

Perspectives

Poetry In Motion

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Greg Warner

As I instruct dispatchers in the area of leadership and watch them carry out their daily activities, I see a true characterization of the term “poetry in motion”. The casual bystander will quickly realize the intricate nature of the business: multiple monitors, keyboards, mice, programs, radio channels, etc., all used in concert to gather and disseminate critical information.

They would also notice that dispatchers are a conscientious group, wanting nothing more than to do the right thing the best way possible. One day while walking through the center, I noticed a dispatcher working on primary, standing at her elevated console and staring intently at the wall of monitors. While passing, I noted nothing out of the ordinary: monitors with red and green lists of officers, electronic maps, phone system, etc. Wanting to understand her fixation, I asked what she was looking at. Her reply, without hesitation or changing her gaze, was “I am watching my officers.” Wow! “Her” officers. Before her shift would end that day, at least one of those officers would speak harshly to her, being caught up in the frustrations of their own day. Yet they were “hers” to watch over and to protect.

A Dynamic Environment

Few people will ever understand the fascinating and subtle qualities that accompany this profession and its people. Emergency dispatching is a dynamic environment where both processes and events are in a constant state of flux. This condition requires that dispatchers have not only technical skills, but an ability to be “aware”... that is, to consciously know what is occurring in the center while simultaneously performing their individual duties. Being sensitive to the environment ensures that the dispatcher has a complete and up-to-date understanding of every situation. The practice of monitoring the room for relevant conversations is even more fascinating when considering that the dispatcher is only picking up bits of information from one-sided conversations. There are times when dispatchers transition into reflective listening by repeating back to the caller what is being said, which helps determine content, but this skill tends to be the exception, not the rule.

Zero Reference

Although dispatcher awareness is a uniquely individual event, there appear to be elements that have direct association to team familiarity. As dispatchers build close professional bonds, they begin to read one another. The dispatcher develops both a conscious and subconscious ability to decode the distinctive characteristics and qualities of fellow team members. They develop a proficiency in reading individual phrases, word structure, sentences, tone, voice inflection and, when possible, body language. This relational connection becomes a zero reference for the dispatchers, enabling them to sense variability in each other. In this case, the term “zero reference” is referring to the natural equilibrium or what is considered normalcy in the team. As change is perceived in the zero reference or norm, there is a heightened sense of awareness, improving the likelihood of detecting information during critical incidents. Increased awareness is also influenced when dispatchers hear certain words or comments such as “clear the air” or verbal descriptions of weapons. Emergency dispatching is a content rich environment, placing demands on a full spectrum of cognitive faculties. As dispatchers mature, there seems to be a honing affect that sharpens their ability to filter out important information from a room filled with disconnected conversations.

The Need to Adapt

The distinctive nature of call taking compounds the complexity of awareness by imposing on the dispatcher the need to adapt for each transaction. Every call brings with it a unique set of challenges which influences the call takers' approach for providing solutions. Add in the urgent nature of the industry and the speed at which information becomes obsolete and we start to get a feel for how complicated life can become in the center.

Clearly, the extent to which dispatchers attain this skill is based on several internal and external influences. The size and layout of the center can have a profound effect—one man operations will differ from centers where telecommunicators are separated from radio dispatchers or the PSAP that does it all in the same room. Additionally, jurisdictional population, call volume, call type and whether the center dispatches for fire, police or paramedics all play a role. The art of being aware is truly a case where “necessity is the mother of invention.” Nevertheless, there is one dynamic, no matter the condition, which can increase or decrease the intensity of awareness—harmony. Because awareness is highly influenced by being in sync amid fellow dispatchers, a negative environment can deter the dispatcher's ability to read their surroundings. Conversely, a positive atmosphere—at least on a professional level—will strengthen the dispatchers' ability to interpret center dynamics, enhancing their abilities to recognize key information.

Dispatcher Awareness

Once a dispatcher becomes aware, no matter how learned, it has an impact on every aspect of life. Lost are the days when parents taught their children not to eavesdrop. Dispatchers that become aware don't appear to be able to switch it on and off. In social gatherings they will be fully engaged in conversation while scanning the room for items of interest. One dispatcher expressed feelings of guilt while at dinner with his wife; he described having a conversation with her but focusing the vast majority his attention on other conversations in the room.

The phenomenon of dispatcher awareness extends beyond center walls and is limited only to the degree which technology will allow the human senses to extend. Oftentimes dispatchers will determine the urgency of response based on what is heard in the caller's voice or in the background, not by the words used. Out of sheer necessity, dispatchers become master linguists, acquiring the innate ability to question and interpret for understanding. They do this without the advantage of body language, where the vast majority of information is conveyed on a time scale measured in seconds. Dispatchers sort through mixed messages, emotions, intentions, deception and background noise. They then produce highly detailed information using the fewest words possible. To acquire information, dispatchers will call on skills like word-smithing, voice tone and tempo to generate a coherent psychological understanding. It is when these aptitudes are engaged that team members get an involuntary glimpse into the conversation, its urgency and content.

One night, the center received a 9-1-1 hang up and, as defined in policy, the dispatcher called the number back to ensure that all was well. Right on cue, just like a million times before, the calling party declared a misdial. Nonetheless, the dispatcher just didn't feel right so he dispatched an officer, explaining that he had nothing more than a feeling. The officer agreed to investigate based on the assumption. Later, it was discovered that the caller's husband was at the residence but had a no-contact-order. He was pulling away from the curb with an alcohol level above the legal limit.

It should also be pointed out that awareness and familiarity are also vital to perform the duties of radio dispatching. It is not unusual to have a guest listen to radio traffic and never really understand a word that is being said. For the non-dispatcher it may come as a surprise to know that often the dispatcher does not understand every word being said either. In many cases dispatchers will never meet a first responder face-to-face but they will become very familiar with them by voice, rhythms, tone, verbal habits, etc. They become so familiar with individuals in the field that the partially jumbled sentence can still convey meaning. To the dispatcher, a sequence of sounds and tempo can convey meaning such as: officer is on scene, checked out, clear, changing locations, or enroute with one, etc. As with other positions in the center, this ability is learned over time through repetition and regular interactions. However, the radio operators have an additional skill that aids them in deciphering what is being communicated in the field ... predictability. Often the sequence of audio exchanges is identical, giving the dispatcher the advantage of anticipating what is coming next. Additionally, being attentive to what the responder is doing allows the dispatcher to think ahead about what the responder is likely to do next.

Reliance on Dispatcher Capabilities

In spite of all this, I hear some dispatchers express feelings of isolation. Dispatchers somehow come to believe they are under-recognized and insignificant, but in this perception they error. Considering the enormity of the public safety system(s), its personnel, equipment and training, it is interesting to note how much reliance is placed on dispatcher capabilities. Most would agree that there is something validating, authentic and noble about performing a service that rarely attracts recognition. The act of fulfilling a responsibility for altruistic reasons is not a sign of failure but a testament to what dispatchers are made of.

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Greg Warner is the dispatch manager for the Ada County Sheriff's Office in Boise, ID. Greg holds a Master of Business Administration and has specialized in bringing operations and cultural change to private and public sector enterprises for two decades. He can be reached via e-mail at gwarner@adaweb.net