

## **Moments of Truth in Policing**

*Sean Duggan, Assistant Chief of Police, Scottsdale Police Department, Arizona*

*Typical of a late Saturday evening, the emergency room at Scottsdale (Arizona) Healthcare Shea Medical Center bustled with activity. Emergency room staffers tirelessly attended to assorted illnesses and injuries that routinely occupy their shifts. Also present in the emergency room that evening was Scottsdale Police Officer Thomas Goodson, following up on an assault investigation. Shortly after he arrived, he heard a commotion in the examination room next to his and walked out to the hallway to see what was occurring. He observed a frenzied but well-choreographed response by emergency room personnel attempting to save the life of a patient in cardiopulmonary distress. In the midst of the stream of doctors and nurses rushing to the room, Goodson saw an elderly woman, who appeared to be the patient's wife, sitting alone in a chair across the hall. She seemed dazed and overwhelmed by the valiant lifesaving efforts taking place in her husband's room. Noticing her anxiety and confusion, Goodson grabbed a chair from the nurses' station and sat down next to her. He engaged her in conversation, asking her questions about herself, her family, and anything else that would keep her mind off of the traumatic scene unfolding.*

*Down the hall attending to another matter was Goodson's supervisor, Sergeant John Zobel. He later recounted how, in the middle of the hectic scene at the hospital, he watched Goodson caringly walk over to the elderly woman and show her kindness and compassion at a time when she needed it most. When Zobel returned to his office, he discovered a phone message from the charge nurse at the hospital that evening, extolling Goodson's benevolence. She explained that, although she and her staff were occupied providing lifesaving efforts and were unable to attend to the patient's wife, she and her colleagues noticed the officer's actions and were deeply moved.*

Goodson's act of compassion had a profound effect not only on the elderly woman, but also on all those who observed and subsequently learned about his goodwill towards another human being in distress. Besides being a great example of the type of caring behavior a community would like to expect from its police officers, Goodson also was a perfect example of an officer recognizing a "moment of truth" opportunity to make a lasting impact on others.

## **The Moments of Truth Philosophy**

Moments of truth in policing is a philosophy that considers each police contact as an opportunity to reduce and prevent crime by winning the respect, trust, and support of the community. It is modeled after Jan Carlzon's approach to customer service while serving as the leader of Scandinavian Airlines in the late 1980s. In his book, Moments of Truth, Carlzon describes how he was able to turn his uninspiring and financially troubled airline into a profitable industry leader.<sup>1</sup> Carlzon accomplished this primarily by focusing on enhanced customer service manifested through what he described as "moments of truth." He recognized each interaction between an employee and a customer as a moment of truth, or an opportunity to win over that customer. Carlzon encouraged his employees to recognize and take advantage of every opportunity to interact with potential and current customers and win their confidence, their high opinion, and their business.

Richard Hammond, former customer relations manager at New York's Madison Square Garden, also recognized the significance of each employee-customer contact. Throughout his 25 years of service at the Garden, Hammond reinforced the importance of winning lifelong customers through successive positive individual contacts. He believed when a customer is alienated, that customer passes on that disaffection to family and friends, resulting in alienation of successive generations of potential customers.<sup>2</sup>

Depending on the size of the law enforcement agency, moment of truth opportunities present themselves each day by the hundreds and even thousands. Every contact an officer has with a citizen, from the way the officer looks in uniform to what the officer says and how it is said, are all opportunities to win over—or, alternatively,

alienate—the customer. But first, the officer must recognize these opportunities.

### **Moments of Truth and the Scottsdale Police Department**

For more than a decade, law enforcement agencies across the United States have experienced dramatic and sustained reductions in crime. More officers on the street, advanced technology, enhanced crime analysis, strategic deployment of resources, addressing minor crimes, and focusing on repeat offenders all have contributed to declining crime rates. Still another underreported and less-attributed factor has played a significant role in the recent crime reduction trend. Scottsdale, Arizona, with a population of nearly 250,000, is experiencing some of its lowest crime rates in more than 20 years. In fact, the Uniform Crime Report Part 1 crime rate is almost half today from what it was in 1987, even though the city's population has grown by more than 125,000 residents.<sup>3</sup> While many of the above-mentioned factors have influenced the overall reduction of crime in Scottsdale, another notable factor deserves equal, if not greater, attention: a focus on community partnerships and participation.

