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Detecting deception: Behavior observation and casual conversation

By Carl Maccario

Detecting deception during a consensual casual conversation can be a challenging job. This is especially true if you have only limited time to assess what an individual says and how he or she behaves. Interviewing strategies and certain cues can increase your chance of determining who may be hiding something, who may be trying to deceive you, and who's telling the truth even during brief encounters.

Pay close attention to nonverbal cues as well as verbal indicators!

Many police officers and security officials receive an inordinate amount of training in officer safety and firearms training, but over 90% of their daily work routine includes talking to people, interviewing witnesses and suspects, and persons of interest. This is where they receive the least amount of training. Psychology professionals, researchers, and experts have identified certain key cues, both verbal and nonverbal, that can increase your chances of successfully assessing who may be trying to deceive you, hide information and be in what I call "the fear of discovery" state, which is when the person is concealing something of possible hostile (terrorism) or criminal intent.

Many jurisdictions now promote the "see something, say something" watch-type programs. Yet, there must be a deeper explanation that tells people what to look for and what to say, so they may articulate to the authorities what they see as potentially suspicious.

General training programs focus on detecting suspicious persons, but they fall short when it comes to what to do next. You need to know how to engage the suspicious activity to confirm or dispel your initial observations, absent an immediate threat. Successfully identifying deception when engaging an individual(s) enables you to assess whether you have a potential threat present or not. To do this, you need to be aware of both verbal and nonverbal indicators that may be present.

Initial observation

No one knows your environment better than you. Where you live, where you work, your patrol route, your work area, and so on are the places you know best. You know what the day-to-day norm is for that area, therefore deviations from that known environment should draw your initial attention and scrutiny. For example, individuals that appear to be more interested in watching police movement, security, or work routines than they are about conducting their own business may be involved in surveillance type activities. There are also individuals who quickly leave an area when they see police or security, as well as individuals who appear to be together but act like they don't know each other, who deserve greater attention.

When you engage these individuals, it must be a casual, non-custodial encounter. You don't want to infuse emotions that were not present initially and may cloud your ability to get an accurate read on this person or persons. Building rapport and putting them at ease, under the guise that this is a routine security check, lessens their suspicion that you may be on to them and will encourage them to talk. It may also give them the false sense that you saw and know nothing in particular and that the encounter is indeed routine.

Initial engagement

It is extremely important that when you engage an individual that you 1) let them answer, 2) watch their reactions, and 3) listen.

In other words, pay attention because if you are cognizant of changes in demeanor when asking certain questions, it will actually point you to the area where you need to ask more questions. For example, if there is someone hanging around for long periods of time without any apparent motivation to come and go or transit an area, you may say, "How are you today? Are you waiting for someone? How can I help?" Now imagine the person becomes more anxious, starts excessively fidgeting and says, "Ah...no...why?" when you asked those questions, did their demeanor change? What did you say or do that precipitated the change in demeanor? "Where are you going today? Where are you coming from? What are you going to do when you are here? How will you get home?" are good follow-up questions. Based on your first questions, the person showed uneasiness, nervousness and seemed ill at ease. Maybe they are lost and won't admit it because they are embarrassed. However, you can't assume anything. You need to evaluate the quantity and quality of their responses. Do their answers make sense? Does their behavior continue to escalate in response to routine questions?