

**The Bill Blackwood  
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**Active Listening: A Peace Officer's Best Tool**

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**A Leadership White Paper  
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## **ABSTRACT**

The law enforcement community has become very proficient over the years at training peace officers to be tactically sound in both their mental and physical approach to all situations up to and including the use of deadly force. While focusing on this necessary aspect of the profession, another area has suffered and lagged behind. Police officers patrolling the streets today receive very little, if any, training on how to communicate with the people they encounter under these same circumstances. Most of the knowledge officers acquire to improve their communication skills are learned by trial and error while they muddle their way through the calls they respond to. It is imperative for law enforcement agencies to find a way to equip their officers with the verbal skill set they need. This is why all law enforcement officers should be taught active listening skills.

Active listening not only gives peace officers a valuable new tool to communicate with, but it also allows them an insight into their own thought process and how to better regulate it. One of the most influential things a person can acquire is how to control thoughts and emotions. This is where most positive dialogue begins, and when communicating under highly stressful circumstances, it will keep a person from further deteriorating the situation (Goulston, 2010). Expanding police officers' communication skills to include active listening should benefit police agencies by decreasing their number of use of force incidents, helping resolve crisis situations and reducing their number of complaints. There is not a police administrator in the United States of America who does not desire these outcomes.

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## INTRODUCTION

Law enforcement agencies have long enjoyed the success of crisis negotiators' use of active listening. However, many law enforcement administrators may not be aware of the actual process or the benefits it could have for their organizations as a whole if all of their officers were trained to use these skills. Crisis negotiators are called upon when peace officers working on the scene of an emergency situation have exhausted all of their resources and are unable to reach a resolution. These types of incidents are generally highly volatile in nature. They require containment from a special weapons and tactics team while crisis negotiators begin speaking and listening to the subject in crisis. A negotiator's number one tool in these crucial moments is active listening.

Active listening is defined as "the ability to hear what the other person is saying: his words, his feelings, and his expectations, and to let him know you have heard" (McMains & Mullins, 2001, pp. 33-34). As just stated in this definition, active listening is much more than just hearing the words that another person is saying. Instead, it requires hearing what the other party is trying to convey. This may or may not match the information the person is passing along. The second important factor in this definition is to ensure the other person knows what he or she said has been received properly. This can be done through the use of several active listening tools. Many new negotiators worry about misinterpreting the message from the subject they are speaking with when using these tools, but they are actually very helpful in clarifying the communication process. If the information sent back to the person in crisis turns out to be wrong, he will simply correct it and send it back. Claude Shannon and Warren

Weaver who worked for Bell Telephone Labs first came up with this communication model in 1948 (Mishra, n.d.). The Shannon-Weaver communication model shows a sender encoding a message that is passed through a channel where there is noise, which is some kind of interference or distraction, to a receiver where the message is decoded, and then feedback is given to ensure the received message is correct (Mishra, n.d.). This is a great illustration of active listening as it is defined today.

The success rate the law enforcement community has had using the negotiation process has been astronomical. One of the foremost reasons for making negotiation skills a part of the law enforcement training process is its success rate of ending incidents peacefully 95% of the time, not many other processes can meet that expectation (Miller, 2005). Active Listening skills are the main component of this process and should be taught to all law enforcement officers. This would translate into peace officers that work on the frontlines of our communities being equipped with the necessary communication tool they need to bring a person in crisis back to a rational state of mind. These officers respond to many different types of calls where they assist a person who is not thinking correctly or has lost control of his or her emotions. The key to de-escalating these incidents is good communication (Dufresne, 2003).

There are several additional benefits for law enforcement executives who teach their employees active listening skills. First, their officers will become better at the communication process in general. This should improve their interactions with individuals both inside and outside of their organization. With better communication skills comes an increase in information gathering. This leads to taking better statements from witnesses and improved report writing, as they are now able to garner

information they could not before. Secondly, agencies that employ the use of active listening skills should see a reduction in their uses of force. As officers learn how to communicate with a person who is in crisis, there will be more understanding from the peace officers' perspective. When people in crises feel like someone is listening to them, they are less likely to act out thereby reducing the number of uses of force to gain compliance from these individuals. Lastly, the public at large will benefit from the officers who are taught active listening. As they grow their communication skill set, the number of complaints from the citizens they encounter should decrease correspondingly. There is not a law enforcement administrator in the nation that does not want this result. It is for these reasons that active listening skills should be taught to all law enforcement officers.

