

2-2012

## Interpersonal Skills Training in Police Academy Curriculum

Peter J. McDermott

Diana Hulse-Killacky

Fairfield University, [dhulse@fairfield.edu](mailto:dhulse@fairfield.edu)

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/education-facultypubs>

Copyright 2012

Peer Reviewed

---

### Repository Citation

McDermott, Peter J. and Hulse-Killacky, Diana, "Interpersonal Skills Training in Police Academy Curriculum" (2012). *GSEAP Faculty Publications*. 57.

<https://digitalcommons.fairfield.edu/education-facultypubs/57>

### Published Citation

McDermott, Peter J., & Hulse, Diana (February, 2012). Interpersonal Skills Training in Police Academy Curriculum. *FBI Law Enforcement Bulletin*. Washington, D.C.: Federal Bureau of Investigation, 81,(2),16-20.

This item has been accepted for inclusion in DigitalCommons@Fairfield by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@Fairfield. It is brought to you by DigitalCommons@Fairfield with permission from the rights-holder(s) and is protected by copyright and/or related rights. **You are free to use this item in any way that is permitted by the copyright and related rights legislation that applies to your use. For other uses, you need to obtain permission from the rights-holder(s) directly, unless additional rights are indicated by a Creative Commons license in the record and/or on the work itself.** For more information, please contact [digitalcommons@fairfield.edu](mailto:digitalcommons@fairfield.edu).

## Focus on Training



© Debbie Overcash

### ***Interpersonal Skills Training in Police Academy Curriculum***

By Peter J. McDermott and Diana Hulse, Ed.D.

**E**ffective policing occurs when officers and members of the public partner to create safe and crime-free communities. This partnership requires that officers display not only strong technical capabilities but interpersonal skills. Therefore, law enforcement agencies must train their officers on how to interact effectively with the public.

Together, technical and interpersonal skills form the basis of all police work. Any well-established law enforcement agency trains and evaluates all recruits for their technical (e.g., tactical and legal) abilities. For example, in firearms training, recruits must earn a certain score to carry a weapon.

Unfortunately, many agencies do not concentrate on training and evaluating officers' interpersonal skills (e.g., active listening, problem solving, persuasion, and conflict management)

even though officers need them to competently execute tactical and legal tasks. If officers cannot communicate with the public, poor community relations will hinder even the most technically proficient departments.

To illustrate this point, in 1983, George Miller wrote about the tension that exists when the community and the police interact. He claimed these difficulties exist because of the different expectations and attitudes that each group brings to the encounter. This conundrum continues 27 years later as officers try to navigate their responsibilities amid police-community tension and increased expectations of privacy.<sup>1</sup>

An officer stops a motor vehicle for a minor violation. Conflict arises immediately between the male officer and the female operator of the vehicle. The female driver refuses to provide necessary paperwork and tells the officer that he makes her

---

uneasy. The officer calls for backup. The backup officer, also male, arrives and speaks with the woman, who expresses her trepidation of the first officer.

Response #1: The backup officer mandates that the driver follow the instructions. The woman refuses to cooperate and again cites her fear of the first officer. The men determine that the situation demands a higher level of force. They ask her to step out of the car and then place her under arrest.

Response #2: The backup officer says, “I understand your concerns, but my colleague and I need this information. How do you feel about handing me the documents, and I will pass them to him? I want to make sure that you understand what I said, so can you repeat back to me what you heard?” The driver replies that she understands the backup officer’s request and provides him the documentation to pass to the first officer.

In this second response, the backup officer displays active listening skills, conveys his understanding of the driver’s perspective, reflects her feelings, clarifies his message, and resolves the conflict by offering an alternative solution.

Department officials might never hear about the incident in the second response unless the driver contacts the department to compliment the backup officer. They may, however, hear about the situation in the first response if the department garners negative attention as a result. This fictitious scenario demonstrates the importance of interpersonal skills training to increase the likelihood that officers choose the second response and, thus, achieve a positive outcome.

## COMMUNICATION IN COMMON POLICE PRACTICES

### Talking and Touching

Fundamentally, police officers do two things: they talk to people and they touch people. Most police activities involve one of these actions. The “touch factor” in police training, driven by concern for officer safety, encompasses instruction in firearms, motor vehicle stops, self defense, arrest and control, and responses to crimes in progress. Instructors easily can witness and evaluate officers’ proficiency in these areas. For example, in firearms training, recruits must receive a certain score to qualify to carry a weapon.

