Communication and Law Enforcement

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To two fine officers—Ted Lewis, who gave me the badge, and Jack Poeling, who taught me what it means to wear it.

D. F. G.

To Hattie Selover, who taught me that laws can be a force for personal improvement.

R. W. H.

Preface

This is a book about communication—the process of relating to other human beings—in the context of law enforcement professions. Nearly all law enforcement professionals have in common the need to achieve success in interpersonal communication. No matter how skillful and intelligent they may become, their effectiveness is severely limited if they have not developed good communication skills. Effective communication will not solve all problems, *but few problems can be handled effectively without adequate communication.*

This book is unique in the literature on human relations in law enforcement because of the detailed emphasis that it places on communication concepts and skills. Others offer some material about effective communication, but this book illustrates that communication training is the key to effective human relations in law enforcement.

Still, this is not just a book about communication. It also discusses the processes of law enforcement and the problems that you, as law enforcement officers or students in training to be law enforcement officers, face every day. Yours is a unique and demanding profession. There are dangers and challenges in the field of law enforcement that few other careers present. What other profession is charged with the safety of the population, asked to keep people from taking advantage of each other, expected to help settle domestic quarrels, sent to rescue those threatening suicide, required to administer first aid to the injured, and comfort the dying? Few others face even a fraction of such responsibilities. We know you to be very special people. We hope that you will not see this as one more book by some academics who do not understand your problems. We think we have an understanding of what it means to enforce the law and try to relate to human beings at the same time.

D. Gundersen has been a deputy sheriff, an investigator, and a private security officer. For the past several years, he has taught communication at The Uni-

versity of Alabama Law Enforcement Academy. This background and set of interests make Gundersen unique among scholars and writers on the communication process. Everything in this text is used effectively by officers who graduated from the academy. Robert Hopper teaches at The University of Texas at Austin and writes books and articles about communication.

We acknowledge the assistance of many people in bringing this book to completion. "Newt" Hubbs of Littleton, Colorado, our own personal editor; Sheriff Raymond Frank of Travis County, Texas; Sheriff Beasor Walker of Tuscaloosa County, Alabama; Chief Winston Morris of the Tuscaloosa Police Department; Chief Erwin Fields of The University of Alabama Police Department; Sheriff Ted Lewis of Gila County, Arizona; the entire police force of Oak Park, Illinois; and all of the inservice and preservice officers who have helped to mold and polish the concepts herein presented. It is essential (and customary) that we note the forbearance of Kay Hopper and Kathryn Gundersen in putting up with the late night phone calls between Austin and Tuscaloosa, as we were resisting the urge to rearrange the nearly 700 pages that have littered our studies for the past several years.

We hope that you enjoy reading this book, and that it may help you accomplish the goals in your profession that you find most important.

D. F. Gundersen
Robert Hopper

Contents

chapter 1

Studying Human Communication

Human communication sometimes seems to be the simplest thing we do. What could be more natural than talking and listening? Only the few people who practice and exercise self-discipline can play the piano or skate beautifully, but nearly all of us can speak and hear.

Yet sometimes human communication seems to be the most complex thing because. That is how we feel when we've just blown an important interview, or skipped at a loss for words over the phone, or been chewed out by the boss for something we've done. Communication seems pretty simple when it's going well, but illusionally not simple at all.

Have you ever stopped to think how many actions go into a single so-called process of communication? Humans can speak about a hundred words a minute, and each word has an average of about five sounds in it. Sounds are combined into words, which are combined into sentences that must express coherent ideas. By the time you list all the things you must do to communicate effectively, you realize that you are performing thousands of acts each minute. No wonder so many things can go wrong!

Consider just a few of the communication skills needed to complete one day in the life of a police officer. You must communicate with the angry, the frightened, the innocent, the victims, and the disinterested. You keep peace in your family, with your superiors, your subordinates, and your peers. The documents you write find their way to the hands of drunks, mayors, reporters, psychologists, physicians, semiliterates, and college professors. You communicate with yourself about your aspirations, fears, stresses, wants, needs, disappointments, and guilts. Many interactions you initiate fall short of your goals; some far exceed them.

Some people refuse to speak to you, others won't leave you alone. Yours is a difficult environment for communication.

To clarify this complex process, we are going to present a model of communication. We have chosen this model from a great many that exist, and we have chosen it for some pretty good reasons.

THE INFORMATION THEORY MODEL OF COMMUNICATION

This model allows you to understand and describe any type of communication. It has five parts and seven terms. Since we will be referring to it throughout the book it will be useful to commit this model to memory.

The model is called *the information theory model of communication* (Shannon, 1949). It was originally intended to describe the way machines talk to each other and people talk to machines, but it describes other types of communication, too. Several decades later, Shannon's model illustrates communication by radio, TV, computer science, journalism, speech, and advertising. It shows information exchange. Since law enforcement requires communication, the information theory model is useful to law enforcement professionals.

