

Building Community Trust through Culture Change

Challenge

Chief Greg Dagnan of the Carthage Police Department knew that successful law enforcement requires maintaining a delicate balance. On the one hand, you need policing that effectively responds to legal violations and prioritizes officer safety. But it is also crucial to cultivate trusting relationships with the community. With inherently stressful situations and a slim margin of error, the stakes in law enforcement are high. Even though Carthage, Missouri enjoyed an exemplary reputation among area officers and within the community, Dagnan was concerned about the increasingly fraught political landscape and the frequency with which police departments across the nation were in conflict with the communities they exist to serve. The aftermath of high-profile events like those in Ferguson, MO, and Baltimore, MD, illustrated a dangerous erosion of trust between law enforcement and local citizens—an erosion that too often escapes detection until after situations escalate. Dagnan was determined to proactively implement law enforcement leadership training to create a sustainable culture within the department; a culture that would ensure ongoing success without compromising the well-being of officers or of local residents. After reading *Leadership and Self-Deception*, he realized that Arbinger had the guiding vision, principles, and experience to provide the law enforcement leadership training he was looking for.

Solution

Chief Dagnan wanted a sustainable solution with deep impact. In order to provide every officer with Arbinger's outward

mindset tools, Dagnan selected key personnel to become certified to facilitate Arbinger's leadership training program for public safety. This investment enabled the department to internally promote cultural transformation far into the future. Under Dagnan's leadership, Carthage PD implemented outward-mindset practices in multiple areas throughout the organization. Arbinger principles began influencing recruitment, leadership development, de-escalation, crisis management, and community engagement.

The impact spread well beyond internal department protocol and procedures. The agency wanted to strengthen its community ties by establishing unprecedented transparency and accountability for every police action. By applying Arbinger's "Voice of Your Community" program, Carthage PD started offering all community members the opportunity to rate and provide feedback following any interaction with a Carthage officer. This feedback was then linked via the department's technology to the specific event and officer(s) involved. In this manner, the Carthage PD could proactively address citizen concerns, deepen trust within the community, and develop their officers.

Results

While gathering feedback is an important step, it ultimately makes little difference unless the recipient is responsive and willing to change. Because the department worked to establish an outward culture, the community responses received via their feedback program have sparked powerful learning and improvement among Carthage police officers. "We've received responses from people who have received tickets, people who have been arrested, you name it. Any type of situation, we're getting feedback," shared Dagnan. And while the department certainly enjoys receiving positive responses from their community, it is not the only feedback they get excited about. They eagerly respond to negative feedback because they have come to view it as a valuable opportunity to build

relationships and make things right. “To be successful as a leader,” says Dagnan, “you have to say, ‘I really want to know. If it’s good, if it’s bad, if it’s ugly—I really want to know and I need to be open to it. I need to be willing to do something about it.’ No matter who’s filling out the survey, or what reasons they’re filling it out for—there’s something we can learn from it. That’s the leadership challenge. It’s real easy to talk yourself out of doing something with feedback, but you can’t do that.” The remarkable willingness to engage with and learn from feedback—even from people caught breaking the law—has strengthened the position of Carthage PD as a community leader.

The seasoned police chief believes this survey mechanism is a useful tool that can help transform any department. However, he is quick to attribute their own department’s success in embracing feedback to the shift in mindset enabled by Arbinger’s law enforcement leadership training. “At Carthage PD we have all been through the Arbinger training, and we have a culture of treating people right, especially when in our minds they may not deserve it.” Nourishing a mindset that prioritizes the humanity of others can be particularly challenging given the nature and constraints of police work. The changes implemented by Carthage PD have allowed a powerful relationship to develop between the community and their police force. The Carthage Chamber of Commerce recently recognized the Carthage Police Department for “Community Contribution”—an award generally reserved for businesses. Chief Dagnan is also confident that department efforts to apply Arbinger principles have contributed to the lower crime rates Carthage enjoys compared to other similar agencies and communities.

When we started the Arbinger process there were leaders who were angry, frustrated, and ready to end their career. As a result of the Arbinger work, these are now some of the best leaders I’ve ever worked with. This change in our people has translated into a tangible increase in trust within the

community we serve.

Greg Dagnan – Carthage Chief of Police