

# **Responsibility, Leadership, Public Trust--Tough Words**

by Edward J. Tully

Many words in the English language give definition to our conduct as individuals or to the conduct of organizations and agencies of government. Among these words are three that have special importance to those of us in law enforcement interested in becoming men and women of character. The words are responsibility, leadership and public trust.

## **Preface**

The world we have known has changed rapidly in the last 50 years. The changes were driven by the advent of high technology, which changed the way our society earns its living. The evolution from an industrial society characterized by the blue collar worker, to a society that now makes money by managing information or providing service to others has produced rapid changes more profound than in any other time in human history. But as Alvin Toffler, Daniel Bell and John Naisbitt have pointed out, these economic/technological changes have also prodded our society to examine virtually every traditionally held belief and custom. In addition every organization, including government, continues to be scrutinized for its relevancy to this new way of earning a living.

As Naisbitt pointed out in *Megatrends*, the time between ages of work will be very tumultuous as we all try to find meaning and relevancy in the principles by which we live.

It is probably best to leave to future historians the task of trying to figure out just who, or what, is to blame for the confusion in today's society. I think it fair to say, however, that we have all had a hand in trashing our traditional values and institutions. It is paradoxical that high technology with all of its great promise to improve our lives, in fact, has been used as the reason for us to create a society that by any historical standard is troubled! Crime in all of its forms, including violence, is at epidemic proportions and the personal conduct of almost a majority of our citizens leaves much to be desired. Our basic institutions such as the family, school, church and government not only often fail to achieve their objectives, but sometimes, through their muddling, make the problems we face much worse!

I have no idea how long it will take us to straighten this mess out! I suspect it will take 50 more years, provided we have a good sense of humor (longer if not!). I can remember my father saying when Elvis Presley first appeared on television, "This is the end of civilization as we know it." I laughed at the time. Now, a bit older and only slightly wiser, I understand that Elvis did not cause our present problems, but to a certain extent, he was like the proverbial canary in a coal mine. His music was a signal that significant change was on the way. Not all of it (as ol' Dad discerned) turned out to be good! If you want to take this analogy further -- from the time of Elvis to the hard rock and gangsta rap of present -- and view it as a mirror or a portend of what lies ahead. It does makes you wonder if our worst times are not ahead of us!

On the other hand, I heard a song on the radio the other day in which I actually understood the lyrics, so perhaps we have turned the corner.

Given the state of our society today and the behavior of many of the people we serve, it is very difficult as a police officer to overcome the temptations of self-indulgence and overcome the cynicism we have developed and the almost constant challenges to our integrity. Yet, for our own good and the good of our families, we have to examine some fundamental aspects of our lives. So whether you are a chief, a sergeant, a patrolman or work in the communications department, we all must ask ourselves what we are willing to do to be successful in life.

Look beneath the surface of this simple question and throw out answers that suggest material wealth or power. These achievements tend to corrupt and in the final analysis, are meaningless. Instead think of your life as a statement to your children and others of what you learned is most important and enduring about yourself. Integrity, honesty, courage, compassion, fairness, justice and kindness are the virtues by which you will always be judged as a cop, a parent, or a neighbor.

After reflecting on the question, you obviously have a choice between living a life that emphasizes your own individuality or one characterized by service to others. Personally, I think the decision is a no-brainer, but I am not a preacher. It is a choice you have to make for yourself.

### **Responsibility**

When we are accountable for something within our power or control we are said to be responsible. Since humans have the capacity to make moral decisions, we also have the obligation to make correct decisions or face some consequence. The first story I am aware of that illustrates this concept is found in the Bible. The story concerns Eve when she, at the urging of the serpent, ate the forbidden fruit in the Garden of Eden and then shared the fruit with the hapless Adam. Typically human, Eve tried to place the blame on the serpent! However, God was not pleased with the behavior of Adam, Eve or the serpent and held all three responsible for their actions. It has been an uphill grind for mankind ever since!

The concept of responsibility is universal. It is found throughout our human history and is prominent in the thinking of every tribe, village or nation that has ever existed. Responsibility became the anvil that society used to forge acceptable social behavior on the part of its members. It also became a yardstick used by individuals to decide whether their actual behavior matched what they knew was the right thing. This is called conscience.

