

Public Information Officers In Criminal Justice: Barriers Or Peace Makers

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Abstract—Public Information Officers (PIOs) are used by public and private entities to manage information flow from and to the external communities. In law enforcement related professions, PIOs are exposed to high stress environments wrought with myriad challenges. They must manage crises with honesty, integrity, transparency without compromising or breaching the safety and security of their agency or the public. This paper examines the dual nature Public Information Officers in Criminal justice fields and their impact on the agencies they represent while appropriately balancing the safety and security of the community.

Keywords—Public information officer; Crisis management; Leadership; Conservation of resources (COR) theory; Corrections; Media censorship; Ethical leaders; Close-hold embargoes; Mandated clearance culture

I. INTRODUCTION

In many agencies in the United States, the primary spokesperson and communication link between the Law Enforcement agencies and the community is the Public Information Officer (PIO), whose main role is to facilitate the sharing of relevant and current information as it pertains to the organizational responsibilities and social media profiles and engagements. They usually work in offices, but they also deliver speeches, attend meetings and community activities, and occasionally travel [1] [2].

PIOs must have command knowledge regarding laws related to public communications, information disclosure, and media relations. Many agencies, from public to private employ Public Information Officer to manage communications between the company and the public and media. Within the Correctional landscape, facility lockdowns, inappropriate relations between inmates, visitors and staff, misconduct, escapes, riots, security threat activities that threaten the security and safety of the facility are just a few corrosive examples compromising institutional security. Communication management and facilitation regarding any and all institutional events fall under the purview of the PIO requiring accurate dissemination of information without violating rules, laws or privacy concerns [1] [4] [5].

When there are critical incidents involving use-of-force events, escapes, riots, or in-custody deaths, a

correctional crisis communications plan becomes vital for outlining the basic rules and procedures to effectively communicate with the public and stakeholders. An effective plan will have salient components to include Contact lists for media, stakeholders and emergency partners, Guidelines for staff communication, Designated spokespersons, Approval workflows for messaging, Prewritten templates for press releases and social posts and Media monitoring and misinformation response protocols. A public information officer (PIO) serves as the primary liaison between the correctional agency and the public, including the media, elected officials and community stakeholders. The PIO coordinates public information and community relations programs within state prisons and parole regions. The PIO is also the Warden/institution head's Administrative Assistant and the institution's designee to respond to media requests [1] [3] [6].

Effective communication is the cornerstone of credibility and trust in both the public and private sectors. Sometimes though, the PIOs tactics can be counter productive to the image of the entity and they can be seen as barriers and firewalls leading to public mistrust and distrust of that entity. If managed and handled well, the PIOs can promote a more open dialogue between law enforcement and the media, contributing to a better weighing of public's need for information to maintaining control of what should be shared without compromising the integrity of the communication or management of it. The daily responsibilities of the PIOs involve information dissemination about high-profile events crime, emergencies, safety, and police activities with the public, developing effective, transparent ethical lines of open and honest communication to and from the public. The reputation and accountability of the agency is equally important to maintain, or it can culminate in erosion of public faith and trust.

A. CORE COMPETENCIES OF A LEADER

To be successful at this very important job, certain skills are very much needed: organizational intelligence, institutional history, mastery over the agency's policies and procedures, fluency in reading and writing, effective communication skills, background in the fields of public relations, crisis management, and journalism are very helpful. Awareness and command over how social media functions and being able to use it to enhance the

agency's public profile is also a definite merit. PIOs are the face and voice of the agency therefore this role yields a lot of power in interfacing with the community, thus mandating the requirement that to be PIO, one must also possess creative conflict transformation skills to allay the fears of the public in situations where misinformation spreads rapidly and causes chaos.

Additional tools in a PIO such as self-awareness, learning agility, Communication and influencing others, which are the for basic core competencies of a successful leader [5] [6] [7] [8] [9]

According to the Conservation of resources theory (COR) theory, having resources such as supportive leaders who provide valuable feedback ensures there is no resource losses of mental illness, stress and burnout [10] [11] [12] [13]

While a PIO may not be seen as a leader in the traditional sense of the term, this role radiates leadership, the PIO is in charge of communications and facilitates what will and should be shared with the public, placing the PIO in a leadership position of decision making; they also grant and host interviews so they have to possess the innate leadership skill of being tactful and forthcoming at the same time while garnering the trust of the audience. These roles to be effective, must through a constant adaptation process whether it is internally within themselves or externally to meet the needs of the agency they represent, ultimately it is a challenging balancing act of weighing public right to information and safety of the institution.

II. BARRIER OR PEACE MAKER

The responsibilities of Public Information Officers can be very challenging given the duality of their role of representing the agency and protecting the community from false information. PIO effectively filters and prevents the general public, media and others from reaching the high-level administrators, that the PIO's job is to shield the top brass from scrutiny rather than relay and allay the fears of the community. It begs the question of is a PIO a gate keeper for the agency or is a PIO a creative barrier or fire-wall between the community and the entity. To be effectively functional and maintain equilibrium, the PIO's humanity must be balanced with disciplined leadership to encourage better morale, lower misconduct, and stronger mission cohesion [7] [14].

Certain situations present unique challenges where the truthful communication might cast aspersions on the integrity of the agency, and even in such dire scenarios, the PIOs have to be steadfastly committed to holistic honesty at the risk of alienating their own leaders.

