RADIO COMMUNICATION 101: THE 5 THINGS YOU MUST KNOW ABOUT POLICE RADIO ETIQUETTE

A Special Report

by E.L. Forestal

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Once you start working the street, you will discover that your radio is the most important tool you have. It’s how you get your calls for service, how you share information with other officers and how you get help when you really need it.

Like any tool, it has to be used properly in order for you and other officers to get the most effective results. The radio network is like a city street – only so much traffic can pass over it at one time, so the traffic has to move quickly and efficiently and be prioritized so the most important messages go first.

That’s the main reason that proper radio etiquette and protocol must be observed at all times. However, it’s even more important for a probationary police officer because misuse of the radio is one of those things that can end your police career in the early stages. In fact, your radio skills are scrutinized and evaluated on a daily basis during the field training program.

Remember, everything that passes over the air is recorded for later analysis, if necessary. That means the chain of command can review any transmission from any officer on any given shift. The public also listens in to police radio traffic on scanners, and, in many states, tapes of radio traffic are public records, so the media has access to them as well.

The way to avoid trouble is to use the radio as it was meant to be used, following the tips below.

**5 Secrets to Proper Radio Etiquette**

1. **Be professional at all times.**

   Communicating on the radio is like any other conversation. People occasionally are going to say things that annoy you. You might miss a message to keep the channel clear for an emergency, prompting a tense dispatcher order you to get off the air. You might ask another officer for his location and have to repeat the question two or three times because he’s not answering clearly. You might have your transmission blocked by another officer who keeps keying in as you.

   Whatever the situation, do not give in to irritation and start arguing with someone else over the air. It’s just unprofessional, not to mention unproductive. Save your gripe for shift change. You’ll probably find by then that you’ve calmed down and realized it really isn’t even that important. If the problem is serious enough that it can’t wait until you return to the station, use your cell phone to call the other person. That keeps the conversation between the two of you and off the public radio.

2. **Brevity, brevity, brevity.**

   Remember, the network can only carry so much traffic, so the more time you spend talking on the air, the less time other officers can use the radio. This problem is not as bad now with digital networks, but the available bandwidth is still limited. When your radio is keyed, others may not be able to connect to the network to make their own transmissions.
Communicate only that information which is necessary and only those details that are relevant. The tag number and description of a car you are about to stop would be necessary and relevant. Your opinion about how poorly the driver is operating his vehicle would not be. Asking your sergeant to meet you at a specific location so that he can sign a report would be necessary and relevant. Giving him a play-by-play of what is in the report would not be.

Once you’ve transmitted only the relevant information, just stop talking. Dispatch or the officer to whom you were talking will acknowledge the receipt of the message. If they have questions or need clarification, they’ll let you know.

③ Make yourself clear.

When speaking over the air, enunciate each word and always be as specific with details as you possibly can be. The dispatchers and officers with whom you are communicating on the radio can’t read your mind, can’t see what you see and can only know what you tell them. Be concise, but communicate the necessary information.

If someone asks your location, you don’t say, “I’m over here by the Burger King.” You say, “I’m at the northeast corner of 139th Street and 16th Avenue.”

If you’re telling another officer about some suspicious activity, you don’t say, “I’m watching some guys who might be up to something.” You say, “Two black male subjects and two white male subjects are loitering around some parked cars 50 yards southeast of my location.”

If you’re pursuing a suspected stolen car, you don’t say, “He’s in a gray car driving north on Charter Street at high speeds.” You say, “Suspect’s in a gray 90’s model Impala, northbound on Charter, just passing Apple Avenue. Speed is 55 mph.”

Remember also that when you’re concentrating or excited, you may tend to mumble or speak too fast. But it is critical that others on the network understand what you are saying, so slow down, speak directly into the microphone and – can’t say it too many times – enunciate.

④ If it isn’t necessary, keep it off the air.

Before you press the transmit key on your radio, make sure you ask yourself how important the information is, whether it needs to be shared over the air and exactly which details matter and which ones can wait. For example, the suspect description in a robbery that just occurred needs to go out over the air. Where you and your buddy in another patrol unit plan to meet up for dinner break does not.

Remember that your radio is not the only means of communication that you have access to while you are on patrol. Almost all officers carry cell phones, even though they usually have to pay for them out of their
own pockets. Use your cell to arrange meal breaks. You also likely will have a mobile data terminal in your car. Those often are equipped to send instant messages between units. Use the terminal to let your sergeant know you left your extra flashlight in his trunk. Just keep in mind that the system keeps copies of messages sent over mobile data units.

6 Know the 10-codes and phonetic alphabet and use them.

The 10-codes are a set of shorthand representations – usually 10 plus a one- or two-digit number – that stand for common police phrases or situations. For example, 10-52 could stand for “mentally disturbed person.”

The codes usually are accompanied by a set of signal codes that are shorthand for other descriptive words or phrases. For example, Signal 7 could mean “deceased.”

Ten-codes vary from agency to agency, but you can bet your department will issue you a little card with all the appropriate codes on it. Memorize those codes, speak them and learn to think in them because that’s how you are going to communicate on the radio.

Remember Rule No. 2, brevity? The 10-codes help you limit the amount of talking you have to do on the radio. Instead of going on the air and saying that you are at the scene of a car crash and that the disabled vehicles are blocking traffic, you simply have to say, “Signal 4, 10-16.” In this example, Signal 4 would be the crash and 10-16 would be the road blockage.

The phonetic alphabet simply helps eliminate confusion as officers try to transmit names, addresses, license plate numbers and all sorts of other data over the air. Imagine the confusion of an officer trying to spell certain names for dispatch. Did he say “B” or “D?” Was that “S” or “F?” Instead, the phonetic alphabet assigns a word to each letter.

This is phonetic alphabet used by many law enforcement agencies:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>A</th>
<th>Adam</th>
<th>G</th>
<th>George</th>
<th>M</th>
<th>Mary</th>
<th>S</th>
<th>Sam</th>
<th>Y</th>
<th>Yellow</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>B</td>
<td>Boy</td>
<td>H</td>
<td>Henry</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>Nora</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>Tom</td>
<td>Z</td>
<td>Zebra</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C</td>
<td>Charlie</td>
<td>I</td>
<td>Ida</td>
<td>O</td>
<td>Ocean</td>
<td>U</td>
<td>Union</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>D</td>
<td>David</td>
<td>J</td>
<td>John</td>
<td>P</td>
<td>Paul</td>
<td>V</td>
<td>Victor</td>
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<tr>
<td>E</td>
<td>Edward</td>
<td>K</td>
<td>King</td>
<td>Q</td>
<td>Queen</td>
<td>W</td>
<td>William</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>F</td>
<td>Frank</td>
<td>L</td>
<td>Lincoln</td>
<td>R</td>
<td>Robert</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X-Ray</td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Remember these rules of police radio etiquette:
