



Some Things DON'T CHANGE

Even in the Information Age, face-to-face communication remains vital



We live in an age exploding with new technology. Just a little over a decade ago, most of us in law enforcement were doing our best to adapt to the new marvels of cell phones, laptop computers, e-mail and access to real-time crime data analysis. Now we absolutely depend on these and other technologies, such as DNA evidence, GPS systems for surveillance and stolen-vehicle location, and night-vision equipment.

Technology has brought massive amounts of information and specialized equipment to all of us. This information and hardware has increased our efficiency and effectiveness. But it's not a cure-all or panacea; technology can break down or malfunction.

Early in the technology explosion someone coined the phrase, "High tech, low touch," meaning that technology's high efficiency creates a reduction in human interaction. Many of us began depending on electronic messages almost exclusively. Face-to-face interaction diminished. Personal relationships that lead to trust and teamwork suffered. And nothing can replace good interpersonal relations in our profession. **We depend on one another on the "thin blue line."** Ours is a job where teamwork, backup and confidence in one another can mean life or death.

Technology can never replace solid personal communication between partners, team members or leaders/followers. As wonderful as technology is to police work, we must continue to hone our ability to interact



Technology such as e-mail and cell phones can never replace face-to-face communication between officers and supervisors.

on a personal level. And those who interact well with partners, the public and even criminals share one thing in common: They listen well.

Learn to Listen

Listening is a fine art. It's only one element in the complex process of communication, albeit a very important one. Effective listening leads to knowledge, understanding and good interpersonal relations. It offers many benefits but requires a character trait that is difficult to develop. Find a good listener, and you will find someone who has pursued the character trait of humility.

Communication specialist William Haney, PhD, labels one of the classic obstacles to clear communication as

"allness," which he defines as an attitude that hinders good communication based on two false assumptions: It's possible to know and say everything about something, and what one says (or writes or thinks) includes all that's important about the subject. Both of these assumptions demonstrate a lack of humility and prevent good interpersonal relationships.

Early in my career, one of my trusted partners made me promise I would never lose my love for police work. One night he made me swear on a vehicle code (that was the most official book in the patrol car) that I would take the time to work with real cops if I ever entered the so-called ivory tower.

As a chief officer I set a goal to get

in my class-A blues and actually work a shift in a patrol car several times a year. Those experiences were invaluable. On one of those occasions, my partner and I took our code 7 at a community meeting where residents were expressing their gratitude by preparing lunch. We were eating with about a dozen other officers when our radios began broadcasting a vehicle pursuit in the adjoining district. The pursuing officers were chasing a suspect in a stolen vehicle involved in an armed robbery with shots fired, and they were headed our way. **When the pursuit suddenly turned onto our street, all 14 of us emptied out of the building.**

The luckless armed suspect bailed out of the vehicle just yards away from an army of uniformed cops turning the corner. He jumped over backyard fences to elude us. A wise sergeant ordered a perimeter confining the suspect rather than forcing a running gun battle. An orbiting police chopper kept him down while we waited for a K9 unit to root him out.

Suddenly my belt radio crackled an order. "Air 12 to officer in front of the green house with the black Ford pickup, move two driveways east to close the perimeter." He was ordering me to

move. The observer in our chopper was a two striper; I had three stars on my collar. I was about 10 ranks above him, but I promptly replied, "Yes, sir." He held a better perspective on the perimeter. It would have been foolish to disregard insight from a person who, even though much lower in rank, had more information than me.

People who are good listeners recognize that important information can be gleaned from just about anyone. Often someone younger in age, lower in rank or with less experience has information that can help you. Working on our listening skills will make us more effective law officers.

Technology offers a plethora of tools to make us more effective law officers. But we must never depend on technology to take the place of personal communication and powerful teamwork. Mastering your listening skills will strengthen those relationships. **LOM**

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5 TIPS The following five tips can help you become a better listener:

- 1. MAKE DIRECT EYE CONTACT WITH THE PERSON TALKING.** Someone wisely said, "The eyes are the windows to the soul." Subtle attitudes and emotions are often revealed through the eyes. And, eye contact tells the person talking that your attention is focused on them;
- 2. ELIMINATE DISTRACTIONS.** If you're in an office, hold or reschedule telephone calls. Put down any written materials. If you're in the field, find a place of relative silence;
- 3. ENSURE YOU UNDERSTAND WHAT'S SAID.** Ask, "Do you mean . . .", then rephrase what you thought the person said. Often, you will find that the true meaning did not get through. This also demonstrates you are trying to understand, not just hear;
- 4. KEEP YOUR EYES OFF YOUR WATCH.** Looking at your watch tells the person talking that you want to move on to some other person or task;
- 5. DON'T GET ANGRY AT THE MESSENGER FOR BAD NEWS.** A negative or defensive reaction will usually cut off communication. I found it helpful to hang a framed statement on my office wall that read, "Bad news welcome here." The first time I acted defensive, the officer talking with me said, "Sir, I'm just doing what your sign encouraged me to do." Embarrassed, I apologized and asked him to please continue.