

To improve public trust, teach police interpersonal skills

By Peter J. McDermott

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I had the greatest job in the world. A job that is necessary to establish justice, peace, order and a feeling of safety in our society; a job that requires constant professional interactions with people from all walks of life. As of late, it is a profession criticized for lack of sensitivity, biases and lack of empathy; a job where people will flood the streets of New York City, Ferguson and Baltimore, shouting, "Kill the Police." A job where society's vitriol is expressed continuously toward officers.

Sir Robert Peel, a two-time British prime minister in the early 1800s, is said to have developed the Nine Principles of Law Enforcement that many still view as relevant today. In these principles, Peel asserted that the ability of police to perform their duties is dependent on public approval of police existence, actions, behavior and the capacity of police to secure and maintain public respect. Public cooperation, he wrote, diminishes with the necessity of the use of physical force. Peel goes on to say that the police seek and preserve public favor not by catering to public opinion, but by constantly demonstrating absolutely impartial service to the law. Public favor is further enhanced, Peel writes, when police exercise courtesy, friendly good humor and individual sacrifice in preserving and protecting life.

Cooperation, respect and understanding between police and citizens are necessary in order for police to be able to perform their duties. Interpersonal skills are essential for bringing Peel's principles to life in today's world, responding to the needs of a multicultural society, and addressing the mounting negative citizen impressions of police. In my five decades in law enforcement I have seldom found a topic of police training that did not require in some fashion the use of interpersonal skills (i.e., investigations, motor vehicle stops and public interactions). However, I have also never found a specific, stand-alone course that requires police recruits to learn, practice and master interpersonal skills with the level of precision required of recruits to learn and master use of force skills training. Imagine how differently the arrest of Sandra Bland might have gone had the Texas police officer who pulled her car over been properly trained in dealing with the public.

There seems to be a presumption that people are born with interpersonal skills. But good interpersonal skills are not genetic; they need to be learned and mastered. In recent years the reliance on technology has grown to where it often supersedes human verbal interaction, leading to an erosion in people's ability to interact effectively in face-to-face exchanges in all areas of life. This situation is especially true of members, and future police officers, of our younger generation. Police in our multicultural society need to, more than ever, learn and master interpersonal skills in order to gain public approval and respect. Those departments facing citizen unrest and those that are not need to have personnel who can interact in a respectful manner and develop partnerships with the public to prevent crime and continuously improve community safety. The argument for the need for interpersonal skills training to a part of police training is supported by the assertions and observations made by the President's Task Force on 21st Century Policing. The task force reports, "Tactical skills are important, but attitude, tolerance, and interpersonal skills are equally so." In addition, the task force identified the need for knowledge of mental health issues and community policing and problem-solving principles, which require interpersonal skills.

I have received pushback when trying to convince police and officials that basic fundamental interpersonal skills training could be one of the major contributors to advancing public partnerships. I wonder, what is so inconvenient about implementing a course in interpersonal skills training? Police are not handed weapons and put on the street. Police are trained, evaluated, and tested on their proficiency. If police recruits were required to have the same level of proficiency in fundamental interpersonal skills, their ability to communicate effectively and use de-escalation techniques could reduce the need for physical force and allow Peelian principles to flourish.

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