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**POWER
(FROM A REALISTC©
FRAMEWORK FOR
ENHANCING
COMMUNICATION,
RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING
& DE-ESCALATION
SKILLS)**

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Shadow of the Law Publications

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ABSTRACT

Presented is Chapter 6 of Richard Moore's book, *A REALISTIC © Framework for Enhancing Communication, Relationship-building & De-escalation Skills* (2021, Shadow of the Law Publications), which considers power and dynamics when police officers interact with citizens.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Richard Moore started his career practicing law before shifting his focus to mediation, conflict management and conflict transformation. He has mediated and consulted broadly and provided expert advice regarding many conflict management programs. He has taught negotiation, mediation, and other conflict management skills to human resource professionals, judges, lawyers, police officers, social workers, conflict management professionals, and labour relations and union representatives. He holds an undergraduate degree in political science from Carleton University, a law degree from Queen's University at Kingston, and Chartered Mediator, Chartered Med-Arbitrator and Chartered Arbitrator designations from the ADR Institute of Canada and is a founding member of the Canadian Collaborative for Engagement and Conflict Management.

REAL-LIFE SCENARIO

“There were two police cars on each side of the road with sirens on. It was foggy and nighttime which makes it a bit hard to get a perfect vision of what’s happening and the reason why they are stopped on the side of the street. I started slowing down way before getting close to their vehicles. As I was getting closer I start to notice flashlights held by a female cop so I really slowed down... At that time, I had stopped completely. As she approached my car, looking so furious and violent, I tried to ask what’s the reason for stopping me, she started shouting out very loudly at me and verbally abusing me with her unpleasant, unprofessional words. She was trying to accuse me of nearly hitting her partner, which does not make any sense considering I slowed down completely and there were absolutely no officers who were trying to cross the road in front of me.

She said the following in her own words in a very rude abusing matter “are you f.... stupid, you stupid idiot you almost ran my partner over, you stupid bitch” and she kept insulting me without giving me the chance to talk and every time I tried to defend myself she would tell me to “shut the f... up” and before leaving my vehicle she threatened me by saying “watch what’s gonna happen to you” and that it’s because of people like me people are dying out there.

At that moment I felt betrayed by the only system that should make you feel safe. By a system that I once thought no one is above the law. I really felt scared, ashamed and truly betrayed. As she was walking away from my vehicle, I heard them laugh and giggle right behind my car.

*Less than a minute later I noticed a male police officer approaching my car again with anger. He also verbally abused me and threatened me by saying the following “are you f***** stupid you stupid idiot, give me your license now and watch what’s gonna happen to you.” Again I tried to defend myself by trying to tell him that “you’re accusing me of something I did not commit”. He got more angry and again shouting at me loud and threatening... He told me that he’s gonna give me the biggest ticket and it will teach me a lesson.*

As I arrived home with disappointing tears and so disappointed of our system of justice I was and still am certain that that night I was verbally abused and threatened by the only people who I thought there is to protect us not to makes feel scared, ashamed, and abused, I was and still am traumatized and it felt like a nightmare.”

CONTEMPLATION QUESTIONS

How did the officers use their power in this scenario?

How was the citizen affected?

What might cause the officers to behave this way?

ANALYSIS

The *Approach/Inhibition Theory of Power* was developed by Dacher Keltner in 2003. It states that the presence or absence of power (or perceived power) psychologically transforms people and affects their behaviour.

Power activates people by increasing their drive, energy, and emotion. More power leads to *approach behaviours* (action, seeking rewards, an increase in physical energy, and self-promotion). Less power leads to *inhibitive behaviours* (reaction, self-protection, avoiding threats and danger, vigilance, lower motivation, and less activity). A lower sense of power explains why people who feel stereotyped have *inhibitive behaviours*. It doesn't matter if their stigma is visible (e.g., skin colour), less obvious (e.g., sexual orientation), or even completely invisible.

More detailed information which reviews empirical advances made between 2003-2020 regarding Keltner's Approach/Inhibition Theory of Power can be found in the article of Kleef and Cheng reported in *Current Opinion in Psychology* 2020, 33:196-200.

Understanding how power, or its absence, affects people can help officers to think about how they can better manage power dynamics to create safer and more stable outcomes when interacting with citizens. One exercise that can lead to interesting results is for officers to analyze their own power behaviour in officer-citizen encounters, taking into account that they have "elevated power" compared to citizens who have "reduced power".

Typically, officers with elevated power

- are more optimistic when they assess risk (e.g., they have a high belief that they will win and a lower belief that they will lose); when judging time requirements (e.g., they tend to underestimate the time it takes to

complete tasks, also known as the *planning fallacy*); and, when making decisions (e.g., they can be overconfident).

- are more likely to see citizens as a means to their own ends.
- are more likely to dehumanize citizens; engage in distant and cold decision - making; and, sacrifice citizens' welfare.
- are more likely to prioritize their self-interest above that of others.
- rely more heavily on mental shortcuts, or rules of thumb (*heuristics*) to help solve problems and make judgments quickly and efficiently. In this way, they risk making mistakes based on narrow perspectives and stereotyping.
- are more focused on their own view (rather than adjusting to the perspectives of others). This makes them more vulnerable to under-estimating how long tasks will take because their planning ignores relevant information.
- are more likely to have unconscious *bias* (e.g., be more positive towards white faces and negative towards black faces) in *Implicit Association Tests*.
- are more likely to hold onto initial judgments and discount other's advice.
- are more prone to risky behaviour.
- are more prone to aggression when they feel incompetent.
- are stricter judges of the moral wrongdoing of others than their own (moral hypocrisy).

And at the same time, citizens with reduced power

- are more likely to have negative emotions.
- have mindsets oriented to threats.

In summary, law enforcement officers have vast power when dealing with people. This elevated power can negatively affect their judgment and influence their behaviour. It can make officers more prone to risky decision-making, de-humanizing behaviour, the use of negative stereotypes, violence, and judging others more harshly than themselves. At the same time, citizens will often have, or think they have, reduced power. This makes them more prone to negativity, seeing things as threats, as well as reduced self-restraint, emotional control, and problem-solving abilities. Unless these power differentials are sensitively handled, officers will end up causing lower citizen satisfaction and cooperation.

One way to combat the negative effects of *increased power* is to re-think what power is. We often understand power as *power over* others. This conceptualization of power is built on force, coercion, domination, and control. It is founded on a belief that power is a finite resource which some people have, and others do not.

Other ways of understanding power, include *power within*, *power to*, and *power with*. These recognize that power is not owned by any one person or group. Power is fluid and ever-changing, present in all relationships.

Power within draws on our individual senses of self-worth and self-knowledge, as well as our ability to recognize and respect people's individual differences. If we can formulate power as *power within*, we are able to recognize that we have *power to* and *power with*, and that we can use them to make a positive difference in people's lives.

Power to avoids domination and control. It is built on the idea that we can all act to make positive differences with people to improve lives and relationships.

Power with is a shared power that grows out of collaboration and relationship building. It is built on respect, support, influence, shared power (empowerment), and shared decision-making. *Power with* helps to build bridges with individuals and groups, across differences such as gender, class, and culture. Rather than using the domination and control of the *power over* mindset, a *power within* mindset leads to collective decisions and actions, and more enduring outcomes.

Officers should not be trying to increase their *power over* citizens. Wherever possible, they should find ways of sharing power. Starting conversations with a *power within* mindset, and only moving to *power over* if necessary, helps to de-escalate situations and gain citizen cooperation.