

# WHEN YOUR PARTNER ISN'T WHO YOU EXPECTED

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When you become a police officer, you spend months preparing for the responsibilities that come with wearing a badge. You learn the law, defensive tactics, firearms, report writing, communication skills, and the procedures necessary to perform the job safely and professionally. What many new officers do not fully understand until they begin working patrol, however, is how important their relationship with their partner will become.

The officer sitting beside you in a patrol car may have a greater influence on your career than you realize. Your partner may become the person who teaches you lessons that were never covered in the academy, helps you navigate difficult situations, provides guidance during the early years of your career, and stands beside you during moments when trust is not simply important but necessary for survival.

At the same time, many new officers eventually discover something unexpected: the person they are assigned to work with may not be who they imagined.

Your partner may not share your personality, your communication style, your approach to police work, or even your outlook on the profession. They may handle stress differently than you do. They may have habits that frustrate you. They may have opinions that challenge yours. They may not be the person you would have chosen if you were given the opportunity to pick your own partner.

That does not mean the partnership cannot succeed.

Law enforcement requires officers to work effectively with many different personalities. Learning how to build professional relationships with people who are different from you is not only important for your career; it is an essential skill for becoming a well-rounded officer.

## **YOUR PARTNER DOES NOT HAVE TO BE YOUR BEST FRIEND**

Many officers develop lifelong friendships with the people they worked beside during their careers. Those relationships can become some of the strongest bonds a person will ever experience because they are built through shared experiences, difficult calls, and knowing that another person was there during important moments.

However, friendship is not the requirement for a successful partnership.

Trust is.

You do not have to have the same interests, the same personality, or the same communication style as your partner in order to work effectively together. What matters most is whether you can depend on that person to perform their responsibilities, communicate honestly, make sound decisions, and support you when circumstances become challenging.

Some of the strongest partnerships involve officers who are very different from one another. One officer may be naturally outgoing while the other is more reserved. One may rely heavily on organization and procedure while the other uses years of experience and instinct to guide decisions. One may approach problems cautiously while the other is more direct.

Those differences can actually strengthen a partnership when both officers respect what the other brings to the team.

Problems usually occur when officers believe their own personality or approach is the only correct one.

## **TAKE TIME TO UNDERSTAND BEFORE YOU JUDGE**

One of the easiest mistakes for a rookie officer to make is forming an opinion about a partner too quickly.

When you spend eight, ten, or twelve hours sitting beside someone every shift, you notice everything. You notice how they talk, how they handle calls, how they interact with citizens, and how they respond to stress. Because you see so much of their behavior, it can become easy to make assumptions without understanding the reasons behind those behaviors.

A partner who does not talk much may not be unfriendly. They may simply be someone who processes information internally.

A partner who uses humor after difficult calls may not be insensitive. They may have developed a way to handle the emotional weight of the job.

A partner who approaches situations differently than you may not be wrong. They may simply have learned through experience that there are different ways to accomplish the same goal.

Before deciding that someone is difficult to work with, take time to understand who they are and why they operate the way they do.

You may discover that the person you initially misunderstood becomes one of the most valuable influences in your career.

## **TRUST IS BUILT BEFORE YOU NEED IT**

In police work, trust between partners is not created during a dangerous situation. It is created long before that moment arrives.

When you and your partner respond to a call where decisions must be made quickly, you do not want to wonder whether the person beside you is prepared, dependable, or willing to do their

part. That confidence comes from the thousands of smaller interactions that happen before the critical moment.

Trust is built when your partner sees that you arrive prepared for your shift.

It is built when you complete your responsibilities without being reminded.

It is built when you admit mistakes instead of blaming someone else.

It is built when you communicate clearly and look out for each other.

A good partner does not expect perfection. They expect honesty, effort, and reliability.

Remember that your partner is also placing trust in you. They are trusting that you will pay attention, communicate, and support them when they need you. A partnership works because both officers understand that they are responsible for more than themselves.

## **COMMUNICATION PREVENTS SMALL PROBLEMS FROM BECOMING BIG ONES**

Many conflicts between partners do not begin with major disagreements. They begin with small frustrations that are ignored until they become resentment.

One officer becomes irritated but says nothing.

The other officer does not realize there is a problem.

Eventually, the frustration becomes personal instead of professional.

The best partnerships are built on communication. If something is affecting your ability to work effectively together, address it respectfully. Avoid allowing problems to grow because you are afraid of an uncomfortable conversation.

Professional communication does not mean attacking someone. It means explaining your concerns while recognizing that the goal is not to prove who is right. The goal is to improve the partnership.

A conversation such as, "I want to talk about something that I think could make us work better together," is very different from accusing someone of being the problem.

Your partner is not your opponent.

You are on the same team.

## **BE CAREFUL ABOUT NEGATIVE INFLUENCE**

During your career, you will encounter officers who have become frustrated, cynical, or disconnected from the reasons they entered law enforcement. Some of these officers may have valuable experience and lessons to share. Others may unintentionally pass along attitudes that can damage your own perspective.

Listen carefully.

There is a difference between an experienced officer explaining the realities of the job and a bitter officer convincing you that the job has no meaning.

Every officer experiences difficult days. Every officer becomes frustrated. That is normal. The danger comes when negativity becomes the entire identity of an officer.

As a new officer, you are still developing your understanding of the profession. The people you spend time with will influence how you see the job, the public, and your role as an officer.

Choose your influences carefully.

Learn from experience, but do not inherit someone else's bitterness.

## **HANDLE PERSONALITY CONFLICTS LIKE A PROFESSIONAL**

You will not get along perfectly with every person you work with throughout your career. That includes partners, supervisors, and coworkers.

Professionalism requires the ability to work effectively with people who are different from you.

Not every disagreement needs to become a personal conflict. Not every difference in personality needs to become a problem. Some issues simply require patience and understanding.

Avoid gossip. Avoid complaining about your partner to everyone except your partner. Avoid allowing minor frustrations to damage a relationship that you may need to rely on during serious situations.

Focus on what matters: Can this person be trusted? Can you communicate effectively? Can you work together to accomplish the mission?

If the answer is yes, then many personality differences can be managed.

## **YOUR PARTNER WILL SEE THE REAL YOU**

One of the unique parts of police work is that your partner often sees sides of you that other people never see.

They see you after difficult calls.

They see you when you are tired.

They see how you react under pressure.

They see how you treat people when you are frustrated.

Because of that, your partner can become one of the people who knows you best professionally.

A good partner may notice changes in you before anyone else does. They may recognize when the job is affecting you. They may challenge you when you need honest feedback.

Do not view that as criticism.

Sometimes the people who hold us accountable are the people who care enough to help us improve.

## **FINAL THOUGHT**

The officer sitting beside you in a patrol car may become one of the most important people in your law enforcement career.

That relationship will require patience, communication, and effort. Your partner may not be exactly who you expected, but that does not mean they cannot become someone you respect and trust.

Do not judge too quickly.

Do not assume differences are weaknesses.

Do not allow small frustrations to damage an important professional relationship.

The best partnerships are not created because two officers are identical. They are created because two professionals understand that they are stronger together than they are apart.

At the end of your career, you may not remember every shift you worked or every call you handled. But you will remember the people who stood beside you when the job was difficult.

Make sure you are the kind of partner others are grateful to have beside them.