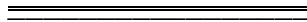


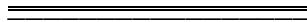
**The Bill Blackwood
Law Enforcement Management Institute of Texas**



Mental Rehearsal – A Critical Task for Police Officers



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



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February 2019**

ABSTRACT

Police officers are killed in the line of duty in the United States in alarming numbers every year. Among others, common causes are gunfire and felonious assault. These deaths happen in various locations, under a variety of circumstances, and are committed by suspects of various backgrounds for a variety of reasons. Police departments constantly search for ways to better prepare their officers to be ready for these unpredictable events. However, this has little notable effect, as the number of officers killed by gunfire and assault seems to remain steady from year to year.

In order to truly reduce these deaths, officers must begin to train and rely heavily on a tried and true practice utilized by sports professionals and successful athletes for many years. This is the practice of mental rehearsal. Mental rehearsal involves the concept of visualizing an event in the mind, and imaging the body's physical action or response to it, before the event ever takes place. This type of mental imagery has been proven to positively impact physical performance including response time, efficiency, and mental coping ability.

The practice of mental rehearsal can be used at any time. It is one of the most critical variables that officers can control before any potentially dangerous incident takes place. Mental rehearsal should be a staple practice in the day-to-day actions of police officers who hope to survive the potentially deadly situations they face every time they put on their uniform and go to work.

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INTRODUCTION

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2017), there were one hundred and nineteen police officers feloniously killed in the line of duty in the United States during the years of 2013, 2014, and 2015. Causes of death include, to name a few, death by gunfire and death by assault. It is incumbent upon all law enforcement professionals to learn as much as possible from these deaths and take actions to attempt to prevent them in the future. While many of these deaths may not appear to be linked to any singular cause or specific factor, a healthy approach to helping to prevent some of these deaths may lie in the power of the mind to plan for the future. It is in this vein that I believe one of the most important things we can do as law enforcers to curtail some of these fatality numbers is to engage in the practice of mental rehearsal.

Mental rehearsal can be defined as the cognitive review or practice of a task in the mind, with the absence of actual physical movement. This type of proactive mental planning has been referred to as covert rehearsal, visualization, or mental imagery. One publication described mental imagery as “the process of an athlete using his or her imagination to see himself or herself performing a movement or a certain skill” (Nicholls & Jones, 2013, p. 21). The concept is based on the idea that people who visualize themselves conducting a task before it actually occurs tend to have success when it comes time to perform the task. In fact, this idea of mental rehearsal has been well-documented as a staple in the success of many high-level athletes who regularly engage in the practice of visualization, which is defined as “the process of seeing yourself doing what it is you need to do – whether running a winning race, throwing a

record-breaking javelin distance or kicking the perfect penalty” (Grout & Perrin, 2006, p. 96).

Research has demonstrated there is a positive link between the practice of mental imagery and athletic success. In fact, according to sports psychologist Ian Lynagh, “What the mind imagines usually creates a capacity of the body to do” (as cited in Grout & Perrin, 2006, p. 97). There is an inherent key in this concept, and it can be applied to the safety of law enforcement officers as well. In order to give themselves the best chance of surviving not only a deadly encounter but surviving the rigors of a full law enforcement career, police officers should regularly engage in the practice of mental rehearsal.

POSITION

Police officers who regularly engage in the practice of mental rehearsal will see an improvement in two significant areas: physical performance and mental coping ability. First, there is a positive link between mental rehearsal and effective physical performance. People who have visualized themselves completing a physical task perform *better* when they actually conduct the task. In fact, according to Martin et al., there have been over two hundred studies that show a positive link between mental imagery and physical performance (as cited in Nicholls & Jones, 2013). These include an increase in physical skill by an athlete imagining that same skill being performed and confidence in which mental imagery was shown to have a positive effect on the confidence of athletes (Nicholls & Jones, 2013, p. 22). According to Lawrence Dallaglio, a successful England rugby captain, “As a result of (visualization), when you

go back on game day, you are not there for the first time and you know you are going to play well because you already have” (as cited in Grout & Perrin, 2006, p. 102).

