The $80 Haircut and the $12 Haircut

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There are certain things in life where bargain hunting makes perfect sense. Paper towels. Coffee filters. Shop rags. Generic ibuprofen. I'm all for saving money when saving money makes sense.

But there are other places where going cheap can get ugly fast. Technically, anyone with a pair of scissors or a razor can give you an effective haircut. If this is your only criterion, the $12 haircut and the $80 haircut are equally successful. Hair was long. Now it's short.

During COVID, like a lot of families, we bought hair clippers and decided we could handle this ourselves. I gave my husband and son haircuts. It turns out I could take a perfectly good-looking kid and, in under 20 minutes, make him look like a mangy dog.



There are no photographs of the haircuts I gave during this period. This is intentional.

This brings me to law enforcement.

Special Operations Figured Out Something Critical

I've spent more than 20 years working closely with military service members, veterans, first

responders and other protectors and defenders. One thing I've always appreciated about the Special Operations community is that they understand something fundamental: their most valuable asset is their people.

They certainly spend money on equipment. Lots of it. They have mind-bogglingly sophisticated technology, specialized training and weapons systems that cost more than most of us will earn in a lifetime. But they also understand that none of that matters very much without the human being operating it. So they invest in those human beings accordingly

In Special Forces, they don't wait until someone is falling apart to bring expertise around them.

They invest in people who are already exceptional because the objective in Special

Forces isn't simply to repair them when something goes wrong. It's to keep exceptional people exceptional.

Then There's Law Enforcement

Law enforcement agencies also understand the importance of investing in equipment, training and readiness. Nobody expects a Chief or Sheriff to justify preventive maintenance on a patrol vehicle by proving the brakes are already failing. Nobody waits until an officer's body armor is compromised to decide that perhaps somebody should have been paying attention to it.

It's obvious: when something is mission-critical, you protect the investment.

Then we get to the human being.

An agency may have an opportunity to bring in highly specialized expertise from someone who deeply understands law enforcement culture, cumulative trauma, moral injury, relationships, nervous-system activation, suicide risk, leadership dynamics and the specific psychology of people who carry tremendous responsibility and make consequential decisions under pressure.

And remarkably often, the answer is: "We see the value of this, we really do, but we don't have the funds."

Sometimes that same agency is managing expensive workers' compensation claims, disability retirements, vehicle accidents, performance problems, policy violations, problematic use-of-force incidents, personnel conflicts, complaints or litigation. Sometimes it is losing an experienced officer it spent years recruiting, training and developing.

Apparently, we can find the money once a human problem gets expensive. We just don't always find it while there is still an opportunity to change the trajectory.

We May Be Putting Psychological Expertise in the Wrong Budget

Part of the problem, I think, is that we still tend to put psychological expertise into the "mental health bucket." Mental health belongs with problems. Problems belong with people who are struggling. Therefore, spending money on psychological expertise when people are doing well can feel optional. But what if we put some forms of psychological expertise somewhere else?

What if some psychological expertise belongs in the same conceptual category as training, readiness, professional development, risk management and performance protection?

Instead of asking, *Why would we spend money on this when our people are doing fine?*, we might ask, *What does it cost us when we fail to recognize human risk early enough to do something about it?*

This is where **Human Risk Discernment™** comes in.

Human Risk Discernment™ is not therapy. It is the ability to understand the human factors that influence behavior, judgment, trust, performance and risk—and to distinguish among problems that can look remarkably similar from the outside but require very different responses.

A change in an officer's behavior could reflect cumulative trauma. Or moral injury. Or grief. Or a relationship crisis. Or organizational distrust. Or burnout. Or a developing problem with alcohol. Or something else entirely.

Getting the answer wrong matters.



Licensed Does Not Mean Interchangeable

There is another curious assumption I often observe within public safety: that psychological expertise is largely interchangeable.

Licensed psychologist? Check. Therapist who works with first responders? Check. EAP? Check. Clinician list? Check. Psychology box checked.

We don't reason this way about almost anything else with meaningful stakes. If you needed brain surgery, you probably wouldn't be terribly reassured if someone told you, "Don't worry. We found a licensed physician."

You would have a few follow-up questions.

What kind of physician? How much experience do they have with doing brain surgeries? How many successful brain surgeries have they done? How good are they? Have they worked extensively with people like me?

The credential establishes a floor. It doesn't establish expertise.

This makes all the difference in law enforcement because officers don't simply have unusual jobs. They inhabit an unusual psychological ecosystem. The culture shapes how people communicate, what they disclose, what they conceal, how they experience loyalty, what threatens identity, what earns trust, what destroys it, and even what distress can look like.

Someone can understand general psychology exceptionally well and still misunderstand cops. In fact, expertise can sometimes create its own blind spots. The more deeply trained you are in conventional psychology, and the more confident you become in your ability to understand human behavior generally, the easier it can be to assume the same frameworks apply equally well to everyone.

But cops know they don't.

This is why one of the most common things I hear from law enforcement professionals is some version of, "There just aren't enough docs who get it." They're not saying there aren't enough psychologists or therapists. They're saying there aren't enough who understand them.

The Math Gets Interesting

Consider an experienced officer who has taken 10 or 20 years to develop. Think about what is actually contained inside that person:

thousands of calls, pattern recognition that can't be taught in an academy, judgment built through experience, relationships, credibility, institutional knowledge and the ability to walk into a volatile situation and notice something a newer officer simply won't see yet.

You can't just order another one from a catalog.

Now consider what happens when something starts going wrong with that officer and nobody recognizes it early enough to change the trajectory.

There may be overtime and backfill. There may be workers' compensation costs, administrative time, treatment expenses, disability leave and lost productivity. Depending on what happens, there may also be an accident, a complaint, a policy violation, a use-of-force review, an employment action or litigation involving the agency.

And sometimes there is the eventual loss of someone the organization spent a decade developing.

Suddenly, investing in highly specialized human expertise upstream doesn't look particularly extravagant. It starts looking like a logical investment.

Maybe the Question Is Backwards

I don't think the answer is for law enforcement agencies to spend indiscriminately on more wellness programs. In fact, I think the opposite may be true.

The next evolution should involve becoming much more discerning about where specialized expertise actually adds value.

Who understands your people deeply enough to notice what others might miss?

Who can help your leaders think through complicated human situations before they become expensive ones?

Who understands the difference between treating a mental health condition and recognizing emerging human risk?

Who can help distinguish between problems that look similar on the surface but call for very different responses?

Who would you want available when the situation is unusual enough that the ordinary answers aren't quite good enough?

These aren't questions about whether officers are broken. They're questions about how seriously we take the job of protecting an extraordinarily valuable human asset, and how much organizational risk can accumulate when we misunderstand what is happening with that asset.



Special Operations figured this out a long time ago. Their people are expensive to develop, difficult to replace and essential to the

mission, so high-level expertise around human performance isn't viewed as an indulgence reserved for when people are in crisis. It's part of protecting the investment.

Maybe law enforcement is ready for this approach?

After all, you can spend $80 or $12 on a haircut.

But if you spend $12, there's a good chance you'll end up looking chopped.



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