With the inception of the community policing philosophy and a renewed focus on crime prevention in the mid-1990s, the Scottsdale Police Department recognized that safe communities are developed and maintained through community partnerships and participation. The public's willing cooperation to help prevent crime and disorder is the cornerstone of the agency's system of policing and has significantly contributed to Scottsdale's considerable crime reduction in recent years. The Scottsdale Police Department shares Carlzon's views on moments of truth and implemented a moments of truth philosophy within the department, viewing each citizen contact as an opportunity to win the respect, trust, and support of the community. Realizing the community is the first line of defense against crime and the most essential component in its prevention, moment of truth contacts reinforce the community's resolve to help police agencies develop and maintain safe neighborhoods.

### **The Role of Leadership in Moments of Truth**

Although self-initiated activity is expected and encouraged among law enforcement officers, the overwhelming majority of police work is generated externally by the community. Instead of always having officers react to calls for service after an incident has occurred, citizens can participate in preventing crime and disorder on the front end—a practice made more likely after these citizens have experienced positive moment of truth encounters with the officers they could be helping. As Sir Robert Peel said in his timeless philosophy of law enforcement 180 years ago, preventing crime and disorder is the primary mission of policing. Crime prevention promotes the health and welfare of a community instead of merely curing the illness—in this case, the crimes. It proactively reduces the threat of crime and enhances the sense of security and the quality of life within the community.

Police leaders, however, play the most critical role in adopting and advancing an agency's renewed focus on customer service. Scottsdale police leadership formally introduced the moments of truth philosophy to their organization in September 2008. An illustrative article in the agency's monthly employee newsletter explained the theory, history, and advantages of moments of truth. All employees were encouraged to submit for publication examples of employees proving enhanced customer service through moments of truth. Throughout succeeding months, command staff discussed and reinforced moments of truth with employees at squad briefings, manager meetings, and employee forums. Almost immediately, supervisors began to submit examples of positive moment of truth encounters through their chains of command to underscore personnel performance. Soon, employees at all levels and across all bureaus began to draw attention to the many examples of moments of truth carried out by their peers and manifested through enhanced customer service. From line-level personnel to the chief of police, moments of truth are now part of the department's vernacular and culture. These published moments of truth can be accessed at <http://www.scottsdaleaz.gov/Police/about/Customer/MOT.asp>.

### **Moments of Truth in the Current Economic Climate**

Winning over the customer in policing in order to prevent crime and work in full partnership with the community has never been more essential than it is currently.

The economic turmoil across the United States has sent shockwaves through police departments of all sizes by slashing budgets, reducing staffing levels, and threatening existing low crime rates. By concentrating their

efforts on recognizing and encouraging moment of truth encounters by their employees, police chiefs may counteract some of the damaging operational and quality-of-life impacts brought on by the ailing economy. In order to insulate fundamental front-line police services, such as patrols and investigations, from sweeping budgetary reductions, many departments have been forced to eliminate or severely decrease community outreach and crime prevention initiatives. Programs developed and honed over the past 20 years are now at risk of elimination because of budget constraints. By embracing and promoting the moments of truth philosophy in their agencies, police leaders can bolster a community's support and willingness to participate in preventing crime.

Although the moments of truth philosophy costs nothing to implement, it does require steadfast commitment and follow-through involving the entire chain of command, chiefly the executive leadership team. Police leaders at all ranks can model and promote the kindness and professionalism demonstrated by Officer Goodson on that late Saturday evening in Scottsdale. The benefits associated with this renewed focus on customer service are profound. Reduced crime through community partnerships and participation, and enhanced levels of community support, trust, and respect, are all possible when recognizing and treating each police-citizen contact as a moment of truth. ■

#### Notes:

<sup>1</sup>Jan Carlzon, *Moments of Truth* (Cambridge, Mass.: Ballinger, 1987).

<sup>2</sup>Richard Hammond, personal interview, 14 June, 1994.

<sup>3</sup>City of Scottsdale Planning Department, 2008.

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[Top](#)

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