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Features

Policing Mass Transit: The SEPTA System

By David Scott

1

Innovative programs decrease crime on a mass transit system.

The Legislative Process: Law Enforcement's Role

By Johnny C. Whitehead

5

Involvement in the legislative process can benefit a police department's operations and its personnel.

Teenage Drinking in Rural America

By Ed Williamson

12

A proactive approach to teenage drinking can bring law enforcement personnel and citizens together to combat this growing problem.

Interpersonal Communication: Improving Law Enforcement's Image

By Garry L. Pritchett

22

Police departments can reap the rewards of an effective communication training program.

Lies, Promises, or Threats: The Voluntariness of Confessions

By A. Louis DiPietro

27

Interrogation tactics impact the voluntariness of confessions.

Departments

10 Focus on Research
The NCJRS

19 Bulletin Alert
Drug Pen

16 Notable Speeches
Intolerance of
Crime and Violence

20 Police Practices
Community Directories

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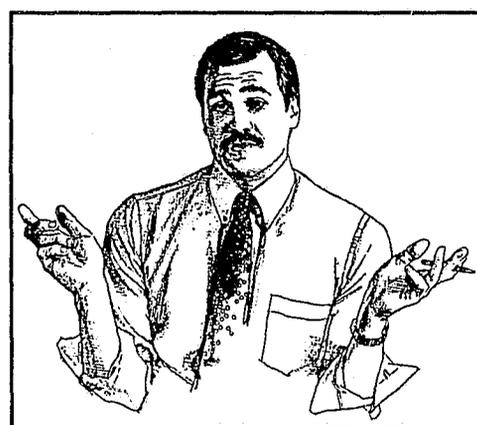
Interpersonal Communication Improving Law Enforcement's Image

By
GARRY L. PRITCHETT, M.Ed.

An officer pulls over a vehicle for running a red light. While approaching the driver, the officer automatically rests a hand on the butt of a holstered pistol. Then, leaning down and glaring at the motorist through the open window, the officer sarcastically comments, "They don't make red lights any redder than the one you just ran, buddy. I want to see your driver's license, vehicle registration, and proof of insurance—right now!"

The majority of police-citizen contacts occur face-to-face—either one-on-one or in small groups—during traffic encounters, interviews, media briefings, or other conversations in both formal and informal settings. The manner in which officers present themselves, both verbally and nonverbally, has a great impact on their professional image. It also affects the public's view of their departments and its attitude toward law enforcement in general.

Because of the complexities of the communication process and the effects that poor communication can have on police officers, their departments, and law enforcement as a whole, police departments need to develop effective communication training programs. This article provides an overview of the communication process, as well as guidelines



for police administrators to follow when implementing communication training in their departments.

THE COMMUNICATION PROCESS

Interpersonal communication involves understanding the dynamics of sending and receiving verbal and nonverbal messages. Whether officers realize it or not, their ability to relate to others directly affects every action they perform on duty. This includes not only what the officers say but also the way they say it. Their tone of voice, facial expressions, posture, and general demeanor broadcast messages to those with whom they interact. Often, these nonverbal elements send stronger messages to the listener than verbal ones.

Paralanguage

An individual sends messages not only through language and words but also by tone of voice, pitch, and inflection. This form of communication is called paralanguage. Like body language, paralanguage also expresses emotions.

Active emotions, such as anger and fear, tend to be expressed by a fast rate of speech, loud volume, high pitch, and "blaring" tone. In contrast, passive emotions, such as sadness, are communicated by a slower rate of speech, lower volume, lower pitch, and a more resonant quality. Furthermore, a high ratio of pause time to speaking time characterizes grief, while anxiety produces nonfluency or blockages in speech.

These voice characteristics can also provide clues to the truthfulness

of the person speaking. A deceptive individual may become less fluent and stutter more frequently. Deceptive answers to questions will likely be less plausible, longer, and contain more fillers, such as "uh," "ya know," or other common expressions.

Hearing Versus Listening

Hearing simply means the ability to perceive sounds. Merely hearing what another says prevents officers from contributing to the communication process and causes misunderstandings, mistakes, frustration, and less successful conflict resolution.

