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Selection of Field Training Officers
In The Deer Park Police Department

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ABSTRACT

In modern police administration, the realization of the impact of field training on new police recruits has forced a renewed interest in the selection and training of field training officers. With the constant threat of litigation, particularly pertaining to lack of training, police management has assumed a more methodological, multi-faceted approach to designating officers as specialists in the capacity of field training officer. Both by examining the policies and practices of existing police agencies with regard to field training programs, as well as identifying skills deemed necessary to effectively perform the function of the field training officer, this research is intended to identify existing inefficiencies within the Deer Park Police Department field training selection program and make suggestions for improvement.

INTRODUCTION

Possibly one of the most emphasized and litigious aspects of the police profession is the necessity for adequate training, particularly for the newly hired probationary officer (delCarmen, 1991). While it is imperative that the probationary police officer receive the most informative and detailed classroom training possible, it is also essential that his or her field training officer be knowledgeable, competent, and enthusiastic about training new employees (Thibault, 1985). In spite of the state mandated 560 hours of basic classroom instruction, (TCLEOSE, 1997), it can be argued that one of the single most influential aspects of a police officer's career is the field training officer to which he or she is assigned. Historically, field training officers were chosen by their experience and ability to perform basic patrol functions. Those officers who had been on patrol the longest were considered good "volunteers" for the training officer program. Many men and women worked hard and became fine officers in spite of this poor beginning (Hansen 1973).

The intended purpose of this research is to develop a program in which the selection method for field training officers evaluates several categories of performance and includes a general assessment of particular qualities identified as desirable for field training officers. The research will be presented to the Chief of Police in an effort to modify an existing policy and more efficiently implement the Field Training Program within the City of Deer Park. This research will also be directed toward facilitators of police field training programs and may benefit those officers seeking acceptance into a field training program. The research methodology will be preserved for review and for use during possible future litigation directed at field training.

Several sources of research will be employed, including the current training manuals of police

agencies within the state of Texas, as well as programs developed in other regions of the country. By examining existing field training programs, comparative analysis can predict imperfections within these programs, enabling the Deer Park Police Department to streamline internal procedure and more effectively allocate personnel in order to successfully meet the specific needs of the community (Goldstein 1990). If an existing program has been successfully challenged by a probationary officer with regard to field training officer selection, the program can be evaluated and modified within the Deer Park Police Department. Another source of research which supports the same theory is the use of case law. Previous litigation which has involved training issues within the police profession as well as the general business population must be given serious consideration when examining a field training program. By researching court cases, a more accurate forecast of future court rulings can be predicted. The final source of information for this research will be in the form of professional journals and books providing insight and a historical perspective from authorities on training issues.

Through research and program evaluation, the demand and justification for a more thorough selection process for field training officers within the Deer Park Police Department will be established, as well as identifying the legal ramifications of an inadequate selection process.

HISTORICAL, LEGAL OR THEORETICAL CONTEXT

In the past, the Deer Park Police Department has employed a fairly arbitrary method of selecting field training officers. After a sergeant has been designated by the Patrol Bureau Captain as the Field Training Supervisor/Coordinator, he or she can "recruit" officers for the field training

program as is deemed necessary. Although in the Deer Park program most of the field training supervisors at least discuss the potential of an officer to be a field trainer with that officer's immediate supervisor, this is not a requirement and can be eliminated at any time. Aside from a requirement that an officer have a minimum of two years of experience with the Deer Park Police Department, no other specific set of standards for selection have been established. In recent years, litigation for lack of training issues have increased dramatically and continues to be a vulnerable target for police officers (Otto, 1995).

In an effort to make the field training officer selection process more objective and less subjective, specific parameters must be implemented. A major concern within the Deer Park program is the approach used to solicit field trainers. In most of the cases, the field training supervisor takes the first step in communicating the desire for an officer to become a field trainer by approaching the officer and requesting participation in the program. Occasionally, an officer has reluctantly accepted the assignment for fear of losing the respect of his or her supervisor, or being labeled as uncooperative. By implementing a process where an application is required of those officers desiring to participate in the selection process, only those genuinely interested in the field training program will reflect interest and will have, in effect, volunteered. Another issue with past practices of selection process was the ability of one person, who may or may not have directly supervised an employee, to decide whether an officer had the potential to train. By utilizing a written endorsement or denial of an application by each of the participant's supervisors, with specific categories questioned, a broader base of knowledge can be applied and more qualified candidates selected. Taking this idea a step further, a formal review committee comprised of

officers of varying rank, assignment, and background becomes the next logical phase in field training officer selection. Given the opportunity for a formal interview with several different officers in attendance, specific questions about the applicant's motives, expectations, and possible perceived weaknesses can be addressed, as well as providing a forum for clarification of misunderstandings pertaining to key issues. Not only will the oral review board make selection of a field training officer more fair, it will give employees the opportunity to target specific weakness that they may otherwise not have been aware were perceived. If conducted in a professional manner, the review board may contribute to the overall quality of the departmental standards by enriching all officers who participate.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE OR PRACTICE

