

Los Angeles City Fire Department

TRAINING BULLETIN

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THE KEY TO EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

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I. INTRODUCTION

The manner in which emergency personnel approach citizens can affect the way we are received. When Fire Department resources arrive on-scene, we are seen as authority figures. Our badge is a symbol of public trust and service. We have a "command presence", and we can use this presence to control the outcome of many situations.

Through the proper use of communication skills we can avoid triggering verbally abusive or confrontational behavior from the average citizen. It is important to understand that we communicate through verbal and non-verbal means. We can escalate or de-escalate a potential confrontation by our actions, demeanor, and attitude. It is important to understand that when citizens perceive that they are not receiving respect, it may trigger verbally abusive or confronting behavior.

II. VICTIM RESPONSE

To help understand how our approach influences the way people respond to us, we should understand the feelings and reactions of the citizens who have become victims. Victims deal with their feelings in a variety of ways, one of the most common of which is blame. This feeling can be explained by the fact that the victim has momentarily lost control of the situation and has an urgent need to regain that control. Victims may blame themselves, but often blame others, including Police Officers, Firefighters, or EMS personnel.

Studies have indicated that victims may respond in a number of ways which include anger, denial, sadness/sense of loss, or shock. Anger can manifest itself verbally, physically, or in both ways. Emergency personnel are sometimes seen as safe targets for victims to vent their anger. Denial of the event is a common feeling and is expressed with statements i.e., "Why me?" or "I can't believe this is happening." Sadness/sense of loss will manifest itself as feelings of emptiness or a physical release of tears. Signs of shock are a flat response, frenzied activity, extreme or contradictory emotions, confusion, or helplessness/lack of control.

The important thing to remember is that the victim is not "attacking" the uniform member personally, but is venting both the frustration and fear of being a victim.

III. COMMUNICATION VERSUS RESPONSE

The key to dealing with people is proper communication. The way we talk, act, and react can make a significant difference when dealing with victims and/or the public in general. Being discourteous, using profanity, or derogatory language when dealing with the community will often cause a feeling of hostility. Citizens may not understand the need for our actions and a simple explanation can go a long way in reducing their anxiety and defensiveness.

Non-verbal communication can be the most meaningful way in which we communicate with the public. While it may not be obvious at the time of an incident, a large percentage of our message (and at times our personal feelings) is communicated through our "body language." The message that we send to others is often 7 to 10 percent content (or the words we use), 33 to 40 percent voice (the tone of our voice), and 50 to 60 percent non-verbal or "body language." Non-verbal communication is often unplanned, but has more of an impact than verbal communication. It is not only reliable, but it can show an attitude.

Experts have broken non-verbal communication into five categories:

1. **Voice Signals:** People often place emphasis on certain words, phrases, or change the tone of their voice when communicating with others. This tone can influence the way others perceive what is said. For example, a person can say "Nice job, Firefighter Smith" in such a way that it is actually a belittling or derogatory statement.
2. **Body Signals:** The way a person sits, stands, or looks at you can send a wide variety of signals. These signals can be interpreted in either a positive or negative manner. For example, a raised eyebrow may indicate disbelief, while a tapping foot may indicate impatience, etc. As first responders, we must be careful not to inadvertently send a conflicting and/or inappropriate non-verbal message as a result of our body language.
3. **Object Signals:** Our outward appearance can often send a message to others. The wearing of mirrored sunglasses or the carrying of a flashlight in a manner that it can be used as a weapon, may send a message of intimidation. On the other hand, wearing a neatly groomed uniform will send a message of professionalism and pride.

4. **Space Signals:** People's personal space can also send messages to others. Huddling close, being distant, or sitting beside someone can send differing messages. Studies have indicated that people have what are known as "body buffer zones." Within these zones, only certain people may enter without the other feeling uncomfortable or defensive. It has been shown that an intimate distance reserved for only loved ones is between 6 to 18 inches, while a personal distance for good friends is between 18 inches to 4 feet. A social distance for acquaintances is between four feet and 12 feet, and a public distance for strangers is 12 feet and more. While we may not always be able to honor these distances, we must be aware of their existence and be sensitive to others. For example, a recent study indicated that violent criminals have "body buffer zones" our-times larger than on-violent convicts. Within this zone, they became very defensive and combative.
5. **Time Signals:** Being on time or being available can also send messages to the public. How we exit our apparatus or the time spent getting on-scene can send messages of either professionalism and caring, or laziness and indifference.

IV. LISTENING

Listening is an important part of communicating. As a service organization we have a heavy workload and are usually under severe time restraints. Often we do not take the time to listen, and let others vent their feelings and frustrations. When we listen, we allow others to discharge some of the pent-up emotions and lower their tension level.

To be a good listener takes practice. We must suspend judgment and pick out the key words that identify a mood or intensity. One way to do this is to restate or paraphrase what was said to clarify a meaning (What I am hearing is). Utilizing this method of listening will enhance our communication and may lead to responses such as: "You're right", or "You're right, but also...", or "You're wrong, or "This is what I mean....." In any case, the communication will become an accurate statement of what was meant and will enable us to more effectively deal with that person.