All societies fashion laws, customs, rituals, religions and taboos to quantify and qualify levels of responsibility for each member or group. A child is not held to the same level of responsibility as an adult. An individual employed by the public is held to a higher standard of behavior than someone employed by a private concern. Although these groups must be held responsible as well, fashioning similar standards for corporations and governments has been more difficult. When people form a group, like they do in building an organizational entity, many of the usual social norms used to pressure individuals will not apply. The social pressure generated by peers, parents, neighbors, religion, and law do not have the same effect on an organization's behavior as they do on an individual. An organization, per se, does not have a conscience. The leaders of the organization provide the conscience of the organization.

Unfortunately, some leaders have concluded that the organization is immune from the usual social pressures, or that they can ignore these pressures while their questionable behavior continues. While this may be expedient or profitable in the short term, eventually most organizations that operate in this fashion lose the trust of the public and are eventually reformed or forced out of existence. This is part of the problem currently facing the tobacco industry; states which piously direct gambling enterprises; the television and movie industry and the Internal Revenue Service.

If the concept of responsibility is to work for nations, individuals or organizations, then appropriate actions must be rewarded and inappropriate behavior corrected or punished. Throughout history, understanding and accepting individual responsibility has been one objective of the legal system, child rearing and the teaching of the church and education system. Individual responsibility was honored while individuals who did not act in a responsible manner were punished. Depending on the time frame, society used methods for compliance that were Draconian, such as hanging or shunning, to force an acceptable level of compliance. Society has also used the similar disciplinary measures with rulers who were not responsible. In the case of the king, it was rebellion and beheading. More recently, in the case of Nazi Germany and Japan, it was virtual destruction. In regard to current standards of responsibility, one could argue the nations of Iran, Iraq and Libya are walking on thin ice!

While this degree of punishment on the part of our society might not meet the fainthearted standards of justice held by some "enlightened liberals," harsh measures have always made the point to individuals, organizations and nations that acts have their consequences. Responsibility in behavior is a concept that has certainly stood the test of time.

In North America, currently our different societies are having more difficulty with people, corporations and governmental organizations accepting, evading or denying responsibility. A recent survey by the Ethics Officers Association suggests that more than half of the present work force commits a serious ethical or criminal violation each year in response to what it claims is pressure on the job. I would not suggest this data, or the voluminous newspaper accounts of the unethical behavior of politicians, sports figures, movie stars, corporate executives and a whole lot of other people who ought to know better, indicate the problem has reached epidemic proportions. But, it has become a problem that needs to be addressed.

What makes the problem more vexing is that it seems more fashionable these days to find someone or something else to blame for our personal and organizational misdeeds. Wouldn't it be refreshing if someone at the White House, the Pentagon, the Congress, the Federal Bureau of Investigation, or the movie industry stood up and said, "I am responsible for that blunder, I am sorry and I'll try a bit harder." This would require character.

It could be argued that blaming others is perfectly normal. After all we are human, not angels! However, the good character we try to achieve cannot be attained by blaming others for our shortcomings, nor can individuals achieve lasting success in their personal or organizational lives by using unethical and expedient means while avoiding responsibility when they do wrong.

"The end never justifies the means" is an old cliché several generations seem not to have learned.

Responsibility is not something each individual has a choice. Shortly after birth you get it! You will continue to have more placed upon your shoulders as you grow older, smarter and more reliable. This will continue until your behavior indicates you cannot accept anymore. I hope when taking the oath as a law enforcement officer you realized you were asking for double or triple the amount of responsibility carried by most other people.

We all know people who try to evade their responsibilities. Few ever fully succeed and most are eventually exposed and punished. Much of the punishment is self-inflicted. Other people may be denied employment, promotions, or fired from their positions. In areas where responsibility is impossible to deny, such as in a school or the athletic field, people who do not accept responsibility usually do poorly. In marriage, a lack of responsibility often leads to divorce, poor parenting and a overall miserable existence.

As a member of the law enforcement community, we accept additional responsibilities by the nature of our work. We also accept double the consequences if we fail. Responsibility is a pervasive, all-encompassing aspect of our lives. We must face that it is virtually impossible to escape responsibility as a law enforcement officer, both on and off the job, particularly if we aspire to a position that requires a significant amount of leadership.

