Conflict And Cameras:

Facing The Reality Of Social Media

By Richard Kay

Technology can benefit public safety operations in many ways. With advances in technology increasing at a staggering rate, there are many options available for public safety agencies to increase operational efficiency. However, point-of-view (POV) technology is now prevalent in people's daily lives and, in the age of smartphones and CCTV, security personnel need to understand that they are always under scrutiny. This article examines the risk POV technology may pose to officers in the form of cameras and uploaded content to the public domain.

Most readers will have seen, or at the very least heard about, incidents of interpersonal conflict and violence being videoed and uploaded to social media websites such as YouTube or Facebook. Most smartphones now have inbuilt apps that upload content directly to the user's page with the simple press of a button. There have been numerous incidents of violence in schools that have been filmed and uploaded as a form of bullying and victimization, sometimes with tragic consequences.

A recent incident in Queensland involved a transit security officer who was verbally abused by a young offender whilst his friend filmed the whole thing on his smartphone and later put the video online. In this instance, the security officer remained calm and professional and did not react to the harassment from the offenders and, as a result, the incident was resolved without escalation – certainly a credit to the officer involved.

With so many people in modern society having ready access to a camera, what can security officers do in relation to this matter? The key is to remain calm and employ appropriate interpersonal strategies to resolve incidents in a professional manner, the basis of which is taught during security licensing training.

Harm Minimisation
The objective in conflict situations is to defuse conflict before it reaches the level of physical aggression, so officers should be aware of the levels of conflict escalation. People often resort to aggression as a last resort, acting out of fear or desperation, whilst some choose violence as an 'easy' option, intimidating others to get their way rather than communicating rationally. Violence rarely occurs without reason and there are usually precipitating factors to any violent episode.

Officers should be aware that what they bring personally to the interaction can contribute to conflict, and includes assessment of stressors and their style of interacting:
- Are there ongoing problems in their life that are affecting their work?
- How stressful is their work and is there greater stress on a particular day?
- Are there clients or colleagues that 'push their buttons'?
- What is their attitude towards the subject?

With additional stressors, anxiety increases and people become susceptible to errors in judgement. It is important to make a deliberate effort to diminish the impact of stressors by developing an awareness of personal style, as self-control is important to achieve situation control.

Negative language reflects the mindset of the speaker and affects the outcome of a situation. It is common for people to view the world as dichotomous – only two possible choices, positive or negative – which leads to judgements and a closed mind. When resolving conflict, keep an open mind to all possibilities and opportunities. Once a pattern is developed, it takes effort to change this entrenched behaviour, so practice maintaining a flexible mind every day. It is important to accept each person and situation on its own merits and only deal with the situation at hand. Previous history can be useful, but do not let it affect the management of a situation.

To effectively negotiate conflict situations, officers should endeavour to:
- control breathing to stay calm
- be patient and avoid arguing with the subject(s)
- be aware of emotional triggers and ignore them
- be objective and neutral
- offer options, not ultimatums
- incite empathy so the aggressor sees them as a person, not an object
- adopt an assertive, not a confrontational, approach.

The ability to 'step back' from an escalating conflict is an extremely valuable skill. Taking a step away or physically withdrawing can provide space, time and an opportunity to reassess. It also sends a conciliatory, non-threatening message to the other party. Mentally stepping back is a process of reviewing, assessing and rethinking the strategy in a conflict situation.

Interpersonal Communication
To effectively communicate with people, it is important to understand the factors that affect interpersonal communication and seek to diminish their negative impact on the situation. Language should be clear, concise and appropriate to the situation, and communication should be courteous and reflect sensitivity to social and cultural differences.

The verbal aspect (the words used) has the least impact in communication, but tends to be the aspect most people focus on. Obviously, the choice of words should be carefully considered at all times, as it can be as simple as having a single word misinterpreted for conflict to escalate. Officers should be adept at communicating with people at many different levels.

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Tone (how the words are said) includes rate of speech, volume, pitch and inflection. The tonal aspect of communication is important, as any particular phrase can have a different meaning depending on how it is spoken and, therefore, how it is perceived. For example, loud volume, fast rate and high pitch can indicate anxiety and stress. Low volume, even rate and low pitch indicate calmness and assertiveness.

