

The Next Level of Tactical Awareness—Getting Left of Bang

Written by Patrick Van Horne

The ability for law enforcement officers to detect and prevent criminal acts is a trait that the public expects and depends on. However, this isn't always easy and rarely is it clear. Police officers often rely on what we would call a "hunch" or a "gut instinct" as the reason for an arrest or the use of deadly force, even though these are the types of encounters that bring public scrutiny to law enforcement agencies. Without the ability of an officer to clearly explain the situation that led to their actions, the public is left to make its own assumptions about police intentions and practices. Being able to articulate the legal and scientific reasoning behind the identification of suspicious people is imperative to good policing and it requires that our nation's law enforcement officers employ a higher level of tactical awareness while on the job. This directly relates to law enforcement's efforts to thwart acts of terrorism and to get left of bang.

If you were to picture a timeline, "bang" is time-zero and is in the middle of the line. Bang is whatever event you are trying to prevent from occurring. It is the drug deal, the shooting, or the bombing. It is the criminal's or the terrorist's goal. When you are right of bang, the act has already happened and you are now reacting to the criminal. Being right of bang means the criminal has the initiative because you missed all of the warning signs. However, when you are left of bang you are able to identify some of the pre-event indicators that exist before a crime is committed and have done so with enough time to be proactive. Getting left of bang is about being able to intervene earlier on the attack timeline and prevent criminal acts from occurring. Left of bang is not just a point on an abstract timeline, but a state of mind that requires we re-examine situational awareness.

Designed to Address Terrorism: Applicable to Daily Police Work

Evolving beyond generic situational awareness and attaining enhanced or informed awareness requires two

skills: knowing what to look for and knowing how to look for those cues. At the Illinois Tactical Officer's Association Annual Training Conference this November, I will be presenting about how the concepts in behavioral analysis created in the Marine Corps' Combat Hunter Program can help our nation's police officers proactively recognize threats and get left of bang. Learning to read the uncontrollable and universal elements of nonverbal behaviors provides police departments with two essential capabilities. For less experienced officers still learning their trade, these behavioral assessments and the observation process that I will present on helps

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to teach what they should be looking for and how to look for it. The second capability relates more to veteran officers

who have already learned how to identify criminals and anomalous behavior through years of immersive experience on the streets. The principles of a behavioral analysis training program provide officers with a vocabulary to explain, articulate and justify what attracted their attention to a certain person and why those observations were significant in that specific situation using a terminology backed by science. In ITOA's next newsletter, I'll go into greater detail about the ability to communicate significant behaviors. For now we will briefly go into the advantage of knowing what to look for.

Information Hoping Vs. Information Hunting

The behaviors that support tactical awareness are important because we can learn how to assess behaviors that are uncontrollable and can be universally applied, ensuring that they are accurate and honest. We have been "people watching" our entire lives, but very rarely are people taught specifically what certain behaviors mean, why those observations are important and how to set the conditions to observe those cues more readily. As Gavin de Becker mentions in his book, *The Gift of Fear*:

We evaluate people all the time, quite attentively, but they only get our conscious attention when there is

a reason. We see it all, but we edit out most of it. Thus, when something does call out to us, we ought to pay attention. For many people, that is a muscle they don't exercise. (p. 38).

To fulfill our duty and the expectations that the public has for law enforcement officers, we can't rely on a passive process to solve problems, or simply hope that criminals will reveal themselves. Information hunting means that we execute this observation process deliberately and in a way supports how we make decisions on the ground when we only have a limited amount of time and a limited amount of information available to us. It begins with knowing what to look for.

The task of assessing human behavior is not as overwhelming as it may appear at first, but can be simplified into four pillars of observable behavior. We can observe individual people, groups of people, how people interact with the environment and the collective mood of everyone present. Because having tactical awareness means we can make more informed decisions, these four pillars help to focus an officer's attention on only those behaviors that support on-the-ground decision-making. In decision-making research, this is referred to as the "search principle," but it is designed to limit the chaos and uncertainty of a situation by ensuring that an officer is only looking for (searching) the information that is going to help identify the person who stands out from the crowd. For a younger or less-experienced officer who may feel overwhelmed by the newness of a situation, the pillars can simplify many aspects of the job by ensuring that they don't fail to see the similarities from the other calls they have responded to or get distracted by less significant behaviors happening around them. The four pillars of observable behavior accomplish the first take of attaining tactical awareness by ensuring that officers learn what to look for.

The second part of the process is developing an understanding of how to go about looking for and using these four pillars of observable behavior. The process that I will talk about at the ITOA Training Conference is the "Baseline + Anomaly = Decision" structure that we use to observe and make decisions. A baseline is simply what is normal for the environment, the situation or the people that you are observing. Anomalies are any deviation from that baseline and, once an anomaly is identified, a decision about how to proceed is required. While the goal is to find the anomaly, identifying those people isn't possible without first having a baseline, that point of reference, to compare observed behavior against. Establishing a baseline is one of the most important elements of situational awareness. The way that we teach an officer how to do this is by asking themselves three simple questions:

1. "What is going on here?" Using the four pillars of behavior, define what is happening.

2. "What would make someone stand out?" If you were the criminal, think about how your behavior would cause you to stand out from the baseline that you just established in step 1.
3. "What are you going to do about it?" For any pre-planned anomaly, decide how you would respond to that assessment.

An officer can answer these three questions before ever arriving on scene and helps to mentally prepare them for what they are about to encounter. It gets them thinking about the norm and the cues that would cause someone to warrant further investigation, facilitating a bias for action. Perhaps even more importantly, these three questions used to establish the baseline ensure that they consider the actions they will take *before* they are immersed in a stressful situation. These stressful scenarios are the exact same ones that have proved to have a disastrous effect on an officer's ability to make sound decisions.

In Conclusion

In 2007, the Marine Corps was forced to find creative and innovative methods because of the situation they were facing in Iraq and Afghanistan. The challenges we faced in trying to identify an enemy that blended in with the local population has a number of very clear parallels to the challenges that law enforcement officers face on the job every single day. The principles of a behavioral approach to tactical awareness are designed to shorten the time required for officers to become effective on the job and increase the number of observed arrests by teaching officers the behaviors that should attract your attention and the process to make those behaviors apparent. In the next newsletter, I'll talk about how these behaviors can support the articulation of incidents and complete the awareness cycle.

In the meantime, I look forward to meeting many of you at the ITOA conference. Be sure to stop by The CP Journal's booth to introduce yourself. I hope that you are able to attend my presentation where I will expand on the concepts of tactical awareness and how behavioral analysis addresses many of the challenges faced by our nation's police officers.

Get Left of Bang and Stay There. 🚩

About the Author

Patrick Van Horne is the Founder and CEO of *The CP Journal* and the co-author of *Left of Bang: How the Marine Corps' Combat Hunter Program Can Save Your Life*. As a former infantry captain in the United States Marine Corps, Patrick served as the officer-in-charge for a training team in the Combat Hunter program after completing multiple deployments to Iraq.