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We Get What We Train

by Kerry Avery, M. Ed.

Policing is one of the most complex jobs because it's multiple roles in a single position. The public expect police officers to be a psychologist, social worker, mental health expert, drug expert, lawyer, negotiator, marksman, and fighter. They're expected to provide the right response at the right time.

We need them to assess the situation, prioritize, triage, and respond appropriately. There is little to no control over what situation an officer will be involved in throughout the day. It can fluctuate wildly from a noise complaint, to domestic violence, a traffic stop, and then an armed person threatening suicide. Officers have to constantly assess the situation and respond appropriately, but this reality is often absent in training as topics are still facilitated in blocks and silos. [This study](#) by the Force Science Institute found recruit training in 3 countries still utilizes blocks. If we use a topic based system for training, we're expecting recruits to construct a multitude of informational pieces while they're on the job. We're handing them a box of puzzle pieces and expecting them to figure out which piece belongs where while they're out on the street.

Training also fails to address the skill used most often on the job. Lynch (2019) identified the majority of police work is engaging in social services and paperwork, yet training has 168 hours dedicated to firearms and defense tactics, 9 hours on mediation and conflict resolution, and 12 hours on problem solving approaches. Obviously firearms and defence tactics are important for the preservation of life but the training does not align with the knowledge and skills for the high frequency situations.

Most recruit training is still paramilitary in nature. Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce (2010) observed the formal structure of positions and the authority held over those in lower positions. They also noted the use of punishments including teasing, insults and threats, physical exercise, extra assignments, and dismissal. I have also witnessed recruits being yelled at, berated, and forced to do physical exercise as punishment for something minor which has

been deemed an offence and committed by one of more of the recruits in class. In my experience, this is done throughout recruit training.



To get a better understanding of the connection to military training, I spoke to ILEETA member Joe Willis. Joe served as a First Sergeant for Military Police Basic Training and explained the military methodology and systems approach to training. He encouraged me to review the Army's reference for Enlisted Initial Entry Training (IET), [TRADOC Regulation 350-6](#). He said those who have not been properly trained as Drill Sergeants and IET Command Cadre are prohibited from administering corrective training and corrective actions because a lot of thought and consideration has been given to how and when to use it. He pointed out the importance of developing a sense of confidence and mutual respect between recruits and their trainers. New Soldiers progress through five phases of progressive training. As the Soldiers pass from one phase to the next, the Iconic Drill Sergeants who greeted them with the time-honored "shark-attack" on their reception day progressively reveal their true colors, as coaches, mentors, and compassionate leaders. The Army has placed a great deal of emphasis on "Drill Sergeants as Squad Leaders" because in short time Military Police Recruits will be expected to function without the rigid controls they experience in IET. Joe explained, TRADOC 350-6 is very clear about how corrective training can and should be employed. During the basic training portion - the first 8-weeks of training - his Drill Sergeants would have trainees conduct no more than 5 consecutive pushups for corrective action in order to ensure the emphasis remained on behavior modification. Leaders throughout the Army's Training and Doctrine Command emphasize the importance of developing the whole Soldier, physically, mentally, and emotionally.

Do the police continue to utilize a military training methodology the military has evolved? What are the results of instructors using their authority to justify yelling, berating, and physically punishing recruits? Guess what happens when those recruits graduate, get their badge, and become the person of authority. How were they taught to treat people who do not strictly adhere to their demands? Did we model empathy, negotiation, and communication skills or did we teach them to yell (possibly swear) and physically punish people? "Do as I say not as I do" is not an effective training approach.

If you've worked anywhere with recruit training, you're familiar with the repeated call of sir/ma'am as you pass the recruits in the hall. Chappell and Lanza-Kaduce (2010) called this "posting" and I have experienced it in most of the training academies I have attended. It was something that made me very uncomfortable when I started working in a police training unit because it is unnatural. In a meeting about a revamp of the communication component of recruit training the instructors kept saying, "They don't know how to talk to people." This caused me to question this requirement to post. How is making the recruits address everyone with a staunch sir/ma'am preparing them to talk to people on the job? Is there a way we can continue to acknowledge and address higher ranked officers and build better communication skills? Why don't they address uniformed and senior ranks by rank or with Sir/Ma'am, but address the civilians in a manner that is appropriate for talking to regular people? Personally, I'd be much happier greeting the recruit class with good morning when I go down the hallway, or have a short conversation while we wait for coffee than have them address me as Ma'am and then ignore me when we're standing together.

Why are we still facilitating recruit training in blocks and silos, with these antiquated para-military methods? Is it because it's the way things have always been done? Or is it a right of passage? Do instructors feel they had to suffer through recruit training so the new recruits should too? Is it too big of an undertaking to overhaul the entire recruit training program? That is a viable reason. I have seen this done and it takes a team, including professional instructional designers, about 3 years to complete. This doesn't mean it's not possible to start making

incremental changes. Consider evaluating the use of "posting" or the system of punishments. Joe Willis said there was a lot of resistance when they implemented of the rule of no more than 5 push-ups followed by coaching regarding the error and how it will be corrected in the future, but once they started using the system they saw value in it.

I'm not saying we go all *mamby pamby*, hold hands, and sing kumbaya. I am saying we need to define the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required to be an effective police officer in the 21st century and design our training to meet those ends. In training it is our job to set people up to succeed, not create an obstacle course designed to weed people out. "Since 2009, it has not been about the old adage you have to break them down to build them up. It's about setting the standard that is expected because most people don't live that standard prior. It's more important to create a soldier we can trust than one that can do a lot of push-ups," Joe Willis. We need officers who can think critically, make decisions, talk to people, negotiate, and show empathy, while commanding presence and minimizing threats. We get the officers we train, so let's train the officers we need.

Chappell, A. T., & Lanza-Kaduce, L. (2010). Police Academy Socialization: Understanding the Lessons Learned in a Paramilitary-Bureaucratic Organization. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 39 (2), 187-214. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0891241609342230>

Lynch, C. (2019). You have the right to remain violent: Police academy curricula and the facilitation of police overreach. *Social Justice*, 45(2/3/2019), pp.75-91.

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About the Author

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