Body language makes up the bulk of interpersonal communication. The body gives a true expression of what a person is feeling, so it is important to observe for signals that indicate whether they are positive or negative in relation to an officer's message. Officers should ensure consistency in their verbal and non-verbal messages, as the subject will perceive body language messages more accurately.

An important feature of aggression is that it does not generally occur as an isolated act, but as part of a process. Awareness of this cycle can assist in assessing the subject's immediate potential and choose an appropriate method for dealing with a situation before it escalates.

Early intervention begins with detecting the subject's emotive state and involves:

- questioning: ask how he feels; does he have needs that are not being met
- listening: hearing 'feelings' allows for identifying the source of agitation and can provide clues on how to assist him
- validation: acknowledging feelings is extremely important, even if it is difficult to attend to the need or request.

Verbal and Non-Verbal Strategies

People have a personal space which they regard as their own. Officers need to respect this personal space whilst maintaining awareness of people entering theirs, especially in potentially violent situations where close proximity increases their vulnerability to attack. Maintain a balanced and relaxed posture to display confidence, and keep a safe distance of two-arm's length; otherwise stand at 45 degrees to the side of the subject, if possible.

Proper use of eye contact shows confidence and assertiveness and helps focus the subject's attention on an officer. The incorrect use of eye contact may be deemed inappropriate and cause conflict by sending the wrong message to the receiver.

Personalise communication by using names and terms like 'us' and 'we' to show involvement, rather than 'you' and 'I', which tends to separate. Officers should show respect for the subject's position, display empathy and promote the benefits of taking their course of action, rather than consequences of choosing another.

Ask questions to gather information and engage the subject's brain, which assists in reducing options for resistance; but give him an opportunity to answer in his own way. Active listening involves co-operation with the speaker, not competition. Using eye contact to focus on the subject and making listening noises indicates interest and shows him he is being 'heard'. Provide feedback to clarify understanding, avoiding personal opinion or interpretation.

Establish a cause for the subject's behaviour. Encourage him to express his frustration or distress, but set reasonable limits and clear consequences. Clearly inform him that aggression is unacceptable, and outline the consequences if it occurs.

Offer assistance by asking the subject what can be done to assist or help him and, where practicable, provide him with a choice of options. Keep requests to a clear, simple and direct manner. Remain neutral and avoid arguing. Do not criticise values or beliefs, or get involved in 'power' struggles. This supports a notion of being right and wrong and will not support the process of resolution. Stay focused on the issue at hand and avoid being side-tracked.

De-escalation versus Compliance

Communication varies depending on the stage of conflict and what officers are aiming to achieve. The initial strategy will revolve around using language that de-escalates the intensity of the situation. If this does not work, then communication that asserts proactive control may be required.

De-escalation phrases are used to defuse potentially violent situations by verbally offering alternatives to the subject's current intentions, or outlining consequences of his course of action. Compliance commands are used for affecting assertive control. 'Commands' does not mean officers start screaming at the subject; it simply means they have chosen to take assertive control of the situation. Once this is achieved, return to normal communication, stressing calmness and cooperation.

Effective verbalisation during an incident is vital because it:

- demonstrates reasonableness
- informs the subject what the officer requires of him
- creates witnesses from bystanders.

A critical skill in officers developing effective conflict management strategies is the ability to assess a wide range of factors, including the subject, the situation/context, their own responses, the potential for escalation, risk factors and environmental issues. Assessment and strategic planning drive the choice of conflict management options, and it is important to ensure that this assessment is as thorough as possible. It is clearly important to acknowledge that assessment must sometimes be carried out in difficult situations, or even while trying to defuse a hostile confrontation. Focusing on assessment, however, helps to maintain a resolution-based approach and an awareness of any potential escalation features.

Security companies should be proactive in creating awareness, through internal education strategies such as presentations, internal memos and updates to company orders, as officers representing the company in the workplace pose a risk through vicarious liability if they make poor operational decisions. It is only a matter of time before someone gets the idea to deliberately set up a security officer and video the confrontation in an effort to either gain social media notoriety or try to extract dollars from a security company through a lawsuit. No company wants their branding displayed over social media in a negative manner.

Personal cameras and social media are a fact of life and officers need to remain alert to this fact in the operational environment. It is important that officers are not only seen to DO the right thing, but are heard to SAY the right thing. Officers should presume they are being filmed each and every time they conduct operations and act accordingly, because the reality is, they probably are!

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