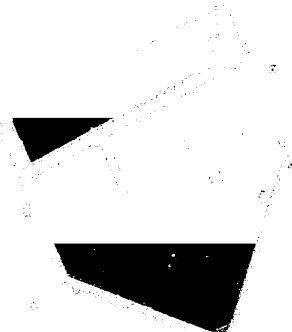
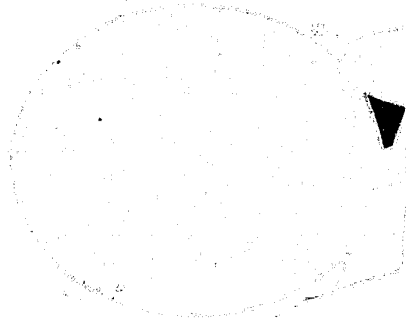


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William S. Sessions,
Director

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Courtesy and Police Authority

By
ROBERT C. WADMAN, M.P.A.
and
STEPHEN M. ZIMAN, M.S.



Policing in modern America has a fascinating history—from the development of “reactive police theory” in the 1930s to the “team policing” concepts of the 1970s and the crime prevention programs of the 1980s. More recently, the move toward community-oriented and problem-oriented policing brought law enforcement closer to its early American roots. Still, America’s police continue to edge toward the brink of major change. But, as Stephen Crane wrote, “We are like the diver who hesitates on the brink of a dark and icy pool, we have failed to leap. The thought of a cold reception has held us back.”¹

Often, significant nationwide events, such as the Rodney King incident, bring about the leap of change. These events strike at the conscience of the Nation. However, as convulsive as the King incident and the ensuing riots were, these types of events afford law enforcement a unique opportunity to grow through open discourse with the community. For, though it may sometimes appear otherwise, the factors that create these incidents are not intractable in any society.

One issue on which the Los Angeles experience provides seemingly contradictory feedback is the use of force. Clearly, outrage over a perceived use of excessive force

during Mr. King’s apprehension contributed significantly to the unrest that followed the acquittal of the officers involved. By contrast, law enforcement came under considerable criticism for exhibiting a decided *lack* of force during the initial stages of the riots, which some observers claim allowed the unrest to escalate beyond control. What conclusions, then, should law enforcement managers draw from this and similar episodes?

The issue of force falls within a still larger area of concern—how law enforcement personnel treat citizens in their communities. Ultimately, the success of any theoretical policing concept depends

largely on this one factor. And, this factor revolves around one simple, yet often misunderstood, term—courtesy.

In order to better understand the impact of courtesy on policing, the Aurora, Illinois, Police Department conducted a study to measure the relationship between police authority and courtesy. Fourteen police agencies (four large departments, five of medium size, and five smaller departments) participated in the research effort.²

Commanding officers from each of the departments completed questionnaires that addressed various issues from training to use of force and citizen complaints. The survey was comprised of nine open-ended questions, such as "Do you think that the teaching of courtesy has a definite impact on an efficient use of power/control?" and "Do you think that discourteous officers are more likely to use unnecessary force?"

The responses provided the framework for a qualitative assessment of the departments' views of courtesy. From the data collected in this survey, as well as a review of previous literature concerning the appropriate application of authority, researchers concluded that courtesy can be a strategic tool for the efficient and effective use of power.

Courtesy and Power: An Overview

In *Historical Capitalism*, Immanuel Wallerstein pointed out, "The overt use of force by the state-machinery to control the internal work-force, a costly and destabilizing technique, is more often the sign of its weakness than its strength."³ This raises the question, "Is the overt use of force by a police officer a sign of weakness?" The answer seems to be an unequivocal "yes."

Overt use of force by a police organization serves as a sign of

weakness in management, in first-line supervision, and in training. More importantly, however, it displays a weakness on the part of law enforcement to understand the fundamental issues relating to police responsibility and the use of force.

Edmund Burke's *Reflections on the French Revolution* outlines the evolution of western civilization and the use of power and authority. Burke's criticism of the French Revolution illustrates the impact of courtesy and respect on power. "All the pleasing illusions which made power gentle, and obedience liberal....are to be dissolved by this new conquering empire of light and reason. All the decent drapery of life is to be readily torn off."⁴

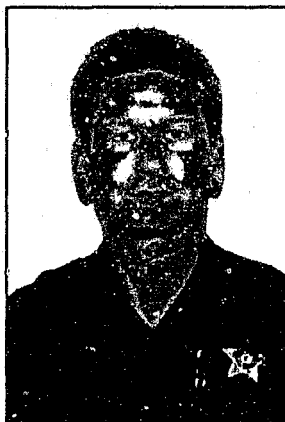
Burke further asserted that courtesy softens power and creates an atmosphere that makes it acceptable and effective. This reveals the paradox. We often mistake courtesy as a sign of weakness, when, in fact, courtesy makes authority effective by strengthening its power.

Often, when police officers need to exert the greatest degree of power and authority, they display the least amount of courtesy. Those who are given authority must strive to be courteous if they expect to use their power effectively. Police officers who remain courteous in the face of an angry crowd, a drunken spouse, or a domestic dispute gain respect, and their power becomes highly valued. On the other hand, discourteous police conduct tends to legitimize disrespect for police authority.