Communication takes place when messages move from one person to another, and this other person assigns meanings to the messages. The *source, or encoder,* is where the message originates. Ordinarily, messages start as ideas in people's brains. The first step in most speech events is that one person thinks of some message he or she wishes to communicate. The main goal in communication is to get the message across to its destination as efficiently and accurately as possible. Efficiency results from sending the message, using as few symbols as possible. A telegram, for instance, is highly efficient. Accuracy is accomplished when the message reaches its destination in the same form it had at the source. We don't send ideas; we *encode* them into a set of symbols. Generally this set of symbols is language, though other symbol systems are also used in everyday communication.

The *sender* of a message is the equipment that transmits the message toward its destination. In most face-to-face interaction, the sender is the vocal apparatus in the throat and the mouth. Sometimes the sender has mechanical help; when you use a telephone or a shortwave radio, for instance, this mechanical or electrical equipment is also part of the sender.

The *channel* is what the message passes through on its way to its destination: it carries the message. If you use a telephone, the channel is wire that carries electrical current. If you use a shortwave radio, electromagnetic vibrations are carried through space at a certain frequency, which keeps your message separate from the messages of others. In ordinary face-to-face communication, the channel is the air space between communicators. The air is put into a pattern of compressions and rarifications that we recognize as speech.

The *receiver* is the mirror image of the sender. The receiver takes in (preferably with accuracy) the symbols that the sender has pushed along the channel. One receiver par excellence is the human ear. The ear receives speech, sometimes with the same mechanical aids the sender uses, telephones, radio receivers, or

even hearing aids. All these instruments are aimed at preserving the accuracy of the message when it might otherwise be lost.

Finally, the *destination,* or *decoder,* is the place where the message gets interpreted. At the destination, the message is assigned a meaning in the mind of the receiver, and the communication transaction is complete. It may seem that little happens between the receiver and the destination, but this last step of the process can be the most critical and troublesome of all. It is at this point that the symbols (words usually) are decoded back into ideas.

We have presented communication as a step-by-step process from source to destination. Actual communication events are more dynamic than this. There is generally activity at all five stages all of the time. Further, most communicators are *both* senders and receivers most of the time. If you are interviewing a witness to a crime, you must sharpen both your sending and your receiving skills. Senders and receivers do not make up the next step of communication in isolation; rather they interact to take into account what has been going on, and what is now most effective to say. Communicators do this by monitoring *feedback* that shows how others are responding to their messages. For instance, if you ask a question, a person may become horrified, or give an unexpected answer, or turn and run away. According to such feedback, you may change the next question you are planning to ask. This topic we will discuss in detail in Chapter 10, on conducting effective interviews.

The main advantage of thinking about communication events using the terms of the information theory model is that these terms can help you spot problems and prevent them from recurring. Many times communication failures can be traced to one of these six areas of the communication process.

If you conduct an interview as part of an investigation, but you do not prepare for it, you will not be able to ask effective questions. This is a problem in the source. Others include attitudes, such as biases against the persons you are interviewing. Even boredom or hunger will diminish your effectiveness as an encoder.

If your radio equipment fails or causes distortion that leads to misunderstanding, there is a problem in the sender. Others might be speaking unclearly, having a speech impediment, or choosing an unfortunate expression for your message and offending the listener.

Problems of the channel are often the most severe and difficult to deal with, especially if there is any mechanical device serving as the channel. It is fairly common, for instance, to misunderstand a message such as a phone number when it is given by radio or telephone. It is common to receive telegrams in which one part is misspelled or missing. We even find typographical errors in expensive books. These are all problems in the channel. If you wish to play baseball, but cannot play because it is dark, this represents a problem in the channel. Baseballs (which act as messengers in the game) cannot be exchanged efficiently unless you can watch them go through the channel. Another example is trying to conduct a conversation when a very loud band is playing. The channel is so full of sound that you cannot distinguish the parts of the message you are interested in from all the other activity.

Often a message doesn't arrive where you send it or arrive in the same form as it was sent because something interferes with it in the channel. In terms of the model we are discussing, the name for anything that interferes with the message whatever it is, is *noise.* Noise prevents a message from arriving in the same form as it was sent.

If you are trying to listen to a lecturer and someone sitting next to you continually taps a pencil on the desk, this is noise in the channel, even though it is not loud enough to drown out the lecture. The fact that it proves a distraction to you is sufficient to qualify it as noise. Noise doesn't even have to be sounds. If there is a power failure and the lights go out in the classroom, you will have trouble understanding the lecture.

Noise interferes with the message in some fashion. Certainly one can sympathize with the officer who must try to quiet a crowd at a rock concert. The crowd and the performers all create what amounts to noise in the officer's channel. This is like trying to signal an oncoming car with a flashlight: its beam is simply overpowered by the headlights of all the cars around it.

A problem closely associated with noise is that of *channel capacity.* Channel capacity relates to the amount of information that can be sent across a channel at one time. One example is found in most police radios: only one person can talk at a time. If two parties both try to talk at once, nobody gets the message, and considerable noise results. A similar event happens on many Sunday afternoons. So many people make calls that all the phone wires are used up, and no additional callers can use the system until someone gets off the phone. Channel capacity has been exceeded. Another example of channel capacity involves CB radios, which are so popular that the limited number of channels is often crackling with static and the voices of people you are not interested in talking to—so you have a hard time communicating the messages you are interested in. This is what happens when you approach a channel's capacity—rather than shutting off completely as telephones do, the system merely stops being efficient. You can still use it, but you may have difficulty understanding the messages that are coming at you. A good way to combat this problem is through repetition of critical parts of the message. If one thinks of our legal system as a communication system, it is suffering from an overloaded channel. Criminals are prosecuted, the innocent are exonerated, but all of this is taking longer and longer. The system continues to work, but at ever-decreasing efficiency.

