

The St. Louis Police Department

COMMUNICATOR



NCJRS

FEB 24 1978

No. 2

December 1977

NOTE

In our last discussion, we talked about how big a part the individual judgment of a police officer plays in the performance of his duties.

About this time you will probably be getting a little skeptical about the whole thing. You will wonder whether this business of "communication" isn't being overdone. You'll be thinking that, after all, you know from experience, the best way to handle a law violator -- any law violator -- is to just get the whole thing over with as soon as possible!

You will be thinking you are more aware of the problems than some guy who only knows theory and who has never had on a uniform. You know that the only way is to be as tough and rough as necessary to get the job done.

You will be thinking, "Why take any chances?"

You will be asking, "Why do we have to give law violators a break?" Any law violators!

These are all legitimate and natural questions. Well, no matter how legitimate or natural the questions ... no matter how much an officer is discouraged by his experiences with people ... nevertheless, the fact remains that he must deal with people who live in a free country, protected by what we call a government of laws.

42311

Remember, this whole business started with the Constitution and the Bill of Rights. So, no matter what the provocations, no matter what the temptations to evade them or go around them, every officer must eventually learn to live with the laws which both govern and protect people, even against the officer, even against the government!

Nobody's going to contend that it's easy for an officer -- who puts his life on the line every time he puts on his uniform or straps on his gun -- to see some crook get away with breaking the law.

There frequently are times when an officer knows positively that on the other side of that door is all the evidence he needs to solve a crime or put a thief behind bars.

But, he can't get to that guy legally! And, it's plenty frustrating.

Some people named Franklin and Hancock and Washington and Jefferson and Adams -- and a few others -- a couple of hundred years or so ago put together some protections for the people against their government -- in the Bill of Rights!

One of those protections says that the officer has to get a search warrant before he can invade a person's home. He has to tell a judge or some other legal authority that he knows what's behind that door before he can legally break it down or enter.

It's tough and it's frustrating. But, it also may be comforting for the officer to know that the same laws that protect the potential law violator also protect the officer and his family ... and the millions of non-law violators.

We are all protected against Hitlers or Mussolinis or Stalins -- no matter what name they use or in which country they operate. They can't legally drag us or our family out in the middle of the night. Only so long as the principles of government by law are observed is anybody really safe!

The officer must remember that he and his family and other people are free citizens, living in a free country, first ... and that he is a police officer, second.

What we're trying to say is that it helps to keep a sense of balance and proportion to be a good law enforcement officer. When we get frustrated at conditions created by the laws that protect people, even from the police, we've simply got to remember these things!

It might seem easier for all concerned if every officer could just go about his business of picking up law violators or suspected law violators as he sees fit and in his own way.

But, in the long run, that same history we talked about in our first discussion, that history which man can write down and preserve and remember, has proved that this is not the best way for people to live and to raise their families.

The preservation of what we call civil liberties and civil rights of the individual is very important to any decent way of living.

Well, so much for philosophy. Now, let's get back to the immediate business of that fellow we had stopped. He's waiting for us to make the next move.

We are about to search his car. We have good reason to do so. But, before we do that, let's let him wait a little longer while we take another and closer look at the meaning of words ... our words, that is ... and how people read them.

Remember that most of our friction, or trouble, in communication is closely related to how people react to what we are saying. How our words affect his gut, his nervous system.

That goes, whether we're asking, telling or listening. In each case, we are communicating with words. And, our words are our most important tools.

Most people don't stop to think about the different meanings words have. They think words mean one thing to them, and so they ought to mean the same thing to other people. We ought to know more about this subject.

Fortunately, lots of studies have been made and a good deal of investigation has been undertaken to find out just where we do have breakdowns in our communication caused by the misunderstanding of words.

These studies destroyed a lot of notions about words we may have believed for a long time. With the exception of a few technical terms, scientists have found out that words -- most words -- have all kinds of different meanings.

The trouble begins, they say, when we put our own meaning on the words we use ... and then act on the notion that the words we use, and the way we mean them, are taken the same way with the same meaning by other people!

It's this kind of thinking that sometimes gets us really fouled up in our communications. For instance, here's what happens.

