

# How To... Have an Effective Conversation with Youth About Your Police Department's Practices

Improving communications between law enforcement and youth is central to effective community policing. It keeps officers safer, and helps officers develop relationships with youth that can yield helpful information. Good communication means that interactions don't escalate into complicated situations and result in unnecessary arrests.



A single conversation cannot address every issue. It may take multiple conversations before youth and police find common ground and understand each other's perspectives, but a single conversation that is effective and respectful can spark interest and a willingness to consider more dialogue in the future.

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## **BEFORE HAVING THE CONVERSATION, DEPARTMENTS MUST ESTABLISH:**

What is the goal?

- Advising youth of a new policing initiative.
- Asking youth to connect and partner in keeping an area safe.

## **HOW SHOULD YOUTH FEEL WHEN OFFICERS LEAVE THE ROOM?**

- Frightened?
- Aware?
- Safe?
- Reassured?
- Acknowledged and respected?

## **CONVERSATIONS WILL BE MOST EFFECTIVE IF OFFICERS:**

- Reframe disagreements or challenges from youth by asking questions.
- Stay positive, not defensive.

- Resist an us vs. them mentality and recognize the complexity of the issues youth face.
- Remember that youth barks are often louder than bites and that youths' language does not define youth as bad or good.
- Remember that youth in groups tend to protect each other against adults (even if they hated each other the minute before), so an adult's apparent attack or criticism on one youth will unite the other youth against officers in the room.
- Use incentives when trying to partner with the youth.

## **WHAT INCENTIVES ARE THERE FOR YOUTH TO PARTNER WITH OFFICERS?**

- Future benefit of the doubt
- Recognition at a future encounter
- A sincere officer to address a point youth raised (follow up!)

## **WHICH OFFICERS/PARTNERS ARE YOU ASKING TO ATTEND? WHY HAVE THEY BEEN CHOSEN?**

Choose officers with excellent communication skills.

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## How To... Have an Effective Conversation with Youth about Your Police Department's Practices (CONT.)

### IF YOUR GOAL IS CONNECTING WITH YOUTH AND ASKING FOR THEIR SUPPORT

#### Be outnumbered.

- If there are 20 youth, bring only 2 to 3 officers
- Delegate responsibilities among officers so that the leader decides when other officers may speak and alerts them when to do so and when not to do so.

#### Sit. Do not stand; officers should not all sit together.

#### Shake hands with participants.

#### Begin by asking for everyone's first name and where they live;

Show familiarity with the area (i.e. "Is your house/apartment right near Carmine's restaurant?")

#### Explain your goal is to understand why situations happened and to ask for help in stopping bad outcomes.

- Assume that youth who volunteer or have been chosen to participate are leaders
- Treat youth as leaders
- Ask youth for advice

#### Ask for ideas about why problems occur at X Station, corner, area, etc.

- Have at least one officer take notes
- Tally frequency of themes mentioned
- Limit the time spent on this discussion to ten minutes and tell youth it is to ensure the focus is on solutions
- Ensure everyone in the room is heard; ask youth who have not spoken if they have ideas they would like to share, and pause to let youth respond before moving on

#### Ask for suggestions to improve the situation according to the role of the person involved.

For example: Ask youth what they could do to prevent bad outcomes or "Which other adults in the community have a role in preventing bad outcomes?"

- What can youth do?
- What can parents do?

- What can police do?
- What can schools do?
- What can store owners do?
- What can bus drivers do? (etc.)

**Do NOT react to statements** by refuting, dismissing, or responding in an argumentative fashion, simply note statements.