Since the inception of formal police training in the early 1900's (Trautman, p4), and the first formal field training program in the early 1970's (San Jose Model, 1972), field training programs have evolved into an almost scientific process. Some agencies, such as the police department in Dallas, Texas, actually promote the field training officer to the rank of corporal and provide an incentive in the form of monetary compensation totaling as much as six hundred dollars per month (Leichliter, 1996). The Richardson, Texas, police department requires training officers to meet and maintain departmental standards for weapons qualification, as well as maintaining the departmental standard for height and weight. Richardson police officers involved in the field training program must also be able to perform a departmental physical agility test at any time while they are field training officers (Richardson Police Department General Orders, n.d.). In the

Pasadena, Texas, police field training program, special emphasis is given to the enhancement of communication skills or "verbal judo" (Wingerson, 1996). Officers begin learning as early as the police academy, the value of communication and teaching technique. When a police cadet attending the Pasadena Police Academy requires discipline, it is not administered in the traditional manner of doing pushups or some other physical task. In the Pasadena program an officer is assigned a topic specific to contemporary policing issues, and is required to research the topic and make an oral presentation to his or her classmates. Even smaller agencies such as the Palestine, Texas, police department with twenty- eight total sworn personnel (Lanier, 1996), require field training candidates to submit an application to the Field Training Supervisor including questions pertaining to formal teaching credentials and the ability to speak a foreign language (Palestine Field Training Manual, n.d.). The Palestine program details in its twenty three page Field Training Manual, specific qualifications required of a field training officer, along with a particular selection process, compilation of an interview board, and the mandatory questions that will be asked by the board.

In researching policies of different Texas police agencies with a wide range of population and diversity, several common denominators were observed within the field training programs. One of the most noticeable recent changes is the implementation of a field training officer application form. In the past, choosing those officers which would train new recruits tended to be a haphazard process with some undesirable results. It was a popular belief that the experienced officer who "knew the ropes" would be best suited to take a new recruit and mold him or her into a good street officer. Often, the result of such practices were new officers which quickly acquired

the bad habits of the experienced officer (Hansen, Culley, 1973). By requiring the submission of an application by those officers interested in training new recruits, the previous mistake of "drafting" reluctant officers with no desire to train can be avoided. Only those officers genuinely aspiring to become involved in the training process are selected. The method of using an application for admission to the program may also serve to impress upon the applicant the seriousness and responsibility of field training, as well as reinforcing the support of the command staff for the program.

Another predominant theme observed in the majority of those field training programs analyzed, was the practice of requiring the applicant's immediate supervisors to provide written documentation endorsing or refuting the applicant's competence to train. By receiving input from the supervisors who are most familiar with the applicant's habits, the mediocre officer can be identified and eliminated from the selection process (Housewright, 1990). Another positive aspect of receiving input from several sources in the selection procedure, is in decreasing the probability of personal prejudice precluding an applicant from continuation based on unsubstantiated logic. An applicant will be more apt to participate in the field training selection process if the fear of retaliation by an individual supervisor with whom he or she has had a conflict is reasonably reduced.

The next common step most often identified in field training officer selection within the realm of this particular research, is the use of some type of oral review board. Though some departments comprise the oral review board of only those police officers who have rank, while

other departments employ the knowledge of existing field training officers, each board focuses on a specific set of questions pertaining to job knowledge, dedication, and past performance. Key issues can be addressed in the review board, and again, the serious nature and upper management support of the field training program is reinforced.

After selecting a field training officer, each of the departments reviewed, without exception, required an extensive forty hour formal field training course be completed before the officer could engage in actually training probationary police officers. Once an officer is accepted into a field training program, many departments, as does the Deer Park Police Department, require attendance of field training instruction a minimum of every two years.

DISCUSSION OF RELEVANT ISSUES

In establishing or revitalizing a field training program within any police agency, the necessity of the program must be analyzed. As with any training curriculum, clearly defined goals help maintain focus, as well as enhancing the program's effectiveness (Field Training Program Objectives of Richardson Police Department, n.d.). Although limiting the discretion of the training officer may alleviate some liability issues, it is virtually impossible to totally map out a teaching curriculum which can be strictly followed. For this reason, a broader vision of the task at hand may serve as a guide for the field training officer while allowing that officer to use the benefit of his or her personal knowledge and experience. Because the true test of the effectiveness or success of the agency depends largely on meeting the needs of the community, the ability of

the field training officer to prepare new officers to identify those needs is imperative (Hansen, Culley, 1973).

