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Training for De-escalation of Force

In situations that require action, perception is reality. If an officer perceives a threat, even where none exists, he will act on that perception. While his perceptions are, of course, affected by the characteristics of the situation, they are also affected by experience, arousal level and training.

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De-escalation of force and analysis of threat are areas of concern to most law enforcement agencies. However, relevant research is somewhat limited and has focused primarily on the external factors that affect the decision-making process, including characteristics of the suspect, state law, departmental policies, the nature of the offense and the individual officer's values. One significant factor that seems to be lacking in the research is an emphasis on the officer's perceptual framework and his arousal level when confronted with a potentially violent situation.

In situations that require action, perception is reality. If an officer perceives a threat, even where none exists, he will act on that perception. The reverse also seems to be true. The misperception of a situation will usually result in either an overreaction or underreaction on the part of the individual officer. While perception is affected by the characteristics of the situation, it is also affected by experience, training and arousal level.

The officer's arousal level refers to the physiological and psychological changes that occur when he is under stress. These changes alter his thought processes, decision-making abilities, reaction time, coordination and, ultimately, behavior. Potentially violent situations require optimum arousal levels, where the officer's stress is neither too low nor too high.

In an attempt to deal with the problem of de-escalation of force, the Colorado Law Enforcement Training Academy, in conjunction with the Department of Justice, funded a project to research, develop and incorporate into the peace officer's basic training program a system of violence reduction/intervention techniques for use in threatening situations. The following article will present the outcomes and recommendations developed as a result of the grant.

Phase 1

The first phase of the project was to develop a law enforcement survey to be sent out to all law enforcement agencies

in Colorado. The survey consisted of 25 questions related to the demographics of the department, training philosophy and attitudes towards the de-escalation of force. Some of the significant highlights from the 113 respondents follow:

- Sixty percent feel that officers are perceived as sometimes acting in an overly aggressive manner.
- Ninety percent feel that their officers occasionally act in an overly aggressive manner.
- Thirty-three percent had received from one to five complaints for overly aggressive behavior in the past year.
- Forty-seven percent feel that they do not have the necessary array of de-escalation of force skills.
- Seventy-one percent train once a year in arrest control, while 7 percent have no regular training and 22 percent train more than once a year.
- Sixty-three percent have a qualification standard for arrest control.
- Fifty percent have a physical fitness requirement.
- Fifty percent provide training in conflict management.
- Ninety percent feel there is an incentive among officers to resolve conflicts without force.
- Seventy-nine percent feel that overly aggressive behavior is a result of lack of confidence.
- Eighty-six percent consider overly aggressive behavior a result of lack of training.

Elevated stress levels, lack of training, lack of control over the situation and lack of self-confidence were the most frequently cited causes for overreaction, while the behaviors mentioned most frequently as being desirable for de-escalation of force were communication and mediation skills, attitude, self-defense and physical condition and anger control.

Better training, improved self-confidence, better hiring standards and yearly certifications were cited by most respondents as solutions to the problem of escalation of force.

Although respondents consider their officers fairly adept at handling suicide attempts, the following situations were rated as potentially creating the most difficulty for officers: traffic stops, family marital disturbances, situations involving verbal abuse, situations in which it is necessary to contact more than one suspect at the same time and situations involving adolescents.

To summarize the survey results, it appears that the responding law enforcement agencies believe that factors other than inherent aggressiveness may cause an officer to utilize inappropriate force in potentially threatening situations. Providing more and better training, including a combination of self-control skills, self-defense/arrest control and verbal/negotiation skills, would seem to be the answer.

Phase 2

The second phase of the project involved observing a variety of law enforcement and training academy classes to determine how these classes either facilitate or interfere with acquiring skills in the de-escalation of force. The courses observed consisted of conflict management, arrest tactics, crowd/riot control and traffic stops; there was no specific course offered in the area of de-escalation of force. While the classes appeared to cover most areas necessary for the performance of law enforcement duties on the street, what seemed to be lacking was the integration of physical and tactical skills with verbal and negotiation skills. Each course tended to utilize either physical/tactical skills or verbal skills. The one exception to this orientation was the vehicle stops course, which did incorporate both tactical and verbal skills simultaneously.

The students' arousal levels or perceived threat levels seemed to be highest in the classes involving some type of physical or tactical orientation. Classes involving verbal negotiating skills did not appear to create any tension levels in the students and, thus, were not perceived

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as a threat. It was noted that the students in the academy appeared to be more interested in learning and utilizing physical and tactical techniques as opposed to verbal and negotiation skills. Any training or emphasis on self-control or the monitoring of internal arousal level was limited to the stress management class, which was only four hours long. There also was no formal training in the assessment of threat levels as they relate to the selection of appropriate courses of action in such situations.

