

Cop Communication Skills

While watching muted commercials recently, I asked Kay whether she considered me a controlling person. She looked over at me with surprise and replied “NO!” quite emphatically, adding with thinly disguised disdain, “You are the *least* controlling man I can imagine.” Notwithstanding the spin, I took it as a real compliment what with all the hullabaloo concerning ‘Me Too’ of late. (What is it with men?) I imagine Kay’s opinion on this question may have something to do with her being CFO of F&K Vaughan Inc.

Be that as it may, it probably has more to do with my being the passenger rather than driver when we travel together. She’s a good driver and I enjoy relaxing and seeing the sights once I get out of the house. I used to tell people that Kay was the world’s second-best driver, but I’ve come around to thinking she may be the best. One time Stan Slete and I were designated to go to the grocer; I asked him if he’d like to drive, to which he replied, “I don’t know; does this car go under eighty-five?” Kay does have a reputation in that regard.



But it wasn't always this way.

At sixteen I rolled my dad's car (about which interesting incident I may describe another time) and had my share of traffic tickets including asking an attending officer whether he knew my brother-in-law who worked for the State Patrol to no avail. But that was all before having completely escaped puberty and reached the age of consent to the eternal matrimonial state. As one last hurrah (so to speak) I borrowed my parents new car to transport Kay to the airport to fly home to prepare things for our wedding one week hence. Having deposited her at the airport, I was on my way home on highway 99 at Alderwood Manor going something over seventy in the fast lane passing a couple of slower moving vehicles on my right. There was a left turn lane with a car in it facing me, but I assumed its driver was sane. He wasn't. I slammed the brake down hard but the inevitable happened. Luckily for the driver and even moreso for his passenger, I hit his rear tire, the axel structure took the hit and gave more than it received by completely caving in the front end of my parent's car. This was long before seatbelts or airbags were installed in cars. I was slumped over the steering wheel – something loose in the car had hit the back of my head, the only pain I experienced.

The two boys in the other car who were miraculously unscathed came running over to my car and opened the door. "Are you all right?" they asked.

"Why did you do that?" was all I could think to say.

Satisfied by my answer, they walked off. I got out of the steaming vehicle, walked to the side of the highway and sat down in a daze thinking philosophical thoughts. Presently I noticed a state patrol officer measuring the length of the strips of rubber I had laid. It occurred to me that that number might have some bearing on my culpability and so I got up and walked out to where he was rolling up his tape.

"How long is it?" I asked.

"Two hundred and..." I don't remember the additional number of feet that he told me.

"Is that about right?" I queried, still worrying culpability.

He seemed uninterested and his response was something like, "Yeah, I suppose."

I looked at where the rubber stopped. It was as thick and black as anywhere on the stripes. Who knows how long they would have been if I had hit a lighter car in a 'softer' spot.

In less than a week I was on the road south in my 53 Ford ready for the next sixty some odd years of marital bliss to begin. And it did begin, after which I finished school and went south to Los Angeles where I took my place as a responsible money-earning adult, an activity that would occupy a large portion of my waking hours for the next thirty-five years with commuting and the occasional interaction with the state patrol or police officers, which was always unpleasant. Paying tickets became a budgeted item after my initial encounter with a California cop.

But before heading south and before I had graduated from the U, we were crossing the four lanes of Campus Parkway on foot, laughing on our way back to married student housing from the U district where we had been Christmas shopping. We walked across to the two westbound lanes against the light because no one was coming, but when we reached the sidewalk area at the center between lanes a cop sped up to the intersection with lights flashing and siren blaring. But by now the light had changed and he had to stop, so carefree we continued on across the eastbound lanes with the light in our favor now. Apparently impatient that we might get away, the cop accelerated through the red light and into the southbound street ahead of where we were walking and lept out of his car at a full run toward us.

"You just ran a red light I taunted."

Dumbfounded, he stopped in his tracks and then yelled back, "And do you know WHY I ran through that red light?" Calming down somewhat then he proceeded to tell us of a new policy of

cracking down on pedestrian jaywalking and light violations because some pedestrian had been killed somewhere who had done what he shouldn't have done. When he had completed that tirade, he bade us have a safe Christmas, hopped back in his vehicle, and sped away, having completed his minor role in my life story. And we walked on happy as can be.

My first encounter with a California cop was less joyful. I was late and, on my way, to work at North American Aviation at the airport in LA. I was driving rapidly on a four-lane road to the parking lot when I saw a motorcycle cop on the side street off to my left. I was less than an eighth of a mile from where I would turn into the parking lot, so I had been unconcerned until I noticed he was right behind me in the lot with siren and light doing their duty.

