A column exploring the real-life details of police work.

Walk the Walk and Talk the Talk: Undercover Narcotics Assignments

Working undercover is a special assignment that presents unique challenges. This lone officer often works without the luxury of backup and a weapon for self-defense. They must have the capability to think quickly, keep emotions in check when faced with highly stressful and potentially dangerous situations, and act outside the norm, even when some actions are in direct contrast to their academy training and on-the-job experience.

It's often said among law enforcement officers and their superiors that not all cops are suited for undercover (UC) work, and those who feel this way offer valid explanations. One reason, and there is significant evidence to support this claim, is that officers who've been on the job for even a brief period regularly develop discernible mannerisms and speech that are distinctive to law enforcement.

These deep-seated "red flag" behaviors, habits, and characteristics are hard to break. Some of the tell-tale signs that a person is a police officer include:

- Always sitting with their backs to a wall in public places, such as restaurants.
- Standing in a defensive position with one foot forward, ready to react to incoming violence.
- Instinctively pulling up on the "gun side" of their belt and pants, a near automatic action when in uniform due to gravity tugging at the cumbersome weight of their pistol (a fully loaded Glock 19 weighs approximately 29.6 ounces).
- When riding as a passenger in a suspect's car, calling out "clear right" to the driver after checking for oncoming traffic at intersections, as would be done in a police car that's hurrying toward an emergency with lights flashing and siren wailing.

These, and many more, are conspicuous signals that are obvious to criminals. They're like flashing neon signs that say, "I'm a cop," and they're routines that must be broken before beginning an undercover assignment. Otherwise, it's nearly impossible for a covert officer to assimilate into a target group of drug dealers, gun runners, counterfeiters, etc.

To become a successful UC, the officer must be a reasonably good actor who can easily transition from law enforcement officer to that of a fictional

character who is able to quickly adapt to whatever situation that may arise. Like a chameleon, they must be able to "walk the walk and talk the talk," transforming their speech and body language to fit with whomever they're around. Hesitations, slipping out of character, or a lack of confidence can be dangerous and potentially deadly.

Like legitimate businesspeople, such as plumbers who repair and install pipes, tax accountants who prepare client documents for submission to the IRS, and dog walkers who exercise canines, each area of the drug trade is frequently a specialty service—cocaine dealers sell cocaine, pill dealers sell pharmaceuticals, and so on. Sure, some dealers sell a variety of products, but many prefer to go with what works for them.

As such, each group of lawbreakers operate in a style and manner that's all their own. The players in each faction have different personalities. Slang and terminologies for their merchandise likely varies somewhat for even those who sell the same product. Therefore, it is extremely important that a UC does their homework to learn intricate details about the people they're investigating, how and where they conduct their business, jargon used, current pricing of "product," routines, if any, and any other vital information that could assist with successfully assimilating into their circle.

I once worked as an undercover narcotics officer. My primary focus at the time largely involved the illegal distribution of cocaine, heroin, PCP, methamphetamine, and pharmaceutical drugs including ketamine and opioids, and barbiturates and benzodiazepines, such as triazolam (Halicon), Xanax, diazepam (Valium), lorazepam (Ativan), to name a few.

To assist with planning and preparation, I (as do many undercover officers) often worked with confidential informants (CIs) who have inside knowledge of the focus of the investigation and of the people involved. In advance of executing high-risk search warrants, CIs can provide the layout of homes and other buildings where drugs and weapons are kept, the number of people typically inside, including children, innocent life partners, and animals, the presence of explosives and/or dangerous substances, and other vital intelligence, such as whether subjects are armed and the types of weapons they carry.

The informants often provide the UC an introduction to the clique, and such was the case when I was on loan to another department in a different state other than where I was employed as a detective. Narcotics investigators in the area needed someone unknown to locals, who could easily fit in once the proper groundwork was established—that all important introduction by someone the suspects knew and trusted.

So they requested my assistance, and within a few days I was on my way south with my wallet containing a fake driver's license and credit cards and a few staged faux family photos. My transportation was a vehicle with phony license plate numbers that, if checked, indicated the car was registered under my undercover name. I even had pieces of mail in the car that displayed my pretend name and made-up home address.

I needed an informant to provide me with foot in the door to the drug

dealer and his runners. Local investigators said they had the perfect person in mind to help, a young woman I'll call Betty (not her real name).

