in Staten Island, New York, for allegedly selling loose cigarettes. Protests erupted in cities throughout America as literally hundreds of black Americans were killed by police from 2014 to 2016.

After retaliatory shootings of police in Dallas and Baton Rouge, President Obama asked the United States Conference of Mayors and the National League of Cities to create conversations between police and communities about ways in which they work together to police neighborhoods more effectively, protect peace and First Amendment rights, and honor everyone affected by tragedy. In response, over one hundred events and programs began alongside many others that arose organically. As a result of its settlement with the U.S. Department of Justice, the city of Ferguson, Missouri, promised to participate in a series of small-group facilitated dialogues between police and community members who have not had strong relationships with the Ferguson Police Department. After riots in Baltimore erupted following the death of Freddie Gray while in police custody, Community Mediation Maryland offered mediation, facilitated dialogue, and conflict management skills training to citizens and police, as discussed in the accompanying article from the National Association for Community Mediation.

Dialogue between police and citizens – as simple as it may sound – has the power to heal broken relationships, foster mutual understanding, change attitudes and, ultimately, policy. Facilitators of dialogue can create safe, structured opportunities for participants to discuss divisive social issues, such as ethnicity and policing. The process helps participants grow internally and move beyond preconceived perceptions of others, which can be a powerful outcome, because much of the tension and violence stems from the attitudes and assumptions each group has toward the other. In the right hands, facilitated dialogue can help participants improve their ability to relate to and engage with others.

Safety and trust are critical elements in this process. The safety of neighborhoods and the legitimacy of law enforcement depend on solid, mutually dependent relationships between citizens and police. Interventions that aim to repair community mistrust of police -- of which facilitated dialogue is only one -- are popular and varied. Although there is wide latitude in program design and implementation, in one way or another, these initiatives try to build better relationships between police and minority citizens. This article will distill the core elements of facilitated dialogue programs from the many efforts towns and cities undertake to repair and restore relationships between police and communities.

CORE ELEMENTS OF FACILITATED DIALOGUE BETWEEN COMMUNITIES AND POLICE.

Project Planning

Sustained, advanced planning and preparations are critically important to police-community dialogue initiatives. Organizers need to understand the nature and extent of prior conversations in order to achieve maximum impact. If organizers can respond to specific incidents immediately, they may be able to prevent reactions from hardening into positions or a particular incident evolving into a symbol of something much larger and more difficult to manage. Because organizers in Baltimore faced broad mistrust between community and police beyond Freddie Gray's death, they built support for the dialogue and designed a program to facilitate mutual understanding between officers and citizens and change perceptions of each other.

Event Planning

A diverse group of stakeholders are needed, including citizen-advocacy groups, elected officials, businesses, and local government agencies that may come into contact with police and citizens, particularly young people. It is important to engage and manage media

so as to establish credibility and promote participation. Goals for the dialogue need to be formed in advance, participants need to be identified, and political support must be built over time, with the assurance that no hidden agendas exist. Dialogue leaders should consider meeting separately with police and community members before convening an event, to explain the process, answer questions, and address concerns. During these one-on-one meetings, organizers can gather information useful in the dialogue process, such as perceptions participants have of themselves and each other.

Organizers need to explain clearly that dialogue fosters mutual understanding between people who have different beliefs — the process does not declare winners and losers, and will not allow outsiders to impose their views on the community. Communication agreements and assurances of confidentiality need to be forged in advance to prevent negative, counter-productive communication. If resources permit, participants appreciate the availability of refreshment.

Participant Safety

Safety is particularly important for everyone involved in police-community dialogue. Many residents have reason to be afraid of police or even being seen meeting with police. Safe, neutral spaces need to be secured, perhaps with separate entrances so that participants are not seen "snitching" to the police. Conveners need to understand all the safety concerns of potential participants and implement as many responsive solutions as possible. Important safety components also include process options that allow citizens to raise concerns and ask questions anonymously, and the presences of impartial facilitators who set a respectful tone and intervene to uphold clear behavioral norms.

Program organizers should help the participants identify attainable outcome goals in advance. Each side should think about the topics they want to address and agree to address issues that are important to the other side. Everyone should acknowledge that disagreements will occur and are normal. All participants should be assured that the same behavior expectations will exist for everyone — police will be expected to adhere to the same standards as community members, and vice versa. Everyone should make a pledge of confidentiality (unless the group agrees that some "takeaways" will be shared with the larger community or others outside of the process). Some programs establish a dress code such that officers wear uniforms, or not, and that youth wear something "appropriate" to the occasion.

