

POLICING IN THE 21ST CENTURY

TALK trumps technology

Peter J. McDermott and Diana Hulse



Policing in the 21st Century: TALK trumps technology
is dedicated to the memory of Ciara McDermott
and other officers who throughout history have
modeled the importance of interpersonal skills.

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Preface

After nearly five decades in law enforcement, I reflect back on a manifold of changes: The emergence and utilization of technology, citizens' demands for safe communities, and the resulting responsibilities of police to meet these demands. The functions of police work in a multicultural society and the complexity of providing fairness and security in a continuously changing environment have tested the abilities of administrators with limited resources to respond effectively.

The one constant I see is the need for interpersonal skills to deal with all aspects of law enforcement. Sir Robert Peel (1829) illustrated that people would judge how well police were responding based on their interactions with the public. That criterion has not changed. Law enforcement was, is, and always will be human interaction. It is incumbent upon law enforcement to ensure the skills necessary to perform its duties.

I believe the need for good interpersonal skills is given "judicial notice" by all in law enforcement. During my career, I always looked within law enforcement to establish best practices because law enforcement has unique needs. Later, through my collaboration with counseling, I discovered that basic skill training was fundamental and not restricted to any one profession. This realization opened up options I had not considered before. There are many resources from other professions that can be applied to accomplish skill training in law enforcement. Once a skill is learned it can be applied to any profession or circumstance. If the skill is not present there is a deficit when it is called for, and in law enforcement this can be critical. *Policing in the 21st Century: TALK trumps technology* is a tool to be utilized in the development of human interaction skills.

There is a saying that one never gets a second chance to make a first impression. Those with better interpersonal skills will make better first impressions, which will lead to more successes in dealing with people. I have had to deal with many negative first impressions made by police officers. I feel strongly that the introduction of interpersonal skills training at the academy level and in the ongoing reinforcement of skills training throughout one's career will lead to better interactions between the police and the public they serve.

Peter J. McDermott

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Introduction

Communication: The Cornerstone of Effective Police Work

“Fundamentally, police officers do two things -- they talk to people and they touch people” (McDermott, & Hulse, February, 2012, p. 17). The touch factor in police work is handled clearly and effectively. The talk factor, while essential, is undervalued, underdeveloped, and in need of a fresh look.

There is a presumption that since a person can speak, that person (in this case a police officer) can demonstrate interpersonal skills. This is not true. Interpersonal skills are not genetic; they need to be learned and they are critical to performance in all areas of police work. The term “interview and interrogation” in police work is often interpreted as skills training, when in fact it is not skills training; it is the application of skills to achieve a particular goal. The question arises, “Where were the skills learned, if at all?”

Our purpose is to introduce methods and resources for teaching and evaluating interpersonal skills as foundational skills which when mastered set the stage for interacting with the public, for giving feedback, and for facilitating leadership tasks. These skill sets can be used and improved upon throughout a police officer’s career.

As our title, *Policing in the 21st Century: TALK trumps technology*, suggests, police officers need to be well versed in interpersonal skills and able to integrate those skills into all aspects of their work in our complex, multicultural, and technological world. The authors operate on the following assumptions:

- Police work is a human endeavor;
- For police to be effective they require the ongoing development of interpersonal skills, skills for giving and receiving feedback, and skills for leadership tasks;
- The ability to communicate with the public and work as a team will be enhanced by effective use of these skills;
- These skills can be learned, developed, practiced, and evaluated by making use of the content in this handbook; and
- Learning the skills is the first step; application of the skills comes later with experience.

This handbook is a practical guide for teaching, evaluating, and honing interpersonal skills; it provides resources for instructors and supervisors to use in beginning and advanced training

situations and for enhancing their own skills. This handbook will lead the reader through each skill set, accompanied by relevant examples.

We are cognizant of the enormous amount of technological advances in police work. These advancements, however, will never replace the need for police officers' personal contacts with the public. In 1829, Sir Robert Peel proposed nine principles that describe the law enforcement profession (See Figure 1). These principles are still valid today and serve as a reminder to police officers of the need to master interpersonal skills in order to effectively interact with the public, achieve public cooperation, and meet the basic goals of crime prevention and crime-free communities. It is our contention that interpersonal skills represent the single most important factor for achieving the goals of law enforcement. We also recognize that the training of interpersonal skills includes learning about oneself and one's relationships with others.

In closing, it is our further belief that police recruits should not be allowed to become police officers until evaluated on their mastery of interpersonal skills. This evaluation should reflect the same rigor and precision that is applied in the evaluation of use of force (touch) skills.

