

**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**

Officer Survival

**A Leadership White Paper
Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Required for Graduation from the
Leadership Command College**

**By
Danny Cornelius**

**Sugar Land Police Department
Sugar Land, Texas
February 2018**

ABSTRACT

This writing will explore the importance the effect training, or lack thereof, has on an officer while attempting to do his/her job. New officers, or rookies as some endearingly call us/them, are just that – new officers. One day they are in the civilian world working a “normal” job that really does not have any issues regarding safety of life. Next, after just a few months of training, some of which includes on-the-job training, he/she is called a police officer and is responsible for his/her life and others on a daily basis. Some rookies, those who receive training in an academy then on-the-job training through a field training officer program, are more prepared than others who receive a badge, uniform and weapon then are sent out to work the street the same day, required to learn everything on their own.

Research shows that officers who receive regular training during their careers are better prepared to handle situations than those who do not. After all, when one is trained on how to handle an issue, or at least advised how to handle it, he/she will have the confidence to settle it. An officer who has never experienced this training will wonder if he/she is doing the right thing and lack that confidence.

This paper addresses physical fitness, self-defense, defensive tactics, and firearms training, along with the lack of training on safety, body language – fight or flight signals, and stress management. The lack of training, usually due to budget cuts, is sometimes a reason a department is held liable for property damage, injury, or death. It is common sense that attorneys will request an officer’s training records first in any situation. Lack of training could result in a negative outcome not only for the officer and others, but also for the agency’s city.

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INTRODUCTION

Officer safety, in addition to numerous other types of training, is an integral part of a police officer's career. Law enforcement officers receive training on officer safety during their academies as well as during their field training program. Interestingly, many departments do not have a field training program, which is equivalent to "on the job training." Newly hired officers, after their brief introduction into the law enforcement field, are expected to know all about their ultimate-goal, going home safely to their families at the end of their watch. If they are lucky, and hired by a larger department, some new officers receive on-the-job training, which usually only lasts a few months. The training is received just prior to him/her going out on duty on his/her own.

Many agencies require officers to qualify with their firearms only once a year, due to costs. A majority of the time, this means most officers are practicing with their weapons only once a year. In addition to firearms, self-defense or defensive tactics classes may only take place during an initial hiring or training phase, if any training takes place at all. The information provided from the training in the areas of firearms and defensive tactics can be vital to an officer's life. During these survival classes, little is discussed on body language. This includes a subject's body posture and signals such as perspiration, clenched fists or jaw, looking around as if scoping out where to run, and more, that can provide clues to the officer on aggression or flight thoughts. This sort of information is important but, a lot of times, is not passed on to the newly hired officers during their training process. It is usually learned throughout one's career as an officer.

According to the Officer Down Memorial page, for the year 2015, there have been 73 deaths, with eight being in Texas ("Honoring officers," n.d.). Safety skills that are taught when dealing with an initial contact with a subject lead to various outcomes. High stress situations that could end in injury or death affect individuals (not just officers) in a variety of ways. Experiences that an officer can feel in high stress incidences could entail tunnel vision, feeling ungrounded, lack of comprehension and sometimes, forgetting to communicate, or communication failure (Slotnick, 2014). One should not forget about auditory exclusion, which can limit the ability to receive and process important audio information in stressful situations (Drzewiecki, 2002).

Officers are sometimes more concerned with the "big bust" as opposed to actual safety. Other officers become complacent in their duties and lose focus on their primary goal of making it home safe. Reasons behind officers' actions may consist of thoughts such as the ends justify the means, complacency, and getting away with it, and there may not be a consequence for their actions or lack thereof (Gayk, 2011).

There should be more training on officer safety and reacting to various indicators. Training will ensure that officers are paying more attention to their safety instead of trying to rush to conclude the call for service. A hopeful outcome to additional training could be a safer environment and less injury for officers. Officers should be trained to pay attention to the subtle clues of a person when he/she is about to reach an emotional end. If a person says that they do not care about anything or makes any other overt statements that show that they are not concerned about the consequences of their actions, the officer should believe them (Remsberg, 1986). Law enforcement agencies should allocate more time and resources into training toward officer safety to ensure

that they have the right mental mindset to prevent loss of life or injury and to help them make better decisions when dealing with violators in the community.