In contrast, police officers who learn effective *listening* skills acquire additional facts that allow them to form accurate judgments about incidents or individuals. Armed with more accurate information, officers can respond or act more intelligently and identify better alternatives to resolve situations.

Effective listening also demonstrates to others that the officer is aware of and sensitive to their emotions.

Kinesics

Through kinesics, the study of nonverbal behavior, scientists have learned that facial expressions, gestures, posture, and other body movements transmit messages that either reinforce or contradict the spoken message. Understanding the possible meanings of expressions and gestures provides important insight into a person's feelings.

For example, the directions of a person's gestures can signal truthfulness or deceit. Individuals telling the truth tend to gesture away from themselves, while those trying to deceive usually gesture toward their bodies.

Nonverbal behavior also communicates information, expresses the personality of the communicator, and integrates the ongoing

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Officers adept at interpreting the nonverbal behaviors of others will be more effective interviewers and interrogators.



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communication process. Individuals most often use body language to express emotion. And, because they usually learn body language subconsciously over time, it becomes almost an extension of themselves.

In fact, research data suggest that information obtained from nonverbal behavior accurately reflects the personality and emotions of the person being observed. Furthermore, individuals who accurately express emotion can better judge the expression of emotions in others.

Proxemics

To communicate effectively, officers need to understand and respect the importance of proxemics, or personal and social space. In American culture, individuals designate concentric "bubbles" of space around themselves and allow only certain people into these "bubbles." There are four categories of individual space—intimate, personal, social, and public.

Intimate space extends from actual physical contact outward, from 6 to 18 inches. Only close friends can enter this space. Personal space continues from 18 inches outward to 4 feet. Individuals allow personal and business acquaintances entry here. Social space encompasses distances of 4 to 12 feet from the body. Individuals granted access to this space include informal business and formal social contacts. Public space includes everything 12 feet and beyond.

When uninvited persons violate another's personal space and approach the intimate space, the

intrusion invokes tension, fear, and a sense of being crowded. The person whose space has been invaded may react with the fight-or-flight response.

In addition, an invasion of an individual's personal space produces anxiety, and most people find it increasingly difficult to lie when they feel crowded. Therefore, police officers who adeptly manipulate spatial relations when conducting interviews or interrogations will most likely enjoy greater success in ferreting out the truth.



Cultural Considerations

The United States has become a multicultural nation. The allure of individual freedom and the pursuit of personal ambitions continue to draw people from around the world. Although the early immigrants settled in larger metropolitan areas, today, every area of the country, whether urban, suburban, or rural, will likely house individuals from different cultures. Therefore,

law enforcement officers need to learn both the verbal and nonverbal ways by which various groups communicate.

The communicative process, while different for each culture, is comprised of essentially three components—language, culture, and ethnicity. These three components are important factors in the formation of a self-concept, as well as in the development of cognitive and coping skills. Each culture has different "rules" regarding speaking and listening. Awareness of these cultural rules enables officers to be sensitive and responsive to the expectations and restrictions governing the communication process of the culture.

Body contact is the area of nonverbal communication that causes the most trouble with cross-cultural interaction. Society houses both contact and noncontact cultures, and police officers need to recognize which cultures are contact cultures and which are not. In contact cultures, physical closeness, occasional touching, and frequent gesturing are important and desired components of the communication process. Typical contact cultures include Arabs, Southern Mediterraneans, and Latin Americans.

On the other hand, people from noncontact cultures interact with others from distances that preclude physical contact. Examples of these cultures include the English and Northern Europeans. Anglo-Americans tend to fall in between the two, but most lean toward noncontact interactions. Police officers who understand the communicative

patterns of specific cultures can more accurately interpret the non-verbal behavior of the members of these groups.

COMMUNICATION SKILLS TRAINING

Unfortunately, many police training programs give insufficient attention to the importance of developing effective communication skills. These agencies simply assume that officers' communication skills will develop as they gain experience. However, without formal training, officers may learn only from the examples set by others. They will then employ these skills, whether effective or not, both on and off the job.