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Chapter 1 - Interpersonal Skills

Part One: Introducing Basic Interpersonal Skills

There is an inevitable perception of conflict when police officers interact with the public. Perceptions of conflict must be anticipated by police when they respond to calls, handle motor vehicle stops, and interact in public settings. Perceptions held by the public are either confirmed or diffused depending on the first actions of police officers. Police officers, aware of these perceptions and well versed in interpersonal skills, are best able to create environments for civil exchanges across a broad range of interactions with the public.

In this chapter, we provide a purpose for and definition of each interpersonal skill followed by methods and resources to use in teaching and evaluating these skills. The interpersonal skills are organized into three categories:

1. ***Setting the Stage for Effective Communication*** (attending to verbal and non-verbal skills, open invitations to talk)
2. ***Gathering Information and Evidence*** (focusing, paraphrasing, reflecting feelings, and confronting)
3. ***Summarizing and Confirming Information and Evidence*** (clarifying and summarizing)

Setting the Stage for Effective Communication

Attending Skills: Officers enhance their ability for effective communication when they understand the positive and negative impact of attending skills, described below. The combination of attending behaviors and active listening skills increases the likelihood that officers will be able to respectively manage situations involving conversation or conflict with a victim, a witness, a suspect, or the general public.

Eye Contact: Police officers should initiate and maintain eye contact with the individual keeping in mind that eye contact can be overdone and convey either warmth and engagement or judgment and distance. For example, talking to a victim does not require the intensity of eye contact that officers might use when communicating with a suspect in a crime situation. Failure to understand this distinction can negatively impact the outcome of an encounter. Officers need to understand *through training* what their natural tendencies are with eye contact, recognizing that how they demonstrate eye contact in specific and varied situations will positively or negatively affect the public's perception.

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Chapter 2 - Skills for Giving Feedback in Police Training

The Role and Application of Corrective Feedback

The ongoing development of police personnel equates to continuous improvement in the organization. One way to ensure continuous improvement is by creating a culture which values and applies feedback on a regular basis. In this chapter we turn the focus to feedback, particularly corrective feedback and its role and application in police training and supervision. Feedback helps recruits learn and master the array of skills needed to competently perform their varied job responsibilities. As officers continue in their career they need feedback that recognizes successful performance and corrective feedback that provides direction for improving desired work performance criteria.

When someone says to you, “I’d like to give you some feedback,” how do you respond? What are your thoughts and feelings associated with the idea that you are going to receive feedback? Do you welcome feedback? Are you intimidated or anxious? Do you equate feedback with criticism and feel a need to protect yourself? Do you have similar or different reactions when you are in the position of delivering feedback? These questions anticipate the complexities inherent in feedback exchange.

Mastering interpersonal skills (see Chapter 1) is essential for giving and receiving feedback. An organizational culture that includes ongoing feedback promotes learning and strengthens the culture of the organization. Feedback is the engine of change in supervision; therefore, our task in this chapter is to isolate the topic of feedback and to advocate for preplanning as a crucial step to help supervisors increase their effectiveness in delivering feedback. While no one can control for all the contingencies that may arise with feedback exchange, we hope to reduce the presence of factors that can hinder effective feedback exchange.

One of these factors is ambiguity felt by the supervisor and the employee. Through careful pre-planning steps that include (a) knowing oneself as a supervisor, (b) knowing the person of the supervisee, (c) and assembling resources and tools to help deliver effective feedback in supervision, supervisors accomplish several objectives. They decrease ambiguity and increase the likelihood that their employees will be able to hear and integrate feedback.

Everyone needs positive feedback; it reinforces successful performance and builds confidence and self-esteem. Corrective feedback is necessary in order to improve performance. Both types of feedback are needed; however, corrective feedback which requests that a person thoughtfully examine or change a particular behavior, is complex, uncomfortable, and often avoided. Irvin Yalom, a prolific writer and renowned psychotherapist (1983), captures this discomfort when he writes, “Feedback is not a commonplace transaction. As a matter of fact, there are very few situations in life where one feels free to comment directly upon the immediate behavior of another person. Generally such direct feedback is taboo. Virtually the only place it is permissible is the parent/child relationship and, occasionally, an exceedingly intimate (or exceedingly conflicted) relationship.” (p.187)

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Chapter 3 - Learning Skills for Facilitating Leadership Tasks

The nature of the police function puts officers in a leadership capacity. They are most often called upon to be problem solvers, mediators, and decision makers. To be effective leaders, police officers need a set of group leadership skills that help them succeed in conflict resolution while on patrol; at neighborhood watch meetings, roll call meetings, at accident scenes, or in special assignments groups, perhaps initiated by the chief of police.