Program Design

The dialogue should help participants break free from old patterns of talking, thinking, and relating. After introductions and orientations, introduce an "ice-breaker" or two that can help participants get to know each other and consider issues from different points of view. For example, ask police to introduce themselves to a group of young people as their teenaged selves, recalling how they spent their free time, or have them describe which adults were important to them and why. Ask community members to summarize how they feel about police in one word, or have them offer advice to police about working in their neighborhoods. Participants should move gradually. Do not begin the process by focusing on the types of interactions participants have as community members and law enforcement officers. Build up to that, so participants become comfortable enough to open up and share stories about personal experiences they have had with each other.

Facilitators should pose questions that invite participants to share their personal values and assumptions and uncover deeper, more complex understandings of their opinions and feelings — not those of others or the media. Eventually, participants confront assumptions they may have carried inside themselves — sometimes at unconscious levels. Effective dialogue will help participants express their hopes and concerns and admit what they do not know about others. When officers and citizens see commonality among themselves, the tenor of interaction and degree of understanding between them often changes for the better.

Conveners might consider a co-facilitation model as an easy way to demonstrate how members of different identity groups can effectively cooperate. This can give the process more credibility, improve participation, improve time management, and better respond to the unexpected.

The Importance of Empathy

Facilitators need to provide opportunities that help participants identify with each other, since prejudice and intolerance may lie at deeper, unconscious levels. Empathy can positively influence how people react to law enforcement representatives. Community members are more likely to trust officers when they feel understood and respected. People who develop a connection with others can develop the capacity to feel empathetic toward them. Thus, police-community dialogue program designers might consider including small-group activities that facilitate mixed social contact between participants.

Participants who attend citizen police academies (CPAs) are exposed through simulations to the life-and-death stressors faced by officers. Police departments operate CPAs in an effort to foster understanding of police work and improve relationships with community members. CPA activities allow citizens to assist with patrol operations, crime investigations, and experience realistic situations that put officers in danger. Although conveners may not have the time or resources to have dialogue participants attend a full-fledged CPA addressing the use of force, facilitators should consider a reverse role-play where citizens experience the intensity of police work and officers experience the fear and indignation of being stopped and questioned by an armed officer on the street. These role-reversals can make strong impressions on participants, thereby fostering empathy between officers and citizens for the worlds they inhabit.

Facilitation Practice

Police-community dialogue programs should employ basic facilitation procedures. People who have differing views, identities, and roles in the community may benefit from small-group interaction when sharing and listening to personal accounts of interactions with police or other members of the community. When tensions heat up and participants fail to honor their own communication agreements, facilitators must be ready to intervene or ask the participants to re-establish how the process will proceed. Facilitators must be found who understand relevant cultural differences in communication and listening patterns, how agreements are made, authority is treated, time is used, trust is built, and people are motivated — to name just a few elements.

Content and Outcome Neutrality

Conveners and facilitators of police - community dialogue must be (and appear to be) neutral and impartial regarding the program's content and outcome. Conveners must keep in mind who "owns" the conflict and potential solution. Participants will benefit most by hearing the experiences of those with whom they interact. Solutions offered (or worse, imposed) from "outsiders" are often dismissed because they do not receive the buy-in needed to create sustainable, positive change.

From a practical perspective, it is hard to imagine a convener or facilitator who does not have an interest or a stake in the outcome of any intervention between the police and residents. Few people will invest the necessary time and resources into facilitating police-community dialogue if positive outcomes are not intended. Of course, organizers should consider how participants might assess the facilitator so that all participants engage in the process in an open and honest way. The neutrality of facilitators requires more than a pledge to be free from bias. In this context, neutrality needs to be observable and believable, which requires experience managing volatile disputes in a way that avoids problem-solving or editorializing and asks open-ended questions.

To what degree should conveners and facilitators understand and appreciate the plight of oppressed groups? Is facilitated dialogue the right process if one group wants to accelerate the rate of change and the other only to listen and learn? These are important questions that perhaps indicate the need for additional processes to address the political nature of the relationship between law enforcement and communities. Conveners and facilitators of police-community dialogue who seek to "balance power" between dominant and subdominant groups may be able to impartially highlight the real-world experiences and effects of racial and ethnic prejudice in a way that engages participants. But care must be taken not to shut down other participants or eclipse their views.