As law enforcement officers conduct physical tasks every day and there is a performance expectation associated with those physical tasks (i.e. arrest efficiency, firearms proficiency, defensive tactics, vehicle operation), there is reason to expect that mental rehearsal will result in the same positive relationship seen with athletes and sporting success. Stated more simply, police officers who mentally rehearse and visualize themselves taking action before it takes place should experience higher levels of physical success. For example, as a police officer begins the process of conducting a traffic stop, if the officer were to mentally rehearse or visualize the suspect exiting the vehicle with a firearm in his or her hand, the officer would be better prepared to handle it should it actually occur. This mental visualization would allow the officer to pre-plan actions, including where to go for cover, determine what position would provide the most effective firing angle, and decide how best to respond to the lethal threat.

One of the best advantages to law enforcement as it relates to mental rehearsal is the improvement in reaction time. That is, officers will react quicker when they are faced with a threat because they have already visualized their response prior to actually experiencing the threat. This concept is rooted in Colonel Robert Boyd's groundbreaking theory of the OODA Loop. Boyd, a highly respected fighter pilot and military strategist, theorized that a person who can observe and orient to a threat quicker than their opponent would win the battle. The theory implies that in every tactical confrontation a person must observe their environment, orient to what they see, decide how they will act, and then take action, in that order. The person who starts that

cycle sooner will win the confrontation because they will observe and orient to the threat quicker (Bertomen, 2009, p. 27).

Law enforcement officers are at a disadvantage because they typically have to *react* to the actions of a suspect. As stated by Burrows (2007), officers who are facing a determined foe are hindered because as they “react to a given stimuli, they are at an acute time disadvantage as they attempt to react instantaneously to protect themselves” (p. 280). For example, a police officer would have to wait for a suspect to attack the officer before the officer would be justified in inflicting physical harm to him or her, or an officer would have to wait for a suspect to produce a firearm before the officer would be justified in shooting the suspect. It is clear that action is quicker than reaction.

However, officers who have visualized or mentally rehearsed what their actions would be if the suspect displayed a threat *before* it actually occurred would be able to react quicker. Officers who have already mentally assessed and rehearsed what their actions will be have essentially already progressed to the “decide” phase of Boyd’s OODA Loop. This will enable officers to move to the “act” phase quicker.

Another benefit to the practice of mental rehearsal is the improvement in feelings of competence and control, especially in high-stress environments. According to Bandura et al., strong feelings of being in control during stressful encounters has been associated with lower distress, less autonomic arousal, and a decrease in the release of harmful stress hormones associated with chronic health problems (as cited in Whealin, Ruzek & Southwick, 2008, p. 103). The idea is that officers who conduct mental imagery prior to dealing with a high-stress situation will feel more in control of the situation when it actually takes place.

The second big advantage of mental rehearsal for police officers is the improved ability to cope with mental trauma. Police officers are in a line of work where it is a relative certainty they will witness or experience violence, death, heartache, and brutality. As a result, many police officers end up suffering from acute mental trauma or Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) due to regular and repeated exposure to these types of events. In fact, according to Carlier et al., a study of humanitarian aid workers found that thirty-four percent of police officers reported significant post-traumatic stress disorder symptoms post-duty (as cited in Whealin, Ruzek & Southwick, 2008, p. 100). This is a significant problem that can have long term personal and quality-of-life implications for police officers, who are “at risk for stress-related problems that can become chronic mental health disorders and impair performance of key life roles” (Whealin, Ruzek & Southwick, 2008, p. 101).

Fortunately, engaging in the process of mental rehearsal prior to exposure to the event may help officers cope with the event afterward. The concept is that officers who have mentally prepared or rehearsed for a critical incident or situation will be better able to mentally cope with it once they experience it. An example of this would be a police detective who is required to respond to the scene of a gruesome automobile fatality. During the car ride to the scene, the detective might be able to take the time to mentally prepare for what they are about to see. They can conduct mental imagery in which they visualize themselves experiencing the event and ready themselves emotionally for the event before it actually occurs. As a result, it can be expected their ability to cope with the incident will be improved after it is over. This is in stark contrast to the devastating emotional impact detectives might experience if they observed the violent car crash

happen in front of them while sitting in their car drinking a cup of coffee. Their mind simply was not prepared to deal with the incident at the time it occurred.

