

Non-Confrontational Interrogation Techniques for the Millennial Generation

By Michael Reddington, CFI and John J Guzman, CFI

For generations, confrontational interrogation techniques have been standard operating procedure within the law enforcement community. These techniques can often involve asserting authority, making direct accusations, voicing perceived threats and presenting reminders of punishment. In some situations, this may be the appropriate course of action. The question here becomes: is this the right technique for younger generation of offenders? School resource officers and school administrators are most effective when they have multiple tools in their toolbox and choose the right tool for the right job.

Consider briefly who taught most of us to lie; our parent. Growing up involves pushing boundaries and making mistakes. Consider the following scenario. You and your brother are playing catch when an errant throw breaks a window. Your parents confront you and ask, "Who broke the window?" Being honest and not wanting to disappoint your parents, you immediately admit your guilt and they respond by grounding you. From this experience you learn that even though you told the truth, you were punished. Chances are, the next time you were put in a situation where you had to decide to whether or not to be honest, you thought back to the broken window and decided to lie to avoid being punished.

It is important to remember that students are always being told what to do and they seldom enjoy it. Parents tell them where to be, how to dress, and what they can and can't do. Teachers give students assignments, coaches direct their activity and authority figures set rules and enforce violations. Students who find themselves in frequent trouble have even greater issues with these authority figures because adults are constantly reminding them that they are not good enough, not smart enough not motivated enough and they will not amount to anything.

Confrontational interrogation techniques create a parent-child relationship when the last thing the student wants is another parent. The interviewer is seen as authoritarian and demanding compliance. Students are often conditioned to resist this approach. When interviewers experience resistance they often will push harder in an attempt to overcome it, which creates stronger resistance. Thus begins a vicious cycle. Admissions gained by this approach can be limited and result in a fractured relationship.

The current generation of students creates even greater difficulties for officers and administrators. Today's youth are far more narcissistic than prior generations; they receive trophies just for playing and expect instant gratification. These students are more likely to get what they want at home and are dependant on technology. They have grown up watching the media critique law enforcement and the Internet provides them with a wealth of information, although it is not always accurate. These factors can create a sense of entitlement and a perception in a student's mind that the world is about them, they are above punishment and that law enforcement is not trustworthy. Confrontational interrogation techniques add fuel to this fire by reinforcing stereotypes and forcing students to deny their activities to protect themselves and avoid punishment.

The non-confrontational WZ Method of Interview and Interrogation avoids many of the obstacles that the confrontational techniques create. The WZ Method starts by establishing a behavioral norm and developing rapport before explaining to the student how the officer does his job, what the officer investigates and how the officer conducts investigations. Now that the student is concerned that the truth is known, the interviewer rationalizes to reduce the student's resistance, creates a sense of urgency and tests to make sure the student is ready to tell the truth. Once the interviewer is confident that the student in front of him/her is involved in the investigation and ready to talk the officer will use a

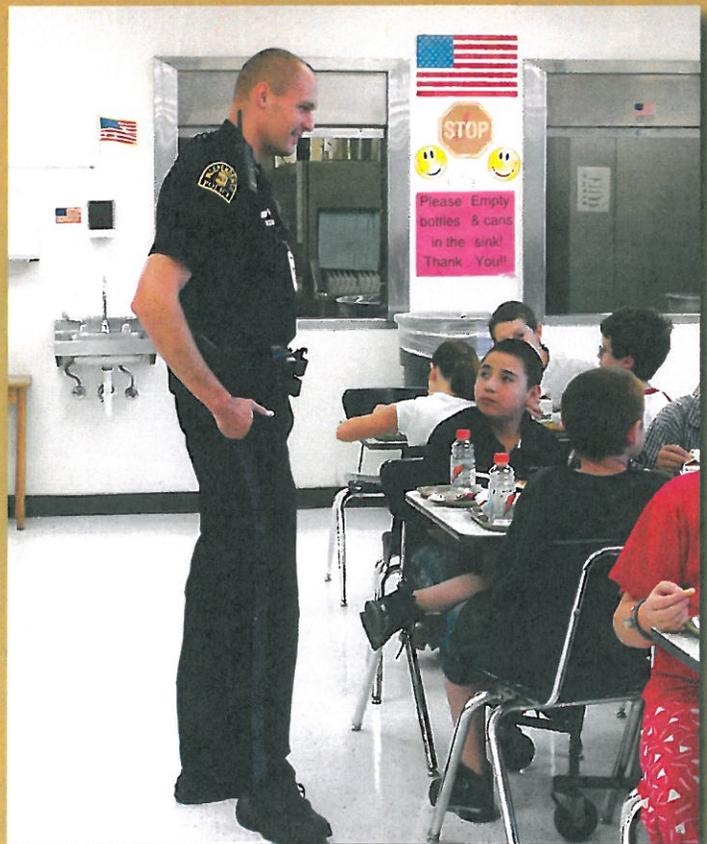
soft accusation to gain the first admission and begin developing a complete confession.

