

## The Fine, Fading Art of Directing Traffic



By Dr. Joel F. Shults, Chief, Adams State College Police Department

There is nothing that shows the skill, finesse, and understanding of human nature like standing in the middle of the road conducting lanes of traffic like a symphony orchestra. It's not about being cool and casual, it's about being the consummate pro. It seems like so few cops do this task well. Here are a few of the officers most likely to scrub tire tracks off the tops of their boots. Are you one of them?

**The Shadow** – this officer can't bear the burden of a reflective vest laying heavily on her shoulders. Surely a motorist flying low at 60 miles per hour can see her shiny 4 inch badge surrounded by her dark black, navy blue, brown or green uniform shirt. Besides, she's standing in the flood of white spotlights and dizzying red and blue flashes – how could she not stand out?

**The Obstructor** – this officer parks in the traffic lane on arrival, gets out, and directs traffic around his car. If he'd just get back in his car and take his lunch break two miles down the road, he'd clear the lane by getting his unit out of the way and traffic would do just fine without him. But the crash was too cool for him to miss so he has to do something or he won't have any stories at roll call.

**The CounterMander** – this officer isn't a team player. If somebody else is already directing traffic, he has to join in. The poor motorist doesn't know which flapping hand to attend to. This is the same guy that yells at your suspect "Get your hands up or I'll shoot" while you're yelling at the same guy "Don't move or I'll shoot".

**The Swizzler** – this officer uses about as much energy directing traffic as he does stirring Sweet 'N Low® into his coffee. Perching his wrists on his equipment belt, one or two fingers flicked in circles is all it takes to signal an 18-wheeler to go left or right. An alternative method is to use the antenna of a walkie-talkie to point the way. This method is often used by firefighters not busy retrieving bodies, and detectives who stumble across accident scenes and figure a belt badge is as good as a reflective vest.

**The Sparkler** – thinks he glows in the dark. Using his flashlight or flare he draws patterns in the air that are subject to widely varied interpretations by oncoming traffic. Using similar skills, he can also write his name in cursive in yellow snow. Also marks his territory by cracking taillights of the cars that brush by him in their confusion.

**The Libertarian** – doesn't believe in unnecessary government intervention. He won't call for help since a blinking arrow stick on the light bar is all anybody needs to navigate the carnage and debris ahead. This officer assumes that the motoring public retains its IQ even when lights are flashing. Possible candidate for management training.

For safe and effective traffic direction model yourself after an NFL referee. Here's a guy who dresses to set himself apart from everybody on the field, avoids being smeared by the tonnage running across his path, makes big dramatic gestures so that even the fans in the

top row can see them, and sticks to the hand and arm movements that have clear meaning for the observer.

Here are some helpful guidelines to remember:

1. Use tools. Wear your big orange or ANSI green vest. Even in the day time. Every time. All the time. The whole time. Get your red flashlight cone attached, your orange traffic cones out of the trunk, and set up a textbook flare or reflector pattern for passive traffic direction. A whistle is still a great attention getter! Take a position of prominence at the scene. Reposition emergency vehicles for passive traffic control. Staging for optimal traffic flow should be accomplished by directing each arriving unit. If you have a large scene and need more than one person directing traffic, coordinate carefully by sight or radio. When traffic can handle itself and there is no immediate hazard, stop directing, disappear, and let it work itself out. Sometimes less is more.

2. Lower your expectations. Assume that the motoring public is sensory deprived and intellectually stunted, i.e. even if they did see you they won't know what you want them to do. My observation is that for every emergency light flashing at a scene, the average driver loses approximately one third of his or her ability to think. That means you must make BIG, obvious, unambiguously clear gestures with your whole arm and body to get attention and compliance. You can't compete with all the distractions unless you make yourself obvious. Firefighters and civilians don't know this. Cops should direct traffic wherever possible and only when a situation is too confusing or hazardous to be left to motorists' common sense.

3. Manage light. Always be lighted from the side or the front. Standing with headlights or spotlights behind you blinds drivers and makes you disappear to oncoming vehicles. Shut down headlights and wigwags in favor of colored overhead lighting. Did I mention WEAR YOUR REFLECTIVE VEST? Use your flashlight's on and off switch to keep your light on only when shining in the direction you want the driver to go, and off on the backswing. Circles and back and forth light provide no clues to the drivers as to which way they should go.

All the flashing lights and noise and uniforms and equipment and excitement makes just another day in the life for you. For the motorist it's a giddy adventure ride at CrashLand Theme Park. Don't count on them focusing on you if you don't make yourself unmistakably the person they need to be watching. Got your glow-vest, whistle, and white gloves ready?

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