

INVESTIGATIVE TIPS & TECHNIQUES: THE VALUE IN LEARNING TO READ THE SCENE

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It doesn't matter in what capacity you work in as a First Responder; Police, Emergency Medical Service, Fire/Arson Investigation, Coroner/Medical Examiner, or Forensic Medicine, learning to read the scene is a critical function that most people miss. We have a tendency to get caught up in the emotion/adrenaline of the situation that we forget to slow down and take the situation in its totality.

Let's face the reality, most people in our professions like the "rush" that is associated with interesting calls but are horrific to the general public. As the frequency of the "Big/Hot Calls" come in, the better we become at handling everything by the numbers. After a stretch of time without the "Big/Hot Calls" coming in, it is normal for our proficiency to lag behind. This is a diminishable task that has to be concentrated on in order to do the best job possible.

What I am speaking of is taking a few extra deep breaths and taking the entire situation in before jumping to or assuming the facts of the case. What I learned early in my career between the Coroner's Office as a Medicolegal Death Investigator and as a Detective with the Police Department is to not rely on all the input given to you prior to seeing the scene for yourself.

Not to be taken incorrectly, I am not discounting input from others that may have input into putting the pieces together, I am saying there may be a more appropriate way to get the input. This is a lesson I took the black eye for twice and learned the hard way.

Most times, when responding to a "Call-Out" following a major investigation or incident, the personnel on scene normally have time to discuss among each other or are independently rationalizing the chain-of-events while they are securing the scene and waiting for assistance. I remember being in that position and wanting the opportunity to show that I had what it took to put the pieces together. On occasion, some of our colleagues take the simple information offered or observed without question and forward it through the report. I have often heard comments during a follow-up with the reporting person similar to, "I didn't think that looked right to me."

I found it best to approach the investigation with only the facts known to the initial 1st Responders with no opinions. Enter the scene looking at it objectively. The scene will speak to you if you teach yourself to listen to it. If you enter the scene to conduct a walk-through and have already received opinions as to what was perceived to have taken place, we then alter our thought process and look at the scene subjectively. Similar to what was once taught and hopefully still being taught; use your imagination to help you. For example: When examining the point-of-entry of a burglary scene, use your imagination to picture in your mind how the entry was made. How the Suspect physically made the entry? Where he/she would have stepped to position them self to make the entry? Where the suspect would have maintained balance in doing so? After getting the opportunity to take in the preliminary information and develop your own thoughts, now is the time to discuss with the 1st Responders and get their opinion on the case. Maybe they have seen something or thought of something you missed or never thought of. If that's the case, re-walk through the scene together and discuss it. If you find this method may be an appropriate approach, I have one more piece of advice. Let your colleagues know what you are doing prior to cutting them off. If you don't, be prepared for some backlash, due to trampled feelings. Some would say too bad, but when it comes down to it, remember, the First Responders set the stage for how the investigation normally proceeds. We need them!

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