

# SHAUNA ‘DOC’ SPRINGER, PH.D.

## CONSULTATION EXAMPLE: SCENARIO, ANALYSIS, RECOMMENDATIONS

---

Highly specialized consultation for public safety leaders, as a type of service that is different from “psychotherapy” or “coaching” may be a new concept for many. I offer this example to illustrate how I think and work with leaders. **What’s in it for you? Insights that will directly impact your recruitment and retention.**

**SCENARIO:** You are a police Chief. One of your officers has been involved in a critical incident. The media is baselessly accusing your officer of wrong-doing.

**My analysis:** This is one of several high stakes scenarios that make or break recruitment and retention for your entire department.

People who have options (i.e., high performers who could work elsewhere), will not stay in a department where their leader does not have their back. If you don’t get this right, word spreads like wildfire. Your department will be less attractive to new recruits and you will also lose those people who have options.

When a good-willed officer who has not violated protocol, policy or ethics is put under mandatory investigation, as required by department policy, the conditions are ripe for the development of not just trauma, but moral injury. These investigations must happen, but you as a leader need to understand how to protect your people in this context.

In most cases, it’s not what’s said, but what is not said that’s the problem. In other words, it’s the silence of leaders that causes an unintentionally damaging outcome. Here’s why:

In today’s America, many citizens view police officers as guilty by default, even in the absence of evidence. This includes the MEDIA - because the majority of people in the media are civilians who do not understand requirements and procedures in policing.

Police officers have no voice when they are under investigation, even when they have not violated policy or professional ethics. Critical incidents will trigger mandatory investigations by policy, and the public doesn’t understand this.

To the public, the fact that there is an “investigation” of an officer suggests culpability.

Civilians, to include those in the media, do not understand why officers are silent during investigations. Civilians can hire legal representation. They can share their story with the media. They can talk to their trusted colleagues. Officers can’t. The public does not understand these rules or restrictions because they are not subject to them. An officer’s silence looks like guilt to the uneducated public, including the media.

As a result, police officers are totally undefended in the court of public opinion.



## DOC SPRINGER'S CONSULTATION: A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

A leader's response can have immediate and sustained ripple effects on how everyone — not just those outside the department, but also how those in a department — treat an affected officer.

After a critical incident, there is no “neutral” response.

When an officer's back is against the wall, the only question that officer is asking is this: “Who has my back and who doesn't?” In this context, the silence of leaders is experienced as a deep betrayal.

If you are a leader, you must be aware that you are leading not a group of employees, but a “Tribe” of protectors and defenders. In this Tribe, there is acute sensitivity to who is “in” and who is “out.” Any perception that you are withdrawing your support can impact how others you lead treat their fellow officers.

In the wake of a critical incident, it is critical to see that you are the only viable bridge between their officers and the public, and you set the tone for how others in the department treat the officer.

But what do you do? You're probably being told by attorneys or by city authorities to “not say anything.” In their world, everything you say can carry risk. So they want you to show up by not showing up.

But if you do this, you will lose your best people and your department will suffer.

How do you cut a path through the chatter of outside voices telling you what you must and must not do?

There is a pathway.

The pathway involves:

- 1) Educating the public (and the media) about a process they don't understand.
- 2) Holding the line that no one should be condemned based on speculation and supposition.
- 3) Explaining that you are committed to a just and fair process for all involved and that any determination will be based on a thoughtful review of the accurate facts of the case.
- 4) Running interference against the public's lack of empathy for officers. If you do not find ways to humanize the toll that trauma has on officers, the public will persist in treating them as though they are not fully human. This is dangerous. It feeds an “us” vs. “them” mentality that sees officers as perpetrators, even when they have done nothing wrong.

## DOC SPRINGER'S CONSULTATION: A PRACTICAL EXAMPLE

### RECOMMENDATIONS.

Consultation includes actionable insights.

Here are 6 examples of things you can say, as a leader, to support and protect your people when the media is jumping to conclusions before the facts of a case have been reviewed.

"An active investigation does not mean that an officer is guilty or that there is a suspicion of wrongdoing on the part of the officer."

"As a matter of department policy, we always open up an investigation after any critical incident to ensure that we give thoughtful examination to how events unfolded."

"We conduct each of these routine investigations with accountability and oversight to make a determination that is objective and unbiased."

"As a routine part of these investigations, officers are not allowed to speak to the press or publicly share their side of the story. Their silence demonstrates their commitment to an ethical examination process."

"Any time there is a critical incident, there are several media reports, some of which will be based on facts, and others that are based on unproven speculation. Let's resist forming baseless opinions that are not based on facts."

"I am committed to upholding the ethics of a just and fair investigation process, in cooperation with the officers involved in this case, who have been personally impacted by this event."

**The good news is that if you understand these insights, and take action in these ways, word will spread like wildfire.**

**If you show up in the right way, as a clear, supportive, fair-minded leader, your department will become a "department of choice" for the best recruits.**

**You will be demonstrating that your department is a place where those who pursue this profession as a calling will be able to thrive, knowing that their leadership will not stand by while they are thrown under the bus.**

Note: There are many other ways you can support your people before, during and after critical incidents. This example is specifically focused on how to address media misportrayals.