It has been said that communication is at its highest level when one can stand in the shoes of another and understand what a particular event means to that person. It does not necessarily mean that we agree, but that we see it like they see it (empathize with them).

For example, we often face in the fire service the angry citizen who perceives a delay in response to an incident. We know all of the particulars as to the timeliness of our response, but it does not negate the citizen's anger. By showing empathy to their feelings and informing them of the facts, we can often resolve their frustration. An important fact to remember is that it is not important to discover who is right or wrong, but to show understanding of what your action means to the citizen.

V. COMMUNICATION WITH PERSONS UNDER STRESS

As first responders, we come in contact with people who are impaired by their emotions. By responding to their feelings we can help identify and defuse their feelings, and encourage them to speak. This will enable us to gather information, provide options, and more effectively do our job. A key to becoming effective in understanding a person's feeling is to remain neutral and not judge the person. Once we have identified what a person is feeling, we can convey our understanding and defuse hostile feelings. This can be accomplished by utilizing the following format:

YOU FEEL ----- (FEELING WORD)
BECAUSE ----- (PARAPHRASE)

State this utilizing a suggestive or questioning format. Do not make it a declaration, "You feel this (afraid)." The other person must sense that we are really trying to understand. This gains confidence and cooperation. Their feeling is defused because the citizen feels that the first responder has "heard" or truly understands what they are feeling.

Emergency personnel should enter each contact with citizens with impartiality and without biases. Putting our two cents worth into a situation or showing a prejudicial attitude causes a breakdown in communication. Analyzing, judging, questioning, or sympathizing with victims are common roadblocks to effective communication. In order to best enhance our communication and avoid common pitfalls, we must avoid the following:

1. **Facing Down:** This means belittling, making a fool of, embarrassing, or challenging someone. Suggesting to a citizen to "act your age" in an effort to calm them down may have the opposite effect and actually infuriate the person.
2. **Threatening Arrest:** The citizen may not be intimidated by the threat of arrest, in which case the members on-scene are placed in a no win situation.
3. **Legalizing:** Emphasizing legal advice as a means to calm disputants can backfire. It may further damage the situation by missing the essence of the problem and by angering the parties involved.

VIII. VERBAL JUDO

"Whenever angry, if you say the first thing that comes to mind, you will create the greatest speech you will ever live to regret!"

George Thompson, Author
"Verbal Judo"

The obvious question that comes to mind when discussing how our approach can determine response is, "How do I handle verbal abuse or confrontations?" Our inherent response or natural reaction would be to confront the person in response to their aggressive behavior. However, experience has shown that a response utilizing deflection and redirection techniques will normally be our best action. What are deflection and redirection techniques? Simply stated, it is absorbing what is said and redirecting the statement to get back to the issue at hand. Examples might include:

"I can understand how you must feel, but..."

"I can appreciate your concern, but..."

"I can believe that, but ... "

"That may be true, but..."

These statements cannot be sarcastic, but must be sincere and to the point. Utilizing either technique will deflect aggression and provide for better communication.

It is important to note that many people say what they say for their audience. By separating the troublemakers from their "audience" or by allowing them to "save face", we can often gain compliance to our requests. Once this principle is understood, it allows us to better deal with difficult people.

Another method suggested by many experts is commonly referred to as a five step method of compliance. This method is utilized by the Police and Fire Departments throughout the nation, including the Los Angeles Police Department. If used properly, emergency personnel will give "difficult" people the opportunity to save face.

This is done by providing them choices, and the opportunity to back themselves out of a corner. When provided this opportunity, the "difficult person" will often cooperate, thereby eliminating a confrontation. This method is utilized as follows:

1. The first responder makes a request; "please get out of the car."
- The difficult person refuses; "no."
2. The first responder makes a reasonable appeal (with reasons) for compliance to the request; "will you please get out of the car so that we can treat the patient."
- The difficult person refuses; "you can't make me."
3. The first responder presents options (these options should be selfish reasons that motivate the citizen to comply); "sir, if you don't get out of the car, two things might happen. First, your friend may die because we can't provide medical care. And second, we will have to have you arrested. If arrested, you will probably miss several days of work and maybe get fired from your job. If you get fired, it's going to hurt you and your family -and I don't think you want that! Please cooperate and get out of the car. "

In most cases when given the two options -- going to jail and losing his/her job or cooperating, the difficult person will cooperate. If not, go to step four.

4. The first responder makes a final appeal and confirms citizen's response; "sir, is there anything I can say or do to earn your cooperation?"

-The difficult person still refuses to comply.

5. The first responder takes an action:

- Have the difficult person arrested. Do not argue with the person, just be professional.

Utilizing this method is a face saving device for the difficult person and often provides him/her a way out. Many police agencies, who have practiced this method, in their day to day operations, state that their use of force has been reduced dramatically.

VII. CONCLUSION

As emergency personnel, we must deal with victims and difficult people on a daily basis. Our demeanor on the street can set the tone for citizen response. By learning and utilizing the tools provided, we will be better equipped to deal with the community in a positive manner and lessen the likelihood of serious confrontations.