## **POSITION**

Peace officers today are being called upon more and more to handle a host of different types of calls. One of the roles law enforcement is relied on to fill is that of crisis intervention. This typically takes place when people have reached a level where they are no longer able to function during a stressful encounter with another individual. The manifestation of this comes in the form of domestic disturbances, civil matters, property disputes and mental health issues just to name a few. Good communication skills are the key to de-escalating a crisis event. It involves listening to individuals and letting them know their message has been received (Oliva, Morgan, & Compton, 2010). By learning to actively listen to people in a crisis situation, officers will begin to see a change in behavior. It is very difficult for anyone to stay at a high level of anger or frustration for any length of time. This is both physically and mentally exhausting for

people having the difficulty. They are looking for a solution to their problem, but are stressed to the breaking point because they cannot find a way out. Most peace officers are rational, straightforward thinkers and want to immediately begin to discuss how solve the issue. However, people in crisis temporarily lose control of their normal state of being and are not capable of ordinary thought process at that time. Officers will find that people in crisis are only able to listen to reason after they have diminished their emotional anxiety (Fitch & Means, 2009). This allows them an opportunity to calm down and return to a rational state of thinking.

Trained crisis negotiators use active listening skills on a regular basis, but officers outside of this niche in law enforcement seldom do. These skills are viewed as a specialty tool that can only be deployed in the direst of circumstances where all other options have failed. Law enforcement's thought process in this regard needs to change. Active listening skills are successful in everyday occurrences, even though they are most prominently on display during major events (Bradley & Jancewicz, 2016). Teaching peace officers to use active listening regularly during the course of their daily duties will empower them with the tools they need to accomplish a large portion of their mission. There is no doubt that law enforcement officers will respond to an abundance of calls over the course of their career where they encounter a person in crisis. When this time comes, police officers need to be prepared to bring a calming effect to the situation rather than raising the level of stress. Peace officers who help a person regain emotional stability de-escalate the situation and eventually bring a resolution to the issue at hand (Oliva et al., 2010).

Every peace officers' number one goal when they leave the comforts of their home to start their tour of duty is to return home safely to their family. This line of thinking is nothing new and is certainly not limited to the field of law enforcement. However, using active listening to assist in accomplishing this goal could be a new thought process for most officers. By listening to individuals, peace officers can begin to understand what is actually at the root of the problem. Knowing this crucial information assists law enforcement in helping people formulate a plan to see them through their storm. Taking the time to care for people in this fashion decreases the chance that someone will use aggression (Meyer, 2016). Using active listening skills in this manner will lessen the number of times a peace officer is involved in a use of force incident. In turn, this will reduce the chance of injury to police officers and the citizens they serve. However, not employing active listening skills can have the opposite effect. There is at least one officer in every agency that escalates an incident just by showing up on the scene of a call. It is these types of police officers who need active listening skills the most. Officers must know how to manage their verbal and nonverbal communication before they can help others. Those officers who cannot do this put themselves and others in harm's way (Fitch & Means, 2009).

Agency heads are constantly liability conscious. They are the ones who carry the burden of performing a balancing act between ensuring their people are taken care of and at the same time reducing the amount of liability that their organization could face. There is good news for these leaders. Active listening can help accomplish both of these goals. Training officers with the proper skills to de-escalate the crisis incidents they encounter will lower the number of injuries to officers and the public alike, as well



as reduce the number of lawsuits filed against the department (Oliva et al., 2010). This should be music to the ears of everyone who holds a job in law enforcement administration. Most people enter the law enforcement field to help others. This does not go away once officers are promoted into a position of responsibility. The difference is they now have more internal and external groups they are caring for. Active listening allows them to have some influence on all of these groups. Their internal groups reap the benefits of having a new tool they can apply to help resolve stressful situations and keep themselves out of harm's way. While their external groups will be more likely to receive the help they desperately need without any force being used against them. This is a win-win outcome for law enforcement and the public at large.

While active listening skills are normally seen as a catalyst to resolve a potentially explosive situation, there is a side effect from teaching the skills to law enforcement officers that is beneficial to everyone involved in the process. Peace officers become better communicators by default just for exercising them. Law enforcement officers speak with the public in some capacity on a daily basis. Whether it is to gather information for an offense report or take a witness statement from a bystander who just saw a crime take place. Law enforcement's desire is to elicit and gather as much information as possible. Most of the time, the best interviewers have mastered the art active listening (Black & Yeschke, 2014). When officers actively listen to people they are able to receive the message that they are valued. This will lead to them trusting the officers they are speaking with have their best interest at heart. As the building of rapport continues, people are more willing to speak freely with law enforcement officers and share all of the information they possess with them. The

effects of the process of active listening are not just the short-term goals of gathering the information needed at the moment while having a successful interaction with people. Instead, in the future when people have to deal with law enforcement again, they will seek out the officers who have invested the time to listen to them before. Peace officers will become highly successful in their dealings with their citizens when they truly understand the power of listening (McDermott & Hulse, 2016).