POSITION

A clear mind allows an officer to focus and prevent him/her from losing his/her life or suffering serious injury in the line of duty. A mindset of improving job performance can also assist with the decision-making process. One lesson to learn is that an officer needs to be in the right state of mind to make it safely through his/her shift. Officers should not be concerned with problems at home or in other areas of their personal life due to this stress; however, the stress can cause poor concentration, anxiety, depression, and anger ("Stress," n.d.). When this occurs, officers are vulnerable to falling victim to a suspect's actions. Officers also need to have self-confidence when patrolling. When one is insecure of his/her self, he/she is more fearful in carrying out his/her duties; again, as previously stated, this stress affects concentration on the tasks at hand ("Stress," n.d.). A lack in concentration could affect or cause an officer to hesitate when making a serious decision. The right amount of training and the proper subject matter for an officer will help him/her make better decisions that will save his/her life and possibly the lives of the citizens they protect.

One should essentially be aware of his/her surroundings because the environment holds many safety hazards. Certain addresses and the environment in which those addresses are in could pose a threat or benefit. Various calls can take place at businesses, residences, schools, or on the side of the road. Knowing one's surroundings will help determine where the avenues of escape are. If a subject is in their home or any other place that they are familiar with, they have the advantage of the

terrain to assist in their efforts. Additionally, weather and light conditions play a part in safety as well. Being aware of one's surroundings can also help with identifying places where a subject can access a weapon or other object to harm an officer. If a subject is in their home, he/she may be able to get a knife from the kitchen. One can also access guns from various rooms in a house, closets, under the mattresses, or inside some of the furniture. He/she may have something stashed for quick retrieval in the event of a conflict.

If an officer is on the side of the road, weapons are commonly hidden in vehicles in a variety of places. Examples of areas where weapons can be hidden in a vehicle are the glove box and center consoles. One can also find weapons under or in between the car seats. Certain vehicles even have hidden compartments. These compartments may have specific or special ways to gain access to them that are unknown to law enforcement officials.

Officers have various tools that can be used while on the job. One such tool that can be a lifeline is the portable radio an officer carries on his/her belt. Charging one's portable battery prior to his/her shift and proper maintenance of the radio is important because if the battery does not have enough stored power remaining, the battery may not allow the radio to transmit. An officer in need of immediate assistance cannot call for help and tell others where he or she is located with a radio that has a dead battery. Other than being vigilant with equipment uptake, certain buildings are made of materials that will not allow a radio frequency to transmit. If one cannot transmit, they will not be able to call for assistance. This can make the difference of an officer surviving an encounter or a supervisor notifying his/her family of his/her injury or death.

There are various clues that officers should be looking for when coming face to face with a suspect. The following are indications that one is contemplating fight or flight. The first thing officers should be observant of is a person's body language. Officers should look to see if the subject is shaking or appears to be nervous. He/she should see if the subject is grooming themselves (Adams, McTernan, & Remsberg, 2009). Officers should also pay attention to the subject to see if he/she is looking around for avenues of escape or looking to see if anyone else is around. He/she may be sizing an officer up and looking to determine if he/she is showing signs of confidence or a lack thereof. The subject generally knows if they are wanted persons or if they are in possession of contraband. If officers take an extended amount of time to act, the subject has just as much time to formulate a plan of action or escape. A person's body language will often show signs of duress. Officer Ian Birk of the Seattle Police Department stated that he observed displayed "pre-attack indicators" that included a clenched jaw, furrowed brows, and a fixed "thousand-yard stare," as he had been trained to do (Miletich & Clarridge, 2011, para. 13). Officer Birk took an immediate action and was not injured in the process. If he had delayed acting on his decision there may have been an alternate outcome. Some additional indicators of something about to happen, either an attack or fleeing, are facial changes, location of hands and arms, and legs or feet. For example, pupil dilation, perspiration, and an open mouth (indicating a feeling of not getting enough air) indicate nervousness and aggressive thoughts. In addition, hands hovering over a waistband or a bladed stance could mean an attack is about to come about (Adam, n.d., para. 5). When an officer is injured or killed, it should be listed in that officer's cause of death that he/she failed to be effective

in the face of a threat (Remberg, 1986). That is a harsh statement and, on the contrary, officers are commonly looked upon as heroes when death comes in the line of duty.

An officer should also be looking for initial threats or weapons that are in a subject's immediate possession. He/she needs to remember that it is not the eyes that cause harm; it is what is in the subject's hands. The officer needs to pay attention to a subject's pockets and other areas of concealment. He/she should look to see if there is a knife clip hanging from anywhere on the subject's body or a bulge coming from the pocket or waistband. Bulges can be in the shape of a firearm or foreign object that can be dangerous to the officer.

The officer should be an effective listener so that he/she does not miss any verbal clues. The officer should try not to ask direct questions because he/she will often get short answers. If an open-ended question is asked, this will allow the subject to talk, which could provide clues that can be observed (Adams et al., 2009). While having a conversation, the officer should pay attention to the intonation utilized by the subject because it could provide clues to a crime that may have occurred. The officer should listen to see if the pitch of the subject changes or if their voice begins to crack, as these can be signs of excitability or stress. Also, the officer should listen to word choice or phrases that could give clues to a possible confrontation that may occur. If a suspect says "they are not going back to jail" or "they do not want to spend any time away from their family," this should be a clue that they may be willing fight or run before being placed into custody.

