



Don't Lose the Agreeable People!

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Psychological research has suggested that about 80% of the U.S. population is made up of agreeable people.¹ Agreeable people are generally honest, seek to get along with others, are open to suggestions, and are compliant to most rules and authority. They can be young or old, rich or poor, male or female, and of any race or ethnicity. These are the people who pay their taxes, show up to work on time, care for their families, and drive within 5 miles-per-hour of the speed limit on most occasions. These are the “sheep” in society that Lieutenant Colonel Dave Grossman discusses in the sheep-sheepdog-wolf analogy in his books and speeches.²

So if they are so agreeable and compliant, why do we need to discuss how to deal with them? The reason is that these people are only agreeable until they are personally offended or they question the legitimacy of your authority.

Too often today, some individuals in public safety are turning these folks against us. The agreeable people have always made up the foundation of the public support for law enforcement. These are the folks that vote in support of police, fire district, or EMS tax levy increases. But too often our appearance, words, and actions are turning these folks off and causing them to question our legitimacy. That is a very scary prospect for the survival of democracy. For democracies to survive, the government must maintain the support of a significant majority of the population. **By mishandling the agreeable people, we are chipping away at the support for and the legitimacy of the police.**

Ethical Appeal

Ancient Greek Philosopher Aristotle laid the foundational principles for persuasion that are supported by science today. The art of persuasion deals with getting someone to do something through reasoning or discussion. Aristotle suggested there are three forms of persuasion: ethical appeals (ethos), logical appeals (logos), and emotional appeals (pathos).³ **When dealing with agreeable people, the ethical appeal is usually all that is needed—if we will take the time to utilize it.**

Ethical appeal refers to the establishment of your authority, credibility, and legitimacy. In other words, do your appearance, speech, and actions convey professionalism and

legitimacy? If they do, then the agreeable people will usually comply without the need for much more prompting. If you don't convey professionalism and legitimacy, then the agreeable people will be less likely to willingly comply, or they will begrudgingly comply, file a citizen complaint later, and begin to question the legitimacy of all police.

An easy illustration is that agreeable people willingly pull over for a marked patrol car when its emergency lights are activated, because it is the right and legitimate thing to do. They don't try to run away or resentfully pull over only because they do not want to go to jail. Agreeable people think "What did I do?" rather than "What does this cop want?" It is the legitimacy of the marked patrol car and the role of the police in society that create the ethical appeal for agreeable people. However, if an atypical car, such as a gold Honda Accord, without a government plate or any markings, attempts to pull them over using a blue light, the agreeable person will be hesitant to stop and may drive to a police station or well-lit populated public area before stopping. Why? The car's appearance does not convey the authority or legitimacy of the police. This is what I am talking about with the ethical appeal.

Do You Look Professional and Legitimate?

Take a look at yourself at work. What do you look like? Are you dressed in a proper police uniform, the way American police officers have dressed for almost a century? Or, do you look like a big walking army backpack? Are you dressed like you just got the call from home, wearing a raid vest over jeans and a t-shirt? Your appearance is important in setting the stage for your authority and legitimacy. Agreeable people shouldn't have to expend mental energy trying to figure out if you really are a police officer and if you really have the legitimacy to expect their compliance. You should be dressed in a manner that conveys the professionalism and authority of your position whenever possible.

Think back to when you were first entering your career. How did you dress for your job interview and your oral review board? Did you wear military fatigues or a t-shirt and jeans? I'm betting that you wore professional business attire in conservative colors and tailoring. Why? Because you wanted to make a good impression. Well, what has changed? Don't we want to make a good impression on the public, especially if we want to gain their compliance and respect with the least amount of hassle? Part of the ethical appeal means looking professional.

If you still doubt the power of the uniform to gain compliance from agreeable people, consider the results of two research studies that proved it. In the first study, hidden researchers observed drivers blowing through a stop sign or making rolling stops at an intersection with a pedestrian college student waiting to cross. They then replaced the college student with an actor dressed as a police officer (minus the gun) standing on the corner. Numerous drivers blew or rolled through the stop sign when the student was standing on the curb. When the uniformed police officer was present, however, every single driver came to a full and complete stop, even though the officer was on foot and didn't have a car to pursue them.⁴

The second experiment involved using an actor to walk up to pedestrians on a busy city street and order them to pick up a piece of trash and put it in a nearby trash receptacle. The actor completed the experiment several times dressed differently each time, while researchers watched from a

hidden location and recorded people's reactions to the actor's command. The actor alternately wore casual street clothes, a package delivery uniform, and a standard police uniform (minus the gun). Far less than half of people obeyed the actor's command to pick up the trash when he was dressed in street clothes, but more than three-quarters of the people complied with the command when the actor was dressed in the police uniform.⁵ Since it wasn't even their trash, these surely were agreeable people!