One of the most important aspects of the initial field training phase is the obligation of the field training officer to act as a transition manager between classroom participation and full responsibility of the trainee as an independent employee. Certain qualities have been identified as beneficial to the field training officer, including the strict adherence to good procedural habits (Housewright, 1990). If a trainee learns bad habits, he or she is not only poorly effecting as a police officer, but may, in fact, become a liability. In analyzing the training programs of several police agencies, other attributes appear to be universally recognized as requirements of the effective field training officer. These common attributes include experience, advanced communication skills, the ability to constructively criticize in a tactful manner, and the integrity to honestly evaluate behavior, not personality. Possibly one of the most simplistic but overlooked qualities of a good field training officer is his or her ability to set a good example for the trainee. Those officers who provide the ideal characteristics of a well respected employee worthy of emulation should be considered a precious commodity since theoretically, the relationship between success and failure of a police trainee is directly impacted by the field training officer's ability, desire, and worthiness to teach.

Having established some of the desired prerequisites of the effective field training officer, other departmental obligations must be explored. Given the enormous responsibility of the field training officer, compensation is often the most logical method of attracting and retaining officers in the field training program (McC Campbell, 1987). While compensation in the form of pay or compensatory time is appropriate and desirable, it brings about obligations of fairness in the field

training selection process. Along with a pay increase, though be it moderate, selection to the field training program precipitates a rise in status within the department for that officer, as well as enhancing his or her influence with the department. Considering these factors, it would be fair to assess selection to the field training officer program as, in effect, a promotion. Given this interpretation, a police department would be remiss in not observing all judicious requirements involved in any promotional process, including all current local, state, and federal guidelines concerning promotion. The promotion and special assignment process within the Deer Park Police Department is currently based on an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of a candidate and a set of standardized performance test evaluations (Deer Park Police Rules and Procedure Manual p72 - 5). Given the importance of the field training officer's impact on the probationary police officer, similar guidelines should be implemented in the selection process for field training officers.

When incorporating the aforementioned changes into the selection process of the Deer Park Police field training program, some key issues become apparent. One such issue concerns the actual implementation of the program. Several officers within the Deer Park police department have been designated as field training officers in the past. Is that designation removed and are these officers required to apply to the program, or are they "grand- fathered" from the new requirements and allowed to remain field training officers? Keeping in mind that these officers were chosen in the past because they were considered worthy of the task, it would be a valid argument that they will succeed in the newly implemented program as well, and more likely than

not, benefit from the experience. For an officer to expand and truly fulfill his or her potential, it is necessary that the need for change be recognized and accepted. This type of officer may not embrace the need for occasional constructive criticism, particularly from a review board, but will recognize it as an opportunity. Those officers who make this realization and rise to the occasion are those truly worthy of mentoring a young officer, while those officers which are exceedingly resistant to change and constantly criticize may need to be re-evaluated. For this reason, strong argument can be made that the designation of field training officer be totally removed from the existing officers, and that they be given the opportunity to participate in the new selection process. Not only will this give the officers who no longer desire to participate an easy "out", it will also preserve the integrity of the newly implemented program.

Another issue of utmost importance to any police administrator is the cost effectiveness of the program. One of the major costs of implementing the new selection process will be the possibility of overtime pay for review board members. By adjusting the time the board convenes to coincide with the time most of the board members are on duty, overtime can be kept to a minimum. Since the review board will be comprised mostly, if not entirely, by supervisors, manpower shortages can also be greatly reduced. The second largest anticipated expense is the cost of training for the officers accepted into the field training program. Since it is unlikely that the officers selected into the modified program will only be officers that have never trained, it can be concluded that some of those selected will have already attended a field training officer course. In fact, chances are that a large number of the selected officers will have been previously trained. Because of the current good working relationship with the Pasadena Police Academy and its close proximity to Deer Park, training cost can be estimated at nominal regardless of the number of

officers in attendance. Because of Deer Park's history of providing instructors for the Pasadena Police Academy, two slots have been allocated in each of Pasadena's training courses at no charge. While this agreement is obviously subject to change, the cost of training police officers is no comparison to the liability incurred from a poorly trained officer, particularly a field training officer.

CONCLUSION/RECOMMENDATIONS

The purpose of this research was to make recommendations for a more consistent way of selecting Field Training Officers. By examining Field Training Programs of other agencies and exploring the reason for recent shortcomings in the existing program at the Deer Park Police Department, some adjustments appear to be in order. To truly be effective in training police recruits police agencies should be vigilant and fair in reviewing existing programs and searching for new and innovative techniques with which to enhance the performance of their officers. To this end the following recommendations are submitted for the selection of new Field Training Officers:

1. Require posting of the minimum qualifications for the position, as well as a schedule of events to take place.
2. Require submission of an application for those interested in participating in the selection process - even those officers who are currently Field Training Officers.

3. Require the employee's immediate supervisor(s) to endorse or refute the application based on work performance and suitability for the assignment.
4. Comprise a formal review committee to interview each applicant and determine those who meet the needs of the Deer Park Police Department Field Training Program.

By maintaining constant vigilance in the quest for excellence in training, police organizations can undeniably make great strides in the development of professional police officers. In an environment where promotion and desirable assignments are increasingly competitive, education and training become paramount to success. By requiring police officers to put forth an effort and justify themselves as qualified individuals, as does the field training selection process addressed in this research, the significance of day to day performance will be emphasized and, hopefully, enhanced.

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