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THE PLAY'S THE THING

A POLICE CHIEF AND A THEATRE PROFESSOR JOIN FORCES TO CONFRONT BIAS IN POLICE DEPARTMENTS

POLICE CHIEF DAVID KURZ HAS GIVEN A GREAT DEAL OF THOUGHT to an incident he was made aware of earlier in his career. A police officer was on a construction detail when a car with four, young African American, men pulled up to him and stopped. It turned out they were lost. The young man in the front seat asked the officer for directions. The officer pondered this for a moment and then said, "Boy, it's not easy to get there from here." One of the men in the back seat rolled down the window and said, "Who you calling boy?" and the interaction went quickly downhill from there. A simple encounter that should have be innocuous became a situation.

This story had a significant impact on Chief Kurz. It brought home to him the immediate effect that language can have and the damage that can result from a lack of awareness and understanding of this fact. It emphasized how a seemingly innocent comment can have a powerfully negative impact, even if the speaker has no intent to do harm. A simple truth became apparent: an individual must first become aware of the power of language, and through that awareness, more positive outcomes are likely to emerge and perhaps disastrous ones can be avoided, all together. He also began to wonder in what other ways language and behaviors were impeding the best possible outcomes in all aspects of police work.

Upon further reflection of this incident, Chief Kurz made the decision to seek more answers and possible solutions. Chief Kurz is the chief of police in Durham, New Hampshire, a small New England town that also happens to be the home of the University of New Hampshire (UNH). He had often been interested in finding innovative ways that could bring together higher education's expertise in research and teaching to the development and training of a police department. To that end, Chief Kurz connected with David Kaye, a professor of theatre at UNH to brainstorm ways to leverage this expertise.

Professor Kaye, whose primary focus in UNH's Department of Theatre and Dance is acting and directing, also had a strong interest in utilizing theatre and theatre pedagogy in areas outside of traditional performance. As theatre was ultimately built around the messy world of human behavior and relationships, he reasoned that he could help design methods that could take advantage of the artificial world of theatrical representation to help individuals or groups tackle difficult issues and problems. He has likened this perspective to a quote from the playwright John Patrick Shanley: "Theatre is a safe place to do unsafe things that need to be done." Professor Kaye has many years of experience working with the psychodrama techniques developed by Jacob Moreno, a contemporary of Sigmund Freud, who used theatre as a tool for deep self-exploration and understanding. Since the mid-90s, Professor Kaye has worked extensively with approaches developed by the Brazilian theatre artist and eventual national legislator Augusto Boal. Boal had been forced out of his traditional theatre by the military junta in the 1950s. Without a theatre facility of his own, he turned his attention to developing some of the first interactive theatre models designed to help communities influence social and political change. This became known as "Theatre of the Oppressed" as it was built upon the theories of educator and fellow Brazilin Paulo Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed." Boal would refer to the audience as "spect-actors" and, together with the performers on stage, a community could address critical issues and try out strategies for overcoming challenging problems.

INTERACTIVE THEATRE TO ADDRESS BIAS

Professor Kaye made the decision to start his own, professional company dedicated to interactive theatre designed to influence change. UNH's PowerPLAY Interactive Development was founded in 2012. Its first project, in collaboration with the UNH Carsey School of Public Policy (at that time the Carsey Institute) and the UNH Cooperative Extension, was to create a program to help develop the facilitation skills of individuals who conduct public meetings. This was followed up with a series of collaborations with UNH ADVANCE, a National Science Foundation program, focused on increasing and retaining more women in the STEM fields. This allowed PowerPLAY to hire Jeffery Steiger, an innovator in the field of interactive theatre, who had created the Center for Teaching and Learning (CRLT) Players at the University of Michigan, the first such group developed under an ADVANCE grant. The core issue that evolved from working on these ADVANCE initiatives was conscious and unconscious bias and its negative impact on the recruitment and retention of women in the sciences. What became apparent through both the programs at Michigan and UNH was how effective an interactive theatre model could be in examining how behavior and language established an institutional culture that allowed bias attitudes to take hold and even flourish. Interactive theatre also provided a highly effective tool for exploring strategies to actually address issues of bias on the individual and institutional level, with the goal of making a more fair, equitable, and positive culture. PowerPLAY later joined forces with Dr. Stephanie Goodwin, a sociologist who serves as Director for Faculty Development and Leadership at Wright State University and a leading researcher in the field of bias awareness and intervention.