Do You Sound Legitimate?

You also establish your ethical appeal – your professional legitimacy – through your speech. Remember that agreeable people can be found everywhere, even in the most crime-ridden, graffiti covered neighborhood or housing project. They just happen to be poor and can't afford to live in a better neighborhood, or their family settled there before the neighborhood declined into its present condition. They don't deserve or appreciate being called bro, cuz, homeboy, or any other absurd term that sometimes comes out of the mouth of a police officer (who was often times raised in the suburbs) when trying to assert their legitimacy through "street language". **You lose your ethos when you use profanity or other unprofessional "street language," causing the otherwise agreeable person to begin to question your legitimacy, and possibly the legitimacy of all law enforcement officers.**

Once as chief, I had a conversation about police legitimacy with a group of African-American ministers. They conveyed that legitimacy, in their eyes, meant that they had the same chance as a white person of talking a police officer out of a ticket. I believe this speaks to a basic desire to be approached, addressed and spoken to in a similar manner regardless of race. Couldn't we reasonable extend this to similar treatment regardless of perceived income and education level?

Handling the Agreeable Person

So handle the agreeable person well, and keep them on the side of law and order, by starting off the interaction by looking sharp and watching your nonverbal cues. Make eye contact occasionally and smile. Begin the interaction with a "meet & greet." Briefly introduce yourself and explain your reason for being there. "Hello, I'm Harry Dolan with the Raleigh Police Department. Look, the reason I'm here is we got a call about someone crying in this apartment. Can I come in for a minute to talk with you about that?" Or, on a traffic stop, you could say, "Good evening sir, I'm Harry Dolan with the Raleigh Police Department. The reason I stopped you this evening is I'm concerned about your unsafe speed. Is everything okay? Is there an emergency?"

When they give an excuse, empathize with it to keep their support, even if you disagree with their logic. If the woman in the apartment responds, "That was me, but everything is okay, really." You can respond back with, "I hear that ma'am, however could I come in for just a minute to talk to you about it to convince myself everything is okay." If the speeder says, "I'm sorry officer, I am late for work," you could respond with, "Oh I've been there before, I know the feeling. Look, where do you normally keep your license and vehicle registration? I'll try to hurry this along for

you so we can get you back on your way.” Often, for the agreeable person, this is all you need to say to gain their compliance.

When deciding on the appropriate enforcement action, use your discretion and be fair in order to keep these folks on our side. For example, if the car you stopped has bald tires, but the driver was polite, is wearing his seatbelt, and his kids are in child car seats, maybe the best course of action is to give him a warning this time. Say something like, “Look, sir, I’m really concerned about the safety of your kids with driving on such bald tires. When do you get paid next? I’ll cut you a break here and give you a warning if you’ll promise me you’ll get some new tires after you get paid. I patrol this area a lot, so if I see you later and you don’t have better tires in a couple of weeks I’ll have no choice but to give you a citation. But I think your money would be better spent on a better set of tires than on a ticket.” This type of language and reasoning is professional and boosts your legitimacy with the agreeable person.

Conclusion

We cover all of this in our [Surviving Verbal Conflict®](#) course that we at Dolan Consulting Group offer. Remember that the majority of the folks out there are agreeable persons. We need their support to maintain our public legitimacy and a democracy. We need their cooperation when it comes to tips for helping solve crimes. We need them to be willing to step up and testify on our behalf when we are wrongly accused. We need them to come to our defense at the local coffee shop, barbershop, factory break room, or family picnic when the conversation starts bashing the police. We need their support when asking for tax increases to fund raises, new stations, or more officers. Luckily, their support is easy to get as long as we use our ethical appeal. Look sharp, speak respectfully and professionally, and treat them fairly in your use of discretion.

References

¹ Matthews, G., Deary, I. J., & Whiteman, M. C. (2003). *Personality Traits*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.

² Grossman, D. (2009). *On Killing: The Psychological Cost of Learning to Kill in War and Society*. New York, Back Bay Books.

³ Aristotle (1984). *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation*. London: Oxford University Press.

⁴ Sigelman, C. K., & Sigelman, L. (1976). Authority and conformity: violation of a traffic regulation. *Journal of Social Psychology, 100(1)*, 35-43.

⁵ Bickman, L. (1974). The social power of a uniform. *Journal of Applied Social Psychology, 4(1)*, 47-61.