Wouldn't it be easier for us to say to ourselves, "I will be responsible, and I will accept responsibility no matter what the consequences. Period."? It doesn't take any more energy to accept responsibility than to evade it. By accepting responsibility for your character and behavior you must have the courage to be held accountable for your actions. You won't be able to blame mom or dad, the environment, your lack of money, your ignorant supervisor, or other people who just do not understand you. You will have to say, "It is my fault, and I'll try and do better next time." These are tough words to say. Nonetheless, once you are honest with yourself, there is a freedom that comes over you that is exhilarating! No more energy wasted in trying to convince other people you are something you know you are not! No more fear that someone will expose you as a phony. No more time wasted trying to find someone else to blame. No more shopping for the most impressive labels to help bolster your feelings of self-worth.

While this is simple advice, it often is hard to follow. Hell, we are human and we all make mistakes. Shake your head at your own stupidity, laugh at yourself if you can. Decide to try and do better tomorrow. The good Lord knows when I make these mistakes, the first thing I do is to look for the wife, kids, or dog to kick. But as I got older and wiser, I realized I was the problem, not them. Things are better now (but the dog still sleeps with one eye open!). This is called being honest with yourself. It is healthy thing to do.

Just remember that individuals who want to be known throughout the department and community as people of good character always keep trying to improve themselves. You have to realize, and accept, that to be committed to a higher standard of conduct you will often be called upon lower your values to a more common denominator. You have to be willing to risk all that you have to maintain your commitment to a higher standard. If you are looking for an example of a "tough cop" this would be the type of individual who would best fit the bill.

## Leadership

There have been many articles and books written on the subject of leadership. I would imagine, if we had the time and inclination to read them, a few would contain some information that would be helpful. Most of what has been written, however, only tries to make a simple subject complex. These works also have a tendency to glorify personality and styles of leadership, whether real or imagined. This has given us the John Wayne syndrome and made "macho" a commodity avidly pursued by fools.

Personally, I don't think the subject of leadership is that difficult or complex to understand. A leader provides direction, makes decisions, is at times inspiring or insightful, and most importantly, sets a good example for others to follow. To do all of this well an individual needs a commanding knowledge of the job, a strong commitment to the values of honesty, courage, compassion, truth and self-discipline. The leader also needs to be respected. Respect need not arise from fear, but rather from the fact that the leader has the sense to do the right thing and the will to make things happen. All of these personality characteristics allow an individual to objectively gather the facts at hand and make the right decision. Hindsight may later indicate it wasn't the best decision, but given the circumstances at the time of the event, it still was a decision made for the right reasons. This is all we can ask of a leader!

Leaders are made, not born! Leadership is not a gift of genetics, it is a combination of knowledge, personality, and habit--all of which we learn from parents, brothers and sisters, schoolwork, teachers, peers and from the other educational experiences during our lives. Leaders have moral courage, strong wills and an understanding of the concept of responsibility. They have a great deal of self-discipline, confidence in the ability of others and the self-assurance to let others participate in the decision-making process. It is quite possible that a leader not occupy a high position in life. My mother didn't, and most likely yours did not as well, but they were leaders!

Each one of us has the potential to be a leader at some time and place in our lives. Most of us are already leaders, either in our family, on the job, at church, in civic clubs, or in the neighborhood. Granted we are not leaders all of the time and in every situation, still when the appropriate occasions arise we stick our heads up and provide direction and leadership to those around us.

Most leadership discussions concern themselves with the leadership skill of the chief executive officer on the job. The only problem I find with these discussions is that in a law enforcement organization every position in the department requires some leadership skills at one time or another. Granted, the chief's position requires leadership more often than the other positions, but the skills and characteristics used by the chief are no different than what you and I use when we are called upon. In my experience the most effective leaders were people blessed with common sense as opposed to a high IQ or a degree from Harvard. Most were self-confident individuals with the capacity to laugh at themselves and not take themselves too seriously. Finally, they were people you admired, not because they were perfect, but because they had moral courage, were honest, kind, sympathetic and understanding. All of them knew their business, were loyal to their troops and would chew your ass in a New York minute if you screwed up! But they also took the time to show you how to do the job right. They all understood the responsibilities of their

position and still they were confident enough to delegate important jobs to their subordinates. If things didn't work out, they took the blame.

By contrast, the worst leaders I observed during my career were those who lacked self-confidence, didn't trust anyone and tried to micro-manage every situation. They considered themselves experts in every field and were more fond of talking than listening. Depending on their personalities, they either couldn't delegate or delegated everything. In either case, their strategy was designed to protect themselves above all else. These were not individuals with strong character traits. On the contrary, they were shallow people either hiding behind their rank, their Gucci loafers or their stylized hair cut. When something went wrong they looked for an excuse, a scapegoat or a cover-up to avoid being held responsible. These individuals remind me of a line I recently read by Bob Evans in an article in the *Toronto Globe and Mail* newspaper. He was writing an article about people who worked hard to become leaders because they thought leadership was all about the enjoying perks and exercising power. He said: "This is a bit like ducks clamoring for admittance to a shooting gallery. It is not that they do not understand shooting galleries; it is that they do not know what it is to be a ducks!"