Another portion of the grant involved observing and assessing the effectiveness of training exercises and scenarios designed to provide law enforcement personnel with experiential-based interactions. One exercise involved having an individual suit up in protective padding before being approached by students in a predetermined scenario. The protective padding allowed the role players to either resist the students or give in, depending on the students' approach to the situation. When the possibility of a real physical encounter existed, the student's threat and arousal levels were significantly elevated. The same phenomenon occurred when role players and students were equipped with guns that could shoot paint pellets, which appeared to add to the sense of realism.

Phase 3

The next phase of the project involved conducting a trial run of de-escalation skills as part of an officer survival course. The course consisted of five days of training provided to instructors of officer survival courses from departments throughout Colorado. The course, limited to approximately 20 participants, was designed to present techniques for dealing with potentially violent situations and relied heavily upon experiential and scenario-based training. Some of the specific topics included officers' safety tactics, legal issues, threat analysis and de-escalation skills. One full day was designated for role-playing scenarios with paint guns. The results of the evaluation indicated that the participants found the course extremely beneficial. In addition, the students felt that the role-playing scenarios were realistic enough that they responded in a manner similar to what would happen on the street.

What We Learned

Several factors appear to be critical in developing skills with de-escalation of force. First, the officer must have sufficient training and practice in all of the techniques. Further, the practice must occur when he is in a physical state of arousal level similar to that experienced on the street. If the students do not obtain sufficient arousal levels or their levels become too high, learning is inhibited, with the result that any techniques that have not been repeated sufficiently to

become an automatic or instinctive response will be blocked out by the anxiety that occurs in a real encounter. This increased anxiety and lack of proactive response would lead the officer to a fight-or-flight response, thus causing him to either underreact or overreact to the threatening situation. It is critical that the techniques be integrated so that the tactical, physical and verbal sections can all be assessed at the same time and interchanged. The officers must have the opportunity to practice the techniques at various threat levels and arousal levels.

Based on the results of the project, several recommendations were generated. The first recommendation is that law enforcement academy training courses, specifically those that utilize primarily tactical or physical techniques, should regularly debrief students from both a psychological and physical standpoint. This debriefing would involve processing with the students their physical or emotional reactions to their activities. These reactions should then be related to their judgment and decision-making faculties. Training classes should develop expectations and rules so that the students' attention levels are consistent across all classes. There should be reinforcement of all techniques necessary for de-escalation of force in the various classes. In other words, there should be

reinforcement of officer safety procedures in the verbal skills class and of verbal skills in the arrest control classes.

The training academy should develop a course incorporating tactical and verbal skills into an integrated class focusing on threat analysis and the de-escalation of force. Students should also be taught the psychology and physiology of their reactions to stressful or threat-filled situations. They need to be aware of the potential reactions that may occur as they experience different internal arousal levels.

Training should also incorporate scenario-based exercises that present the various aspects of threat. It is further recommended that formal evaluation criteria be developed for assessing students' handling of the scenarios. Students should be faced both with scenarios that can be resolved with verbal skills only, and with scenarios that require a physical or tactical solution.

Conclusions

In summary, several factors appear to be necessary to help an officer properly assess and respond to a threat.

The first relates to the selection process, where it is important that pre-employment screening attempt to eliminate individuals who are predisposed to either overreact or underreact to situations.

The second is repetitive training in the areas of both physical/tactical skills and verbal/negotiating skills. The officer needs to be competent and comfortable with both levels of intervention. This training must be conducted at arousal levels similar to what the officer will be experiencing on the street. If the officer does not achieve street levels of arousal during training, then any material presented may be lost or inhibited by the anxiety response when he finds himself in real-life situations. Officers should also be trained in the physiology and psychology of the mind and body in stressful situations. Through such training, officers can become aware of what happens to them in stressful situations and exert controls to help them maintain optimum arousal levels. It appears that scenario-based training is able to achieve arousal levels similar to what the officer would experience on the street.

It is interesting that, while the majority of departments surveyed had qualification standards for arrest control as well as fitness requirements, most did not have standards for communication skills, mediation skills or negotiation skills. It is therefore recommended that departments begin to consider developing standards in these areas to complement the standards they already have in the physical and tactical areas. ★

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