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How Body Language Skills Can Help Engage the Community

BY CHIEF/RET. MARK A. SPAWN

Analyzing a person or their motives by the way they act is basic human nature. Before a single word is spoken, a person's movements can already be sending a message: frustration, desperation, happiness, sadness, leadership, compassion, or malice. The ability to detect and understand a person's expressions and mannerisms is a valuable skill to possess provided it is objective. For law enforcement, special training provides insight on the conscious and unconscious biases we have. Awareness of how biases are formed and how we manage them are important to police in order to assure that predispositions do not interfere with the just and prudent administration of law and it is one of the ways law enforcement administrators are ensuring nondiscriminatory enforcement practices. With demands for reforms in policing and the criminal justice system, training on bias and communication techniques are some of the ways that police departments are improving their relationships with the communities they serve.



A body language workshop is now part of all new police recruit classes for the Buffalo, New York Police Department.

Photo: Shea's Performing Arts

Community Policing Initiatives Working Well, Then COVID Strikes

In Buffalo, New York, Captain Steven Nichols is extremely proud of the work of his Community Engagement Team. He said that the whole department was so vested in their programs that it was often difficult to keep up with demand. "Officers were saying, 'I want to do this, I want to do that, I want to take 10 kids to a (Buffalo) Bills game'", said Nichols, adding, "It just really spilled into our officers, we were engaging the community, and then COVID shut it all down." When it comes to building trust and establishing a productive dialogue, face-to-face is ideal, but social distancing, face masks and teleconferencing caused a roadblock to some of the Buffalo Police Department's (BPD) community programs. But Nichols said the investment in police-community relations brought about some very meaningful relationships. "We didn't have a lot of the problems (that other major cities had)," said Nichols, adding, "we had our share of protests and a couple days of rough ones, but not like a lot of the

cities were having because we spent years training our officers and working with the community to show that we are in this together and that it's not us against them." Nichols added that his department is always open to trying new and better ways to improve relationships.

Unconscious Demeanor; Stoic Presence; A New Approach

Nichols remembered attending a public meeting when he realized that some of the group were talking about him. "They thought something was wrong with me, after all, this was a community meeting, a positive event", said Nichols. "They commented that I was standing erect, alert, and was scoping out the room. You don't even realize as a cop that you're doing that, you put on the uniform and you're always *that guy*, you're always on guard, looking around."

So when the idea came about of having an actor instruct police officers on how to better engage the community Nichols was intrigued with the idea, but the departmental reaction was mixed. Veteran officers were skeptical, even doubtful that it could work. The concept came about when Thembi Duncan, Director of Arts Engagement and Education for Shea's Performing Arts Center in Buffalo, New York watched a community meeting online between residents and police. Duncan said that there was tension in the room and the meeting did not seem productive.

One of Duncan's projects in the Buffalo area was a workshop called The Business of Body Language for Young Professionals. Duncan said, "The people who attended that body language workshop were asking if we could do the same workshop for their group. I ended up doing it for college interns, and for nurses for D'Youville College. Each time, I adjusted the details of the training for their particular line of work."

Duncan had a contact at BPD and asked about meeting with the Police Commissioner to make a proposal on using creative writing and performing that she believed could help police. Duncan said, "I got a meeting with Commissioner Lockwood and I had this long proposal that included creative writing and performing, and he asked me what other things I do, and I mentioned the body language training, and he said, 'tell me more about that.' And so I pushed the proposal to the side and we talked about body language training, and he said, 'I want that'."

The prospect of adding this new module to the basic training for police recruits was a departure from traditional academy training which already includes interpersonal communication skills; But BPD Commissioner Byron C. Lockwood believed that providing officers with lessons on body language from an actor who relies on selling the viewer on their character, emotion, and to following a storyline, could enhance existing training for de-escalation and approachability. Commissioner Lockwood said, "One of the things that I am very strong on is community policing. And I believe that body language fits right in, it helps the officer's dialogue with the community, with the person."