Critics feel that PIOs are critical positions for public and private entities to control journalists' inquiries. The Public Information Officer is a frequently obstructive mechanism thinly veiled by a helpful sounding title. PIO-approved comments shape the narratives of their news coverage across the country on matters that range from the mundane to the extremely

consequential [15] [16]. PIOs must earn the trust of the communities they face and the agencies they represent, be able to look for commonalities that bind us all together and possess the innate ability to be gently persuasive and be open to constructive or unhelpful feedback from all involved parties, which requires one to be humble and introspective.

Critics also contend that public information officers tend to censor access to public records and other assaults on free speech. In the correctional world of jails and prisons, compassionate and thoughtful morality is much needed for PIOs in addressing the needs of the highly vulnerable population. Accountability and transparency are vital, for legality, fairness and consequences of how institutional practices impact marginalized groups [16] [17] [18].

In situations where a certain media outlet has caused intentional or accidental harm to the agency by way of false or misleading reporting, the PIOs will proactively ban the reporter or the outlet from interviews with their agency's personnel [17].

It is the PIOs responsibility to protect their agencies and officers from being targeted by ill-willed reporters and media looking to settle scores, and this shielding might inevitably be seen as curbs on free speech. Not all staff members have the confidence and acuity to be able to handle questions and interviews, whether they are active patrol men, correctional officers, sheriffs or corporate workers, the challenges do exist. The PIOs bridge this gap between field officers and the media by taking the leadership for agency representation.

III. MANDATED CLEARANCE CULTURE

Information is power and that can be misused, abused, over used or under-used. *Mandated clearance culture* requires journalists to go through PIOs to speak with government workers. Certain events such as a prison riot, criminal activities, acts of terrorism and other such shocking crimes are better understood if explained by professionals and experts; however, in many instances, agencies forbid direct interviews and contacts with the personnel involved creating barriers while time is of the essence for ensuring public's need for safety is not being compromised. Another issue causing friction are the "*close-hold embargoes*" in which a government PIO calls together journalists and offers to give them a briefing about an upcoming announcement but in return, the journalist would not be allowed "to ask any questions of sources not approved by the government until given the go-ahead." [19] [20].

Head (Logical), Hearts (Emotional) and Hands (Cooperative) are the basic tenets of influencing tactics and appeals, thus, the PIO being the person with power to decide which spigot of the information reservoir shall be opened and for how long makes this role vital in every aspect of a functional entity; PIOs have to assess, evaluate and determine the most logical options that culminate in gaining cooperation

by creating collaborations, and alliances; they must appeal to the rational and intellectual views of the community while also taking into careful consideration their emotional investment and welfare [8][20].

For an organization to be successful in representing itself positively even in crisis, leadership is fundamental, a good blend of performance and efficiency, goal achievement, task completion and with ability to provide social and emotional support to all involved with focus on maintaining positive interpersonal relationships. Altruistic, holistic, ethical expressions of character and perspectives within the leadership spectrum also have an impact in how the message is received by others, therefore, all these qualities are transformative tools for PIOs to flourish in their role and earn the trust of community as well as their agencies ([21] [22].

A poignant example of journalists having open access to the agency is seen at NASA. Their 1958 Space Act mandates the dissemination of the agency's scientific findings to the widest possible public. In contrast is the National Cancer Institute that mandates "All media inquiries must be directed to the NCI Media Relations Branch." The Society of Professional Journalists (SPJ) in 2014 submitted a grievance letter to then President Obama indicating PIOs were "requiring questions in writing before interviews, having PIOs monitor and direct interviews with agency employees, prohibiting employees from speaking to journalists and blackballing reporters who question too aggressively." It did not gain traction, and the SPJ submitted a similar letter to the Trump administration accusing the PIOs of controlling the flow of information [20].

IV: DISCUSSION & CONCLUSIONS

Public relations specialists work for a variety of organizations, including schools, media buyers, and professional associations. In the face of a state or local emergency, PIOs become crucial figures for ensuring public safety and maintaining order. There is a projected growth rate of 6% for public relations specialists (which includes Public Information Officers) from 2022 to 2032, faster than the average for all occupations. This translates to roughly 25,800 job openings each year. This growth indicates a positive trend in the industry, driven by the increasing importance of digital media and the need for organizations to maintain a strong public image.

Job seekers can look forward to a growing number of opportunities in this field. Many organizations, from government agencies and nonprofits to corporations, require clear and effective communication with the public. Public relations specialists typically need a bachelor's degree to enter the occupation, and the median annual wage for public relations specialists was \$69,780 in May 2024 in the United States [23].

Consistency from the PIO across various platforms is important in ensuring the trust from the public and the media does not erode, especially when the organization or facility is facing intense scrutiny. The

PIOs have to be cognizant of the potential for reputational damages, pay close attention to privacy laws, and ethical and legal points of contention. The PIO is the primary source of critical information so a fluency, and currency of language is required to prevent any misunderstanding and misapprehensions resulting from information relayed by the PIO that might be complex.

Information has to be synthesized with an awareness to not use stigmatizing language. Equally important to this role is the self-control to not be overly emotional in their delivery, and be impartial and unbiased even if they do not agree with the decisions taken by the agency. They have the opportunity to help the public view the challenges of the agency from a closer perspective. So the approach has to be holistic in prioritizing interdisciplinary connections and experiential learning to inform how the PIO formulates an integrative, comprehensive response to the crisis on hand. Without a supportive pattern of interventions, the message can become fragmented, tattered and sound patronizing which in turn hinders and erodes the community's trust in the PIO and the agency.

Thus, the job is certainly a test of resilience, effective communication, emotional stability, and it also presents a platform that allows for compassionate, kind, empathetic yet fair leadership in crises.

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