"Why are you stopping me?" I asked sincerely confused.

"For speeding," he said. "You were going 55 on a city street."

I didn't know how fast I had been going, probably at least that fast, but I also knew that he could not have known how fast I was going either. Starting out from where I had seen him, crossing the multiple lanes between us, and then accelerating to catch up to me after I had already slowed down to turn into the lot, he could not have assessed my speed. But I was unable to convince him of that fact. To avoid being drug off to a cell, I signed the ticket noting the location of the court where I could contend the issue. I didn't really like him.

So... rather than paying the ticket I took off work to go to court. Needless to say, I didn't know how the system worked. I was in a crowded court room awaiting my turn to plead before an honorable judge. I was back a ways in line with plenty of time to organize my thoughts on what to say but it wasn't coming together very well. An old man ahead of me had been ticketed for driving through a pedestrian crosswalk when a pedestrian had just entered or was exiting. The judge proceeded with a tirade asking the plaintiff, asking rhetorically whether he realized that some named person (presumably an upstanding citizen) had been run down while on just such a crosswalk. The man was visibly gob smacked at being accused of potential murder, but then pled guilty anyway.

Later a 14- or 15-year-old kid stood up there to be told how serious a crime it was to have missed a court date. Asked what he had to say about that, the kid said, "My parents went to New York and took me with them."

That didn't seem to soften the judge's tone. "You realize why you had to appear of course?"

"Yes sir!"

"The law states that handlebars on a bike cannot be more than 12 inches above the seat. Do you plead guilty or not guilty?"

"Guilty."

Things did not look good for me. When I finally got up there, the judge read me my alleged offense and asked, "Guilty or not guilty?"

"It's not a matter of whether I'm guilty or innocent," I said, "it's..."

"Guilty or not guilty?" he interrupted.

"The officer could not..."

Rudely interrupting again the judge told me that if I wanted to argue the case, I would have to plead innocent and request a hearing. This was clearly no place for logic or philosophy.

"Guilty!" I said.

I paid my fine, realizing that I had already lost more money in my time off work than the ticket cost. *That* is the way the system works. So thereafter when I was given a ticket, I would just pay the damned thing whether I thought it was fair or not – the budgeted item. I would take the ticket

defiantly like a man when they handed it to me. I was learning the lines for a debut in a role as cool hand Luke should it ever be offered.

But there were some exceptional cases. Once when leaving the Boeing facility in Kent, I turned off Orilla road onto the West Valley highway in a driving rainstorm. The cars on the two southbound lanes were creeping. I saw that there was a state patrol car in the right-hand lane going way below the speed limit intimidating the other drivers. I had miles to go, children and wife to kiss and horses to feed so I was not going to be intimidated. I proceeded to go by the cop at the speed limit on the inside lane, upon which he proceeded to jump in right behind me at my speed. We proceeded that way through the light at James Street, on through Meeker, after which I turned onto Willis a short stretch to the onramp to the Valley Freeway. He had his lights and siren going before I entered the onramp. I rolled my window down rain dripping in.

“Why have you stopped me?” I asked, convinced of my innocence as I gave him my driver’s license.

As response, he said, “Did you now that Washington law number (he gave it an identifier) prohibits driving a vehicle in the rain without (some specific number) of square centimeters (I’m sure he said centimeter units – he must have thought I looked like an engineer) of wiper area?”

“No, actually, I did not know that Sir!” That’s not what I said of course, but I knew my goose was cooked, realizing that it would not stop here.

“May I see your registration?”

I didn’t have the registration hanging on the visor where it’s supposed to be, so I reached for the glove compartment. When I opened it, firecrackers cascaded out onto the floor. Embarrassed I said, “Oh, my wife must have done that.” It was lame, I know, but what can you do? I remember having said it. Meanwhile I rummaged around until I found an official looking piece of paper and handed it to him.

He glanced at it and said, “This is 19 [sixty something],” (definitely not the current year); he handed it back to me. I rummaged some more and found another official looking paper and handed it to him.

“Nope.”

So I continued rummaging through the cassettes, napkins, few remaining firecrackers, and whatever else might have been put in there ‘by my wife’. Now I looked at the pieces I brought out until I found the current year. He accepted that and proceeded on smartly.

