

NEWSLETTER

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Save this Date!
IADLEST 2017 Conference
May 21-24, 2017
Nashville, Tennessee

**THE MISS(ing) COMMUNICATION
IN POLICE TRAINING:
A DEFICIT IN NEED OF ATTENTION**

*by: Peter J. McDermott,
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Problem: Today there is an ever-growing divide between the police and the public. Among the factors driving this divide are the public's limited understanding of the complexities of police work and the media's focus on use of force incidents that, in actuality, make up an extremely small percentage of police responsibilities. Seldom does the public hear or see evidence of the everyday performance of police as guardians of their communities. What can the profession do to respond to this divide?

In their article in a recent issue of *The Police Chief*, McDermott and Hulse make the case that law enforcement professionals have roles to play in strengthening the partnership between police

and the public.¹² In fact, the authors emphasize that police have a duty, "grounded upon the ethical principle of non-maleficence to avoid doing harm," to ensure that the divide does not persist.¹³ The authors point out that a lack of interpersonal skill competencies can exacerbate this divide; therefore, they argue that one way for the police profession to act on their ethical responsibility to the public is to mandate fundamental interpersonal skills training for recruits.

Support for interpersonal skills training for police dates as far back as 1829 when Sir Robert Peel wrote his *Principles of Law Enforcement*, which are as relevant today as ever before.¹⁴ These principles clearly state that there should be no divide between the police and the public, insisting that the police should be impartial in their service to the law. Implied across all of the principles is the expected interpersonal exchange of information between police and the public. The bond that such communication can foster supports Peel's belief that "the police are the public and the public are the police."¹⁵

In present day, police training consists of hundreds of hours appropriately devoted to officer safety due to trends in our society where police face dangerous situations on a daily basis while keeping communities safe. For unknown reasons, however, the most important skill of police, verbal communication, has not received anywhere near the same level of attention in training. Perhaps an assumption exists that the average person already knows how to interact with others effectively. In reality, the majority of negative interactions between the police and the public are verbal ones.

Police have a responsibility to minimize the negative perceptions that the public has of them and their profession. Police can accomplish this

¹² Peter J. McDermott and Diana Hulse, "Learning the Art of Active Listening and Responding: An Ethical Imperative for Police Training," *The Police Chief*, November 2016.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Virginia Center for Policing Innovation, "Peel's Principles of Modern Law Enforcement," <http://www.vcpionline.org/pdf/Peel's%20Principles.pdf> (accessed 2014).

¹⁵ Ibid.

task by becoming highly skilled in effective verbal communication. Verbal interactions routinely occur on the job for police across a range of responsibilities including contact with the public at schools or community events, investigations, and interviews with suspects, witnesses, and victims, as well as everyday enforcement activities such as motor vehicle stops. Whereas other professions call for a more frequent use of communication through technology, police predominantly carry out their work through face-to-face interactions. Without proper interpersonal skill training, however, police must figure out on their own how to conduct these interactions.

In today's multicultural and socially dynamic world, it is especially important for the public to feel comfortable and confident about seeking out interactions with the police. Police with limited confidence in their ability to communicate due to a lack of sufficient training in interpersonal skill competencies will avoid welcoming such contacts. On the other hand, police who have learned and mastered the skills for actively listening and relating to their community's citizens through communication will help to close the police-public divide.

In response to public concerns about police performance, The President's Task Force on Policing in the 21st Century and other groups have created initiatives and identified objectives to spark change and improvement in multiple areas of police training, including:

- Community policing;
- De-escalation of force;
- Multicultural awareness;
- Social interaction;
- Interaction with individuals with mental illness;
- Fair and impartial policing; and,
- Crisis intervention.¹⁶

¹⁶ President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing, *Final Report of The President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Justice's Office of Community Oriented Policing Services, 2015), 52, https://cops.usdoj.gov/pdf/taskforce/TaskForce_FinalReport.pdf (accessed September 2015).

What is over looked, and what will surely impede the success of initiatives to address the concerns of the public, is the current lack of training in fundamental interpersonal skills. In a PERF Study of 2015, findings showed communication to be a low priority in police training nation-wide.¹⁷ This finding is unfortunate considering that each of the topics listed above require competencies in active listening and responding. Police cannot accomplish the proposed initiatives for change without training in interpersonal skills, just as one cannot build a house without a foundation. It must not be assumed that people either inherently possess interpersonal skills or not. It is, in fact, possible to teach interpersonal skills.

A New Solution: To address the missing communication element in police training, Hulse, Chair of the Fairfield University Counselor Education Department, and McDermott, Distinguished Visiting Professional for the University's Center for Applied Ethics, collaborated to design and implement a pilot interpersonal skills training program. Since 2012, McDermott and Hulse have conducted trainings, delivered presentations, and published literature to advocate for mandating interpersonal skills training in police academy curricula. One of their primary objectives is to increase awareness among law enforcement professionals that interpersonal skills are not inherent, but are skills that law enforcement professionals can learn and master. In Spring 2016, four sergeants and three officers from five Connecticut police departments participated in an 18-hour pilot training program at Fairfield University. Participants were all males ranging in age from 27 – 46 years old, and their experience in the field of law enforcement ranged from 6 – 20 years. McDermott and Hulse operated as lead instructors with help from 13 volunteers made up of faculty, licensed counselors, practicum supervisors, alumni, and current students who served as skills coaches.

