

INSIGHT POLICING: A CREATIVE APPROACH TO BUILDING BRIDGES BETWEEN POLICE AND THE COMMUNITIES THEY SERVE

Megan Price * and *Bruce A. Blitman* **

Recent events in Baltimore, Maryland; Ferguson, Missouri and elsewhere have brought national attention to the connections among police practices, violence and community progress. How can police and communities stop entrenched patterns of conflict? In this interview, Megan Price (MP), Director of the Insight Conflict Resolution Program at George Mason University's School for Conflict Analysis and Resolution, and Bruce A. Blitman (BAB), longtime mediator and Florida Bar member, discuss Insight Policing and the innovative ways in which it can improve police-community relations for the safety of the public.

1. **BAB: What is Insight Policing?**

MP: Insight Policing is a community-based, problem-solving, communication skill set for officers of all ranks. It is based on the principles of Insight Conflict Analysis and Resolution that recognize that conflict behavior—those fight, flight, freeze things we do when we feel threatened and choose to defend ourselves—is often at the base of criminal behavior, whether that criminal behavior is violent assault, petty theft or noncompliance with a police officer. At the same time, Insight Policing skills help officers recognize and temper their own impulses toward conflict behavior, so they can maintain a controlled and engaged presence with community members that doesn't escalate. What is unique about Insight Policing skills is that

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they position officers to identify, deescalate, understand and productively manage conflict behavior in civilian encounters, thereby enhancing trust and legitimacy.

2. BAB: What are the origins of Insight Policing? Why was it developed?

MP: Insight Policing was developed through a grant from the Bureau of Justice Assistance (BJA) and in collaboration with the Memphis, TN and Lowell, MA police departments in an effort to help police departments get ahead of the persistent challenge of retaliatory community violence. At the time—2011—crime rates were falling across the country, but retaliatory violence was staying the same. Departments were finding themselves struggling to prevent it and instead left to pick up its pieces. Given that retaliation is inherently action taken in the context of conflict, we were asked to weigh-in on the problem as conflict resolution experts. What we found confirmed what much of research has shown, that retaliatory violence is linked to a more systemic conflict over police legitimacy. Police, therefore, have a particular responsibility to rebuild legitimacy with communities experiencing high incidence of retaliatory violence. This is an extraordinarily difficult task, however, because there is a baseline of conflict and mistrust. Being able to understand how we operate in conflict, however, helps officers overcome it and strengthens their relationships with communities, even as they enforce the law.

3. BAB: How do you adapt Insight Policing skills to police-civilian encounters?

MP: Officers trained in Insight Policing are able to recognize both in themselves and in others when behavior is conflict behavior—what the Insight approach defines as a decision to defend against an anticipated threat. When an officer can recognize that, he can become curious about it and ask targeted Insight questions that elicit the threat and defense at the root of the behavior. Simply asking these questions deescalates mounting tension, induces the citizen to reflect on what they are doing and why, yields important information for the officer to help him or her determine the best course of action, and allows the officer to engage with the citizen in terms of the citizen's own decision making. This fosters the key components of procedural justice—citizen voice, respect, neutrality and trust, which enhance officer legitimacy.

4. BAB: How does Insight Policing differ from Mediation and other traditional forms of police responses to conflict situations?

MP: Insight Policing differs from mediation in that officers employ it in their direct interactions with citizens rather than as third parties. They notice signs of conflict behavior and get curious about it in order to reveal what is motivating it. It is different from traditional forms of police response in that it commands and controls through engagement, communication, understanding, and curiosity, rather than through force.

5. BAB: What police departments are utilizing Insight Policing today?

MP: To date select officers in Memphis, TN, Lowell, MA and Montclair, NJ have been trained in Insight Policing.

6. BAB: What can you tell us about the effectiveness of Insight Policing in these departments and communities? What responses and reactions have you received from police? What responses and reactions have you received from civilians and civic leaders?

MP: Evaluation surveys show that 80% of officers trained in Insight Policing say that Insight Policing has enhanced their ability to deescalate the feelings of threat citizens have in their encounters with police officers and that animate conflict between citizens. Officers report that with Insight Policing they have a more effective command presence without the use of force, that they are making fewer preventable arrests (arrests for crimes against a responding officer, like failure to comply), that they are getting more cooperation and compliance from community members, that they are building better cases with better information, that they are able to help community members access resources they need, that they have better rapport with community members, that they can better control their own defensiveness and anger in community encounters where they feel challenged, that they feel good at the end of their day, and that they performed their jobs with integrity. These findings show the promise of Insight Policing. However, it is still a new development in the policing and conflict resolution fields, and more evaluation is needed, particularly among citizens and civic leaders who are on the receiving end of officers' Insight Policing skills.

7. BAB: What “Insight Policing” strategies and techniques can police use to gain the trust and confidence of the citizens in the communities they serve?

MP: Using Insight Policing skills like “noticing” conflict behavior and asking “curious questions” to elicit the threat and defense motivating conflict behavior positions officers to engage with a citizen on his or her own terms and address their concerns head on. When citizens feel heard and responded to, especially in contentious moments and in moments of enforcement, trust is built. Citizens are more likely to willingly cooperate and comply because they feel engaged with instead of engaged against.

8. BAB: What are the benefits of using Insight Policing techniques and principles?

MP: Insight Policing skills enhance officers’ communication skills with both self-awareness and empathy when it comes to recognizing and dealing effectively with conflict. Insight Policing skills help officers deescalate contentious encounters with civilians, engage with civilians in a procedurally just way, and make targeted and precise enforcement decisions, thereby building trust and legitimacy, and strengthening their connection to the community.

9. BAB: Can you share a “real life” example of how Insight Policing can change the dynamics of an encounter between police and civilians?