“Step on your brake.” I did and he walked around to see the effect on the rear lights. “Turn on your head lights.” I did. He walked around to the front of the car. “Your left turn signal.” I pulled the lever. “Your right.” I pushed the lever.

He returned after walking completely around my car, making considerable marks on a sheet he had on his clip board. He handed me a copy of the sheet which specified that I had two weeks to bring all the marked items on the old car up to snuff.

I didn’t really like him that cop very much, but it was just one more lesson I had to learn.

On another occasion I was driving either the ‘Enumclaw Blue Flash’ (hatch back Honda) or the old fifty Plymouth. I don’t remember which. Kay was driving the chevy station wagon right behind me. The kids were with her, I think. We were heading somewhere needing two cars. They had just changed the East Valley highway through Auburn to four lanes with a turn lane. There was absolutely no traffic on this big expanse when out of nowhere a cop pulls me over.

I do the usual “Why have you pulled me over?”

His reply was terse, “Do you know what the speed limit is here?”

At that point I looked up and there was a speed limit sign just to the right of my vehicle, so I pointed to the sign and said smugly, “50 I would guess.”

“No! It was 30 back there,” was his defensive retort as he pointed back in the direction from which we had come.

“There’re four lanes and no cars,” I remonstrated in dismay but to no avail. I didn’t like him either; it had become a pattern.

So... I spent more years of just paying my tickets without pretending that these guys would be interested in anything I had to say. But I was a muted version of cool hand Luke.

I had a radar detector for a while that would go off whenever we went by a Safeway store, but the only time it should have helped me was a disaster. I was just coming around a corner and the thing went off like a Geiger counter at Three Mile Island, clicking away as the cop sauntered up to my window. I’m trying to hide the damned thing while Buddy is up over my shoulder trying to ameliorate the situation by befriending the cop. It was totally embarrassing, and the cop would not be befriended. He was rather unlikeable.

Alas one year I had rear-ended a sports car whose blond bombshell driver had indicated she was turning right but alas, didn’t. The fiberglass fender exploded with no other damage, but still it went on my record as if it was a big deal along with all my tickets, including a more serious violation crossing several lanes of traffic in downtown Seattle. All of which exceeded criteria for ‘bad driver’ in the state of Washington. The consequence of which was that I was issued an official summons forcing me to attend a meeting with the ‘state patrol psychologist’. Who even knew there was such a position paid for by my taxes. Significant aspects of this scheduled meeting were that it was to occur in Puyallup on Christmas Eve – oh, and if I did not attend, my license would be suspended. I was angry! So was Kay; we would not be going south to Kay’s folks for Christmas that year.

Christmas Eve. I showed up and looked at those gathered in the room. Eventually the psychologist appeared looking for all the world like Colonel Sanders – the original, not the standard revised slimmer model.

“You’ve probably looked around and wondered what you all have in common. There are none of the prototypical bad drivers amongst you. There is no one in here under twenty-five. There is no one over fifty. There are no women.” (Oh, did he say that... or am I imagining it incorrectly after all these years? That was a different era.) “What you have in common is that you are all workaday men, probably with family responsibilities and your driving problem has to do with being distracted by your busy daily lives.” Probably each of us is saying, “No, not really; a lot of times I am wondering what could cause cosmological redshift other than a big bang.” What we had here was a ‘Cool Hand Luke’ type failure to communicate. But we don’t protest; that’s another thing we have in common no courageous cool hand Luke emerges from *our* group. The colonel tells us a bunch of facts about how programs to keep teenagers from smoking didn’t work. They didn’t work because however bleak the consequence of the lung operation they showed us in vivid color when I was in high school (some considerable number of years ago now) with the bloody black lungs being pulled out of bodies because of smoking, the lesson teenagers took from it was apparently: ‘Every one smokes and you gotta die somehow, so let’s get on with the fags already.’ I hadn’t thought I needed to learn that then, and certainly not now. Anyway the crux of the present psychological lesson for us was considerably less complex, “If you get one more traffic ticket in the next year, your license will be suspended, and how would you like that!?” Wow! Merry Christmas! I was pissed.

So I'm speeding home in a rage along a river road I had never driven before when coming around a corner I see a cop car hiding in behind some blackberry bushes. Terrified, I slam on my brake – a squealing type slam! Panting I creep past the cop. He doesn't come after me! He had to have known I was speeding, didn't he? I thought about that all the way home and something started to click.

