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The Portrait of Sgt. Grey

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The Welcoming

Officer Newbee stood by the patrol car, his hands shaking slightly as he nervously watched the FTO walking toward him. "First days on any job are always hard," he told himself as he took a deep breath. Sgt. Grey approached him with a look of displeasure. He tossed the keys to Newbee.

It doesn't matter if you're leading from the position of chief of police or FTO. You're impacting the culture of the organization. (iStock photo)

picked up the keys he dropped. "Good morning, sir," he said while straightening his uniform shirt. Sgt. Grey glared at him.

"Dammit," Newbee mumbled as he

"Yeah, well, you drive kid."

Sgt. Grey flopped into the passenger seat with a thud and a groan. Newbee couldn't help but notice that Grey looked unkempt with a wrinkled uniform, tarnished badge and dirty boots. The pitting on the sergeant's weapon showed that it had rarely left its holster.

Officer Newbee began to drive out to the Charlie Zone, where they'd been assigned patrol duties that day.

"So kid, what's your story?" asked Grey.

"Well, I'm a new academy graduate," he replied.

"Yeah, I figured that out all by myself kid," Grey said. "Yeah, God hates me," he continued. "That's why I get all you shiny young kids to break in."

"I don't understand what you're asking sergeant."

"I'm asking why the hell you're here," Grey said. "Why did you decide to grace us with your pretty face and become a cop?"

"Well sir, I guess it's because I want to help people. I want to give something back to the

community," replied Newbee.

"You want to help people? Oh, that's cute. That just makes me feel all warm and fuzzy inside. Damn if I don't just start bawling my eyes out."

The sweat began to bead on Newbee's head. He hadn't bargained on this sort of treatment.

"Pull over kid," demanded Grey.

Newbee turned into a restaurant parking lot and stopped the patrol car.

"Listen kid," said Grey. "Forget everything you've learned in the police academy. That stuff is taught by lawyers and pinhead administrators. I'm gonna teach you how to be a real cop. Got it?"

"Yes sir," replied the shaken young officer.

The Call

They had just finished their lunch at Ruby's Diner. "You boys need anything?" asked the waitress.

Grey shook his head without speaking.

"Just the check, ma'am," said Newbee.

Grey turned and stared oddly at him as if the young officer were insane.

"No charge sonny," said the waitress as she turned and walked away.

"You just don't get it, do ya kid?" said Grey. "We don't pay for lunch. We scratch their backs, and they scratch ours."

Grey picked up the car keys and tossed them to Newbee. The young officer began to follow the sergeant out to the patrol car.

"Ya see, kid, us sitting in there is keeping them from being robbed. So, taking a longer lunch than we called out for is just like doing our civic duty," said Grey with a smirk of sarcasm.

"That's why I didn't call out that we were on lunch until 30 minutes into it. See kid, I'm a regular boy scout. I should be freaking president, I'm so good."

Newbee started the car without speaking. Then the radio call came in.

"Dispatch to Charlie 2." Newbee picked up the microphone.

"Charlie 2 to dispatch at Ruby's," he replied.

"Signal 36, fight in progress, in the parking lot of Joe's Bar and Grill, corner of 17th St. and Dink Rd."

"In route dispatch," replied Newbee as he picked up the speed driving toward 17th St.

"What are ya, a freaking fireman?" asked Grey.

"What do you mean, sarg?" asked Newbee as he closed in on the bar.

"You're not going to a fire, slow down and let them beat the tar out of each other a while."

"But, shouldn't we be going to stop the fight?" asked Newbee.

"Son we're going to take a report and call EMS. By the time we get there they should be good and tired. That way we don't break a sweat," Grey said.

Newbee had slowed the car down, but he didn't feel right about it.

"Ya see kid, ya can't save the world from itself. I generally find that people get what they deserve. These are a couple of no good drunks," said Grey. "If they beat each other up, who cares?"

Newbee pulled into the parking lot. They got out of the patrol car. Lying on the pavement was the body of a young boy. Next to him was the wheel chair he had been sitting in a few minutes earlier. The drunken man, who beat him unconscious, simply because he was an easy target, was long gone.