Unfortunately, many agencies do not understand the importance or the full potential active listening could have on law enforcement. These skills are not just used for crisis intervention anymore. Police officers speak daily with many people in their communities. Active listening can be used to enhance the communication process in these interactions as well. Although active listening skills are essential to helping officers complete their daily tasks well, very few agencies focus on teaching them (McDermott & Hulse, 2012). Law enforcement administrators can reinforce how valuable these listening skills are by placing an emphasis on training their officers in the use and application of them. From there, it would not take long for peace officers to recognize the value of having good listening skills and put them into practice daily as they are carrying out their duties.

Law enforcement agencies and businesses in the private sector differ in many ways, but one thing they have in common is they both do their best to provide good customer service. Active listening can without a doubt assist police officers with this mission. If officers learn to really listen to what people are saying to them, they will be on the correct path to helping them. However, when peace officers are unable to discern what citizens need from them, it leads to tension that can manifest itself in the

form of a complaint. It should not surprise anyone that the officers with the best communication skills have more productivity, are better at calming a situation, and receive the fewest complaints and lawsuits (Fitch & Means, 2009). Supervisors nationwide would love to have a shift full of officers with the attributes just mentioned. The good news is they can. It would only take a small investment to educate all of an agency's peace officers in the use of active listening skills. The return of a reduction in the number of complaints from citizens would alone make this investment worthwhile. The truth is the actual benefit would certainly be much larger in scope.

The relationship between law enforcement and the public as a whole has been strained recently. This tension has been fueled in part by citizens who have developed a lack of trust in law enforcement due to a false narrative being spread by certain special interest groups. Although this movement is largely built on lies, those affected by the rhetoric spewed are so enraged that they cannot listen to the truth until they have been heard. If there is ever to be a bridge built across the divide that has been created, it will start with both sides sitting down and listening to each other. If law enforcement agencies do not take steps to make communication skills a key component of their training, then the gap between them and the people they serve will only grow larger (McDermott & Hulse, 2016). By really listening both sides can begin to understand what the issues are that hinder their relationships. Only then can work be done to repair the damage. This is not to say that the process will be 100% successful, but active listening certainly increases the chances.

## COUNTER POSITION

One main reason communication skills are often overlooked in the law enforcement field is the tactical mindset instilled in officers as soon as they are hired. Police agencies are operated as paramilitary organizations. The first item of business for new recruits is sending them through the academy where they will learn the law, become proficient with their service weapon and learn arrest tactics. When recruits graduate the police academy, agencies continue to strengthen these skills in their officers through the use of a field-training program. Officers are taught that their mindset is the most important thing in getting them through a deadly force situation, and this is ingrained in their heads through the use of role-playing scenarios where wax bullets are shot at them (Tracy, 2011). Officers' daily experiences on the job, combined with the training they receive, leave them feeling as though they can only connect with their families and other officers. This leaves a huge communication barrier between them and the people they are sworn to serve.

Most police officers never discharge their firearm during the course of their duty for an entire career, but they do spend an enormous amount of time dealing with social issues (Oliva et al., 2010). This does not mean police agencies should abandon training their officers for these deadly encounters. Instead, they need to find equal time to devote to developing their officers' communication skills. These skills are used on a daily basis and affect everything police officers do both inside and outside of their department. It is also often at least part of the criteria the public uses to judge how they feel about a specific police organization. One bad encounter with offensive officers can leave citizens viewing all of the law enforcement community from this aspect. Improving

the way officers interact with the public starts by giving them a good set of communication skills to complement their excellent use of force skills (McDermott & Hulse, 2016).

A concern about allowing officers to use active listening skills during the course of their duty is they simply do not have the time it takes to do so. There is no doubt that officers in every agency are busier now than they have ever been before. Due to a lack of applicants and a generation retiring out of the field of law enforcement, departments nationwide are seeing rising labor deficiencies (Scott, 2010). This means the police officers on the streets are feeling the pressure of an ever-increasing demand from the public they serve as well as having fewer officers to accomplish this mission. Some agencies are getting creative just to fill the void left by not being able to hire enough employees to cover their daily duties. The Austin Texas Police Department has a deficit of one hundred officers and is having trouble attracting enough applicants. They are sending their investigators back to patrol just to be able to cover their call load (Sadeghi, 2016). Armed with this information it is easy to see that demands on police officers are at what seem to be all-time highs.

