Perspective

Edward F. Davis
Edward Davis, LLC

Decades of Preparation, but Only Moments to Respond: How Authentic Collaboration Saves Lives and Solves Problems

Referring to the events surrounding the Boston Marathon attack, I am struck by the ease with which collaboration occurred across very diverse formal and informal groups of individuals and organizations. In fact, the contradictions of communication and coordination that were once major obstacles to effective policing were almost nonexistent. But the nature of the response did not develop overnight. Rather, it came from decades of leadership and collaboration cultivation. For me, personally, I reached a major turning point more than 20 years ago, which has since guided my work in policing. In 1993, I experienced a profound change in my perception of policing. I have benefited greatly from this turning point, and I realize that few people experience the same good fortune of perceiving their life’s work with such clarity and in a fundamentally different way. My understandings of policing have kept me grounded in such clarity as I knew intrinsically.

I am a second-generation police officer. In the 1980s and early 1990s, I managed a police drug task force that was very good at arresting narcotics traffickers. I worked collaboratively with the Drug Enforcement Administration and the Federal Bureau of Investigation on federal drug investigations. Measured in arrests and search warrants executed, the efficiency of my unit increased every year. But I was uneasy. More arrests did not satisfy the community; moreover, most people in the community were troubled by the strategy. They desperately wanted to live in peace. Like politics, all crime is local. Despite all the hard and dangerous work done by my unit, our city experienced more crime every year. You could feel the danger.

It is said that you can teach, but if the student is not ready to learn, you accomplish nothing. I was ready to learn in 1993 when I was assigned to attend the Senior Management Institute for Police (SMIP), a leadership development course sponsored by the Police Executive Research Forum. During this course, I experienced a profound change in my perception of policing. I have benefited greatly from this turning point, and I realize that few people experience the same good fortune of perceiving their life’s work with such clarity and in a fundamentally different way. My understandings of policing have kept me grounded in such clarity as I knew intrinsically.

I have since become the leader of two sophisticated and significant police agencies. I know this occurred because of my transformation from a reactive, prosecution-focused police manager to a prevention-focused police officer. I have had more success in reducing crime and increasing trust in the police departments that I have led with this community-centered approach than I could ever have imagined.

I have learned that prevention is the goal. I also know that problem solving and partnerships are the means to that end. So collaboration is good—it results in a tide that raises all boats. Everyone says they collaborate, but a close look reveals that it is not usually as easy, or authentic, as it is portrayed.

The collaboration among law enforcement agencies that I previously mentioned is easy. You see it every time an arrest is announced by the prosecutor. Police from different agencies stand shoulder to shoulder with prosecutors to announce the latest roundup. This is important but unsophisticated in a genuinely
community-centered environment. The community should expect far more from its police and criminal justice system. Effective collaboration requires a close look at the problems faced and a hard assessment of the principal players needed to confront and mitigate the threat. Fortunately, here in Boston, we had faced such assessments years before Patriot’s Day 2013.

Multiple agencies wove collaborative efforts through years of thoughtful planning. Collaboration starts with transparency, and it is only possible in a vacuum of ego. It requires operation across silos of responsibility, so agency supremacy must be transferred to the team on the ground. The key component, however, is community-centric thinking. Here in Boston, for example, the hospitals agreed to partner with the police and fire departments in realistic disaster response drills. Hospital logistics staff enthusiastically participated in our training exercises. Our public health department attended every planning and response meeting, so that when the city was faced with hundreds of victims who needed help and guidance, the public health department was charged with their liaison. The Copley-area business community was devastated by the blast and unable to reenter their stores for a full seven days. Millions of dollars in revenue were lost. In this instance, the City of Boston took a leadership role in business assistance. It provided guidance and financial help for weeks on end. This happened so quickly because of long-standing relationships and prior collaboration.

The effective collaborative spirit experienced among responders to the Boston Marathon bombing event was evident. It occurred because of mutual respect among the principals as well as a history of partnering. The bombing-related investigation was quick and successful, but this is not the vital lesson from the tragedy. Of even more importance, every one of the 42 critically injured people transported to hospitals survived. “Boston Strong” became the enduring symbol of the event, a defiant victory for the community over terrorism and a defeat of those who practice it. These facts prevail because of our community-centric focus and because of the thoughtful collaborative partnerships practiced in Boston for decades.