Closing

In closing the dialogue, facilitators should summarize what the group covered in the session(s). Allow time for participants to reflect on what they have experienced and invite them to offer final thoughts and feelings. A symbolic closing activity or small celebration such as a cookout, pizza, or game can be a memorable way to conclude. Some facilitators may want to ask participants to articulate how they will act differently in the future or how they might want to move beyond talk toward action. Facilitators also need to allow time for participants to evaluate their experience.

Sustaining the Effort

Houston's experience with police—community dialogue in the 1960s was a precursor to the challenges faced by today's organizers of police-community dialogue: programs will die without sustained engagement or positive change. Granted, no formula exists for successful police-community dialogue programs and organizers should be prepared for high levels of resistance, skepticism, and opposition even when police officers and community leaders agree to support a program.

Organizers need stamina to keep hope alive for their program, even when key supporters lose interest and prospects for success look dim. For example, a collaborative agreement between police and citizens is well into its second decade in Cincinnati, Ohio. The Cincinnati Collaborative, started in 2001, is a recognized model for improving police-community relations. To maximize chances of success, the Collaborative brought together almost every segment of society: political, judicial, institutional, and citizenry. Some unusual factors coalesced. First, even though a number of federal law suits had been filed against the police alleging racial profiling practices, local leaders knew that social and identity issues such as the need for respect, dignity, and control over one's destiny, were at the heart of the problem, and could not be addressed by an adversarial process. Second, a successful plan to engage the media helped organizers maintain credibility and engage over 3,500 citizens to participate, provide input, and eventually, reach consensus on a platform of goals. The Cincinnati Collaborative was not born from a peaceful process. Ironically, a riot broke out during its formation that actually sustained the effort.

The process in Cincinnati raised an important sub-set of identity-based conflict that almost derailed the initiative: the conflict between professions. After the extraordinary work organizers accomplished through dialogue and deliberation, attorneys and institutional leaders who were not involved in the goal-setting process, nearly killed the entire effort by maintaining their roles as zealous, adversarial advocates. This caused a major rift with facilitators and other collaborative professionals involved in negotiating the final terms of the collaborative agreement. The process intentionally allowed opposing parties to have different ideas of what they were doing and why. Some parties wanted to avoid a court-mandated solution, but others wanted the court to enforce implementation of the negotiated agreement and would not have mediated without the court's involvement. Perhaps this

tension helped the parties reach a resolution, but it also fostered an adversarial mistrust between them that remained in the wake of the formal resolution.

Evaluation

Program organizers need to have considered how they will measure the program and its impact from the beginning of the planning process. User opinions, observational reports, and personal interviews comprise the main set of evaluation tools that have supported the claim that dialogue programs make a positive impact. But these tools do not assess our human capacity for inner transformation. We have yet to develop instruments that measure critical reflection of one's own ideas, or the extent to which new possibilities are recognized, or whether shared meaning is developed, even though these inner transformations may have the greatest potential for generating positive social change.

Programs need sufficient time and adequate resources, which are more likely to be awarded to those that can produce objective data to justify the investment. Although facilitated dialogue between police and communities has important ramifications for public safety, law enforcement legitimacy, and democracy, evaluators and conveners will have to uncover what measurably works, or funders may move on to something else.

Conclusion

After all is said and done, dialogue programs may fall out of favor if they fail to lead to meaningful changes in policies and future interactions between police and citizens. Cincinnati's agreement is credited with keeping protests peaceful after police killed an unarmed black man in 2015. It is noteworthy to witness a community respond with peaceful protest after the use of deadly force by law enforcement against an unarmed black man, whether or not the outcome can be traced to a particular process for evaluation purposes.

Given the national, historical, and cultural scale of tensions between police and ethnic minorities, perhaps facilitated dialogue is best supported by a number of additional interventions. For example, in addition to police–youth dialogue, Community Mediation Maryland offers citizen complaint mediation and collaborative policy change programs in Baltimore City and throughout Maryland. Dialogue that facilitates the safe exchange of fear, vulnerability, and other emotions, must occur before looking toward the future. Groups that have historically opposed each other can improve relations, but they need to experience cooperative interaction, agree on shared goals, learn about the "other" person, have a sense of equality between themselves, and receive support from political leaders. With sustained effort, positive relationships between police and minority communities have a much stronger chance of being developed. ■