Betty had been arrested numerous times over the years for offenses ranging from cocaine possession to burglary and armed robbery. She was in real danger of going to prison for decades because of her most recent apprehension, an arrest for trafficking a substantial quantity of narcotics.

It was at that point in her life when Betty decided the criminal lifestyle was not in her best interest. Nor would going to prison for several years be conducive with raising her two young daughters. Therefore, hoping for leniency, she offered to work as an informant. Betty readily accepted the deal offered by the DA of a no-jail-time sentence in exchange for helping police with their investigation into the group of drug and gun-dealers with whom she was involved.

Task force members and I and met with Betty at a secluded location to begin the weekslong planning to make the initial purchase of cocaine from a mid-level dealer. As I came to know Betty, I learned she was extremely bright, charming, had a wonderful sense of humor, and loved her family. She'd simply gotten involved with an abusive man who dragged her into his world.

Once Betty and I were satisfied that our backstories matched—I was an out-of-town cousin—and that I was comfortable with details, she and I drove several miles out into the county in territory unfamiliar to me. She directed me to turn right here, left there, and so on, until she had me veer off the main road onto a hard-packed North Carolina red clay path leading to a run-down clapboard-sided house with a rusted tin roof. In direct contrast with the shabby dwelling were four expensive vehicles parked side by side facing the front porch where two very large men stood watching our approach.

Sure, I was an old hand at this sort of thing, but my experience didn't stop the butterflies in my gut from taking flight. On the outside, though, I was as a cool as the center seed of a cucumber, I hoped. Betty was Betty. She wasn't easily rattled, even when reminding me that the people inside were usually armed and that there was at least one fully automatic Uzi located somewhere in the house. I had my doubts about the firearm being a true automatic, but a gun is gun when it's pointing in your direction, no matter how fast the rounds come.

I pulled up behind a black SUV and switched off the ignition. The two men approached.

I rolled down both windows, mine and the one on Betty's side. The man at Betty's window recognized her immediately, smiled, and engaged in a friendly chat. She introduced me as her cousin from "up in the D.C. area." The fellow at my window was not smiling, nor was he chatty. However, Betty's friend who seemed to oversee the situation, said, "Hey, if Betty says he's cool, then he's cool." We were invited inside.

As I stepped to the door, I turned my head and saw a third man open my car door and begin to have a look at the contents. I have no idea from where

or which direction he came. I hoped he wouldn't detect the hidden cameras and microphones mounted in the front door panels.

Thirty minutes later, Betty and I were safely back on the road with a plastic bag containing powder cocaine. It wasn't a large quantity, but it was a successful foot in the door. The purchase was the first of several, which eventually led to me becoming a trusted member of the group. It wasn't long before they gave me product to sell for them. Of course, my sales involved handing the drugs over to the task force supervisors who, in turn, supplied me with cash to return to the drug dealers. Then, when everyone was satisfied that we had enough evidence to establish a criminal enterprise, warrants were issued, search warrants were served, and those involved in the distribution of drugs were arrested.

With Betty's invaluable assistance, the operation was highly successful.

The drug trade is much different today than it was back when I worked undercover. As dangerous and devasting drugs such as heroin, PCP, methamphetamine, and cocaine can be to users and their families, and they can be deadly, they take a back seat to fentanyl.

Fentanyl surpasses heroin in both potency and the number of deaths caused by its use. It's a man-made opioid that is up to 50 times stronger than heroin and 100 times stronger than morphine.

There are two types of fentanyl—pharmaceutical fentanyl and illicitly manufactured fentanyl. Pharmaceutical fentanyl is legally prescribed by doctors to manage and treat severe pain after surgery or for people suffering from advanced-stage cancer, for example. Illicit fentanyl is distributed through illegal drug markets and is sold alone or combined with other drugs, such as heroin.

Fentanyl is a major contributor to both fatal and nonfatal overdoses in the United States. According to the Drug Enforcement Administration, "Two out of every five counterfeit pills with fentanyl contains a potentially lethal dose of fentanyl."

In 2022, the DEA announced the seizure of over 50.6 million fentanyl-laced, fake prescription pills and more than 10,000 pounds of fentanyl powder. They estimate that these confiscations conducted in the US signified more than 379 million potentially lethal doses of fentanyl, enough to kill every American.

By the way, Betty did indeed turn her life around. She moved away from the area, attended a community college where she earned an associate's degree. Afterward, she landed a job she loved, and her two daughters excelled in school and in athletics.