



**EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION SKILLS FOR SECURITY  
PERSONNEL**

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Communication is an essential part of everyday life. The inability to effectively communicate with others can create a plethora of problems for anyone, regardless of their life goals or ambitions. The ability to obtain an education, the ability to hold a job, and the ability to manage a family are just a few examples of the barriers faced by one with poor communication skills. With that in mind, imagine the repercussions of underdeveloped communication skills within the security profession. Security personnel interact with people on a daily basis. Whether it is giving directions, interviewing/interrogating a suspect, or simply reporting an incident to a supervisor, effective communication is essential to one's success and to the success of the business they protect. According to Fiems and Hertig, "communications ability is probably the single most important skill a security officer has" (2001, pg.51).

## **CHANGING ROLES OF THE SECURITY OFFICER**

The overall role of the security officer has made some significant changes over the past five years. According to an article written by Roth (2001), since September 11, 2001 the demand for private security is on the rise. He mentions that some companies where funding for specific security measures was normally very difficult to come by is now being "rubber-stamped." Roth said security is now being considered an asset and not a liability or added expense.

Not only is the need for security on the rise, but the perception of what a security officer does is also changing. Zalud (2005) mentions that corporations have an increasing demand for guards who can act as "immediate responders, managing and monitoring premise control equipment and taking on responsibility beyond physical security such as responding to crises and monitored alarms, as well as special events." Security guards are no longer simply considered "watchdogs." They are now assuming more of a role as a service-oriented agency, taking on tasks such as overseeing mailrooms, taking care of hazardous materials, performing basic first aid, and even handling transportation duties. As a result of this new approach, the need for specific training has increased. These duties also increase the likelihood of interaction between security officers, and the general public (Hertig, 2003). The ability of the security officer to perform these duties successfully is contingent upon many factors, but effective communication skills should be considered the foundation on which all other factors are based.

## **EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION**

Thibodeau (2003) describes effective communications as "the faithful reproduction of a thought, idea, observation, instruction, request, greeting, or warning, expressed in verbal, written, electronic alarm annunciation, or pictorial media, originated by and transmitted by a communicator or communicating device to a specifically targeted receiver or receiver group" (pg.166). He adds that the term "faithful reproduction means that whatever was contained in the original message that left the communicator is both received by and understood by the targeted receiver or receiver group" (pg. 166). It is within this term "faithful reproduction" where the importance of interpersonal communications lies. It is very simple to talk with someone, but having them understand what is being said is a very different story. Effective communications is not an inherent trait, but instead is a skill which requires a great deal of hard work to master. Although some actually do become masterful communicators, one has to believe that the

majority do not. However, improving ones communications skills does not have to rise to this level to become effective. By simply paying attention to three basic principles of communications; speaking, listening, and body language, one can enhance their opportunity for a successful career in the security industry.

## **SPEAKING SKILLS**

As a speaker, one must consider several factors that will provide a better opportunity for them to be heard and understood. Tibodeau (2003) presents six essentials of effective communications:

1. **The message must be delivered in a timely fashion-** information changes constantly and any delay that is incurred could cause the information to become dated.
2. **The message must be complete-** meaning all the information that the speaker wants the listener to hear must be presented.
3. **The information should be delivered in a clear message.**
4. **The message should be concise and to the point.**
5. **The message should be factual-**adding a lot of extraneous information will tend to confuse the listener.
6. **The message must be accurate-**always keep in mind that information should be verified before being presented to the listener.

When presenting this information, Thibodeau (2003) suggests that one must also consider the communication level of the listener. He maintains that there are several different levels of communication, the midpoint of which is at the seventh grade level. Thibodeau adds that this median of communications will continue to fluctuate and will be influenced by the nation's educational system. Talking above or below the listener's level will present an obstacle to effective communications. This aspect is likely to be a major factor within the role of the security officer. It will be heavily affected by the nature of the business being protected and the various types of people which the security officer is likely to come into contact with. For this reason, it is important for the security professional to become intimately familiar with his or her surroundings.

