



# FORCE SCIENCE<sup>®</sup> NEWS

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## In This Edition:

How to approach each call as an improv skit and how to talk persuasively to hostile people were two topics related to effective police communication featured recently at the 2016 WINx training event in suburban Chicago.

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## Two views of how to get effective communication to work for you

The one-day program, presented annually by its founders, Force Science Analysts Brian Willis, president of Winning Mind Training, and Roy Bethge, co-founder of the Virtus Group training organization, showcased nine speakers, ranging from a transit officer wounded in the Boston Marathon massacre to a behavioral scientist who specializes in wellness and maximal performance.

Following the format established by the popular TEDx talks for civilians, WINx presenters had 18 minutes apiece to deliver memorable messages for law enforcement.

Chelley Seibert, a retired academy instructor for the Dayton (OH) PD, and Scott Erickson, an active, 19-year patrol officer with San Jose (CA) PD, zeroed in on tactics they favor for “winning friends and influencing people” on the beat in these contentious times.



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Here are excerpts from their WINx remarks and from conversations afterward with Force Science News:

How a cast of characters can help you control the theater of the street

Chelley Seibert, a former Officer of the Year and the first female recruit to win a “Top Gun” award from her department for shooting skills, notes that “over 95 per cent of police work is showing up and talking to people.

“The citizens can say whatever they want and use whatever verbiage they choose in these interactions.” But because “the officer is being paid to have these conversations,” he or she is held to a higher standard. “When you are paid to perform an action or service, you are considered a ‘professional,’ and as a professional you are expected to perform ‘professionally.’ ”

When unprofessional exchanges or behavior erupt, sometimes escalating to physical violence, it’s often because an officer’s ego is challenged and, especially with younger, less experienced officers, “they don’t know how to protect it,” Seibert believes.

**IMPROV INSPIRATION.** An effective strategy evolved for her out of improvisational acting exercises she experienced as part of a public speaking class. “I came to realize that a police call for service is usually like an improv skit, with the same series of steps”:

1. You enter the scene and assess the situation (Is it safe? Layout? Number of people?)

2. You uncover the story line (what’s the complaint, crime, circumstances?)

3. You determine the roles already present (Who is the victim, witness, suspect?)

4. You pick a ‘character’ with which to respond (What role is needed?)

5. You bring the scene to a successful conclusion (Take a report, arrest suspect, etc.)

6. You exit, “take off” your character, and go on to the next call, where this process is repeated.

A key benefit of this framing is that it creates a “psychic disconnection,” Seibert explains. “You don’t put your ego on the public stage. You maintain a difference between who you are as a person—your authentic self—and the roles you’re called to play during any given tour of duty.

“When you distance yourself from who you really are by consciously playing a character, it’s easier to feel that insults and protests don’t apply to you personally, just to the role you’re playing at the moment for your job.”

**BASIC PERSONAS.** Seibert recommends “three main characters officers need to have in their back pockets.” The body language, facial expressions, words, and tone of voice for each need to be practiced so they can be assumed and smoothly transitioned among as circumstances merit.

The Compassionate Consoler appears “when we need to show caring empathy,” Seibert says. “On a death notification, for example, or when trying to calm a lost child

or dealing with a confused Alzheimer's patient or trying to interview a timid person or keep an injured party from going into shock.

"Here, you do anything you can to appear smaller and not intimidating. Your voice should be low, slow, reassuring. Keep your eyes large. Ever notice Disney characters? If they want you to like the character in the story, the animators make the eyes larger. Villains' eyes are often smaller, sometimes only slits."

The Enforcer. "We've seen cops get hurt or even killed because they were 'too nice' and couldn't make a transition into an authoritative role when needed. First, make yourself seem as large as possible—wide stance, elbows away from your body, shoulders back, head up, lips thin. Commands sound different when spoken with thin lips, teeth visible. Speak in short sound bites—commands, not questions."

Although many departments discourage profanity these days, Seibert argues that a sparing but emphatic use of "the F-Bomb" can underscore your commitment to controlling a resistant suspect and convey that you are really serious about the orders you're issuing.

The Composed Stabilizer is the character you want "when you have to display calm and confidence even in the most gruesome or frightening scenarios," Seibert says. "Imagine a horrific homicide scene with a partial body on the living room floor, the severed head on display as a lamp shade, random body parts nail-gunned to the wall—and a grief-stricken, hysterical family member who's just discovered it, now looking at you to make sense of it all."

Your demeanor needs to convey "been there, done that," Seibert advises. " 'Okay, here's what we need to do...' Again, you want a larger body to convey control, being in charge. Your voice is slow, calm, almost conversational, not rushed or animated. Your face should be calm—think 'bored'—so as not to show any adverse reaction to an already difficult scene."