This type of mental preparation has been found to have a positive impact on how people may be able to cope with mentally traumatic events. One study found that people who have “prior exposure to the contextual environments of potentially traumatic events will help prevent subsequent traumatization” and that “mental planning skills have been implemented to help reduce feelings of helplessness and discomfort” and an “increase in problem-solving abilities during real-life highly stressful situations” (as cited by Whealin, Ruzek & Southwick, 2008, p. 106). The mind is a very powerful tool in the battle against mental anguish and it is important to understand that “it is the mind that heals” (Smith & Brantner, 2000, p. 100).

COUNTER POSITION

While there are obvious benefits that come from engaging in the practice of mental rehearsal, there are also beliefs that the practice has drawbacks. One of these concerns involves the concept of confirmation bias. One definition of confirmation bias is “the tendency of humans to seek or notice only information that corroborates, rather than contradicts, what (they) already believe” (McCabe, 2015, p. 20). The concept implies that people’s thoughts or beliefs about a situation or circumstance influence what they actually see or perceive. Confirmation bias is a common occurrence, and people only have to search their own heart and mind for examples in which they have made assumptions and perceived truths about someone or something that later turned out to be false or inaccurate. As stated by McCabe (2015), “Understanding the pitfalls of our inclination to confirm what we already believe...can lead us to make better

decisions and treat others more fairly” (p. 20). As it relates to mental rehearsal and police officer tactics, the presence of confirmation bias can be a critical mistake.

For example, let us consider a police officer conducting a traffic stop. The officer, who is very safety-oriented and mindful, is preparing to pull a vehicle over. As the vehicle begins to stop, the officer begins to mentally rehearse where he will go for cover, what he will say, and what he will do should the driver display a handgun and attempt to shoot. As the driver puts the car in park, the door opens and he begins to step out. The officer observes this and begins to exit his vehicle and take action to counteract the threat he believes may be coming. The driver turns, reaches toward the back, and retrieves a black pistol from a back pocket. The officer, who has mentally rehearsed this very scenario, is one-step ahead of the game, pulls the firearm, and shoots the driver dead. This is a textbook officer-involved shooting in which the officer would likely be legally and morally cleared of any wrongdoing. However, the officer was mistaken. In actuality, the driver was not armed and only retrieving a black-colored wallet from a back pocket. The officer’s belief in what was thought to be seen hindered his ability to observe what was actually in the driver’s hand, and this confirmation bias led the officer to make a fatal mistake.

As stated by Kirschman, Kamena & Fay (2013), “the actual and potential dangers of their jobs can make law enforcement officers highly reactive to the perception of danger, real and imagined” (p. 163). Also, as theorized by Radley Balko (2013), confirmation bias is potentially rooted in the minds of police officers everywhere who might “approach the job as if every day could be (their) last” (p. 273).

While the idea that mentally rehearsing a response to a potential threat might cause police officers to react inappropriately, officers perform this type of threat assessment on a regular basis. Officers already conduct this type of immediate assessment on every call they respond to in which they are expected to determine if every witness, victim, or suspect is what they appear to be. Whether on a highly dangerous family disturbance call, or a simple traffic accident, police officers already are skilled professionals at evaluating potential threats all around them. Officers all over the country successfully resolve countless numbers of complex situations every day without excessive force or overreaction.

The biggest way in which police officers can prevent the negative consequences of confirmation bias is through training. Officers regularly receive training in the police academy and throughout their careers in use of force techniques, laws relating to deadly force encounters, and extensive courses in how to respond to various threat levels. According to Burrows (2007), these types of training simulations show how officers' reactions on the street can be "influenced by previous experiences in either real-life situations or simulated training where officers are required to react to unfolding events" (p. 280). Simply put, officers conduct lots of training on what is a threat and what is not. Though they conduct threat assessments on a regular basis, and they train constantly on how to assess potential threats, they should continue to mentally rehearse and visualize their reactions to potential threats on an even more frequent basis.

Another argument against police officers regularly engaging in the practice of mental rehearsal is the concept of hypervigilance. Hypervigilance is defined as a constant, heightened state of mental awareness regarding one's safety; it involves how

“the potential for danger” is “lodged in the psyche of most officers and reinforced by all-too-frequent reports of officers who are killed or injured in the line of duty” (Kirschman, Kamena & Fay, 2013, p. 162). According to Dr. Kevin Gilmartin, this constant state of awareness exhibited by officers can lead to up and down variances of hormones, effectively causing a “biological roller-coaster” and having a profound negative effect on officers’ moods, particularly when they are at home (as cited in Kirschman, Kamena & Fay, 2013, p. 163). These variances in hormone levels can make officers feel “tired, detached, isolated, and apathetic” (Kirschman, Kamena & Fay, 2013, p. 163).