Not much later (definitely much less than a year) I'm heading for work; I'm late. I had figured out from long experience that once you make the light at Meeker, if you gun it, you can make the light at James. So I'm gunning it toward James when I see the lights and hear the siren. Oh God!!! That's it. I'm done for. I was already through the light and the cop was waiting for it to change on the other side of James. I waited at the side of the road. When he came to my window, I began groveling like I have never groveled before in my entire life. It had always been a part of my image that I would not grovel. Well... I groveled! I told him the sad story of Christmas Eve and that since I live 25 miles from where I work, if I lose my license my children will starve to say nothing of the horses and dogs. I pleaded indecently. Silently he took my license and went back to his car. When he came back, he said, "You know... if I was you, I would definitely slow up, but I'll let you off this time." I liked the guy – Christ, you could almost say I had fallen in love with him. So I figured out that cool hand Luke was not a role for me; I had learned how to communicate with cops

I didn't get another ticket before my year was up, so I dodged that bullet. But old habits die hard. It isn't that I ever yearned for a career as a race car driver. It's just that if I'm going to B from A, I want to be at B already. Coming home from Portland, no car stayed ahead of me. One might pass me just to show off, but his foot would get tired, so I would end up passing him again as a matter of course. But that was then. If the standard revised Fred Vaughan sees a cop car he slams on his brake so the cop notices. They like it; they just can't help themselves. It's like body language they understand – logic be damned. It's like tipping your hat and saying, "Howdy Sir! You're doing a fine job; I hope you're having a nice day." Everyone thrives on that kind of respect, I guess. I did get stopped when I didn't see the cop in time after my big scare, but instead of taking it like a man the way I used to, I grovel: "I don't know what I was thinking; is the speed limit really 25. I didn't notice that sign. I am so so sorry. I won't ever do that through here again, etc., etc. I'm glad you're here keeping this street safe for the children" So I get a very nonconfrontational suggestion to be more alert, but no ticket. Once I did that in going through the speed trap in Buckley with Kay and the kids in the car. I bragged about my new skill to the family; disgusted, Sean says, "The only reason he let you off was because you have a nice-looking family." I think he wished I was more like cool hand Luke but for whatever reason, I did not get tickets anymore.

I bragged with my friends at work about my newfound skill. Of course they doubted whether what I told them was true or not. So one day I was driving the boys to lunch at a restaurant at the southwest corner of Lake Washington. There was a strange route into the restaurant's parking lot – a stop sign at the right where you have to turn left. So I didn't notice the stop sign and proceeded through without stopping. A cop happened to be stopped just coming out of the parking lot. I drove right by him as my friend Russ says, "You went through that stop sign."

So I'm in the parking lot already; the cop has turned around to pull up behind me. He came to my window with my friends all snickering at my situation. I say, "You know, my friend here tells me that I went right through that stop sign. I guess I was just watching where I had to go and yadda yadda yadda."

"Well, you guys have a good lunch now," the officer said and was gone. No ticket.

My friends proceeded to fake sticking their fingers down their throats in nausea. There's nothing better than demonstrating superpowers before your friends.

I have stated a few incidents in which cops have lacked personality or were purposely perverse, but there was an incident that was a brilliant exception to this rule – and it is a rule. Kay's mother's death was nigh at hand on the 23rd of December 1996 so we purposed to rush down to Oregon after I got off work in spite of inclement weather to see her one last time while hopefully she was still conscious. "Rushing" was, in fact, what I was doing – in heavy rush hour traffic. (We had many guests coming the next day so we would have to return the couple of hundred miles shortly.) Then I saw the too familiar red and blue flashing lights of a Washington State Patrol car coming up behind me. Resigned, I pulled over to the shoulder, rolled my window down, took out my driver's license and waited for the trooper to check out my vehicle via radio and come up with his flashlight, which he then shined directly into my face.

"You don't look like Mario Andretti," he said. I was somewhat taken aback by this humorously complimentary but prickly comment and did not respond. He continued, "It's raining. The roads are very slick, and I was going 85 in this heavy traffic trying to catch you!" Not finished yet, he added, "You were in all four lanes zigzagging through traffic; sometimes you used your turn signal, sometimes you didn't..."

He paused, pointing the flashlight at Kay. "Is this your wife?" he asked.

"Yes," I said, quite subdued but glad to have at least one right answer.

"Have you bought her any jewelry for Christmas?" he asked. To my negative response, he appended, "It would have been a lot cheaper than the ticket I'll have to write you. Have you bought her *anything* for Christmas?"

"No," I confessed sheepishly.

After taking my license to his car to check it out, he returned and said, "Don't you think your wife could use some new jewelry better than the State could use that money?"