"Call EMS kid," said Grey.

The Revelation

This time the sergeant was driving, as they pulled the patrol car into the oil stained driveway of a small gray house. The blinds were all pulled so that no one could see in or out of the house. On the mailbox was the name "Grey."

"Come on kid," said Sgt. Grey. "You'll feel better after ya take a load off and have a drink of something."

They walked inside and into a small living room with an old leather easy chair, a television and a fireplace.

"You want a beer?" asked Grey.

"No thanks," replied Newbee, noting in his mind that they were still on duty.

"Oh yeah, I forgot, you're still a boy scout," said Grey as he walked out to the kitchen.

The young officer noticed a black and white photo of a young woman with two small children.

"Is this your family?" he asked as the sergeant came back into the room with a beer in his hand.

"That's my ex-wife," said Grey. "She left a long time ago."

"I'm sorry to hear that," Newbee said.

"Don't be," said Grey. "The only thing more worthless than her was the two brats she gave me."

"Do you see your kids often?" Newbee asked.

"Nah, they don't have much use for me," said the old sergeant as he flopped into the easy

chair.

"Here," he said, handing Newbee a framed photo from the television top. "That's me when I was a rookie."

Newbee felt a chill as he looked at the photograph. First he looked toward the old sergeant with his sloppy uniform and face worn into a constant frown and then toward the old black and white photograph of a young man, who was sharply dressed with a polished badge that gleamed only slightly less than his smile. And then it hit him. All at once he realized that the young man in the old photo was not Sgt. Grey at all. It was instead an image of himself.

"Don't worry, kid, it's your first day. You'll feel better tomorrow."

"Yes I will," said the young man, "because I've just decided to resign from the police force."

Epilogue

How many readers of this parable recognize Sgt. Grey as someone you know on your force, or, as who you have become? Leadership happens at all levels of any organization. Often it isn't the chief of police who is sending the messages throughout the organization that define its members and their collective values. Often, it is certain members of the rank and file who hold sway and set the tone. You can be the greatest coach in the world, but to have a great team, you must have great players. Great players may have the right talent, but they must have the right attitude. In the case of organizations, or cultures, opposites do not attract. Like attracts like, and those who show moral courage are often destroyed while the good towns' folk hide in the barbershop.

In some respects, police officers are a tribal community. Throughout human history, tribes pass on the values of the group, like passing cultural DNA forward through time via the elders, the informal leaders, the trainers. In American law enforcement, the FTOs and line supervisors are often the key link in transferring culture to the new members. History shows us that leadership can exist for the good or the detriment of the organization, culture or nation.

Dr. Edgar H. Schein of M.I.T. wrote that "leaders create and change cultures, and managers and administrators live within them. The most decisive function of leadership is the creation, the management and sometimes even the destruction of culture." Leaders at all levels are the creators of culture. We do this by sharing our beliefs, values and assumptions over time via our words and deeds, our customs and rituals, our legends and sea stories. FTOs and line supervisors are in positions of leadership. They're often the first step for the new officer in the organizations' socialization process. With great power comes great responsibility.

It doesn't matter if you're leading from the position of chief of police or FTO. You're impacting the culture of the organization. As leaders, we must always be aware of the power of resonance and dissonance. In the book *Primal Leadership*, authors Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee point out that leaders—formal and informal—have the power to emotionally hijack another person and, by extension, an organization. The human limbic system which regulates hormone levels, sleep rhythms, cardiovascular functions and our immune system is an open loop. This means that we're involuntarily impacted by the emotions demonstrated by others. Leaders who are resonant drive emotions positively. Leaders who are dissonant drive emotions negatively. As we used to say in the Marines,

leadership sets the tone.

FTOs and line supervisors are important leaders in every law enforcement agency. As leaders within our profession it is imperative that we stop handing the keys to the gate to just anyone who has been around a while. We must ensure that the culture we build is one we can be proud of. This will take having a professional identity that's based on true proactive professionalism, a vision to act as our guide and the moral courage to look mediocrity in the face and say, "Not this time."

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