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Powerful Questions - Police Tactical Psychology Bulletin

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Powerful Questions

Powerful questions are those questions that lead the person asked to reflect. What this means is that by asking powerful questions, an officer can lead a witness or suspect to mine their own mind to seek answers. There are tactical ways in which this concept can be used. First of all however, I would like to explain how human consciousness is structured so that one can better understand how it works. By knowing how the mind works, the officer can work with it for more efficacious outcomes on street encounters.

Human consciousness is “intentional” which is not to mean the same as being “purposeful” or “willful,” but rather the mind is always thinking about something other than itself. There are three components to a person’s psychological experience. There is the subject (the thinker), the psychological act (thought, belief, desire, imagine, etc.) and the object or state-of-affairs that such psychological acts are about. In short, Subject→Act→Object is the structure of consciousness. With this structure, we can see how goal-directed our minds are toward accomplishing its acts. “I plan to stop the suspect” has this very elementary structure of consciousness. Likewise, “I wish I had done such-and-such” also has the: I (subject), regret (act), something (object or state-of-affairs) structure. So our minds are always relating to something other than themselves whether these things are real things or irreal things. Irreal things are those things in our mind that emerge from it like memories, imagined things, fantasies, etc. So when planning, a person is using a combination of memories, current information, and imagined possibilities in constructing what he or she might do, say or expect next.

Reflection is a particular act of consciousness in which a person can make him or herself the object of his or her own consciousness. For example, “I am disappointed in myself” creates the Subject→Act→Object structure, but the subject and object possess the same identity; Me/Myself/I. The point is that when I am reflecting on myself, I am no longer planning to do something to someone else. This is where the tactical use of powerful questions can be useful.

When dealing with an emotionally charged or volatile situation, your suspects’ and victims’ thoughts are racing. They consider this, worry about that, anticipate events, and so forth. Figuring out that the suspect wants something to happen, is protecting something, or fears something can help the officer anticipate problems but also lead the persons toward solutions. How one might know he or she is asking powerful questions can be determined by the thoughtful consideration the suspect or witness gives to answering. Let’s look at some examples of powerful questions that officers can put in their interpersonal communications toolkit.

Sometimes the most powerful questions sound the dumbest:

- What do you want (to happen)?
- What about that is important to you?
- What will you do and when will you do it?
- Who do you need to be?
- What is the worst thing about it for you?
- Is what you are planning the best for you?
- What do you think that means?
- If you could do it over what would you do differently?

There are many powerful questions that are at an officer’s disposal, but notice that these questions are not complex or close-ended. Simple and direct questions are typically the most powerful, particularly if they make the person think about his or herself and the situation.

An officer that wants a suspect or witness to “spill his/her guts” must ask questions that will tap into the emotion of the situation. On the other hand, an officer
can lead a potentially volatile suspect to “think twice” or reconsider by avoiding questions that make him or her emotionally engage with his or her fears. Most experienced officers can read whether the suspect is anxious-avoidant (wanting to flee) or anxious-aggressive (planning to fight.) There is really not the space here to go into reading body language and non-verbal cues. However, anxious or keyed-up behavior can be ambiguous or misleading. So when you detect that you are dealing with an agitated or anxious subject, ask a powerful question that you think might get him or her to let you know what’s going on. If you can sense the particular psychological act (anger, fear, want, etc.) you can form the question to that act. For example, “What or who are you so angry at?” You might follow up with, “How is your anger or frustration helping you right now?” Further, you might ask, “What would be the one thing that would make things better?” You just might get the suspect, victim or witness to tell you “where their goat’s hitched.”

A key interrogative word to avoid using is “why” because it can invite excuses or elaborate explanations. We have all been on calls when a suspect or complainant tells his or her story in a circle. Sometimes it is because they believe they are not being heard and other times it is because they are anxious and burning off anxious energy through rambling on. If you have a rambler that will not allow you to get the essential information you need, you can take time to ask some powerful questions and shut them down. You aren’t stifling them, but simply directing their storytelling process.

The suspect that starts rambling can be trying to buy time while he or she plans a means of escape. On the other hand, like propaganda, the suspect may think that re-asserting the same things over and over make them more believable with every repetition. When you hear this going on, stop and take control of their story-telling process. Ask some powerful questions like, “What is the most important thing you want me to know?” Then you can follow up with “…and then what?” You can also ask, “What are you so excited/upset about?” Of course, you can get him or her to be self-aware with, “Do you think how you are acting is in your best interest?”

In an active situation where essential information must be gathered first, the officer can commit to the interviewee that he or she will listen to the person’s whole story once certain information is provided. Remember, asking permission in uniform implies that the person go along, in most instances. So the officer can say, “I need to get some basic information before we talk further. Would it be okay if we get that out of the way first and then you can tell me everything you want to tell me?” When a suspect agrees to that, you can hold him or her to it because it psychosocially acts as a verbal contract. Once the essential information is taken, the officer can transition to asking powerful questions and making notes on the responses. The person will feel listened to and may divulge more than he or she originally intended.

These powerful question tactics can be helpful, even when you have someone in custody. The most powerful questions can elicit important information but remain general enough that it isn’t likely to constitute an interrogation.

I invite you to play with these powerful questions and concepts in the field. Take the time to make notes on what works and what doesn’t. Do Internet searches for “powerful questions” for new ideas and questions to use. I would like feedback on what you think and experience about them.

Send comments/question to:
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