The “talk factor” in police training focuses on verbal interactions during criminal investigations, traffic stops, interviews, and interrogations. Unlike technical skills, however, police instructors cannot easily witness and evaluate officer performance in these competencies. Yet, officers need these skills to ably execute tactical and legal tasks. The Connecticut Police Officers Standards and Training Council (POSTC) and the Kansas Law Enforcement

Training Center (KLETC) both support this view and maintain that effective interpersonal skills are essential to virtually every aspect of police operations.

Law enforcement officers cannot avoid interactions with the public because they occur so frequently in three very common areas of police work: motor vehicle stops, criminal investigations, and domestic violence and conflicts. Officers’ interactions with the community as part of these duties illustrate the need for interpersonal skills training in law enforcement academies.

“  
**If officers cannot communicate with the public, poor community relations will hinder even the most technically proficient departments.**  
”

---

Motor vehicle stops are considered one of the best ways to prevent crime, and they present the primary opportunity for communication between officers and the public; unfortunately, traffic stops also serve as the most frequent source of complaints against the police when they lead to conflict between the stopped individuals and officers. While law enforcement cannot avoid all hostility from motorists, the outcome of such conflicts depends on how officers approach the situation. Even when the incident requires enforcement action, officers should make every possible effort to seek a satisfactory outcome for everyone involved. Officers cannot predict the exact behaviors they will encounter during motor vehicle stops, and, thus, they need strong interpersonal skills to minimize hostility and misunderstandings in these situations.



© Thinkstock.com

In criminal investigations, the community calls upon police officers to assist individuals who have suffered the most negative experiences imaginable, and the outcomes of these investigations dramatically impact those involved. During these cases, the investigating officers' interpersonal skills significantly influence the community's impression of the police. Public perception, in turn, affects the success of investigations by impacting community members' willingness to provide information.

Often, domestic conflict involves physical violence coupled with strong emotions. Officers who respond to these situations must secure the scene and gather information to determine probable cause. A strong foundation of verbal and nonverbal skills allows officers to accomplish these tasks in a sensitive environment.

### Essential Techniques

To improve officers' performance in common police practices, agencies can instruct personnel

on basic competencies that ease communication between the police and the public during motor vehicle stops, criminal investigations, and domestic conflicts. These skills fall into three categories: setting the stage, gathering evidence, and confirming information.

To set the stage for effective communication, officers should practice crucial *verbal* and *non-verbal conversation habits*. These include eye contact, body position, voice tone, facial expressions, gestures, physical distance, and physical contact. Police also should use open invitations to talk, such as encouragers and closed and open-ended questions.

When gathering evidence, four communication skills assist officers in collecting pertinent information: *focusing*, *paraphrasing*, *reflecting*, and *confronting*. Focusing helps with reframing and reconstructing problems. When paraphrasing, officers restate someone's thoughts in different words and in a nonjudgmental manner. Reflecting involves feelings as officers articulate an individual's emotions, whether stated or implied. Finally, confronting aids police in identifying discrepancies in a story.

To confirm information, officers should use two strategies to pull together relevant data and ensure that they accurately capture an individual's story. *Clarifying* confirms that the officer and the individual agree on the exchanged information, and *summarizing* establishes that all information gathered is accurate.

### INTERPERSONAL SKILLS TRAINING IN LAW ENFORCEMENT

Some law enforcement training programs, such as POSTC and KLETC, already provide communications-based instruction for recruits. However, current descriptions of many training

---

programs fail to explain how learning objectives link to lesson plans. Instructors might simply describe these skills in class, telling their students “You use interpersonal skills when you walk up to motorists with a friendly demeanor and engage them in conversation.” Or, maybe teachers describe skills, model them, and evaluate recruits. Perhaps, students only observe the instructor, or, maybe, they practice, demonstrate, and master these skills. Currently, a lack of clarity surrounds how academies determine that police recruits truly master the competencies in a communications training curriculum.

### **Counselor Education Training Programs**

As police academies determine how to teach and evaluate interpersonal skills, they should consider using methods from counselor education curricula. Counseling-education students complete at least one course on essential interpersonal skills and then apply these techniques to all other areas of their training. Similarly, in police academies, interpersonal skills should be taught and mastered independently so that recruits can use these abilities to supplement technical training. Six steps comprise a common procedure in counselor education courses; this process exemplifies how law enforcement academies can teach their own recruits.

- 1) The instructor presents, defines, and demonstrates a specific capability to the class.
- 2) The students practice the skill, often in groups of three. One student takes on the role of the counselor, another plays the client, and the third observes. Group members take a turn in each role.

3) Class members discuss their challenges with each task, and they continue to practice.