To communicate effectively, police officers must gain an understanding of the myriad of verbal and nonverbal message elements that are communicated consciously and subconsciously by the participants in all interactions. In addition, they must not only learn appropriate communication behaviors but also how to match those behaviors to the demands of particular situations. Officers exhibiting poor communication skills may be perceived as having a "bad attitude" or "abrasive personality," not only by their supervisors and peers but also by the citizens with whom they come into contact.

Training Issues

Police managers should conduct communication training at a very basic level. Training issues should evolve from situations that police officers and other agency personnel encounter every day. These

may include dealing with peers, supervisors, superiors, subordinates, and family members, in addition to typical situations encountered in calls for police service.

Attitude can be the greatest obstacle when implementing an effective communication training program within a police agency. Individual police officers often

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space has been
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response.***
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view efforts to improve their communication skills as either a criticism of their abilities or an attempt to discredit their "tough" image. They may believe that such training interferes with their ability to take charge of the situations in which they often find themselves thrust with little or no advance warning. They may not recognize how communication skills relate to the stresses of police work.

For example, police officers attempting to control a hostile situation may establish themselves as the authority and expect or demand that everyone comply with their orders. In such a case, poor communication may only inflame the situation and provoke a violent reaction, thus limiting the officers' options for resolving the incident.

Command and staff personnel within an agency often profess the importance of effective communication skills but do not allocate departmental funds to develop and implement a communication skills training program. Yet, most agencies' performance evaluation procedures establish standards for evaluating the oral and written communication skills of individual officers. Officers who receive a low or unsatisfactory score in either of these categories rarely receive any department-sponsored, formal training to help them improve their communication skills.

Therefore, an effective communication training program begins with efforts to change the attitude of all employees within the police agency. Everyone must believe that improved communication skills will benefit not only the individual employee but also the organization as a whole.

Guidelines

The first critical step in achieving a professional level of competency rests with the command personnel of a law enforcement agency. The process cannot begin until the command staff commits itself to developing organization-wide competence in communication. Teaching personnel effective communication skills improves the performance of the entire agency and enhances its ability to meet the demands for efficient public service.

Next, police administrators must determine who should receive training. Three groups of people within the agency should

receive priority. Command-level personnel, critical to the agency's function, should receive first attention. Improvements in their ability to communicate will often result in measurable improvements in overall department productivity. Second, employees who regularly deal with the public, either directly or through the media, must receive training because they can build a healthy, productive communication relationship between the agency and the community.

Finally, employees who are critical to the department's internal networking function should receive training. These individuals may be clerical personnel, managers of laboratory operations, telephone operators, or division supervisors, among others.

Role-Playing

One of the more successful methods of teaching effective communication involves role-playing. Role-playing places officers in different scenarios, thus allowing them to practice different communication skills. It also affords officers the opportunity to gain insight into another's point of view and to accept this perspective as legitimate.

BENEFITS OF GOOD COMMUNICATION

Effective communication helps police officers to identify additional, alternative courses of action when responding to calls for service. Being good listeners and understanding the importance of spatial relations and other nonverbal communication allow officers to defuse potentially violent situations and resolve them in a peaceful manner.

Body movements (kinesics), body position (proxemics), and paralanguage are spontaneous and involuntary messages that can provide clues to the speaker's emotions and accurately indicate deception. Officers adept at interpreting the nonverbal behaviors of others will be more effective interviewers and interrogators. Likewise, effective communication enables officers to deal more successfully with their peers, as well as their superiors.

Furthermore, improved communication provides a more effective flow of information throughout the police agency. This, in turn, facilitates better coordination among the various departments, resulting in increased productivity.

CONCLUSION

The rapid changes in our society since the tumultuous 1960s and 1970s have resulted in the public's holding law enforcement to a higher standard of behavior. Never before in the history of law enforcement have police officers been held more accountable for their actions, not only by the public but also by the court and other law enforcement agencies.

By learning to be more effective communicators, police officers can achieve the standards of conduct expected of them by the public, without surrendering authority, responsibility, or discretion. With proper training, the traffic stop can become:

"Good morning. I stopped you because you failed to stop for the red light at the last intersection. May I see your driver's license, vehicle registration, and proof of insurance, please?" ♦

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