Background – Shea’s Performing Arts Center

Located in Buffalo’s Theatre District, Shea’s Performing Arts Center began as a movie theater in 1926.¹ In addition to providing entertainment, Shea’s mission also includes working with the community, and in 2018, Thembi Duncan who was working in Washington, DC, became Shea’s Director of Arts Engagement and Education. Duncan said, “At Shea’s, we already had a couple long term programs of doing musical theatre with middle schoolers and high schoolers. But our President, Michael G. Murphy’s, position is to work with all parts of the community - with seniors, veterans, and others.

Duncan’s background includes experience as “...an arts administrator, director, actor, and teaching artist with over fifteen years of experience synthesizing theatre, American history, and social justice in and around Washington, D.C.”²

Acting First Met with Reluctance

Duncan and Nichols met with about 12 veteran officers from the Community Policing Division which Nichols oversees. Nichols remembered that Duncan engaged two ‘good-sized’ officers and asked them to have a random conversation in the corner of the room. Duncan remembered that first workshop, “I was barely holding on, trying to convince them that using theater works in their relationships with the community”. Nichols said, “She looked at the officers and said, ‘relax.’ They were relaxed, but relaxed as cops would be relaxed, with their hands on their belts, standing upright, and she said ‘try to make yourself smaller, just try it...’” Nichols continued, “They’re hunching, squatting, everybody cracked up laughing which broke the ice. When you think about it, you put that uniform on, it’s a subconscious thing, you become that person who is going to protect the community so you have to be on guard...”

While some of the veteran cops did get something out of the experience, Captain Nichols decided to try the program with police recruits, and Duncan agreed. Nichols said that younger officers tend to bond only with each other which can create isolation from the community they serve. He said, “We become this person where we don’t trust anybody but other police officers.” Nichols added that Duncan’s workshop helps officers better understand that they are members of the same society that they police, saying, “We are all different shapes, sizes, colors and personalities.” Before the next phase of training began Nichols knew that Duncan could relate better to the recruits with some firsthand experience.

Ride-along Shapes Performer’s Perspective

Nichols suggested that she should do some ride-alongs to learn more about the department. Nichols remembered saying to Duncan, “Let me get you fitted for a vest, and she said, ‘oh my god, it just got real for me.’”

Duncan said that 20 hours of ride-alongs were extremely valuable. “That made a huge difference in my whole approach to the work, because I didn’t have any experience, so I was going from what I was assuming, and it was clear that it was all theoretical...it completely opened my eyes to the kind of issues that they face. I came back and spoke with the Lieutenant and Capt. Nichols to ask them a lot of questions about the language I need to be using, and the situations that they are going to encounter and then I put that back into the workshop.” Duncan said after the ride-along and modifications to



A police ride-along helped actor Thembi Duncan to better understand the work of the police. Information learned from the ride-along was incorporated into the body language workshop.

Photo: Buffalo Police

the workshop, the next three classes were much better. “It was much more productive, I had much more of a command of what they might experience.” Nichols said that the program has now evolved into an extremely relevant and exciting part of recruit training.

Principles of Acting

Duncan said that what actors learn in theater school is applicable to what police officers encounter with interpersonal exchanges in their job. But, she stresses, she does not want to influence what officers do or how they are trained for high stress, life-and-death situations. Basic police training includes of a variety of real-life scenarios that police will face: dynamic encounters, verbal altercations, active shooter, and many include strategies for de-escalating conflict. Whether it is a crime scene or a scene from a script, it begins with the method or tactics in how the actor, or officer, will approach that scene and engage the audience. Duncan said, “So I start there and talk about the acting principles of antagonist-protagonist. We also talk about objective, obstacles, and resolution.”

Costume or Uniform?

The police uniform is likely one of the most commonly recognized in the world. It is symbolic of training, authority, and service. While it can be a welcome sight for those in need, a bad experience, or a volatile situation can make the uniform threatening to others. Nichols and Duncan agree that, in some situations, the police uniform can be an obstacle. Just as costumes in theater represent a character or persona Duncan explains that it is not the *person* they are necessarily reacting to, but rather what the costume or uniform *represents*. Nichols said, “A lot of my officers (in the Community Policing Division) when they do special events they wear polo shirts, like a bicycle uniform, and they’re received totally different than a fully uniformed officer with a vest on. It’s just perception.”