MP: Certainly, I have many examples from all kinds of policing encounters. It is interesting, because the stories officers have told me include times when they have used Insight Policing skills to get a handle on their own conflict behavior as well as when they have used the skills to deescalate the conflict behavior of a community member.

10. BAB: Can you start with an example of an officer recognizing his or her own conflict behavior?

MP: An officer in Memphis once described to me how Insight policing made a difference in the way he handled himself during a routine traffic stop. The officer pulled the car over for a traffic violation, and when he came up to the car he saw that the driver was a big man, probably 6’4” and 300 pounds. If his size wasn’t intimidating enough, the man began yelling at the officer: “You’re always writing

tickets! There are other crimes being committed! You all need to be working towards that, not coming after me!” The officer remarked that in the past, he would have taken the man’s aggression as a sign of disrespect toward his role as a police officer, and he would have called for additional cars. However, he noticed this response in himself as his own conflict behavior. If he acted on it, he realized, he would be escalating the situation. He told me that he realized that bringing more officers on to the scene just because he was offended would have put the man at a disadvantage and made him uneasy—which before Insight Policing training might well have been the point: to show the man that the officer was the one with the power. But how would it have ended? Recognizing his impulse as conflict behavior, though, the officer changed his mind. He decided, in his words, “to deal with this on a one on one level, and keep it to a moderate tone.” As the officer reported, “it ended up working out real well.”

11. BAB: How about an example where an officer deescalates the conflict behavior of a community member?

MP: In an example from Montclair—this comes from a school resource officer who works with kids in the high school—a student was angry and yelling and lashing out at the Vice Principal. The officer intervened. She didn’t grab the student or pull him away, instead, she noticed his conflict behavior, and said, “I can see you are really mad at the Vice Principal.” And he said, “Yes, I am.” He started going off about the Vice Principal, but the officer stayed curious about the conflict behavior as the Insight approach suggests. She refocused the student by asking, “What is it about what the Vice Principal is doing that is making you so angry?” And according to her, the student just stopped. She could see that the question caught him off guard. She had been genuinely curious about what he was experiencing, and he told her, “No one has asked me that question, not even once, they’re just asking me ‘what’s wrong?’ and telling me to calm down.” Clearly he was relieved to be wondered about in this way. The officer’s question calmed him down, and to answer it, he had to think. This allowed him and the school resource officer to have a conversation. It turned out that the student was upset not because he was in trouble or because he was caught out of class, but because the Vice Principal for various reasons had promised him previously that security would not touch him, and in this instance she had instructed them to. He was reacting because he felt that she had let him down and broken a promise. Being able to communicate that

deescalated an escalating situation. It put him, the school resource officer, security and the Vice Principal on the same communication plane. From there, they were able to address the issue that had gotten him in trouble in the first place, without it spiraling any further out of control.

In a more dangerous example, a Memphis officer detailed to serve a warrant on a man wanted in connection with murder told me about an experience using Insight Policing. While looking for the man, the officer reported that he and his partner came across the suspect's brothers. As the officer put it, the brothers "were real uncooperative with us." However, when the officer recognized the refusal to cooperate, not just as obstructionist, but as conflict behavior—where they were defending against some kind of a threat—he used his Insight Policing skills to ask about what made them not want to cooperate. The Insight question opened the brothers up. They were willing to tell the officer why they did not want to talk to him. What they said was that they had had bad experiences with police in the past, where the police arrested them without hearing them out, without taking the time to find out what was going on. They thought this situation would be the same. But by wondering about their concerns and by hearing what they were saying, the officer was able to defuse the brothers' concern that they were about to be arrested. And as a result, the brothers changed their minds about being aggressively uncooperative. As the officer put it to me, he was able to "talk to them and win their trust over so that they eventually turned their own brother in for the murders that he [was under investigation for]." The officer expressed amazement that the brothers were willing to bring him and his partner directly to their brother, and that when they did, the suspect willingly surrendered. There was no fight and no struggle. The officer stressed that this "kind of cooperation doesn't happen very often. Not unless you really listen to the story." His Insight policing skills had helped him do that.

12. BAB: Where can we find more examples of officers using Insight Policing skills?

MP: I have a lot of other stories published in an article I co-authored called "Insight Policing and the Role of the Civilian in Police Accountability" in Clearinghouse Review from the Shriver Center on Poverty Law.

13. BAB: Can you tell us about the Insight Policing training process at your university? Who can attend? Who should attend? How long is the training course? Where and when is it offered? Do you have any other details about the program?

MP: *Insight Policing can be requested by any department across the country just by contacting our office at insight@gmu.edu or through our website, insightconflictresolution.org. Insight Policing trainers train on-site to deliver a hands on, experiential course to officers through exercises and role-play. For this reason, the Insight Conflict Resolution Program likes to work with a department to tailor the training to their specific needs and contexts. An 8-hour basic course is available, as is a more intensive 16-24 hour course that includes certification. An instructor training course is currently in development.*

14. BAB: What are your goals and visions for the future of Insight Policing?

MP: *My ultimate goal is to make Insight Policing available to officers in departments nationwide so that officers have the communication skills they need to engage with community members in ways that uphold the integrity of their commitment to the public as they enforce the law and keep communities safe.*

15. BAB: Do you have any other reflections about Insight Policing you would like to share with our audience?

MP: *The whole nation is crying out to mend the conflict between the police and the public that has been building since the death of Michael Brown. We are all devastated by the violence coming from both directions and are looking for a way to stop it and to change the prevailing experience of police as executors of force. Insight Policing is a community-oriented, problem-solving, communication tactic that can help do that. It can reengage officers and civilians in procedurally just ways that build trust and bolster police legitimacy.*

