



Noble Cause Corruption



By Steve Rothlein

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There exists a serious threat to law enforcement, which can compromise the high ethical standards and values our profession has achieved during the past several decades. This threat is typically referred to as "Noble Cause Corruption."

Traditional corruption is defined as the use of one's official position for personal gain. The personal gain can be economic or otherwise, such as sexual favors. As a profession, we have long understood this type of abuse of power and, when discovered and investigated, those involved are arrested.

A less obvious but perhaps even more threatening type of misconduct in law enforcement is Noble Cause Corruption. This type of misconduct involves not necessarily the rotten apples in the agency but sometimes involves the best officers in the agency, or the golden apples. Noble Cause Corruption is a mindset or sub-culture which fosters a belief that the ends justify the means. In other words, law enforcement is engaged in a mission to make our streets and communities safe, and if that requires suspending the constitution or violating laws ourselves in order to accomplish our mission, then for the greater good of society, so be it. The officers who adopt this philosophy lose their moral compass.

This type of thinking is misguided and places the officer at risk of losing his/her job, facing criminal charges, and seriously damaging the reputation of their agency. Some examples include; lying in court to convict a suspect, also referred to as "testilying", planting evidence on suspects, and falsifying reports. When we engage in this type of behavior, we adopt a philosophy that supports the notion that justice should be dispensed on the street, not in the courtroom, and it is morally right to do whatever it takes to imprison those who prey on society.

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One example of this type of behavior, sometimes embodied in the battle cry, "Never let the truth stand in the way of justice," is as follows:

A subject is walking down the street when he turns and takes flight on foot because he observes a police car coming in his direction. The officer engages in a foot pursuit and observes the subject discard an unknown item into the bushes during the pursuit. After capturing the subject, the officer discovers he is a convicted felon on probation. The officer retrieves a firearm from the bushes but never actually saw what the item was that the subject discarded. If the officer testifies truthfully, the subject may survive his probation violation hearing. If the officer lies at the hearing, and testifies he saw the subject discard a firearm, his probation will be definitely violated and a dangerous criminal will be off the streets. This is the dilemma that officers find themselves in when they become tempted to exaggerate the truth and engage in noble cause corruption.

The tragic killing of Boston Police Officer Sherman Griffiths on February 17th, 1988, highlights the consequences that can occur from Noble Cause based law enforcement. On that date, officers from the Boston Police Department executed a search warrant at the home of Albert Lewin. As they entered the premises, Lewin shot and killed Officer Griffiths. Lewin was charged with murder but charges were later dismissed when it was discovered that the affidavit for search warrant filed by Detective Luna was based upon false information and a fictitious informant. Luna was indicted for perjury while all of the charges against Lewin, including the murder of a police officer, was dismissed. This case demonstrates the tragedy which can occur when officers suspend the constitution and fabricate evidence in the pursuit of justice.

The Innocence Project has disclosed over 200 individuals that have been released from prison because they were wrongly convicted. Many of these cases have been overturned as a result of DNA evidence, which established that the convicted subjects were innocent. A large percentage of these wrongful convictions have resulted in civil litigation, which has exposed false confessions, improper identifications, and perjured testimony by officers. Our system of justice was built upon the premise that it is better to allow a hundred guilty individuals go free than to wrongfully convict an innocent person. Many of these wrongfully convicted individuals served decades in prison and some on Death Row. There can be no doubt that the Noble Cause mentality is responsible for some of these instances of innocent persons being convicted. This is a stain and a disgrace to our profession.

Preventing the Noble Cause Mind-Set

Step 1: Define Noble Cause Corruption to officers in the academy and explain why this type of behavior can be illegal and destroy an officer's career and reputation or worse.

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Conduct in-service ethics training at least annually and discuss Noble Cause Corruption.

Step 2: Explain the consequences of a civil rights violation, including potentially being confined in a federal penitentiary.

Step 3: Foster a value driven orientation as the driving force in the police agency vs. being strictly rule driven. Officers find it easier to rationalize violating rules than compromising values, especially when officers truly believe in the values, and use them to guide their behavior.

Step 4: Reward those officers that exemplify the agency core values in their daily performance via commendations and performance reports.

Step 5: Eliminate both formal and informal arrest quotas, which pressure officers to exaggerate the facts in order to establish probable cause and please their supervisors.

Step 6: Train officers that operating within the law is the only acceptable choice, even though guilty subjects will sometimes avoid arrest and conviction. This is the consequence of living in a free society and what separates our nation from those tyrannical governments that execute suspects without a fair trial.

Step 7: Provide leadership and supervision, which fosters an environment that is committed to due process and respecting the rights of all of our citizens.

Step 8: Involve the first line supervisors and FTOs in the battle to eliminate the Noble Cause sub-culture. They are the most influential stake holders in controlling the agency culture and will recognize and, hopefully, discourage Noble Cause mentality in the field.

The challenge to our profession is to convince our officers that no matter how tempting, we cannot legitimize throwing out the rules and the constitution because we are doing something for the greater good. This type of thinking is an abuse of power and violates the sacred freedom of liberty upon which our democratic society is based. When we allow the abuse of power by individuals in the name of "Noble Cause," we are no better than the tyrannical societies our soldiers have spilled their blood and sacrificed their lives to eliminate. Our criminal justice system is flawed and imperfect, yet it is by far the most civilized and humane method of maintaining order and providing a free society for our citizens.