



How Confusing Methods with Outcomes Damages Public Safety

One of the biggest mistakes I see leaders make is confusing methods with outcomes. The consequences of this error can endanger public safety and diminish the quality of life in a community.

Outcomes are the desired results (the “what”), whereas methods are the ways to achieve those results (the “how”). When people focus on the “how,” they tend to lose sight of the “what.”

Why is this important? You cannot get to a conversation about the value of desired outcomes when you remain mired in a discussion about methodology.

Mistaking methods for outcomes occurs across the U.S. every day. In the public sector, a shortage of resources has caused politicians and administrators to focus narrowly on methodology rather than broadly on outcomes.

For example, one seldom hears discussions about the level of public safety that the community wants. Instead, the focus is on how much to cut the budget or on methodologies like proportional sharing. Unfortunately, when the discussion is limited to cutting the budget, that’s what the conversation will be about; the impact of those cuts is not addressed because it’s not part of the question that was asked.

Here are four ways to ensure your community doesn’t suffer because leaders focus on the wrong thing:

1. Begin with the end in mind. That is, ask people what level of public safety they want and will support, and work backwards from there.
2. Keep asking “Why are we doing this?” and then, “So what?” When there are no further

answers, you probably have arrived at your outcome.

3. Frame your questions in terms of outcomes rather than of methods. For example, ask, “What level of public safety do you want to provide the community?” rather than “Should we use proportional sharing or results of a public opinion poll to cut the public safety budget?”

4. Relentlessly bring the conversation back to outcomes when it has strayed to methodology.

It’s tough enough ensuring a responsible level of public safety when resources are very tight. Don’t compound the problem by allowing the public discussion to focus on methodology rather than on outcomes.

More about Dr. Pat Lynch

Pat Lynch, Ph.D. enables first responders to elevate the level of public safety in their communities and to keep their personnel safe. She is the primary author of *Every Fire-Rescue Professional is a Leader: A Practical Guide to Individual, Team, and Organization Development*.