Despite the fact that law enforcement is experiencing manpower shortages along with increasing call loads, peace officers must not lose sight of the fact that they are employed to deliver quality professional services. Sometimes this means they will need to slow down and actually spend time with the people who called them for assistance. For police officers to be successful in de-escalating crisis incidents, they must be allowed to use the necessary amount of time needed to do so (Oliva et al., 2010). Spending a little more time on a call to reach a resolution will actually save officers time

in the long run. On the other hand, if the call is handled poorly it will not be long before officers are responding to a similar call at the exact same location. The same is true if the officers are unable to help people understand the origin of their problem. Using active listening can assist law enforcement officers in determining the real issues, while also working to defuse the emotions that led to them being called in the first place, but this takes time. All officers should be cognizant of the fact running from call to call might seem like the best option to accomplish their mission. However, in reality, it could cause them extra work by having to respond to the same location multiple times for the same situation. If officers spend the appropriate amount of time listening to an individual the first time, a resolution to the situation is more likely and no return trips will be required.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Active listening skills should be incorporated into the permanent training cycle rotation for all law enforcement agencies. These listening skills have been proven very successful when used by crisis negotiators in extremely high-stress situations, and they can also be fruitful for peace officers during the course of their daily duties. Officers nationwide handle calls on a regular basis where they are dealing with people in crisis. Calls such as civil matters, domestic disturbances, property complaints and even animal complaints can send people over the edge and into a state of emergency. Being armed with the necessary tool to de-escalate these incidents is vital to law enforcement's mission. Active listening skills not only work to bring people out of control back to a rational state of mind, but it also prevents police officers from being in harm's way. When law enforcement officers can effectively communicate with people in crisis they

greatly reduce the chance that it will become necessary to have to use force. Every time law enforcement agencies reduce the number of use of force incidents they have, they also decrease the chances that officers will be injured in the line of duty. Officers who regularly practice active listening will inherently become better communicators. This will increase their ability to gather information that should, in turn, improve the quality of information contained in their reports. Learning these listening skills should also improve peace officers interactions with the citizenry they work for. When people feel as though officers listen to them and care about their issues, they are less likely to complain. A reduction in the number of complaints received by an agency translates to more time dedicated to other matters for the people responsible for investigating these complaints.

From the very beginning of peace officers' careers, they are trained in tactics to assist them should they encounter a situation that would require them to use deadly force. This is accomplished in the form of firearms training, force on force training and even simulators that allow officers to go through use of force scenarios. While officers must continue to be trained for these incidents, time should also be spent teaching them communication skills they can use daily. Law enforcement falls short in this area and must change its way of thinking if it wishes to advance to the next level. Police agencies nationwide are feeling the crunch of manpower shortages combined with increased call loads. These conditions sometimes lead officers to cut corners and not spend the time necessary to properly handle a call. This is due to pressure from their supervisors to deal with a call quickly and move on to the next one. However, officers often return to the same address for the same problem over and over. Peace officers

and their supervisors must change this mindset and allow themselves the appropriate amount of time they need to properly address each situation. Employing the use of active listening skills can assist officers in getting to the core issue of a problem the first time. It will just take officers devoting a little more of their resources on the front end. By doing so, repeated responses to the same location will be reduced. This, in turn, allows officers to allocate more resources to other important needs. Better work productivity, reduced tensions, fewer fights, improved resolutions and excellent community relations are all possible outcomes when a priority is placed on listening (Freedman, n.d.).

All law enforcement administrators should take time to consider what active listening could do for their organization. Chances are they already employ officers who have been taught the basics of active listening at a crisis negotiation school. At first, experienced individuals could immediately start conducting in-house training for all the officers of their agency. It would not take long for this department to reap the rewards of this decision and the monetary costs would be very minimal. In the long run hopefully, there will be enough support to muster developing an eight-hour training course and a train the trainer course approved through the Texas Commission on Law Enforcement (TCOLE). This would allow administrators the option of sending their officers through the eight-hour course or sending officers through formal active listening instructor training. The trained instructor could return to their employing agency and educate the rest of their workforce in the use of active listening skills. These trainers would teach the same eight-hour course that would be offered by TCOLE. This course could consist of four hours of classroom instruction and four hours of roleplay scenarios. This would



give every participant at least one opportunity to experience using active listening. The participants would also benefit from observing their fellow classmates use this skill in different situations. Lastly, TCOLE could incorporate active listening into the regular training cycle for all police officers. This would ensure that law enforcement officers are at a minimum being exposed to active listening every two years. Peace officers use communication skills on a daily basis in every facet of their job. It is time for the law enforcement profession to dedicate the proper amount of training time to this vital aspect of the business.

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