Yes, many lousy leaders we have all known did not realize that leaders have to take responsibility, sometimes for something they had no control over. Leaders, like ducks, get shot at and sometimes hit. The good ones accept this as part of the territory. The others usually claim they were in the restroom at the time of the incident!

The demanding, complex, and explosive nature of law enforcement requires good leadership in every rank and position. On the street, where we are most often judged by the public on our performance, we just do not have the time to form a committee, gain consensus or wait until some control freak arrives on the scene. Each day in law enforcement brings different, unexpected problems. Some problems requiring a degree of leadership may be handled by the chief; some days a captain in charge of the administrative division may be required to make decisions requiring a high level of leadership. On some occasions the most important work of the department may require leadership on the part of an evidence technician or a dispatcher. Situations change rapidly on a daily basis and it is the wise leader who knows how to prepare and rely on other people to provide essential guidance when necessary.

In both the military and law enforcement the requirements for leadership and the burden of responsibility fall heavily on the shoulders of the sergeant. If you were in a situation where you had to spend your training and education dollars on just one rank, my suggestion would be to spend every dime on this position. It is the sergeant who most frequently makes decisions, provides direction, sets the example for younger officers and employees to follow. If this leadership is weak, then the operational and administrative performance of the department suffers greatly. No department can tolerate sergeants who are lazy, incompetent, dishonest or afraid to accept responsibility. This is why they must be chosen based on the level of their moral courage, performance on the job and potential to learn. After their selection, these individuals must be carefully trained and properly educated if the department is to enjoy success.

I would argue that all employees have leadership potential. Whether they achieve this potential depends on how hard they wish to work to prepare themselves for the responsibility. Individuals

who have these aspirations must know the job. This may require study, experience on the street, membership in professional organizations, taking classes, obtaining another degree, reading serious literature and changing personal habits. It requires you examine your core values to see how they measure up with traditional beliefs, not the beliefs of the current "me generation," mind you, but the values that have stood the test of thousands of years. If you don't understand the traditional values, such as honesty and have made a habit of cheating all of your life, you have two choices: first, forget about being a leader or; second, study the literature on honesty until you understand honesty's benefits. Then change your thinking and your habits. The same is true of the other values which form good character! I realize many of these suggestions would be difficult to implement. In addition, our personality is very hard to change. It is a question of whether we should try to change or just continue on with business as usual. My advice is that you are living the only life you will have and how you live this life is up to you. How you are regarded by yourself and others is your responsibility. When you look at yourself in the mirror each morning it seems reasonable to me that you should be able to say, "I may not be perfect Ugly face, but I am getting close."

### **Public Trust**

Public trust, in the context of this article, is defined as the faith the public has in organizations that are created to protect our basic freedoms. Examples of some of these organizations would be our courts, the military, the legislative and executive branches of government at all levels: public health, social services, fire and rescue services, as weak as law enforcement organizations. Each citizen has an expectation that public organizations, and each member of the organization, will discharge their duties in a competent manner and not abuse authority granted to them by law. Not only does the citizen pay for these services, but they have relinquished some of their individual freedoms to ensure that the government has the ability to look after their well-being. Consequently, a sworn member of a law enforcement organization is held to a far higher standard of conduct than other public employees because they have been entrusted with great power. An abuse of this power always is a betrayal of the public trust and is seldom tolerated in a democratic society. Hence, the punishment of cops, FBI agents, DEA agents, prosecutors and judges who abuse the powers and privileges granted them by the public is always harsh!

Public trust is a precious commodity not only to organizations in the public sector, but to organizations in the private sector. To be successful in the private sector a corporation has to have the public's trust in the products it sells or the services it provides. Should this trust waver, or be lost, the corporation encounters a serious problem that may include being forced out of business. Why many well-known corporations would jeopardize public trust through their questionable business practices is very hard to understand. Was it demand to show greater profits? Ignorance? Or was it that they all thought the corporation was above the law and the scrutiny of the public? Squandering a company's reputation to make a quick buck is a very high price to pay for a lack of some employee's ethical standards and the lack of oversight of these individuals. Similar problems beset the public sector. Unfortunately, some government organizations do not treat taxpayers as if they were customers. Disrespect, rudeness, inefficiency and minor abuses of power by government employees are well-documented and not uncommon. Virtually every public organization has employees who abuse the power of their position at the

expense of others. However, you can bet that the public, tiring of inefficiency and insensitive behavior of these individuals, will call for heads to roll.