"Yes," I said groveling.

He handed me my license saying, "Well why don't you go out and buy her some and try to keep your speed down!" Then he turned to walk away.

Quite emotionally stirred at this, I reached out my arm and said, "You are a credit to your profession, may I shake your hand?" He grabbed it and shook it heartily and then I was immediately smashed against the door handle as Kay was coming up over the top of me to extend her hand also to her gentleman benefactor of the law!

"Merry Christmas!" she said, or some such inanity, which being interpreted is, "Oh, thank you kind Sir!" Whereupon he took her hand and smiled, as would a true knight.

I must confess that I did not manage to get Kay any jewelry before Christmas, but thereafter she received beautiful opal earrings compliments of *The Law* of the State of Washington!

I think however difficult this lesson was for me, I think these communication skills must be even harder for women.

Once, coming back from Yakima after having watched our horses run, I had come down with the flue and was leaning on a pillow against the passenger side window when I heard the siren. The cop came to Kay's window and said, "You were going 15 miles over the speed limit and..."

Kay interrupted disdainfully: "Fifteen Minutes?"

I think, "Oh God! Here we go!"

"I said FIFTEEN MILES" the cop countered, furious already.

Things calmed down somewhat after that, followed by the ticketing transaction. Then a week or so thereafter Kay appeared in court and told the judge that the officer had been “very rude.”

One time after we moved to Federal Way, Kay’s mother was staying with us for a few days before Thanksgiving for which we were expecting a crowd. I had asked Kay if she would take me to work – I was probably late and wanting to avoid the stop and go traffic. After much pleading, she succumbed. On her way back she had just turned onto first avenue, speeding down the hill to 356th when a motorcycle cop pulled in behind her, siren on and lights flashing. She refused to stop, turning onto 256th and then on to the turn off on third and down to our new home, a two-block drive to where she finally stopped. Now there were two motorcycle cops, the other having been called in for support.

Asked why she hadn’t pulled over with the lights and siren, Kay responded, “I’m hassled! I just wanted to get home before I stopped.”

The cop, looked at her license, said, “It says here that you live in Enumclaw.”

Well, yeah. Apparently, a prolonged explanation followed with Kay’s total lack of cop communication skills becoming a new budgeted item.

There was the time she was driving down to Portland with Nola and got tickets in both Oregon and Washington. While waiting for the second cop to come to her window, Kay asked Nola, “Do you think I should tell him that I’ve already had my ticket for the day?” Of course I never heard of this incident until years later. Kay has a cool hand Luke communication problem.

At a driver education class to reduce the cost of a ticket, someone in Kay’s class asked why the Federal Way cops weren’t following up on all the crime in the city instead of harassing law abiding citizens. The response was, “That is a separate department within the police department; all we do is give tickets. It’s our job.”

Once when Kay was stopped, the cop asked, “Doesn’t it bother you that you drove right past a fully marked police car doing 80 miles per hour?”

Kay replies, “Yeah!!!” with some emphasis.

Later after Federal Way had installed traffic cameras with whom it is very difficult to communicate, we picked up some truly outrageous tickets with no other cars or pedestrians in the photos. So we became very cautious when going by the Panther Lake school at show time. But carefully doing the speed limit, we still got ticketed with photos of our car 1.5 seconds apart. So with my technical skills, the marks on the road, and my tape measure used at night, I was able to prove that our car had actually traveled at 20 mph over that interval rather than almost 50% above that as the ticket stated. So I did a graphics job (shown below) that I had printed on a board to take to court. The honorable(?) judge was awful – as unreasonable as I had come to expect only from cops. He insisted we all look at the video over and over instead of concentrating on my graphic.

He concluded finally, “Since we do not have a ladar recording, we’ll let it go this time.”

I stopped him politely with, “Your honor, there is no ladar. It is just two photos at two different times.” And I was showing him on my chart.