You may develop other characters to develop particular circumstances—a seemingly harmless, gullible Barney Fife is often helpful in getting suspects to lower their guard on drug interdiction stops or rape interrogations, for example. The critical point, Seibert says, is not to approach every call with only one persona in your repertoire and risk being stuck with a character that doesn't work because you don't know any other.

"You need to be the director of the skit. Like a good coach, you read the people and circumstances you're confronting and send in the best character for the job, keeping officer safety always as your foremost consideration.

"Successful veteran officers often realize they've been doing something similar to this for many years. They just haven't named it or given it much thought, but they make up stories to better relate to a victim or suspect or suddenly develop an accent or use slang phrases to better establish rapport."

ACADEMY NEED? Seibert, who holds a master's degree in education, strongly believes "we should be teaching this improv 'theater sport' at the academy level, just as we do other physical skills, and not depend on officers developing it through years of

trial and error. Some officers are naturally compassionate but need to develop their Enforcer side. Some are strong Enforcers but don't have a compassionate bone in their bodies. We have to be good at all the roles because we can't pick and choose the calls we go on.

"We wouldn't put officers on the street without a vest. So why are we sending them out without the tools to keep their ego in check and protect their authentic selves and then wonder why our divorce rates, alcoholism, and suicide numbers are so unacceptably high?"

"By applying a protective coating of characters, we can prevent officers from succumbing to job burnout, cynicism, and frustration."

Chelley Seibert can be reached at: [drumgrrrrl@yahoo.com](mailto:drumgrrrrl@yahoo.com)

Tips for overcoming hostility with the pro-police message

Scott Erickson seems to revel in facing the challenges of persuasive communication.

He's a rising star in Republican politics in a deep-blue state; as an avocation, he writes policy papers on controversial topics like Benghazi for the Heritage Foundation, a conservative DC think tank; he addresses audiences of college students who question police control tactics; he has founded a nonprofit called Americans in Support of Law Enforcement to educate civilians on the police perspective; and, of course, as a second-generation cop who holds a master's degree in criminal justice, he patrols the streets of a liberal city in tumultuous times.

Appropriate, then, that as the final speaker on the WINx roster he should offer pointers on how to communicate with "people who are hostile to us."

Erickson concedes that "you can't always reach everyone. There are activists who don't care to have a genuine conversation. They just want to yell at you." But, he insists, "more people than we often realize are looking for answers and can be swayed," even if they are vocally critical of police.

For maximizing your chances of connecting with them, whether in groups or one-on-one, he offers three bullet points:

**DON'T VILIFY.** "It's easy to dismiss our critics and try to delegitimize their opinions" with name-calling and other abusive, disparaging actions: " 'I'm right, you're wrong, and you're an idiot.' Easy, but also very destructive and dangerous," Erickson says.

"It's not just about the other side understanding us. We need to understand their concerns and why those concerns feel legitimate to them, even if you know they are objectively false. That may take some introspection on our part.

"When you're trying to engage someone, it's important not to issue blanket condemnations of them and their concerns. Once you delegitimize people's opinions and feelings, you delegitimize them as human beings. And once you do that, how do you expect them to consider your point of view?"

VALUE LISTENING. “There’s value for us from genuinely listening to other people,” Erickson says. “Soliciting their opinion and giving them a sense of being on equal footing in the conversation helps to disarm them.

“No matter who we’re talking to, we can learn something from everyone we encounter. Even with career criminals, there’s probably something in their experiences that you can take away that will be useful to you.

“The same with our critics. How can we improve if we don’t listen to find out what they object to about us? We don’t have to compromise our principles or always agree, but we do need to actively listen, encourage them to share their point of view, and try to put ourselves in their shoes. If we’re disingenuous, people recognize it, and they’ll dismiss what we want them to understand about the problems of policing in America.”

USE ANECDOTES. “We tend to rely far too much on statistics and hard data” when we’re trying to sell our point of view, Erickson believes. “How can you reach someone who’s highly emotional about controversial issues with data? You can’t.

“We have to communicate our perspective in a way that appeals to their emotions, not just their sense of reason.”

He recalls a college crowd he spoke to that was upset about the “militarization” of police, focusing particularly on the acquisition of large armored vehicles “like an occupying army.”

In response, Erickson related a real-world anecdote about a barricaded, armed subject scene he was involved in where SWAT operators used an armored truck to evacuate civilians from a building under siege and carry them to safety.

“I was able to explain that those citizens were damn glad we had an armored vehicle and agreed that tools shouldn’t be taken away because you never know when they may be needed.

“Real-world stories many times can help frame our perspective and make a connection better than anything else,” Erickson says. “If you’ve been a cop for more than a week, you have plenty of real-world anecdotes to draw on.”

Written by Force Science Institute  
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