## **LISTENING SKILLS**

Another important aspect of enhancing one's communication skills is becoming a good listener. People tend to place the emphasis on speaking as the most important aspect of communication, but this is not necessarily so. Barker (1971) breaks down the percentage of time spent throughout the day for an average person engaged in one of the four aspects of communication:

- Listening-42%
- Talking-32%
- Reading-15%
- Writing-11%

The reality is that the majority of people only listen for approximately 25 percent of the time. And in many cases, most people only listen to the first couple of words from a speaker before starting to formulate a response in their minds (Communication Skills, 2005). There is a distinct difference between listening and hearing. Merriam-Webster (1994) describes "hearing" as: "the

process, function, or power of perceiving sound” (pg. 346.) Merriam-Webster (1994) describe “listen” as: “to pay attention in order to hear” (pg. 433). The key to becoming a better listening is to stop simply hearing what someone is saying and to start listening to what is being said.

The following are some suggestions for becoming a better listener:

- **Do No Interrupt.** To become an effective listener, wait until the speaker is finished before providing feedback or expressing opinion. People have a tendency to become impatient while listening and cannot wait for the speaker to finish (Communication Skills, 2005). Not only is this rude, but it will drastically limit the information exchange and damage the communication process.
- **Do Not Jump to Conclusions.** Do not assume that you know what the speaker is going to say. People can process information faster than one can speak (up to three times faster). For this reason, one might start formulating a response before receiving all the necessary information (Communication Skills, 2005). This can lead to confusion and poor response on behalf of the listener.
- **Do Not Judge the Speaker.** Do not allow ones opinion of the speaker to interfere with the message being received. The speaker’s accent, speed of delivery (talks too fast or too slow), appearance, and age are just a few factors that can create bias and limit effective listening. Concentrate on the content of the message, not on the speaker (Communication Skills, 2005).
- **Take Notes to Hold Interest.** Not only is taking notes a good way of retaining information for a later time, but it also helps the listener maintain interest, shows the speaker that you are paying attention, and helps eliminate distractions (Communication Skills, 2005).
- **Ask Questions.** Asking good questions, paraphrasing, and providing feedback are essential to good listening. This will help one listen more carefully and will also strengthen the relationship between the speaker and the listener. Good listeners play an active role in the communication process including head nodding, eye contact, and asking questions (Communication Skills, 2005).

Some rewards for becoming a good listener include “expansion of knowledge, vocabulary development and language development, ability to evaluate messages, passing examinations, saving time, accruing financial benefits, and short-cutting acquisition of knowledge (Barker, 1971, pg. 14). This will also help in the areas of public relations, investigations, and crisis/emergency management situations.

By using these listening suggestions, practicing them, and putting them into action, the security officer can maintain an open line of communication and will be better able to obtain sufficient information for reporting to supervisors and preparing for investigations. The security officer will also be able to gather this information while continuing to project a professional image on behalf of his or her employer. Thibodeau, Hertig, and Barnett (2001) suggest that “no matter what the business is involved in, the security officer is many times the out front person for that company [and] is frequently the first contact that anyone will have with the company” (pg. 284).

## NON-VERBAL COMMUNICATION SKILLS

A third aspect of effective communication is a basic understanding of body language. Studies have shown that more than 50 percent of a spoken message's meaning can be determined by nonverbal gestures. Hannigan (2003) claims that only 15 percent of what is said is verbal and "at least 85 percent of interpersonal communications are nonverbal" (pg. 173). For this reason, it is important for the speaker and the listener to be aware of three important characteristics and principles of nonverbal communications.