Suspects often mislead officers in conversations (P. Prevost, personal communication, August 8, 2015). Suspects may say that they have been to jail but do

not remember what for. They may also try to downplay what they have been charged with in the past. For example, some may say that they were charged with possession of drugs, when fact, it was possession with the intent to deliver. Subjects may also only state what their case was pled (negotiated down and more often to a lesser charge) and not what the initial indictment was for (P. Prevost, personal communication, August 8, 2015). For instance, one may say that they were charged with a simple assault and fail to mention that the assault that they were charged with was on a public servant. These comments are deceiving and can often lead to an officer letting their guard down. When an officer lets their guard down, he/she places his/her self in potentially life-threatening danger (P. Prevost, personal communication, August 8, 2015).

An officer, at times, needs to make decisions quickly based on the current information, so they can determine what their next course of action will be. If he/she has decided to end the interview and release the subject, then this needs to be done safely. The officer should allow the subject to depart first. If this is not possible, the officer may leave first, but they should never turn their back to the subject. The officer should always try and maintain a visual of the subject until safely departed so that he/she is not attacked from the behind. An officer cannot defend what he/she cannot see.

Lack of training also has an effect on an officer's job performance. Nothing is as important as ensuring law enforcement officers receive proper training. Not only does it increase their chances for winning confrontations, the lack of such puts the department at risk of being held liable, according to guidelines set in the 1989 US Supreme Court ruling, *City of Canton, Ohio v. Geraldine Harris* (McNamara, 2006). Since Canton, one

legal scholar has estimated that in the 1990s, law enforcement agencies faced approximately 30,000 lawsuits per year. The court made it clear in Canton that training police personnel is a critical managerial responsibility and is not viewed as a luxury. Administrators may be held liable if inadequate or improper training causes injury or violates a citizen's constitutional rights. The Court also made it clear that the basic police academy emphasizes law and discipline, but that such training alone is not enough (McNamara, 2006). When an officer is involved in an altercation, it can have a lasting traumatic effect if he/she is not trained on how to handle the stress. Another matter, as an example of this trauma, occurs in soldiers when they return home from a tour overseas that was critical and traumatic. It is commonly referred to as Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). An officer is less effective and productive at work when he/she does not know how to deal or cope with a stressful situation (McMurray, 1990). This stress can also carry over into an officer's personal life. When this happens, stress is taken out on the families and can sometimes lead to family separation.

Some officers have stated that even though his/her supervisors were supportive in their recovery efforts, they feel that the agency's support services were inadequate (McMurray, 1990). Some feel like the departments should offer more training on how to cope with being in a traumatic experience. If an officer does not receive the right kind of help, he/she may not carry out his/her duties the same. An officer can potentially shut down and not be as open with the community. This is not the overall goal of an agency since most agencies are trying to implement the community-oriented model of policing.

It is very important that more resources be allocated to training or there could be a significant increase in the number of uses of force. Most likely, because officers may overreact to a situation to stop something else before it happens. Meaning, officers may not have the tools to de-escalate certain situations and are more likely to use guns and tasers. Many officers believe they do not receive enough and request more training and some of the best street training is scenario-based and control techniques (Geiselman, 2014).

McMurray (1990) said that almost half of the officers were more likely to avoid a situation that is akin to the one in which they were previously assaulted. This shows that an officer may not carry out his/her duties in the manner of which they did in the past due to fear. This is a disservice not only to the citizens of the community but to the officer as well.

Also, some officers are not receiving training in how to deal with the financial aspect of having to take time off for more serious incidences. For example, an officer may be required to take a significant amount of time off from work when recovering from an assault-related injury or severe car wreck. When there is miscommunication between the hospital and the agency in regard insurance, an officer may receive bills at his/her home. This may be an issue due to slow payment by an agency's insurance company, which can cause unnecessary stress on the officer and his/her family at a time when it is not needed.

There should also be more training in understanding assailant characteristics regarding assaults on officers in order to prevent the officers from being attacked. Officers who are attacked by subjects who try ambush attacks are more often assaulted

when the officer and subject are isolated from any witnesses. One study showed that officers who were assaulted fit in the average build (medium) category (McMurray, 1990). This same study showed that the average build of subjects who assaulted officers fell into the short (slender) category (McMurray, 1990). Additionally, this research indicated that there were fewer assaults in previous years due to many agencies having height requirements. There are some correlations between the demographics of neighborhoods and officer injuries. Furthermore, one study by Kaminski (2003) showed that areas of poverty, single parent, and low income have higher levels of violence against officers.

