

TRAINING & CAREERS

De-Escalation Training: Learning to Back Off

March 2, 2016 • by David Griffith (/authors/338049/david-griffith)



Photo: Police File

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The discussion of how to reduce police use of force in the United States did not begin with the outcry that followed the fatal shooting of strong-arm theft suspect Michael Brown by then Ferguson, MO, police officer Darren Wilson in August 2014. But Ferguson and other controversial police encounters with "unarmed" persons and knife-wielding subjects have put a spotlight on police tactics and training and have led to the implementation of policy changes and training in de-escalation tactics at numerous agencies.

A recent controversial report by Washington, DC-based criminal justice think-tank the Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) lists 30 guiding principles for law enforcement use-of-force policy and training. At least eight of the guidelines directly mention de-escalation or discuss aspects of how officers can reduce force by backing off in situations where immediate action is not mandated by law or required for officer or public safety. The PERF guidelines were the product of a conference that included chiefs, public officials, and trainers

De-escalation is also a common theme in many Department of Justice reports on agencies facing consent decrees for civil rights violations and allegations of excessive force. A concern expressed in many of these reports is that the agencies have a "pattern and practice of taking immediate offensive action" in encounters with subjects. The obvious implication is that the DOJ investigators believe the officers could have mitigated the use of force in these situations through de-escalation.

It's Not Magic

Which begs the question of just what is de-escalation. And as with many things, the definition depends on who you ask. One writer recently defined it as: "The art of defusing a tense situation with a word or gesture instead of being confrontational or reaching for a weapon." