

The in-custody death of Freddie Gray led to protests in Baltimore due to a failure to communicate the truth to the public. Freddie Gray was arrested on April 12th, was hospitalized that same day, and died a week later on the 19th. Upon Gray's death, the media began to question the arrest and what occurred while in police custody that would have resulted in Gray's death. Baltimore PD leaders attempted to remain active and in the face of the media, unfortunately, they were unable or unwilling to provide an explanation of how Gray's injuries were obtained. Tensions continued to rise and much of the media focus shifted to the protesting.

There is always a need to preserve the integrity of an investigation, however, an extensive delay in the release of any information leads to great amounts of speculation. On April 24, 2015, a press release was finally held and Deputy Commissioner Kevin Davis identified the basic time line of the incident. He confirmed that 3 bike officers arrested Freddie Gray after a foot chase and identified the other stops along the route to the point when an ambulance was actually called for Gray. He acknowledged Gray should have received medical care at the point of apprehension, however, still failed to confirm how the injuries were obtained.

What the leadership lacked in this incident, was the ability to find the right balance regarding how much information to release to the public in order to keep them satisfied with the understanding that the incident was still under investigation. The community expected answers, and they did not receive them. All of those unanswered questions fueled the fire for the riots that began the afternoon of Gray's funeral on April 27, 2015.

There were lessons to be learned from the Ferguson shooting which occurred in August 2014. During his interview with Darren Wilson, George Stephanopoulos mentioned how Wilson's and the agency's silence essentially allowed for everyone to develop their own stories about what occurred that day. With each new controversial law enforcement involved incident, it is becoming more and more important for the agency officials to be proactive and take the lead on the release of accurate information. Leaders should also be actively engaged with community leaders, particularly those community activists calling for and leading protests.

In January 2015, an officer from Freeport Police Department in Texas was involved in a shooting that took the life of a black man. A crowd immediately gathered and threatened to riot. Police Chief Daniel Pennington tried to share the facts of the case, but it fell on the deaf ears of an angry crowd. Pennington invited the activist Quaneil X to review the facts of the case as well as the crime scene and share the truth with the community. Chief Pennington credits Quaneil X with preventing a riot. Active community involvement and engaging community leaders on all fronts, can maintain law enforcement and community relationships.

What Police Chief Pennington did, which Baltimore PD leadership failed to do, was “Confront the Brutal Facts.” In Jim Collins’ publication, “Good to Great,” he wrote. “When you start with an honest and diligent effort to determine the truth of your situation, the right decisions often become self-evident....A primary task is to create a culture wherein people have a tremendous opportunity to be heard and, ultimately, for the truth to be heard.”

Leaders in similar situations must do just that; acknowledge and accept the brutal facts. Their presentations to the public must be open, honest, and transparent regarding their investigative findings. Leaders must also work with activist leaders to ensure the truth is being relayed in a manner that is being heard and understood by the public audience.

Resources:

AFN USA. “Baltimore, MD Police Department holds a press conference about the death of Freddie Gray (RAW + Q&A)” April 20, 2015. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=s1XGPJtS_6g

Botelho, Greg and Fantz, Ashley. CNN. “What we know, don’t know about Freddie Gray’s Death.” April 29, 2015. <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/04/22/us/baltimore-freddie-gray-what-we-know/>

CNN Wire. Q13 Fox. “Police: We failed to get Baltimore man who died in police custody timely medical care.” April 24, 2015. <http://q13fox.com/2015/04/24/police-we-failed-to-get-baltimore-man-who-died-in-police-custody-timely-medical-care/>

The Sun. “Timeline: Freddie Gray’s arrest, death, and the aftermath.” April 12, 2015. <http://data.baltimoresun.com/news/freddie-gray/>

USA Today. “Police chief, activist work together after officer shooting.” Jan. 09, 2015. <http://www.usatoday.com/videos/news/nation/2015/01/09/21487507/>

US DOJ COPS. PERF. “Good to Great Policing: Application of Business Management Principals in the Public Sector.” June 2007. http://www.policeforum.org/assets/docs/Free_Online_Documents/Leadership/good%20to%20great%20policing%20-%20application%20of%20business%20management%20principles%20in%20the%20public%20sector%202007.pdf