



Corruption

A personal, incremental struggle



Two officers are changing from their uniforms to “civvies” in the locker room at end of watch. One asks the other, “Did you hear about those two coppers from 88th division getting busted by Internal Affairs?”

“Yeah,” says the second officer. “Sure did surprise me. I didn’t figure either of them for taking bribes from pimps and bookies. Pretty bizarre!”

“The bad thing about this,” remarks the first, “is that now we’re all painted with that proverbial broad brush again. I wonder how they got down that low?”

The Corrupted

The big questions about corruption: How do seemingly honest, hard-working officers slip into corrupt behavior? How do altruistic men and women who regularly put their lives on the line for others turn into criminals? In coming issues, we’ll reveal some conditions that can inadvertently encourage corruption, and I’ll suggest some practical steps and systems to help prevent it. I’ll also suggest ways to discover and root out this destructive problem once it occurs.

Public corruption is a worldwide phenomenon that adversely affects government agencies. On its Web site, the FBI states: “Public corruption is one of the FBI’s top investigative priorities—behind only terrorism, espionage, and cyber crimes.”

More than 30 law enforcement leaders, as members of the Pointman Leadership Institute, developed the following general definition of *corruption*: “A violation of integrity through the abuse of one’s role or position; or the influencing of a person in authority either

for personal benefit or the benefit of another.” They then went on to describe some forms corruption can take:

1. Accepting money or favors for using one’s position inappropriately. *Example:* Acting as a collector for private loans.
2. Accepting money or favors for special attention. *Example:* Providing security at a liquor store at closing time for a “half pint.”
3. Using position in organization for personal agenda. *Example:* Using police records for off-duty business.
4. Accepting money or favors for not enforcing laws. *Example:* Overlooking prostitution.
5. Giving resources (including money) to secure favors.
6. Stealing.

Underlying Causes

Studying government corruption at our institute revealed that usually one or more of the following factors are involved in the personal lives of officers involved in corruption.


- *Lack of legitimate accomplishment:* The employee hasn’t achieved a desired level of success and accomplishment despite their effort.
- *Anger:* The employee thinks they’re a victim of the system, that they’ve been unfairly treated and that they must be compensated for an inequity.
- *Lack of character:* The employee doesn’t have firm opinions about right and wrong; they’re undisciplined, lacking self-control.

- *Lack of team spirit:* The employee isn’t loyal to the team, and they’ve failed to make a strong commitment to the welfare of the larger group.
- *Short-term goal orientation:* The employee evaluates decisions based upon short-term impact rather than long-term consequences.
- *Lack of knowledge:* The employee doesn’t understand the negative results of losing the confidence of the people they serve.
- *Greed:* The employee can’t control their thirst for more.

In 38 years in law enforcement, I haven’t been aware of any colleague who suddenly decided to turn into a “rogue cop” and tarnish the badge. I have, however, become aware of many colleagues who made a series of small compromises that ended up bringing them to the same shameful position. That’s the way it happens: a chain of seemingly insignificant compromises gradually move you from integrity to corruption.

Case in Point

Two officers just completed a burglary investigation of a video store at 3 a.m. They were working a specialized assignment focusing on tripped burglar alarms. The owner’s agent had just left the scene after securing the property. The officers turned on the headlights of their patrol vehicle as they leave and notice DVDs in the alley. Apparently, the thieves had dropped them while leaving the scene. The recently released DVDs were popular movies.

The correct action would be to book the cassettes as “found evidence.” This would give technicians 

an opportunity to examine them for latent fingerprints and eventually return them to the store owner. Rather than taking this action, however, the officers decided to keep them for their own private use. They reasoned that the process of booking the DVDs would take them out of the field for nearly an hour and would probably not result in any usable evidence. They rationalized that they would be of more value to their mission by remaining in the field on patrol and that the owner of the store would have given the DVDs to the officers out of gratitude for their diligent investigation and protection of his store.

A little over a year later, these same officers were caught actually forcing entry and stealing from businesses during false-alarm responses. They later explained that their criminal actions were the result of a series of small compromises of policies, procedures and ethics. They started down a slippery slope that ended up in disgusting criminal behavior.

A similar pattern is usually present with officers caught accepting bribes. Such a pattern can begin with something as petty as a free cup of coffee. As each gratuity or gift is accepted, it becomes easier to escalate to more significant gifts and eventually attempted influence or favors. The best way to avoid sliding down a slippery slope is to never get on it.

Zero Tolerance

When a police department tolerates no behavior that even borders on corruption, it earns the respect and confidence of the public. This respect and confidence result in more effective officers, and greater recognition, fulfillment and legitimate rewards follow. It is the responsibility of each of us in the profession to do what we can to keep our organization corruption free—On Point. **LOM**

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