Whether the problem is noise or an overloaded channel, the remedy is similar. If a distraction injects noise into your channel, you have several choices for increasing the communication to maximum efficiency. The first might be to ask the instructor to shout or to repeat every sentence twice. This would be a use of *redundancy.* Redundancy is repetition, but in terms of our model it means much more. Redundancy is anything we do to to combat noise. So asking the instructor to shout, repeat, or turn a fire hose on the noisemaker are all examples of redundancy used to combat noise.

In police work we commonly use a series of "10-codes" to communicate on the radio. These are not used to confuse eavesdroppers; they are used because they are more efficient and understandable than is plain English. There are many

channel and noise limitations for a shortwave radio carrying the message, "Hey you guys, I didn't quite understand that last transmission, would you please say it again for me?" Yet the radio does quite well with the analog, "10-9."

So far we have talked about spotting communication problems that occur in the source, the sender, and the channel. There are also problems that mostly involve the receiver. A radio provides a good illustration. If a radio receiver stops working, then no matter how good the interaction is at every other step, there will be no communication. Or if the person you are addressing has a hearing problem or is not paying attention, there is a problem in the receiver. Often, securing the attention of the receiver can be the most difficult of communication problems.

If all parts of the model except the destination are working, there is still no communication. If persons you are addressing speak a different language or belong to a different cultural group, they may hear your words just fine, but not be able to assign meanings to them—or they may assign different meanings than you intend. For generations it has been common to address teenage males as "boy," yet you'd best get out of the habit. In modern society, youngsters of all races have come to resent such forms of address.

The final component of our communication diagram is *feedback,* the responses of each communicator to the messages from the other. Many communicators are unaware of how thoroughly they use feedback in everyday life. In face-to-face conversation, feedback comes both to our ears and to our eyes. Many speakers feel handicapped on the telephone because this channel does not carry any visual information. When you talk on the telephone, you cannot see the face of the listener. You are apt to speak more loudly and clearly and to gesture more often on the phone because of this lack of feedback. In some situations, there is virtually no feedback at all. If you make a TV commercial publicizing a law enforcement charity benefit, you get no feedback at all as you are sending your message.

Let's summarize why we have presented this model, and why we refer to it throughout this book. Using the model, you can describe and understand any communication transaction that exists. Having done this, you can determine *where* in the situation problems are occurring. You can decide whether your communication channel is getting overloaded or noisy and what to do about it if this occurs.

This model has one weakness: It seems to indicate that noise in the channel is always a bad thing. This is not the case; sometimes noise is a very important and good thing. Suppose you are on the street talking to a grumbling group of teenagers. Do you simply shout over the "noise," or would it be better to consider the grumbling noises as important indicators of possible problems. One person's noise may be another's message.

One final caution: All problems are not communication problems. Communication is very important, and that concept is quite popular today. But there is a tendency in some books to suggest that there are no bad people, only ineffective communicators. This is not true! The same train of thought suggests that any problems of marriage, relationships, or occupations are really communication problems. Don't believe it. There are many problems in the world that *are* com-

munication problems, but many other problems have little to do with communication. Years ago, a successful movie called *Cool Hand Luke* portrayed a dictatorial and cold-hearted prison warden. Each time the prisoners resisted in any way, he would react violently. As a prisoner lay on the ground after a beating, the warden would say, "What we have here is a failure to communicate."

Actually, there was no failure to communicate at all in this situation. The communicators (warden and prisoners) seemed to understand each other's messages quite well. But the communicators disagreed about almost everything and were usually working to achieve different goals. This warden and the prisoners did not need better communication; rather each side of the conflict needed to set more realistic goals.

WORKING ON YOURSELF

There is only one person in the world whose behavior you can reliably change, and that is you. For this reason, we recommend that you give up waiting for others to change in ways that will make your life or your work better. If you wait for some troublesome citizen to change an attitude, or for all teenagers to begin to respect police officers, you may have a long wait. If you decide to change your own behavior in some ways that make you more effective, you can start on that job today. We believe that personal change is generally a beneficial process and that resistance to personal change impedes lifelong learning. In this text we frequently ask you to try out a new set of behavior, just for a little while. If it works, keep it. If not, try something else.

RECOMMENDED READING

DeVito, Joseph A. *Communication: Concepts and Processes* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1971). We recommend this text as another excellent overview of general communication concepts. Several authors collaborate to provide interesting insights into the complex process of communication.

Hopper, Robert. *Human Message Systems* (New York: Harper & Row, 1976). This text explores many facets of communication models from a substantially different perspective. Issues of interpersonal communication not dealt with here are explained in detail in Hopper's work. This is a readable text that has served thousands of readers well.