Employing Goodwin's research and knowledge of the subject and PowerPLAY's expertise in developing interactive theatre models to address such issues, a program was created that has been brought to universities around the United States for the past three years. PowerPLAY went on to develop similar programs to help faculty address bias-related issues in the classroom and to train student resident assistants in methods to confront bias incidents in their dorms. Most recently, PowerPLAY has been developing a program with the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) to serve as a springboard for colleges' athletic departments to engage in critical dialogue surrounding these issues. Two common threads have emerged from PowerPLAY's programming: (1) an institution's culture determines the climate for bias attitudes and (2) confronting these biases can be a difficult proposition. The challenge is rooted in the fact that culture and bias are intertwined with human relationships that include such factors as institutional history, rank, and power dynamics and past personal experiences, primarily expressed through words that operate on multiple levels of meaning. Theatre-based pedagogy is well suited to be utilized as a tool for addressing these problems because these same elements are the foundation of virtually any play. A stage director's eye is trained to uncover the authenticity of these aspects of relationships, as well as the other crucial element of theatre and human interaction—conflict.

APPLYING THEATRE TO LAW ENFORCEMENT

With Professor Kaye's background and experience in interactive theatre and Chief Kurz's focus on using education and training to address issues of bias related to language and behavior, as well as a desire to collaborate with UNH, the two conceived the idea to create an interactive theatre program that could be used by police departments to actively improve their culture and climate by addressing everyday issues related to bias.

The subject of bias and the challenges these issues present for effective law enforcement are not new to police departments. Recent events, though, have brought these concerns to the forefront with increased urgency. When Professor Kaye and Chief Kurz began their discussions and research, one crucial question related to the learning objective quickly surfaced: Should the program concentrate on officers in the field, like the situation that had started Chief Kurz's investigation of the subject? Or should the program focus more on the culture and climate of the overall police department?

Most of the research concerning bias incidents in law enforcement almost exclusively focused on the split-second decisions made by officers, often under pressure, that had led to tragic

outcomes. Research appearing in the journal *Social Psychological and Personality Science* helped to guide the direction Professor Kaye and Chief Kurz would take in developing their program. The researchers' study focused on the connection between *implicit* bias (attitudes or stereotypes that affect our actions in an unconscious manner) within a community and cases of *explicit* bias (attitudes or stereotypes expressed through actions in a conscious manner) exhibited by law enforcement in that community. The research revealed the connection between higher levels of implicit bias within a community and higher levels of lethal force used by law enforcement against the subjects of those biases. As researcher Eric Hehman summarized, the results indicate

that this is not specifically a problem of police officers but reveals that there is something about the broader communities and contexts in which these officers make speeded, life and death decisions that is associated with killing more African Americans.

Though Professor Kaye and Chief Kurz would not be able to address the prevalence on implicit bias across an entire community, they could focus on such attitudes and related incidents within the more localized community of a police department. The rationale was that if implicit and explicit biases can be recognized and addressed at the more foundational level of a department's culture and climate, then the critical thinking and decision-making in the field may be based on a more normalized set of unbiased attitudes. In other words, if police officers were more aware of the biases within their own ranks, and this awareness led to an overall improvement of the department's culture and climate, then the officers' behaviors and use of language in the field would also improve, leading to better outcomes.

Professor Kaye and PowerPLAY Program Director CJ Lewis began to examine what research was available on issues related to bias within police departments. This included interviews

with some members of Chief Kurz's department who had experience in Durham and the region. For the first development phase, PowerPLAY would focus on three specific areas of bias concerning identity within a police department: race, gender, and sexual orientation.

The theatrical model that the group would use are known as "activation scenarios"—very brief scenes where a specific bias incident or incidents take place. For this program, these scenes would also have to incorporate the dynamics of rank and the power and command structure of a police department, the often-prevalent nature of a hyper-masculine culture, and other factors that present obstacles to creating a fairer and more equitable workplace.

Building awareness of implicit bias would be a first major goal. The model would have to be universal enough to be applicable to as many police departments as possible. A major objective would be to create characters and scenarios where the audience (members of

a police department) could recognize themselves and their colleagues, through their behaviors and use of language, and witness enough touch points that were reflective of the culture of their own department—for the model to be effective, there would have to be enough recognition to prompt self-reflection in each audience member.