What exactly does leadership in these types of settings entail? What unique conditions surface when people interact, face to face for decision making and problem solving purposes? Leaders can always expect that individuals will arrive to a meeting or gathering with their particular personal communication styles and their specific expectations and goals. These styles, expectations, and goals will become the focus of the leader's attention as he or she attempts to encourage and manage the contributions of all players in the group to engage everyone's input. The leader can be likened to an orchestra conductor who needs to comprehend the value of each participant's voice while making sure that the effort and input of all involved achieves the stated mission of the meeting or gathering. This is a tall order that requires a leader to develop an appreciation for and an understanding of group dynamics and to demonstrate that understanding across a variety of settings.

The Role of Process and Content

Properly run group meetings are ones that balance process and content. Properly run meetings establish the value of meetings for an organization and help make an organization successful. Effective application of group dynamics involves understanding the terms, process and content. **Process** refers to relationships; to how people interact in group settings. Group leaders must pay attention and respond to behaviors that can enhance or hinder the work of a group. **Content** refers to the purpose or reason for the group. In most groups there is often so much focus on the content; things to do, outcomes to achieve, that little to no attention is directed to the manner in which members of a given group interact with one another to either support the goals of the group or in some cases obstruct or derail the work of the group.

Effective group leaders use a variety of tools to make sure everyone has opportunity for an equal and fair chance to contribute, to be heard, and to be recognized. In fact, in task and work groups, it is the contribution of all members that leads to successful conclusions (Hulse-Killacky, Killacky, & Donigian, 2001).

The bell-shaped curve (see Figure 17) is used to visually display a balance between process and content. When leaders pay attention to how things are happening in a group, they increase the likelihood that the group will be successful in meeting its goals. In this visual depiction of process and content, the placement of the heavier process line indicates its prominence. This

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Epilogue

In our handbook, *Policing in the 21st Century: TALK trumps technology*, we have presented concepts and methods for **teaching and evaluating interpersonal skills, skills for giving and receiving corrective feedback, and skills for leadership tasks**. Our principle focus has been providing information for instructors in order to enhance police training in these areas. The information in our handbook can serve as the base for continuing education of all police personnel. The tools and resources presented in the handbook serve as departure points for instructors. They are meant to guide, not to prescribe. Police training personnel will need to review and adapt these tools and resources to their particular training circumstances.

We began with a reference to Sir Robert Peel and his principles of law enforcement from 1829 that still capture the essence of police work in current times. Peel's principles also underscore our belief that the cornerstone of police work centers around initiating and maintaining partnerships with the public in order to create safe and crime-free communities.

The central emphasis of the handbook has been on developing core interpersonal skills. Mastery of core interpersonal skills leads the way to mastering feedback skills and skills for leadership tasks. Taken together, these proficiencies round out a police officer's repertoire of verbal skills. We argue throughout that training and evaluation in verbal skills are not well articulated and are not given the same prominent attention as touch (use of force) skills.

Collaboration between the disciplines of counselor education and law enforcement was key to addressing the needs of skill training within law enforcement settings. Counselor education training programs use well defined methods for teaching and evaluating the skills addressed in our handbook. We have gathered resources from graduate courses that train counselors in interpersonal skills, feedback skills, and leadership skills. Instructors and supervisors can consider how these resources can be adapted to the recruit training realities in police academies and to continuing education needs for officers throughout the organization. We have pulled from the research on feedback that directly addresses the need for feedback in police supervision. We introduced the parallel between clinical training courses in counselor education programs and the FTO program and the preparation of new supervisors in first-line supervision training courses. Taking ideas from group work training in counselor education programs, we discussed the role of group dynamics and essential leadership skills that can be incorporated into leadership management courses and other continuing education for police personnel.

The collaboration across our two disciplines led to a call-to-action essay that invites counselors and counselor educators to consider supporting local police departments by sharing their skills and expertise, not only in skill training but in other ways that can provide important service to

police in their local communities (Hulse & McDermott, 2012). This handbook is an outcome of continued dialogue across the two disciplines.

The bottom line is this: Police work is a human endeavor. When all is said and done, the uniform and presence of a police officer is a powerful visual. Achieving a tone of civility is a hoped for outcome of the training we recommend. Our colleague, George Miller, wrote in 1983 about the tension that exists when the public and police interact. There are a number of reasons for this tension and we believe that training and evaluation in the skills we introduce in our handbook will go a long way in creating more respectful exchanges between the police and the public (Miller, 1983).

In our research for this handbook we became aware of parallels between police work and the medical profession. It is noteworthy that a number of medical school training programs are now making the case for interpersonal skills and good communication in admissions criteria, in training curriculum, and in the actual practice with patients (see Harris, 2011). The parallel between what doctors do with patients and what police do in their work with the public is striking. Both professions need people with strong technical skills and both professions need people who can successfully communicate with the public and work together as a team.

To close our handbook, we provide a quote from Abigail Adams written to her son John Quincy Adams in 1780 that sums up the invitation we offer to our readers:

Learning is not attained by Chance;
It is sought for with Ardor
And attended to with Diligence.