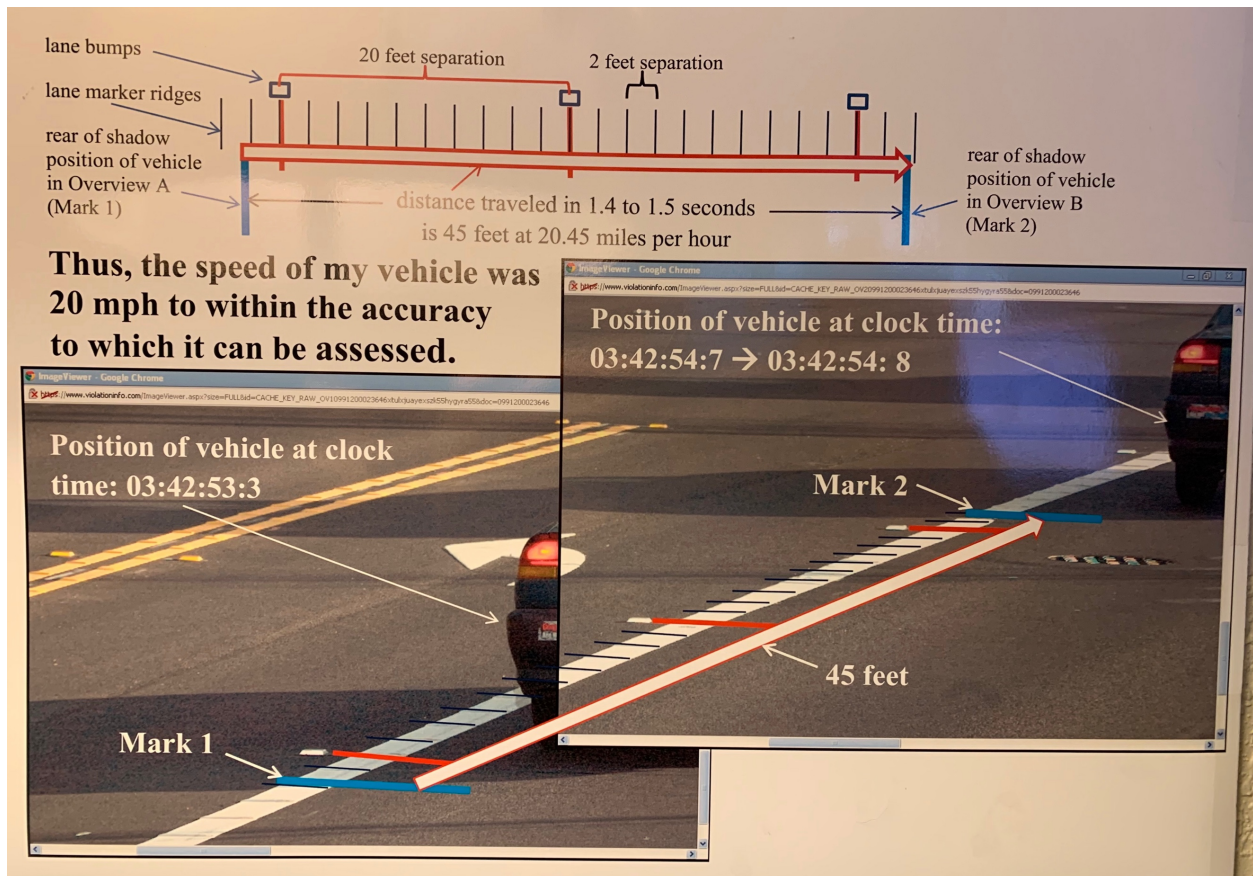
He interrupted me rudely, saying, “Do you want to be excused from paying this ticket or not?”

My cop communication skills kicked in: “Yes, your honor.” But my anger was still there.

I started an email communication with the Federal Way Chief of Police to explain that their camera system was out of calibration. We bickered back a fourth a few times until I gave him a FOIA (Freedom Of Information Act) request to get the technical description of their system. It turns out it’s a pico pressure sensitivity (or whatever it’s called) system with a circular loop of wire cut into the pavement that produces a signal when a car goes over it that triggers the camera if the time difference between loops is too quick. You can see where the loops are so you could speed

up to the first one and then slow up till you have passed the second. But I couldn't convince him That the system built somewhere like Minnesota and monitored and controlled in Arizona should be fixed.

So eventually Kay got caught in the trap and I did the analysis on the provided photos. By then they had extended the time separation to 5 seconds. So I put a chart together for her and we went to court. I had plead with her to practice what she had to say, but she insisted, "NO! I've got this handled!"



I was back in the peanut gallery this time where I heard Kay arguing my analysis saying something like, "My car couldn't possibly have gone that far in five minutes..."

"Five seconds!" I corrected from the grandstand to which the honorable judge took a major exception to my behavior, and he was done taking lessons from the plaintiff and we were excused from the court. The unfair ticket had to be paid. Of course Kay claimed that she would go to jail if she had too, but she would not pay the ticket. We paid the ticket.

I don't think Kay will ever master cop communication skills.