Awareness, however, would only be half the battle. For positive change to take place, there would also have to be action. At first, implicit (and sometimes even explicit) bias must be recognized. But how, in the culture of a police department, can these issues be addressed and resolved in a way that will move the organization forward? What strategies can be devised and employed? PowerPLAY would have to create a model that will allow the professional actors to work with the audience to collectively answer these questions.

PowerPLAY designs its interactive programs to allow audiences to deeply investigate the thinking behind the behaviors of the characters and then to use what they have uncovered to experiment with possible interventions. The actors are experts in working with both scripted scenarios and improvisation. The exploration and improvisation aspects allow the audience to experiment with the ideas and strategies they would like to see the actors employ. The audience takes part in a process of coaching the characters and then observing and evaluating the results. While one actor puts the audience's suggested approach into action, the other actors are trained to provide all the authentic obstacles that an individual attempting that tactic may encounter. It is a method that Augusto Boal referred to as "a rehearsal for the future."

PowerPLAY also includes other mechanisms for use by the audience like "What If?" This tool allows the audience to alter the scenario in order to observe a new obstacle or to change a factor that would impact the strategies being explored. For example, "What if the sergeant was a woman and not a man?" or "What if we reversed the roles and the person who made the prejudiced remark was of higher rank?" This allows audiences to not only broaden the scope of the exercise, it also lets them customize the scenario to their specific circumstances. The interactive format also allows the audience to interview the characters in various ways that offers a compelling insight and understanding into the actions of the characters. PowerPLAY's process is ultimately built around their "3 Rs":

1. *Reflect*: examine how you and your organization is reflective of the behaviors exhibited in the scenario.

2. *Replay*: double back to aspects of the scenario to learn more and try out different strategies.

3. *Respond*: make use of what has been played out as a constructive springboard into a difficult dialogue about the subject at hand.

PUTTING THE PLAY INTO PRACTICE

Professor Kaye and Director Lewis eventually developed several scenarios to be presented at the 2018 IACP Annual Conference and Exposition in Orlando, Florida. These scenes were developed with PowerPLAY's actors and in collaboration with Chief Kurz.

At the program's IACP presentation, Professor Kaye functioned as the facilitator of the session and began with a brief overview of the rationale behind the training, what research has revealed about how bias operates within the culture of an organization, and some overriding ideas of how members of that organization may address the biases they observe in the scenes.

The opening scene focused on a subtle bias incident where an officer of color had just received a promotion. A fellow white officer congratulates him, noting, "It's great that this department is actually putting their money where their mouth is with this whole diversity thing." There are two additional officers present in the scene. One appears to be oblivious to the fact that the white officer is insinuating that the officer of color received the promotion because of his race, and not his merit, while the other officer is clearly uncomfortable with the remark, but chooses to remain silent.

Professor Kaye then opened the floor for the audience to ask the characters questions, in an effort to better understand what they were thinking and the behaviors they witnessed. Audience members wanted to know why the uncomfortable officer failed to speak up. (She herself felt marginalized as one of only a few women officers and thought that saying something might make her sense of isolation worse.) Did the officer who said the remark realize what he said was biased? (He did not and resented the implication that he was in any way racist.) Did the officer who seemed completely unfazed by the comment perceive it as biased? (Perhaps in retrospect, but he had heard worse.) What was going on in the mind of officer who was the target of the comment? (He

had to choose his battles, and quite frankly, he was finding the subtle but constant incidents like this exhausting.)

The questions posed by the audience could be asked of the characters in either a public format (where all other characters could also hear responses) or in private, where responses were entirely between the audience and the characters. This allowed the audience to investigate what could or could not be stated publicly in this department and what the characters were really thinking. At times, what the characters were actually thinking could be diametrically opposed to what they were stating publicly. After the audience had the chance to better understand the culture of the fictional department and the thinking of the characters, they launched into devising strategies that the actors did their best to implement. Some attempts were disastrous, others were partially successful, and a few managed to navigate the minefield of human relationships, behaviors, and tricky language issues to actually have a positive impact. Each attempt, whether it backfired or seemed to stop the bias incident in its tracks, offered a safe but engaging process for the audience to dive into the real challenges they might face if they choose to be an active participant in effecting positive change.