In essence, courtesy signifies self-control, even in the face of disrespect. True courtesy transcends



Chief Wadman commands the Wilmington, North Carolina, Police Department.



Officer Ziman serves in the Aurora, Illinois, Police Department.

cultural differences, class distinctions, and educational variance.

The Power of Courtesy

Courtesy's effectiveness is probably more easily understood through experience than definition. In a law enforcement context, citizens simply define courtesy by how the police treat them. For the most part, citizens call the police when they are unable to handle or control a situation themselves. They then want to feel that they are an extension of the police force, that their call is the responding officers' primary concern.

Therefore, law enforcement personnel should not focus merely on responding to problems, but also on making valuable positive contacts with citizens. Generally, the public seeks two responses from officers—good service and respectful treatment. When police respond with courtesy, it strengthens in the public's mind the image of the police as a positive force.

Officers who treat citizens with respect receive respect in return. Therefore, when officers stop or arrest citizens, it is critical that they do not treat these individuals in a manner that adds to their anger, fear, or embarrassment. Simple courtesy on the part of officers softens these emotions.

Further, courtesy affects more than police relations with the community. It strikes at the very core of police power and effectiveness. A complex series of events unfolds when unfriendly contact occurs. Slighted citizens may take one of four basic avenues to vent their dissatisfaction:

- They may develop a lack of self-confidence (Because of this lack of confidence, citizens may not report crimes to the police. Instead, they may communicate their dissatisfaction to friends and associates.)

“

...courtesy and the efficient use of power are woven together in the professional police organization.

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- They may register a complaint with the police department regarding an officer's conduct
- They may enter into a verbal confrontation on the street, created by discourteous conduct by officers
- They may physically confront the police, creating a need to implement force.

However, officers should not exercise courtesy merely to avoid possible negative consequences. Courtesy is a strategic tool, a positive force that builds confidence within the community. It also helps officers to manage effectively and efficiently the very power given to them by law. In turn, it becomes a measure of the police department's performance and effectiveness.

Police-Citizen Contact

Courtesy remains an ongoing relationship between citizens and officers. This relationship exists not for public relations purposes alone, but rather as a means to maintain government efficiency. The cumulative impact of discourtesy in dealing with the public will ultimately impair the ability of the police department to function effectively.

Every time that a police-citizen contact occurs, citizens make a subconscious assessment of the quality of that meeting. In fact, these contacts remain a critical part of citizens' perceptions and judgments about both the police department and the government.

If officers do not exhibit proper behavior during police-citizen contacts, then the quality of the meeting is mediocre and nothing is gained. However, everyone gains when the officer exercises courtesy while handling the situation.⁵ The very common thread of courtesy and proper manners gives police officers the value and power that their positions should hold.

Effects on the Department

The line connecting a citizen and a police officer is a crucial point of contact that presents the greatest opportunity for the officer to exercise courtesy. The department's image can either improve or deteriorate with each contact.

When a police officer is courteous, the citizen tends to believe that the department as a whole reacts to the public in a similar manner. How police officers treat each citizen, how they handle calls, and how they

follow-up all play a part in successful police-citizen contacts.

Courtesy and Management

To remain a viable component of a department's approach, courtesy must be supported by management. Since citizens more often voice complaints rather than compliments, police supervisors must encourage and help officers direct their attention toward the needs of the public. In turn, officers become more attentive and responsive to citizens, who then share their positive experiences with others.

Conclusion

It is difficult to grasp the extent that courtesy influences people.

However, the lack of police training in this area is also puzzling, as is the lack of management's understanding of an issue this critical to police power and effectiveness. Police leadership must encourage officers to strive for measurable results that foster positive citizen feedback.

Courtesy softens power and makes power acceptable to those who are to be influenced by it. This study confirmed that courtesy and the efficient use of power are woven together in the professional police organization. If police organizations are to remain effective in traditional policing efforts, or if they attempt to implement new community programs, the need to train and consistently evaluate the use of

courtesy by all elements of the police department becomes absolutely essential. ♦

Endnotes

¹ *The Complete Short Stories of Stephen Crane* (Charlottesville, Virginia: Press of the University of Virginia, 1969), 267.

² The research proposal was developed in conjunction with Aurora University, Aurora, Illinois. Additional information regarding this research may be obtained by writing to Stephen M. Ziman, Aurora Police Department, 350 North River Street, Aurora, Illinois 60504.

³ Immanuel Wallerstein, *Historical Capitalism* (London: Thetford Press Limited, 1984), 56.

⁴ Edmund Burke, *Reflections on the Revolution in France* (Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, 1973), 90-91.

⁵ Albrecht & Zemke, *Service America* (Homewood, Illinois: Warner Books Publication, 1985), 79.

Unusual Weapon

"The Machete Stopper"

The U.S. Coast Guard and Drug Enforcement Administration caution law enforcement personnel to be aware of a stainless steel tube that can transform an ordinary flare gun into a lethal—and illegal—handgun. The conversion tube, which is advertised in some boating magazines, loads into the wide barrel of a conventional flare gun. With this type of insert in place, the gun is capable of firing either a .410 or .45 shell. As the advertisements make clear, the conversion is intended to circumvent the stringent firearm control regulations in many foreign and American ports by allowing boat owners to retain concealed firepower after surrendering conventional weapons to authorities.