All law enforcement agencies, large or small, are dependent on a high level of public trust. Since society has entrusted us with the power to keep the peace, collect evidence and make arrests, it is only natural that people are concerned that we not abuse this power. Thus, law enforcement operations are subject to more intense public scrutiny than any other public organization. This overview of the police's potential abuse of power is accomplished through the judicial system, the press, citizen review groups, and oversight by other law enforcement agencies.

Even though all law enforcement agencies have had employees who abused their authority, or were corrupt in other ways, the public still has a high level of trust and confidence in law enforcement organizations and individual officers. In fact, this level of trust is higher today than at any time in our history. I would argue there are three reasons for this level of confidence. First, the public recognizes the difficult nature of our job and that a few officers will not be able to resist the temptation of corruption. Although some corruption is expected, the public also believes that police officials will take prompt action when corrupt behavior is alleged on the part of an officer. They are also confident that law enforcement's internal controls will quickly identify corrupt officers. The second reason the public has a high level of confidence in law enforcement organizations is that we are doing a good job! The vast majority of officers are working under adverse conditions, making good cases, and performing a wide variety of valuable public services. In short, they are doing far more to protect and serve than what the public has a right to expect. It is by virtue of the good work of thousands of officers that our profession has established a high level of public support. Thirdly, the public needs our services--no alternative to public law enforcement has proved feasible. Although private sector security organizations have grown significantly in the past 20 years, this service still has not attained the viability to provide public security.

Good will and public support, however, can evaporate quickly when we do things that are abusive, stupid or just plain wrong! We all know of several police departments, federal law enforcement agencies and state agencies that have recently been rocked by scandals. Most of these agencies will survive, but it will take them many years to regain their reputations. In the meantime, the morale and efficiency of the departments suffer.

It is the sole province of the chief of police to keep public trust at a high level by keeping the public informed as to the department's daily operations. Most of the time this flow of information will be positive, reflecting the successes of the department in areas of interest to the public. On other occasions there may be a situation where an officer has screwed up. Here the chief has several choices. First, cover it up. Second, defend the officer's actions no matter what! Third, fire everyone involved and tell the press you were out of town! Fourth, calmly report the situation as you know it at that moment, advise the parties that an immediate, impartial, internal investigation will be conducted to determine the facts of the situation, and finally, that report that you will keep everyone advised of the outcome. When this information is at hand, advise all parties concerned that a mistake has been made; the offender was appropriately disciplined and you have taken steps to ensure the mistake is not repeated. Should the investigation reveal the officer acted properly and within the scope of the law, you stand behind him or her completely.



My sense is that the best damage control is the truth. I would argue that truth is what has always worked best and is what the public wants to hear. Most of the population understand police often run into difficult, demanding and complex situations. Occasionally, officers will make a mistake and do something that may be a violation of policy or law, or perhaps, just a failure to use common sense. All the public requires to sustain its faith in the organization is that reasonable people within the department give the matter serious consideration and take whatever corrective steps are required.

This takes moral courage on the part of the chief to operate a department in this fashion. You have given up some of your control of the situation. You have possibly put your job on the line and the troops or the union may initially criticize you for not immediately and vigorously defending them. It is quite probable that a minority of the public will never accept your explanations or actions and will continue their criticism for a long time. The history of the Los Angeles Police Department over the past decade is a case in point. There really is no reason to suspect this will not happen again, particularly with those department's who, rightly or wrongly, do not enjoy the trust of minority communities.

The bottom line is that taking responsibility is what chiefs of police, sheriffs, and directors get paid to do. This is what being a leader, or a duck, is all about.

### **Conclusion**

Tough words -- responsibility, leadership and public trust. They are even tougher to put into practice and blend into your own character. But if we are successful in building our character into a reflection of what those words mean, the personal reward is worth far more than the effort required. Peace of mind, respect, admiration and the ability to withstand life's curve balls are a few of the benefits of being a person of character. I am still working on my character, and believe me, I still have a long way to go. I hope you also think it is a worthwhile, lifelong endeavor.