This technique creates an adult-adult relationship between the officer and the student. The student feels better about the situation because they are being spoken to with respect. The officer plays into the student's narcissism by building rapport and allowing the student to talk about themselves. When the officer explains what his/her role is, what the officer investigates and how the officer conducts the investigations the student convinces himself/herself that he/she is caught.

This is powerful for two reasons. First, the officer does not accuse the student, which in turn, does not create an opportunity for the student to respond with a denial. Second, the student convinces himself/herself that he/she is caught. This is much more powerful because it is an internal realization and not an external assertion.

When the officer rationalizes with the student, it allows the student the opportunity to save face, feel like they are not alone and transfer blame for their actions. The soft accusation is not a direct accusation and it allows the student to admit without feeling threatened. Finally, when the student makes this first admission it is not a result of a fractured relationship, in fact it is the result of a developed relationship. This collaboration creates a window for the officer to develop the details of the incident under investigation, other unknown incidents and other students or adults involved in similar activity.

Many officers might question the effectiveness of a non-confrontational interrogation technique with gang members, street smart students, and students with a criminal record. Non-confrontational interrogation techniques are very effective with these students. Most students who fit into these categories have extensive experience with authority figures. These students feel that authority figures don't respect them, don't care about them and can't identify with them. These students are also accustomed to being directly accused and being able



to deny their actions early and often. Non-confrontational techniques, specifically the WZ Method, circumvent these obstacles. When an interviewer delivers the WZ method they show respect, demonstrate empathy and avoid direct accusations. This technique removes the experienced criminal from their comfort zone and creates advantages for the officer.

As an example of the effectiveness of the non-confrontational technique, the author (John Guzman, CFI) was investigating three students who were suspected of being truants. These subjects were observed in a bus stop near a public high school during school hours. When the students were called over to the marked squad car for a field interview the author observed a backpack lying on the ground. When asked whom the book bag belonged to, all three students denied ownership.

When the book bag was opened to ascertain whom it belonged to, a loaded .22 caliber semi-automatic pistol was recovered. The backpack also contained schoolbooks, homework assignments and test papers that had the name of one of the three students written on them.

Instead of directly confronting the 16-year old student, the non-confrontational technique was utilized. The student stated that the gun belonged to his mother and that he took the gun to school because other students were intimidating and harassing him. The student also admitted membership in a local gang.

In addition to the generational differences that create challenges for confrontational methods it is important to examine the types of offenses that students are involved in. Students can be involved in drugs, violence, bullying, intimidation, theft, cheating and other pattern crimes. Confrontational methods can be successful for obtaining one admission. Non-confrontational techniques are much more effective

in gaining multiple admissions. A direct accusation reveals to the student exactly what the officer knows or suspects.

The WZ Method, followed by a soft accusation conceals exactly what the officer knows or suspects and causes the student to choose a crime to admit to. This can cause the student to admit to crimes the officer was not previously aware of. The constructive relationship developed during the interrogation allows the officer to build off the first admission to develop complete confessions.

No magic technique exists to elicit the truth from every student, every time. Officers should educate themselves in multiple techniques to prepare themselves for the multitude of challenges students can present. However non-confrontational techniques limit exposure to media and legal scrutiny, provide officers with the best opportunity to conduct productive and collaborative interrogations, and can establish relationships with the current generations of students as opposed to destroying them.

About the authors:

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