First, most nonverbal communication is "automatic and unconscious" (Gorden, 1998, pg. 66). This means that it is essentially more difficult for the speaker and the listener to control their nonverbal responses than their verbal ones. It is because of this factor that most people will place more emphasis on the meaning of nonverbal clues as opposed to the actual spoken message. Marwijk (2005) adds that it is equally important for the speaker to be aware of their own body language in order to make certain they are conveying the message without contradiction to the verbal message.

Second, if there is an attempt by one person to deceive another with words, there will likely be a "conflict betrayed by leakage of nonverbal cues" (Gorden, 1998, pg. 66). This means that a false statement provided by the speaker will likely be accompanied by a nonverbal cue, or nonverbal leakage, which actually represents the truth. One should also be aware of a conscious effort on behalf of the speaker to suppress nonverbal responses. For example, if one attempts to control their facial expression while providing a false statement, one might unconsciously display the truth through nonverbal expressions of the hands or feet (Gorden, 1998).

The third characteristic to consider is that "different types of nonverbal cues are usually interconnected and congruent in manifesting the same attitude or emotion" (Gorden, 1998, pg. 66). This is how two different people listening to the same story can come to the same conclusion despite paying attention to different types of communication cues. One might be more aware of the tone of voice of the speaker, while the other pays more attention to the visual cues, yet both interpret the same meaning of the message.

The following are some examples of nonverbal cues to be aware of for improving ones communication skills:

- **Eye Behavior.** This includes eye contact, tears, and pupil dilation. Eye contact can signify a willingness to listen and truth (direct) or avoidance and deception (no contact or very little contact.) Tears can indicate a wide variety of emotions, but most importantly, they tend to indicate the strength of the feeling. The dilation of pupils can be a good indicator of alarm, excitement, interest, and satisfaction. Conversely, the contraction of pupils can represent lack of interest, boredom, or tranquility (Gorden, 1998).
- **Facial Expression and Head Movements.** The human face is capable of expressing more than one emotion at a time. However, the mouth of the speaker is more restricted than the eyes. There are "different degrees of smiles, different degrees of spontaneity of smiles, and different degrees of congruity with the expression of other parts of the face, particularly the eyes" (Gorden, 1998, pg. 110). Because of this, it is very difficult to interpret the movements of the mouth and their meanings. One should seek additional

training opportunities to become proficient in this area. Head movements such as up and down, which normally indicates agreement, or back and forth, which normally indicates disagreement are common. These movements can be very subtle during conversation, but can be very helpful in determining attitudes (Gorden, 1998).

- **Shoulders.** Shoulders can be a good indicator of stress. As tension begins to rise, so will one's shoulders. Conversely, as one becomes more relaxed, so will the shoulders (Gorden, 1998).
- **Arms and Hands.** Arms folded across the chest, animated talking with arms and hands, trembling or fidgety hands, fidgeting with an object while speaking, playing with hair, clenched fists, and pounding the table are just a few of the many indicators with arms and hands (Gorden, 1998). Most of these will be self-explanatory to the observer and will likely provide the bulk of the nonverbal cues within a conversation.

These are just a few examples of nonverbal cues for the security professional to be aware of when conducting an interview or simply carrying on a conversation within the normal scope of duties. It is very important to keep in mind the different personalities and different cultural beliefs one might encounter when interpreting nonverbal cues. Do not jump to conclusions and be certain to take in the whole picture before making an evaluation.

## CONCLUSION

Effective communication skills must be learned and practiced on a continuous basis. Simply learning to talk is not enough. As was mentioned earlier, good communication skills are an integral part of the security officer's daily duties. Projecting a professional image, enhancing liaison between outside agencies and company employees, testifying in court, use of force alternatives, and communicating with the general public are just a few examples of the importance of effective communication skills to the security professional.

The role of the security officer is becoming more diverse and complex, requiring a more proactive approach by the individual officer. It is no longer acceptable to simply "get by." The successful security officer is the one who takes pride in themselves and the organization they represent by developing effective communication skills. These skills will provide them with the foundation on which to build all other facets of their career.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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