



# California Community Colleges

In partnership with POST

The following is a  
summary of the  
CCCCO and POST  
Webinar  
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## Panelists

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## Moderator

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# Language Shapes Experiences

Language shapes not only what officers do, but also the experiences that individuals, community members have with officers, and the relationships between entire police agencies and the communities they serve.

There are at least three critical areas of communication: 1) how police academies and training officers communicate with officers; 2) how officers communicate with community members during police encounters; and 3) how agencies communicate with the media and the public.

## Language in Training

The way that instructors, including field training officers, communicate with officers in academy training, field training, and throughout their careers affects how officers view their role, the operational environment, and encounters with community members. Notable examples include:

- **Catastrophizing:** Emphasizing officer safety is an important part of training; officers work in what can be a high-risk environment. However, exaggerating the risks—for example, by focusing on severity and not discussing probability—and encouraging hyper-vigilance can lead officers to develop a counterproductive “us versus them” mentality. An emphasis on worst case scenarios in training can lead officers in the field to engage in “catastrophizing,” preemptively anticipating unlikely negative events.
- **Adversarialism:** When officers are taught that the world is out to get them and that surviving a shift requires hyper-vigilance and “command presence,” it can contribute to an aggressive approach to interpersonal interactions that alienates community members.
- **Tone and style:** People mirror the behavior that they see demonstrated from their supervisors and senior peers. The tone and style that instructors adopt is accepted by recruits as the way things are done. When academy instructors or field training officers treat officers poorly—yelling needlessly or demeaning them—officers are more likely to replicate those behaviors in their interactions with community members.

To better inform training, and to better prepare officers for the difficult job of policing a highly diverse society, instructors must teach officers the foundational skills that they will need to become proficient on the street. Being a proficient officer means knowing how to identify and repair interactions that are starting to go poorly, recognizing that what is routine for officers (e.g., responding to a delayed burglary call) can be frightening for community members, knowing when it is professional appropriate to take risks, and being able to gain perspective during encounters with community members by asking the right questions (e.g., “What can I do to help you feel safe?”) instead of assuming that the answer is already known.



## Language in Encounters

The way that officers communicate with community members—both verbally and non-verbally—during field encounters not only affects the outcome of the encounter; it also shapes how that individual views the officer and how the entire community views the police agency. Some interactions, including those with individuals who have prior offenses or encounters with the police, individuals with mental illness, or individuals suffering from a personal crisis, are particularly challenging.

Officers should ensure that they are communicating in a situationally-appropriate way. Typified behaviors—what an officer *generally* expects and how an officer *generally* behaves—may not meet the needs of a specific encounter. Officers should be prepared to ask questions that allow them to better understand what the individuals they interact with are thinking and feeling.

The best officers make sure that they are modeling the dimensions of procedural justice. Officers should:

- **Ensure that community members feel *heard*.** No one likes being disempowered. Whenever possible, officers should take steps to ensure that community members have an opportunity to express themselves, including their opinions about specific police actions.
- **Ensure that community members feel that officers are *fair and equitable*.** As authority figures, officers must take care to treat people fairly. That *does not* mean treating everyone the same; people differ, and officers have a professional obligation to recognize those differences and respond to them. For example, a young black man may have concerns about a police encounter that an older white woman would not; officers need to take such factors into account.

- **Ensure that community members feel the officers' decisions and actions are *transparent*.** Policing, as an industry, has not traditionally taught officers to explain the reasons for their actions or decisions to the community members with whom they are interacting. Those explanations—from why an officer pulled over a motorist to why an officer is conducting certain investigative actions—can go a long way toward ensuring that community members are left with a positive impression of the interaction.
- **Ensure that community members feel that officers are making decisions for the *right reasons*.** Explaining the reasons for officer decision-making is not just about transparency, it is also about showing community members that officers are acting properly and in the public interest. Explaining, for example, that issuing a speeding ticket is part of a traffic safety initiative on a dangerous strip of road can leave a better impression than saying nothing.

## Language in Institutional Communications

The way that agencies communicate with communities can strongly affect how the public, as a whole, views the agency, its officers, and policing more generally. Relevant considerations include:

- Is the agency viewed as an “occupying force” or as part of the community?
- What does the agency prioritize and value? Does the agency publicly announce and emphasize the success of interactions and negotiations or the number of arrests?
- What information does the agency include in issuing crime alerts? If the only available information is so non-specific as to be unhelpful—for example, a Hispanic male in a jurisdiction where Hispanic males make up a large percentage of the population—the agency might consider whether it makes sense to broadcast without additional information about clothing, hair, etc.

## Where can I learn more?

### Resources

1. **National Initiative for Building Community Trust & Justice, *Procedural Justice*** (<https://bit.ly/3gKzBDD>)
2. **Justice Collaboratory, *Scholarly Work*** (<https://bit.ly/3xxYWHW>)
3. **Sue Rahr, John Diaz, and Joe Hawe, *The Four Pillars of Justice Based Policing: Listen and Explain with Equity and Dignity*** (<https://bit.ly/2SAAUxb>)
4. **Tracey L. Meares and Peter Neyroud, *Rightful Policing*** (<https://bit.ly/3zLxUyP>)
5. **United States Department of Justice, Community Oriented Policing Services, *Procedural Justice*** (<https://cops.usdoj.gov/proceduraljustice>)

## California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office and California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training Virtual Forums

The California Community Colleges Chancellor's Office (Chancellor's Office) has partnered with the California Commission on Peace Officer Standards and Training (POST) on a series of virtual forums to share best practices and the review of policies and practices that govern police academy instruction.

The focus of these forums is intended to contribute to a police culture reform agenda. As providers of nearly half of the state's police academies, the Community College system is in a unique position to influence and drive statewide instructional practices that will shape the standards by which officers conduct themselves while on duty.

This initiative is a result of the Chancellor's [Call to Action](#) in June 2020, in response to the protest and social unrest stemming from George Floyd's death. In it, the Chancellor's Office called on community colleges to address structural racism and injustice to ensure that our communities and students have access to equal educational opportunities. The Call to Action highlights the focal point of diversity, equity and inclusion at the core of the Vision for Success.