

Command Presence  
By Bob Vernon

You're the first officer on scene at a serious, multiple vehicle traffic collision. You have attended to your first duty to protect the injured from further injury and summon medical assistance, and you've begun laying out a protective flare pattern. The rear deck lid to your patrol car is open. A well-meaning citizen wants to assist you with expanding the flare pattern. He's about to ignite a flare when you realize he's standing in a flow of gasoline coming from one of the damaged vehicles. He needs to be stopped immediately. There's no time for explanation. You shout: "Don't light that flare." Your strong direction stops him just in time.

Consider another scenario. You're the first unit to arrive at a family dispute that has become violent. Two men and a woman are fighting. Children are screaming. Neighbors are standing by looking troubled and confused. Backup is on the way, but it won't arrive for two to three minutes. Clearly, you must take action. Whatever you say or do must be done with wisdom and convincing authority.

In both of these all-too-common scenarios you need *command presence*. You must speak and act reasonably, and with confidence and power.

Proper exercise of authority

In prior issues, I have addressed two types of exposures unique to law enforcement that can mold and change an officer's personality. So far, I've covered the limited perspective syndrome and exposure to the extremes of life. These exposures have the potential of making you cynical and calloused. They can damage important personal relationships, unless recognized and appropriately addressed. In this issue, I discuss command presence, a tool we must use in the exercise of authority.

Command presence was covered at our police academy and then reinforced by the modeling of my field training officers. They did a good job, and I developed the behavior and language that became a powerful tool. I learned that there is a certain tone of voice, a deliberate look in the eyes and a distinctive body language that exude command presence.

This phenomenon is important to law officers. But it too has the potential to make changes in an officer's personality that can be destructive and alienating. At 2 a.m. when confronting three armed robbery suspects, a strong form of command presence, coupled with excellent tactics, can avert a deadly shootout. On the other hand, explaining the purpose of a traffic citation to a cooperative violator will probably call for a completely different interaction.

Exercising legitimate command presence on a regular basis does begin to change you. First, you begin to realize how effective it can be in controlling people. Second, it can be a shortcut to getting what you want more rapidly. Without realizing what's happening, it can become a permanent part of your personality. Further, it's easy to begin using this powerful tool inappropriately.

One evening I was having what I thought was a normal conversation with my teen-age daughter. Suddenly her eyes became moist. I wanted to know what was going on and asked her what was wrong. She replied, “Daddy, you’re not talking with me. You’re interrogating me.” She was right. My time on the street was changing me. I was beginning to use command presence in many of my personal relationships. That was not good.

Consider this scenario. An off-duty police officer approaches his neighbor about the ivy growing on the fence that separates their backyards. The officer uses the authoritative voice and body posture of command presence. The conversation goes something like this, “Fred, I need you to trim the ivy on your side of the fence, and I need it done now!”

This is not how to “win friends and influence people.” Some suggestions to prevent this attitude from infiltrating your home life:

1. Be aware: Recognize that you will or already have developed command presence to a certain degree. For law officers, this takes place naturally and of necessity, whether or not you are formally trained in how to project the attitude.
2. Develop guidelines: Consciously think through this issue with the goal of establishing personal parameters that will contain your use of command presence to appropriate situations.
3. Feedback: Ask a few people you trust to alert you to perceived abuses of this powerful tool.

#### Bottom line

The daily practice of a vocation or profession understandably focuses attention on the development of certain skills that make you successful or keep you alive. In our profession, exercising authority usually involves projecting command presence to some degree. Although an important and necessary tool, it can negatively change a person’s overall behavior. Officers successfully completing this demanding career without damaging personal relationships learn to use command presence with wisdom—On Point.

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