#### End the discussion as follows:

- As youth leave the room, shake hands and say you hope to see them again
- Thank youth for a respectful encounter
- Thank youth for being open and honest
- Reiterate plans to review notes taken and report them to higher-ups
- Give out business cards and invite youth to call with other ideas
- **VOW TO DO SOMETHING** based on a criticism youth repeatedly raised
  - "I vow that the next time I see youth I will say hello."
  - Ask other officers to make a vow
  - Ask youth to make a vow

### IF YOUR GOAL IS LAYING DOWN THE LAW

- Show your strength.
- Bring many officers to show this is not negotiable
- Explain the goal is to make youth aware of new rules and how they will be enforced.
- Describe the rules verbally and provide the rules in writing.
- Explain the reasons for the change.
  - Make presentation neutral, devoid of emotion
    - Present the just doing my job face
    - Reiterate the logic behind the rule in a neutral manner
  - Cite proponents of the change (e.g. neighbors, school principal, specific groups such as the elderly)
- Give a scenario involving the rules and their violation and demonstrate how an officer will respond.
- Ask youth if they have questions about the rules.
- Ask youth if they have questions about the enforcement.

## How To... Have an Effective Conversation with Youth about Your Police Department's Practices (CONT.)

- Don't ask questions if you don't want to hear the answer. Avoid verbal tics like, "Okay?" If it's not "okay," what will your answer be?
- Anticipate the following reactions:
  - Rules are too broad and affect protected conduct
  - Enforcement does not target the real culprits
  - Officers overgeneralize
  - Officers will sweep up youth who are not guilty
  - The plan is not fair; it's part of a scheme to hurt youth and enhance police power
- Plan how you will respond to these reactions:
  - Complaint line
  - Return to discuss impacts of implementation
  - Offer a neutral third party (i.e. youth-serving, community based organization) to hear out youths' views and relay them to law enforcement
- Do not engage with direct challenges or try to refute youths' reactions.
- Listen carefully and note these reactions. If a youth says, "This is bull. You're full of it," the better part of valor may be to move on, ask "Any other thoughts?"

### REMEMBER

- The self-perceptions of both youth and police are not necessarily representative of reality: As often as you perceive yourselves as fair, impartial, respectful and youth-sensitive, youth perceive themselves as adult-like, respectful, innocent, and at-risk of being treated unfairly.
- When youth raise issues that attack your perception of yourself and your colleagues, e.g. by calling officers racist or liars, it is natural to want to defend all police conduct. Similarly, when you raise issues that embarrass or threaten youths' perceptions of themselves, e.g. by calling them hoodlums, youth typically want to defend all youth as a group.
- What really matters—good outcomes for police, youth, and communities—gets lost in the scuffle.
- As the adults in the conversation, you are best positioned to understand why youth accuse officers of certain behaviors.

You can de-escalate the conversation by engaging youth who make these claims and spending the time to have youth describe the situations and the actions that led to these conclusions.

- Listen and think before you respond. If you respond to youth's statements with accusations or justifications, the conversation can escalate into a free-for-all. This response prevents you from discovering more effective approaches to working with youth. It may also reinforce the negative stereotypes youth hold about police, which they might use to justify negative actions.
- When police seem to justify the actions of all officers without considering the concerns of youth, youth conclude there is no point talking to police and lose any incentive for positive behavior because they perceive that no matter what their behavior is, they won't receive the benefit of the doubt.

### EXAMPLE OF THE WRONG WAY

Youth speaks up in classroom with six officers standing at the front of the class – three in uniform, three not – and fifteen students. He accuses an officer, "You wouldn't tell a woman with four kids to get off the sidewalk the way you tell us." The officer responds, "Yeah and how many women with four kids shoot other kids to death every week?"

Result: Youth has confirmation that officers see all youth as dangerous.

### EXAMPLE OF THE RIGHT WAY

In a classroom of fifteen students, with two officers (not in uniform) sitting among the students, a youth speaks up, "You wouldn't tell a woman with 4 kids to get off the sidewalk the way you tell us." An officer responds, "Do you think that's what happens?"

Result: The officer has shown the youth that he values and respects his opinion, and can use the discussion to demonstrate why an officer might react in a particular way and/or offer to investigate the action.