

Command Presence

How It Affects Officer Survival

By Richard Kay

Officers have numerous options available for controlling a situation and ensuring public, and personal, safety. These options are used in response to the resistance displayed by the subject, and are required under law to be 'not disproportionate' to the objective the officer is trying to achieve.



The first response option is officer presence, which is the 'presence of a uniformed authority'. This option alone can have an important impact on the outcome of a situation, as an officer that is presented in a professional manner and looks fit and alert can often create doubt in the mind of the subject and therefore limit options for resistance.

Why is it that some officers get attacked on duty and others do not? Often, officers who are not assaulted possess something that victim officers do not: **command presence**. Offenders choose not to resist certain officers because they did not feel they would be easy targets and could fail in their attempts. Officers with command presence carry themselves and perform in a manner that leads 'predator' offenders to look for easier 'prey'.

A recent study in the US examined more than 130 incidents in which officers were unlawfully assaulted. One point in the study particularly stood out – offenders size officers up and scope them out. Like any interpersonal interaction, offenders assess people, including officers. The most dangerous offenders in such situations are those often described as 'predatory', and because they do not experience the same levels of stress as most people, they are less distracted by internal or external factors. In circumstances where offenders feel that an officer has the edge, they often respond by waiting until the officer makes a lapse in procedure or attention.

Offender's experiences with the legal system results in familiarisation with public safety practices, as well as opportunities to observe various officer-related behaviours. Scrutinising these behaviours helps offenders evaluate all officers in general, regardless of any particular activity or agency, including response times, types of approaches, handcuff, search, and transport procedures. Interaction with specific officers and agencies allows the offenders to observe and evaluate a variety of officers performing their duties under specific circumstances.

Humans conduct this type of activity when encountering other humans, whether they realise they are doing it or not. Everyone we come into contact with is sizing us up and does so quickly. This phenomenon is called 'thin-slicing' – the ability of our unconscious to find patterns in situations and behaviour based on very narrow slices of experience. It is our brain's ability to filter out all but the essential information required to make quick judgments. These judgments, although formed quickly, are surprisingly accurate. This occurs so quickly that most of us do not even realise we have done it. But it does

occur and it is done to us.

Although we can do nothing to stop individuals from sizing us up, we can control how they perceive us through the aura we project. Officers should consider how they are going to be perceived by those who may do us harm, and what we can do to work that in our favour. For example, when you put on your uniform and look in the mirror, do you see someone who commands respect, or gives off the signals of struggling prey? Do you project a professional aura of authority, or do you appear apathetic, as if you could not care less? Are you confident and assertive, or nervous, timid and unsure of yourself?

Command presence is an important part of public safety. It is all about how others perceive us as officers. To improve your command presence, consider the following:

Conduct an honest self-assessment of personal strengths and weaknesses. The trick then is to make the most of the strengths and work to improve on the weaknesses. Analyse your confidence; in yourself, confidence that you can perform your job effectively, that you can handle threats as they present themselves to you, that you can successfully go home at the end of your shift without having jeopardised the safety of fellow officers and the public, that you can do the job properly.

Build confidence by developing a thorough knowledge of the academic requirements of the job – law, policy, procedures, etc. Know clearly and simply what you can and cannot do. Develop competent physical skills through regular training. Develop a strong mindset and body, because physical stamina is the basis of mental toughness. Learn to use eye contact, as the eyes can expose fear or your lack of confidence to others. Build credibility and lead by example, showing what to do and how to do it. Good leadership requires confidence and outward displays of confidence evokes a command presence.

As soon as you enter a scene, people begin to judge you and assess what kind of officer you are. Most people will form an impression of you within the first 30 seconds, and these initial judgments are based on visual cues. Take advantage of this. How you carry yourself and wear your uniform will weigh in on the assessment. Looking sharp includes being well-groomed and wearing a clean-pressed uniform. Take a few minutes before your shift to polish your shoes. Do not be the officer that appears to have slept in their uniform. Wear the uniform with pride. If you look sharp, people will assume you

are sharp. Conversely, if you look sloppy, people will assume you perform sloppy work.

Carry yourself with professionalism and authority. Know your job. Being confident in your abilities generally reflects in your body language. Walk tall, speak clearly and stand up. Doing so will reflect your command presence and help project authority. With modern technology, you could end up on YouTube within minutes of any given situation, so always act as if someone is videotaping you, because the reality is that they may well be. Officers must be professional and respectful, which is not always easy. Keep your emotions in check. The idea is to be the voice of reason in the midst of chaos. Think before you speak, and remember that people are always watching you.

Do not underestimate anyone! Expect the unexpected. Keep yourself well-rested, exercise regularly, watch the hands and search for weapons. Utilise cover, wear your vest and practice your skills. Develop warrior attributes... honour, integrity and teamwork...and build trust with your community and colleagues. To do this, you must play by the rules and treat people fairly. Never allow your confidence to outrun your competence. Competence is measurable; confidence is subjective. Remain humble, professional and courteous, and have a plan to survive every situation. Go home at the end of every shift, stay out of jail, keep your job.

Physical presence is the first level in the officer response toolkit. Because physical presence is a factor in nearly every situation, it is important to make a positive and professional first impression. First impressions last, and this will be based upon the person's perception of you. Whether the perception is true or not is irrelevant...perception is reality.

Know that people are judging you based upon your appearance, language and behaviour. Make it a goal to set professional standards for yourself to look, act and be sharp. By doing so, you will instil confidence in yourself, colleagues and the public. Keep in mind, the person who saw you today could testify in court tomorrow. How do you want to be portrayed? Everything in life is a graded event. Remember, they are sizing us up.

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