Fortunately, there are many ways officers can counteract the negative effects of hypervigilance. As Dr. Gilmartin believes, officers can and should counteract the effects of hypervigilance by simply getting out and being active. He believes officers should avoid the urge to sit and do nothing and should instead stay mobile and busy. Among other things, this can mean spending quality time with family, enjoying a hobby, and physical exercise. According to Gilmartin (2002), “By controlling their personal time, they (officers) turn off police work and turn on a personal life” (Gilmartin, 2002, p. 118). The biggest way to counteract the effects of hypervigilance is to first educate officers on what hypervigilance is, explain to them how it can be identified, and reassure them that it is often a normal part of the police experience. Police departments can then show them ways in which they can counteract the negative effects of hypervigilance.

RECOMMENDATION

Officers practicing mental rehearsal whenever they can may very well save their lives. During the years 2013, 2014, and 2015, 17 police officers were killed while conducting traffic stops, twelve were killed due to ambushes, eighteen were killed

during responses to disturbances, and fifteen were killed as they investigated suspicious persons (The Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2017). It is a difficult task to dissect the circumstances of those deaths because a large number of factors play into the reasons for these types of critical incidents. However, the hope is that we can learn to take actions to prevent the loss of lives in the future. Mentally rehearsing as much as possible is the key to potentially saving those lives.

On a traffic stop officers should think ahead, scan for cover, and mentally prepare for their response should their life be threatened. As officers approach vehicles, they should never be surprised when a driver pulls a handgun. Rather, officers' response should have already been contemplated, allowing their actions to be focused, deliberate, and effective.

As officers approach any call, they should be prepared for an ambush. Officers should scan their surroundings, scan the interior of any vehicle they approach, and look up in the trees for a potential suspect lying in wait. Officers should have already planned their reaction should the event turn out to be an ambush.

At a disturbance call or a suspicious person call, officers should mentally rehearse their actions should a deadly threat emerge from the front door as they approach or an armed assailant emerge from an interior door even though they were informed the room was empty. This type of mental rehearsal does not take much time and is simply a matter of deliberate thought and preparation. It can and should become a regular habit.

Officers or detectives responding to calls involving traumatic scenes should mentally rehearse their response. This will allow them to better process the situation

and mentally deal with it afterwards because their mind has already effectively experienced the situation. As a result of this cognitive preparation, their ability to mentally cope with the incident after the fact will be improved.

Though effective mental rehearsal can have a positive influence on the physical response taken by officers, it is important to note that the most effective way to mentally rehearse is to involve all five senses. According to Nicholls and Jones (2013), “Athletes who are able to create very detailed pictures, smells, noises, and feelings in their mind are regarded as having high imagery ability”, and “Imagery ability is important because it determines the extent to which an imagery intervention will be effective” (pp. 24-25). This means that to obtain the complete benefit of visualization officers should incorporate as many senses as they can. They should mentally rehearse not only what they will see, but also what they will hear, what they will smell, and how they will feel. As stated by renowned Australian rugby player, Michael Lynagh, one has to “involve (their) senses in sport” and “the more you involve the better.” He also says you need to “feel it, see it, hear it – use all your senses” (as cited in Grout & Perrin, 2006, p. 102).

In closing, it cannot be denied that the number of officers killed in the line of duty each year is staggering and results in police departments constantly training their officers in ways they can survive dangerous encounters. Unfortunately, regardless of the amount of training officers receive, they have no way of knowing when that violent suspect may strike or when that deadly incident may take place. They can, however, always engage in that practice which prepares them for what they may encounter at any given moment, mental rehearsal. Police officers should add the practice of effective and regular mental rehearsal to their everyday activities. It will increase their self-

confidence, help them cope with the mentally traumatic situations they are virtually guaranteed to experience during their careers, and most importantly, it will save their lives, the lives of their partners, and the lives of the innocent civilians they are sworn to protect.

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