Technology has grown so fast that most of us can’t keep up. Suddenly, it’s easier to text, tweet or “like” than talk, yet the absence of human contact and interpersonal relationships leave out a basic psychological need – the need to communicate face-to-face. Police are not immune to this reality and, in fact, law enforcement has had to adapt their methods of communication in order to help the communities they serve. But, that doesn’t mean that communication, as we once knew it, is no longer valuable or necessary. In fact, face-to-face interaction is more important than ever, especially when it comes to law enforcement and our communities.

Connecting with the Community

Lack of communication results in an “us versus them” mentality and doesn’t work well when it involves a community and those sworn to protect it. We can all recognize the necessity for the two parties to merge together to resolve issues and there are several actions law enforcement organizations can take to connect with their communities.

1. Kids are the key. Forging relationships between urban youth leaders and police can occur in a variety of ways. Constructive dialogue between the two groups through forums and programs can facilitate ideas, creating an understanding of the two perspectives. Incorporating core values from organizations like Strategies for Youth: Connecting Cops & Kids (SFY) (strategiesforyouth.org/about) is helpful in bringing youth and police together. SFY even has pamphlets they distribute to kids which promote positive interactions with police officers.

Community programs such as bicycle safety, Special Olympics, school safety programs, Shop with A Cop, and youth sports leagues are also beneficial in building rapport. The contact between officers and youth doesn’t have to be a formal program and can be as simple as a street chat or picking up a ball and shooting some hoops in the park.

2. May the Force Be WITH You.

Creating a culture of integrity is in the forefront of all police
administrations and begins by mirroring the police force to represent the community it serves. Training pertaining to cultural awareness and empathy toward specific populations is also being incorporated into police education. Cultural disparity in law enforcement tends to be a sensitive topic and often difficult to discuss, but it must be addressed. It is important to reflect your community through a diverse organizational makeup.

3. Dive in! Immerse officers in the community they serve. By volunteering time and representing the department in plain clothes, they are viewed in a different light. When officers are involved in town projects and engage with community members on or off duty, they invest themselves and belong. This stimulates dialogue and sustains community partnerships. Police become a part of a bigger picture and are not singularly perceived as an instrument for fighting crime. By being recognized as citizens, they become part of the community.

Not long ago, community policing was at the top of every administrator’s agenda. This concept merges problem solving; organizational reconstruction and change; and community partnerships to find a balance in community relations and prioritize proactive responses for combating crime. Encouraging community partnerships is not a new concept. However, it’s more focused on specific community needs. For instance, the Coffee with a Cop (coffeewithacop.com) program provides a friendly platform which facilitates discussions and connections within the participating communities.

Stretch the imagination on this concept to include broader reaches such as forums, idea generating conferences with multiple disciplines, empowerment of community leaders, and using multiagency task forces to combat crime, litter, code enforcement, and infrastructure problems. The new twist on marrying the community with cops sinks communication barriers and creates a safe environment.

5. Now You See Me. Certainly, we are all aware that law enforcement officials are exposed to human misery, dynamic situations and sensitive circumstances. These occurrences impact communities and the members will demand to be informed of local matters and safety concerns. Just what should the police release to the public to keep privacy intact while also meeting the expectations of transparency? Privacy and information often don’t mesh and are bound by a patchwork of complex laws, policies and regulations, yet somewhere in this mix lay the expectations of police accountability and organizational transparency. Additionally, an investigation can be compromised by releasing too much information. A balance may be found through administrators looking at transparency as promoting department fundamentals, embracing public engagement and being accountable to their community.

Public Information Officers (PIOs) have been around for some time and many larger law enforcement departments incorporate training for administrators and PIOs into their managerial model. Police administrators can also procure public trust by being proactive.