We say ... and we mean ... one thing. The other persons hear what we say but, somehow, by the time the words get through their brain, they mean something different to them.

Let's take a few examples. Here's a word like "suit." Stop to think about it. "Suit" can mean a suit of clothes; it can mean a lawsuit; it can mean "suit yourself;" or "suits me;" or a bridge suit or what people call a furniture suite.

Take a simple word like "table." Are we talking about the multiplication table, to table a motion, a dining room table, or what?

Take another word like "run." Some professors have figured out that the word "run" has 400 different meanings.

When somebody says, "I've got a run," is he talking about a run in the stocking, a home run, a run home, a run to a meeting, or run the whole show, or run up costs, or run down to the store? Is he talking about running up the totals, or running someone down? And, if he's running someone down, is it with an automobile or with words?

Well, we could go on like this with other words, but we always come out to the same starting place. Words -- the same words, mind you -- don't always mean the same thing to other people as they do to us.

And, the meaning of words often changes. Time makes a difference. Take the word "square." To some people the word "square," when applied to people, means a fair person, someone who is honest, on the level, etc. Or, if we use it in connection with a square deal, it usually means something constructive, like everybody getting an even break, no favoritism and so on.

But, what does it mean to some of your children? Well, in the words of a modern teen-ager, a "square" means a "jerk" or something similar to it.

Anyhow, it's far from a complimentary reference in many conversations today. It used to be very complimentary.

We used to refer to a jazz musician as a "hot" musician. Today, most of our kids refer to them as "cool, man, cool."

So, it's no wonder some parents have trouble understanding or communicating with their children these days. They just don't "dig" their kids, or how they talk, or the meaning of their words.

The whole point we're trying to make is, when we communicate, we must understand that words -- our words -- don't always mean the same thing to all people and that words can even change in meaning with the times. This is an important thing to remember, because sometimes an officer will be talking or interrogating some person and doesn't seem to be getting anyplace.

Knowing what you now know about words, it might be a good idea to either say or think something like, "Let's stop and see if we're talking about the same thing." It would be a very helpful thing if the officer could also say, "Now, here's what I mean by this. What do you understand by it?"

When we use words that are not understood by our listeners, we might just as well be making a lot of sounds or noises. That's all the good it does in getting through or getting other people to understand what we are trying to say. It's not that we just waste time. It's also because misunderstanding the meaning of words often results in friction, in irritation, in arguments and even physical violence.

When you get right down to it, misunderstanding, friction, irritation, arguments and fights are no good for ordinary people. And, they're even worse for police officers! So, to be real selfish about it, it helps us individually and improves our knowledge if we know these things about communication.

We left that fellow who was stopped in his car standing right in the middle of things, didn't we? We were about to search him.

Assuming the officer was going to make the search of a car, we found the usual procedure was for the officer to tell the man to get out of his car.

There are a lot of different ways to get people out of their car. One of them is to just order him out of it. Like, "All right, mister, out of your car!" Or, "Hey, boy, out of your car!" Or, "Where do you think you're going, mister, to a fire or something!" And, a lot of other ways we've all seen and heard.

But, there are other ways. And, they have a much different effect on people, including how they feel or how they cooperate with the police officer or what they think of him and the entire police department.

The way comes from a basic principle of human communication
that runs something like this:

"Talk about the situation, the thing that happened, the event,
rather than someone's character or personality or what you think
their character or personality is or was."

Working with that principle, we would be saying something like:

"Sir, you were going 60 miles an hour in a 30 mile zone. Would
you please step out of your car?" Or,

"Sir, would you mind stepping back here? You're left tail
light is out."

You can think of lots of other ways. But, notice that, when
you talk about what the other person did, you don't call him names,
you don't reflect on his character, you don't get him uptight about
your words. And, mostly, if he is talked to this way, he's still
communicating. And, when you ask him for his driver's license or
tell him you are going to look in his car, he is more apt to cooperate
with you than not.

Anyhow, nobody had to get their "bowels in an uproar" by the
way you communicated or by the way you talked to them or by the
words you used.

More later.

###



END