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Inside Internal Affairs
with John Hein

Why our best police officers are altruists

Because 'real police work' can include dealing with truancy, family issues, traffic safety and control, community health, and neighborhood disputes, many of the most effective police officers are those who are altruistic

A public servant is a government employee at any one of several levels who provides some type of service which benefits the general public — particularly the disadvantaged. A police department provides a public service and can be considered a social service agency because of the myriad issues addressed by police officers — recall that most police issues are not crime related.

'Real police work' can include dealing with truancy, family issues, traffic safety and control, community health and safety, neighborhood disputes, and many other issues.

Because of this, many of the most effective police officers are ones who are altruistic.

Motivated Toward Good

Altruism is selfless, genuine concern for the well-being of others. An altruist who performs a service for others does it for their own personal gratification. An altruistic police officer feels a sense of fulfillment when he or she risks their life to help others. An altruistic police officer is one who is approachable by citizens, is easy to meet and uses his or her 'game face' only for the chosen few who deserve a stern attitude and face of authority.

Arrogance, aloofness, being overbearing and a cynic are not traits of an altruist — although on occasion being overbearing is appropriate for any officer. An altruist is not detached, disinterested, or unconcerned. An altruist is compassionate, involved, and engaged with the matter at hand, whether that is a victim's plight or a citizen's concern.

Whether an officer responds to social issues or criminal violations, maintaining order requires a certain mindset that develops and keeps an interactive relationship with citizens served. Many reports of police misconduct portray officers as applying their authority arbitrarily, being insensitive and caustic to others, and exhibiting an attitude that their authority gives them privilege and entitlement. Unfortunately, many department leaders ignore reports and fail to learn from mistakes.

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Countering Others' Misdeeds

The occurrence of police misconduct — or the perception of misconduct — which can be caused by insensitivity of officers, (among other reasons) cannot continue if a police department is to be successful in maintaining order. An entire department must understand the culture of the people it serves even if that culture is markedly different from their own.

All officers may not be altruists, but all officers must know they cannot successfully serve the public without civil intercourse and vigilant respect along with discipline and professionalism.

About the author

John F. Hein is an adjunct instructor of criminal justice for the American Public University System and a retired executive of the former U.S. Customs Service. Hein served 35 years in civilian and military security and law enforcement agencies. He is a member of ASIS International, an association of security professionals, and is a Certified Protection Professional (CPP). Hein supported, supervised or conducted employee internal investigations for the U.S. Department of Transportation, Office of Inspector General, then for the former U.S. Customs Service, Office of Internal Affairs, and, as a reservist, the U.S. Air Force Office of Special Investigations. He was a deputy sheriff prior to his service as a federal criminal investigator. He is the author of [*Inside Internal Affairs: An In-Depth Look at the People, Process and Politics*](#), published by Looseleaf Law Publications, Inc.