COUNTER ARGUMENTS

The department's budget has everything to do with agency training. If there has to be a cutback, it usually deflates the training budget first. The cost of sending officers to schools/training, in addition to the cost of ammunition, etc. for one to attend a weapons school/training, can deplete an agency's training budget very quickly. There is a study showing that 43% of the departments studied in a three-year period ending in 1990, either reduced or discontinued training programs (Moulder, 1992).

One should know and/or remember a time when law enforcement officers were actually laid off from their departments due to their budgets. One such department was San Jose, CA police department. This agency had once been dubbed "America's Safest Big City" and had to lay off 66 of their officers due to a \$115 million budget shortfall. This came at the same time San Jose had homicide surge. Thankfully for those officers, other agencies were calling, once they heard the news, to hire some of

the officers who were facing job loss. Approximately 30 officers facing layoffs were hired by surrounding agencies (Woolfolk, 2016).

When there is a tragic outcome, which normally occurs due to lack of training, agencies often find that the officer just did not see it coming, and was unable to react in a way that ensured a better conclusion. Training is also a shield against liability suits. Deficiencies in training are always targeted in a lawsuit against a police officer and/or his/her agency (Pfeiffer, 2012). Training develops skill. Training, if it is any good, is a dress rehearsal for the real deal. Dynamic training inspires confidence. Confidence allows the sympathetic nervous system to react better under stress.

Some officers stated that he/she paid for some of their training classes out of his/her own pocket. This was accompanied by taking his/her own time off of work to attend these training classes (Pinizzotto, Davis, & Miller, 1997). There are a few agencies that even stated that they did not buy their officers body armor, and many agencies that did purchase the armor stated that the wearing of body armor was not mandatory (Pinizzotto et al., 1997).

Some agencies may be concerned about officers suffering injuries during training. For example, Durham, NC, police motorcycle officers and a sheriff's deputy on a motorcycle were involved in a serious crash during a training exercise. A motorcycle driven by the deputy lost control, traveled off the road, and struck a ditch. As a result of this crash, an officer, who was also operating a motorcycle, traveled off the road, struck a ditch, and overturned. A third officer, who was operating another motorcycle, struck a utility pole support wire, and overturned ("NC officer," 2017).

One agency experienced what is could be the most terrible tragedy in law enforcement history, when an officer was shot and killed in a training accident. The training exercise consisted of using munition, not live rounds. One officer had not experienced the pain of a sim round and asked another officer to shoot him in the back so he could. The officers were just returning from a break in which they had left the training area for a time. They had switched the Sim guns out with their live duty weapons and this one officer had forgotten to switch out again upon returning. In his mind, he still had the Sim gun in his holster when, indeed, he had his live duty weapon. At the other officer's request, he fired one round into his back, killing him (Griffith, 2013).

Physical fitness is essential to training but some agencies do not even have any physical requirements. Some agencies conduct a physical agility test during the hiring process but there are no physical requirements after hiring. One metropolitan police agency indicated that almost half of its officers had at least three of the five major risk factors for coronary heart disease – high cholesterol, smoking, obesity, inactivity, poor cardiovascular fitness, or high blood pressure – which are all due to inactivity, poor diet, and smoking (Smith & Tooker, n.d.). A few of the benefits of a physical fitness program include improved capacity to perform specific physical tasks, ability to mobilize the body efficiently, improved mettle to fatigue, and reduced risk during physical attacks (Quinones, n.d.). Some officers become/remain overweight, causing them to suffer from back or knee problems and lack strength. This is a lot, in part, due to today's society being a society of minimum standards and many people live their lives by the minimum (Howe, 2005).

RECOMMENDATION

Officers can never receive enough safety training. The lack of training or continuing education causes officers to fail to recognize clues that can save their lives. This type of training also reminds officers to continue to have the right mental state of mind when conducting their duties. Continuing education training should be done on an annual basis at minimum. It is preferred that this training is offered more frequent. If time and resources are available, this training should occur at least twice a year. This will allow officers to become more proficient in their skills.

When one is confident in his/her job, or in any other arena, it makes sense that he/she should have the ability to make better decisions. In law enforcement, these decisions could save the officer's life. When an officer perceives a threat, his/her timely reaction could result in a safe arrest or detention and the possibility of an injury to the officer or a subject is lessened. More importantly, the probability of an officer or subject losing their life will decrease. This also prevents families from having to go through a grieving process because they lost a loved one. One could ask those officers who were injured and are still alive how their attack could have been prevented and many most likely would say that more training could have prepared them for the situation they were in that caused their injuries. Of course, one could not ask this question of those who lost their lives.

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