When asked about how these exercises in the performing arts can assist police, particularly with the demands for police reform, transparency, and accessibility, Nichols noted, “That’s the whole point of this workshop, to help make an officer more approachable. You walk into a heightened situation, people may be agitated, angry, or scared, they may get in your face and say things they would not ordinarily say. We have to remember, ‘they’re not talking to me, they’re talking to that patch on my shoulder, or that badge on my chest.’”

Body Language and Exercises

So, exactly what happens in the classes with police recruits? Duncan gets the recruits on their feet to demonstrate how certain movements can change the perception of who they are. She also engages the recruits in conversation, asking them why they became a police officer, and to describe something about themselves that nobody knows.” Nichols said, “She tries to dig a little deeper into each recruit to learn more about them, to humanize them.” Duncan added, “These (exercises bring out) subtle things they already know how to do, I give it more of a name and then, that’s a tool for their toolbox.”

Duncan explained some of the role playing exercises they do with police recruits in her workshop, “I always do a mirroring exercise with them. It’s a common theater exercise where you’re standing in front of somebody and you’re both doing the same thing, you’re mirroring each other physically, but you’re not talking. You’re just looking each other in the eyes. That’s just one example of many exercises that we do that, on the surface, seem very simple, but the objective is to look into someone else’s eyes and make a connection with another person and trust them and create movement together. And when you make people do that they always start out with giggling and feeling weird and stupid. It should be very simple, but it’s very hard to make that connection. So they do it once and they feel silly, and then we do it again and you find that people become more comfortable with it.”



An acting exercise called mirroring is used to help police recruits understand the actions and reactions of body language.

Photo: Thembi Duncan

We’re Not Acting

The news media in Buffalo picked up on the story of an actor working with police recruits, and while Capt. Nichols was proud of the body language workshop, he said that he was concerned about

the publicity of police officers taking acting classes. “I didn’t want people to get the perception that were trying to teach our officers to fake anything. We’re not teaching them to act, we’re trying to show them that their body language is the first thing that people see.” Nichols added, “Nobody is looking to change their personality or fake their compassion or anything like that, we’re just trying to smooth out some of the edges a little bit.”

Future of the Program

When asked about the future of this program, Duncan said that it is constantly evolving. She will also be sharing the success of the Buffalo Police program with her colleagues in the performing arts community. Duncan, Nichols, and Lt. William “Craig” Macy will be presenting the body language workshop to the Creative Professionals Exchange in November 2020. One of the goals of the Exchange, according to Duncan, is to discuss innovative partnerships between the performing arts and the community. She urges her peers that this is something they can do in their own communities, interfacing with police to show how the arts can help. Commissioner Lockwood said that he hopes this idea will spread to other departments. Duncan said that because of COVID, artists cannot be on stage, but they can use their talents in an area such as body language to share with their local law enforcement.

The body language research workshop is seen as a success by Commissioner Lockwood who said that it will be a part of every recruit class going forward. The relationship between Thembi Duncan of Shea’s Performing Arts and the Buffalo Police Department has been reciprocal, each learning from the other. Police officers learned about how actors use body movement to connect with their audience in much the same manner officers use words and actions to engage with people in a variety of situations. The workshop has evolved to include more than the acting model alone, but to relate the training to the world of law enforcement. Both Nichols and Duncan agree that the ride-along experience was necessary to the success of the program, and urges any other agencies considering such a program to include that exposure. Nichols said, “So now that Thembi is getting to know us I think she understands certain things she doesn’t want to change about us or see us do differently, that maybe in the beginning she did. So it’s becoming a really, really good relationship, and positive for the community.”

¹Shea’s Performing Arts website; <https://www.sheas.org>; Accessed October 3, 2020

²Shea’s Performing Arts website; <https://www.sheas.org/leadership>; Accessed October 3, 2020



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