¹⁷ Police Executive Research Forum, "PERF's Survey on Current Training Practices," *Defining Moments for Police Chiefs, Critical Issues in Policing* (Washington, D.C.: Police Executive Research Forum, February 2015), 11 – 12, <http://www.policeforum.org/assets/definingmoments.pdf> (accessed March 2015).

Based on recommendations made in McDermott and Hulse's (2014) book *Police Training in the 21st century: Talk Trumps Technology*, the training program was organized around three categories representative of the daily interpersonal tasks faced by police: setting the stage for effective interactions, gathering information and evidence, and summarizing and confirming information and evidence.¹⁸ During the pilot training program, participants learned and practiced fundamental skills for these categories following sequential interpersonal skills instruction and practice common in graduate programs in counselor education. The skills covered throughout the training included verbal and nonverbal attending skills, door openers, minimal encouragers, focusing, paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, confronting, clarifying, and summarizing.

Each training session commenced with a slideshow presentation introducing the skills, followed by a group discussion of the significance of the skills and their utility in the field for police personnel. Instructors and coaches modeled the skills and provided examples of specific language to use to activate each skill. Next, small groups of two to three participants and one to two coaches broke off into separate rooms to practice the skills until participants demonstrated them successfully. After, the coaches provided participants with verbal and written feedback, identifying strengths, and areas needing improvement.

Between sessions, participants completed a form to reflect on the skills they demonstrated, the learning points they gained from the session, the approach they planned on taking next session to improve their skills, and the extent to which they were open to feedback during the session. For the final training session, participants demonstrated all skills acquired throughout the program and received feedback on their mastery of these skills. This final evaluation helped participants integrate and transfer learning to their fieldwork outside of the program.

Supporting Evidence: At the end of the program, participants completed a final evaluation form to reflect on their experiences in the 18-hour training.

¹⁸ Peter J. McDermott and Diana Hulse, *Policing in the 21st Century: TALK Trumps Technology* (Santa Anna, CA: Police and Fire Publishing, 2014). 12.

Responses strongly indicated that all seven participants benefited and learned from the training. In their comments, participants reported finding the interpersonal skills useful to their work, adding that they would immediately apply their skills to the field. One participant commented on the effectiveness of this instructional design by saying, "I liked how we discussed a certain skill, talked about it, attempted to demonstrate it, and then reflected afterwards. Getting feedback from well-qualified professionals really helped. I also liked that this was taught in a small-group setting."¹⁹

In alignment with the advocacy efforts of McDermott and Hulse, participants unanimously stated that interpersonal skills training would improve the curricula of police academies. As one participant stated, "This training needs to be introduced ASAP. As the divide between the police and the public grows, we need to start developing the skills that will bridge this unfortunate gap. The skills learned in this class would produce a better-rounded officer who is able to interact with the public on a much higher level."²⁰ To date, this pilot training program represents a rare example of a systematic training method to teach interpersonal skills and provide formative and summative feedback to participants. Feedback from participants in the pilot training program provides strong supporting evidence that it is possible for police to achieve mastery of interpersonal skills.

Recently, McDermott and Hulse led a "Train the Trainer" workshop on interpersonal skills for field training officers and instructors from four police departments in Connecticut. Participants included six officers, two sergeants, and one lieutenant. Two participants were females and seven were males; they ranged in age from 27 – 50 years old, and their experience in the field of law enforcement ranged from 5 – 16 years. When asked if they believed fundamental interpersonal skills training was a necessary component to include in police academy curricula, all participants concurred. One officer observed, "Absolutely. It is what being a police officer consists of: talking, communicating, gathering information, and doing it with compassion. These skills are fundamental."²¹

¹⁹ Participating officer, conversation with the authors, 2016.

²⁰ Participating sergeant, conversation with the authors, 2016.

²¹ Participating officer, conversation with the authors, 2017.

Answering the Ethical Imperative: The training methods carried out by McDermott and Hulse are congruent with teaching techniques commonly utilized in officer safety training in police academies. As noted in *The Police Chief*, “in firearms training, recruits must demonstrate and practice clearing a jammed firearm to achieve a designated level of proficiency. Similarly, interpersonal skills training procedures require demonstration and practice to achieve a designed level of proficiency.”²² Therefore, it is certainly possible to implement interpersonal skills training in police academy curricula by utilizing models such as McDermott’s and Hulse’s. Currently, police instructors tell recruits that they need to have communication skills, and occasionally instructors show them examples of a skill. This method of instruction, however, is not as effective as practical interpersonal skills training in which participants actively train until they achieve mastery of the skills.

a volunteer skills coach in the pilot interpersonal skills training program for police at Fairfield University, and she wrote about the experience in a December 2016 article for Counseling Today magazine.

The police profession has an ethical obligation to provide training that prepares police to do the job the public expects of them. Fundamental interpersonal skills are a dire need for police in all aspects of their work in order to effectively gather information, communicate respect, resolve conflicts, reduce violence, and promote a sense of partnership with the public that results in safer communities. The training methodology modeled in Fairfield University’s program demonstrates that police can learn, practice, and master interpersonal skills. Going forward, police can help their personnel start out their careers with skill competencies in both communication and officer safety. These skills will help police serve the public, convey civility, model diplomacy, and improve police culture as well as the culture of the community they serve.

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²² McDermott and Hulse, “Learning the Art of Active Listening and Responding,” 27.