One of the scenarios that was developed intertwined two concerns to reveal some aspects of the culture of a fictional police department. One issue focused on an inherent negative view related with gender roles, the other, on how individuals from underrepresented groups felt marginalized in this organization. The scene takes place in the common office space of the department, where a group of officers are discussing one of the officer's new partner assignments while his normal partner is on paternity leave.

Al: Yeah, so I guess she, like, popped the kid out like a rocket.

Bill: But they got to the hospital in time?

Taylor: Just the nick of time. If Jake came off patrol like five minutes later, he'd have to deliver his own kid.

Al: He could have handled that.

Bill: Didn't he have to do that once? It was like a snowstorm or something and he got called to check out a car off the road…

Taylor: No. No…that was Phil, I think. Or maybe Dan.

Al: Well, whatever the case—looks like Jake is going to take full advantage of this maternity leave thing for guys.

Bill: I don't think it's called maternity leave.

Al: Paternity, maternity…it's six-weeks-with-your-feet-up-goofing-off-ternity leave as far as I can see. *(Bill laughs)*. Bottom line is, the captain has me partnered with Sam until Jake's back from his extra paid vacation.

Bill: Oh, man.

Taylor: What?

Bill: What, what? I mean, come on. Nothing wrong with Sam but…

Taylor: Yeah?

Al: It's just… I don't know… not a great fit.

Taylor: *(letting out a sound of unease)* Huh.

Al: But, what the hell. I'll make it work. Just for a while until Daddy Jake gets tired of playing Mr. Mom.

Bill: Just thinking about him changing diapers cracks me up.

Al: I'll bet he'll be back on duty next week.

Bill: Sam problem solved.

Al: Bingo.

(Sam enters)

Sam: Ready to go, Al?

Al: Let's do it. See you, guys.

(Sam and Al exit.)

The scene is purposely designed to offer just a glimpse of the culture of this department. Through the interview process between the audience and the characters, a far deeper understanding of the behaviors, attitudes, and language use emerges. The audience ultimately makes the decisions about what problems to tackle and the strategies that will be devised and tested using the actors. An additional feature that was built into this scenario was the ability to rotate the actors into different roles. This allowed the audience to examine multiple variations that were related, but revealed major differences concerning prejudicial attitudes and their negative impact on the culture of the department. The character of Sam in the first iteration is a male officer of color. In the second version, using the exact same dialogue, Sam is a female officer. In the final replay with the audience, the characters Bill and Al make derogatory gestures during some of their lines, suggesting Sam, a male officer, is gay.

In all the scenarios, there was always a 'bystander' character. This is the person who appears to be aware of the biased behaviors they are witnessing, but who fails to act. In this scenario, Taylor is the bystander, so by changing the role of Taylor from a white male, to a female, to a person of color, the audience has the opportunity to better understand the complexities of action. How much more is at stake, for example, for a person who is part of one marginalized group to stand up for a person of another marginalized group? In a department where "fit" (which will have different meanings and ramifications based on the culture of the organization) is crucial for an individual who hopes to thrive in that environment, speaking up could have substantial risk.

The presentation at the IACP conference allowed Professor Kaye and Chief Kurz to see how well this and other trigger scenarios operated as effective interactive tools to address their original learning objectives. The scenes that were rolled out proved to "activate" well, a term Professor Kaye uses to gauge a scenario's capacity to be utilized for robust interaction and dialogue with the audience. The audience became quickly engaged in digging into the thinking and behaviors of the characters and in devising ideas for strategies and tactics for the actors to attempt to address these issues. Those in attendance also used the program to reflect and share some of the challenges related to the situations that they have faced.

Professor Kaye and Chief Kurz, along with Program Director Lewis will continue to develop the program, offering it soon to police departments in New Hampshire. They are also currently in the process of making this training available across the United States. ♥

IACP RESOURCES
- "Implicit Bias and Law Enforcement" (article)
- "Assessing Bias and Intolerance in Police and Public Safety Personnel" (article)
- "Addressing the Elephant in the Room: The Need to Evaluate Implicit Bias Training Effectiveness for Improving Fairness in Police Officer Decision-Making" (article)

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