4) Each student performs in front of the class and instructor, who evaluates each class member on all of the assigned skills.

5) The class repeats steps 1 through 4 until all techniques are introduced, modeled, practiced, demonstrated, and evaluated.

6) At the end of the semester, students demonstrate all of the competencies that they

learned in the course during a 10- to 15-minute mock counseling session. The instructor videotapes each session and evaluates the students’ command of all the skills.

Many counselor education course materials outline step-by-step processes for learning interpersonal skills, which police academies can adapt for law enforcement.<sup>2</sup> Recruits can practice their techniques by modeling common interactions between

the police and the public. Additionally, instructors should consider using counseling interns or other trained nonpolice personnel to facilitate recruits’ learning.

This initial training builds an essential foundation for new officers because they need to master communication skills before they execute tactical and legal tasks. In this context, law enforcement training resembles learning to play an instrument, like the piano. Beginners must learn certain basic and requisite piano techniques, regardless of their chosen genre, before they can progress. In law enforcement, all new officers must master verbal and nonverbal interpersonal skills regardless of their job function, title, or location.

**“  
...in police academies,  
interpersonal skills  
should be taught  
and mastered  
independently so that  
recruits can use these  
abilities to supplement  
technical training.  
”**

---

---

## Lessons from the Medical Profession

Though law enforcement and medicine seem unrelated, both professions demand interpersonal skills for many of the same reasons because they blend technical tasks with frequent human interaction. Like doctors, police officers must listen to and understand the public—their “patients.” When officers communicate effectively, it strengthens their ability to gather pertinent information, supplements their technical knowledge, and breaks down barriers between the police and the public. These items mirror how interpersonal skills function in medicine because doctors must bridge the gap between professionals and patients to practice medicine competently.<sup>3</sup>

Both doctors and police rely on information from human sources to facilitate their investigations. “If the doctor does not facilitate the story telling—if the patient is not encouraged to go on—the patient very often will not.”<sup>4</sup> The same logic applies to interview subjects: Witnesses provide however much or little information is drawn from them, depending on how the officers conduct the interview. Just as spoken and unspoken language influences patients’ willingness to comply with their doctors, the same factors impact an individual’s cooperation with the police.

Doctor-patient communication remains at the forefront of medical education. In classes, internships, and residencies, medical students learn how to interact better with patients, which enhances care.<sup>5</sup> Police recruits need to learn the same type of skills in the academy. Then, after this initial training, officers can apply their techniques on the job and, thus, build trust and cooperation with the community.

## CONCLUSION

Police academies need an effective structure for teaching essential interpersonal skills. To guide them in this endeavor, counselor education programs provide various methods for teaching and

evaluating these skills, which academies can tailor for their current curriculum. Then, when recruits leave the academy, they will have the interpersonal capabilities to enhance their legal and tactical skills. Entering the work force with this solid foundation enables officers to remove some of the barriers between the police and the public.

Officers need interpersonal training that their instructors easily can witness and evaluate. With this preparation, police recruits enter the force feeling competent and confident. This ensures that they will communicate civilly and respectfully with others, which ultimately leads to better public partnerships and safer communities. ♦

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> George I. Miller, “On the Construction and Production of Ideology: The Question of Police Civility” (paper presented at the 35th Annual Meeting of the American Society of Criminology, Denver, Colorado, November 9-13, 1983).

<sup>2</sup> For example, refer to Mark E. Young, *Learning the Art of Helping: Building Blocks and Techniques*, 4th ed. (Upper Saddle River, NJ: Merrill/Prentice Hall, 2009).

<sup>3</sup> Mary R. Talen, Kate Grampp, Angela Tucker, and Janet Schultz, “What Physicians Want from their Patients: Identifying What Makes Good Patient Communication,” *Families, Systems, & Health* 26 (2008): 58.

<sup>4</sup> Judith A. Hall and Debra Roter, *Doctors Talking with Patients/Patients Talking with Doctors*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2006), 4.

<sup>5</sup> Jerome E. Groopman, *How Doctors Think* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 2007); and Frederick W. Platt, “What Drives Doctors Crazy?” *Families, Systems, & Health* 26 (2008): 68.

---

*Mr. McDermott welcomes readers’ questions and comments at [pete06422@yahoo.com](mailto:pete06422@yahoo.com).*

---

*Mr. McDermott is a retired captain from the West Hartford and Windsor, Connecticut, Police Departments and a retired instructor from the Connecticut Police Academy.*

*Dr. Hulse is a professor and chair of the Counselor Education Department at Fairfield University in Fairfield, Connecticut.*

---