



THE PATH FORWARD STARTS WITH LEADERSHIP AND CULTURE

An Op-ed by Sarasota County Sheriff Tom Knight

The recent death in Minneapolis of George Floyd at the hands of a Minneapolis Police Department officer has sparked outrage in communities throughout the country, including Sarasota County.

This time, however, the national reaction feels different than when Michael Brown was killed in Ferguson, Missouri, or when Freddie Gray was killed while in police custody in Baltimore, or when Laquan McDonald was shot 16 times in Chicago.

The relationship between citizens and police has reached a tipping point. We have never seen the shared sentiment and shows of unity between police and protesters that we are seeing now. Police leaders, including all 67 Florida sheriffs, are publicly decrying the Minneapolis Police Department and use of tactics like the knee on Floyd's airway that obviously resulted in his death. They are not fearful of backlash from their brothers and sisters in uniform. It would seem that the thin blue line is slowly being erased.

This begs the question, "What now?"

It is foolish to believe that everything will change from this point forward, and there will never be another tragedy like Floyd's. Police officers are imperfect human beings, and some will still make bad decisions in heated moments — decisions that can determine whether they, their fellow officers, and the citizens they were sworn to serve will live or die. The most we can expect is a continued evolution toward trust between communities and police agencies, reducing the number of volatile situations with bad outcomes like the one we have just seen.

There are nearly 18,000 police agencies in the U.S., employing more than 680,000 people. Reform will not happen overnight. How can we accelerate it?

Recently, U.S. Rep. Ayanna Pressley of Massachusetts stated that she wants to legislate police policy.

"I know when you're talking about systemic injustice, sometimes people will chalk it up to culture, but culture is human behavior. And it can be changed," Pressley said. "And I think that begins by holding all accountable, from this White House to our State House to our City Hall, to root out the scourge of police brutality and the many other intersectional injustices that also play a part."

Pressley is right on culture: It has tremendous power to shape human behavior, bad or good. She believes legislation will change behavior and improve police culture. I believe she has the process backward.

A positive police culture must come first. It is the foundation of reform, and without it, nothing changes. No amount of policy, legislation and diversity in the ranks will change the behavior of cops in a negative culture with an "us versus them" mentality.

How else do you explain the continued racial bias in law enforcement against African American people, despite two decades of increasingly diverse hiring practices and legislated reform measures nationwide?

When I watched the video of officer Derick Chavin leaning on George Floyd's neck, I saw what America saw — unspeakable police brutality. After nearly 34 years in law enforcement, I also saw things that many others did not. I saw black gloves that were likely not COVID-19 protection, but a statement of power and intimidation. I saw four officers, including an African American and Asian, with an attitude that said it was just another day at the office. In my mind, the situation was clear: the Minneapolis Police Department had allowed a culture to fester in which officers feel empowered and separate from their communities. De-escalation is something to which they pay lip service but don't practice.

Could a policy against putting your knee on someone's airway have saved Floyd? Possibly. But a police culture like the one in Minneapolis is a perpetual breeding ground for problems. If not Floyd, it would eventually be someone else's life lost at the hands of the police in any of a hundred ways.

Most people don't want to hear this. Changing police culture and mindset is big and messy. It takes a lot of time. You can't wrap it up in a bow like a policy or a law: "There, the bill is signed now so we've solved this problem." You can't measure it easily, like the number of minority officers in your ranks.

The good news is that it is possible. It begins at the top. Law enforcement leaders are the CEOs of their organizations, and as they go, so go their people. We know this from the private sector, where CEOs and their management styles define everything about their companies. We also know from the military that good leaders can achieve remarkable things.

If America wants to accelerate change in police reform, it needs to focus seriously on its police leaders — which is not the same as handcuffing them into submission. In hiring or appointing police chiefs, municipalities should look beyond credentials on paper and talk to people who have worked under the job candidates. Likewise, voters should elect sheriffs not based on their personal ideologies, but on their proven leadership qualities.

Most importantly, the people who put police leaders into position should ask themselves, "Is this the person who can build a culture that creates trust?" Then, hold them accountable.

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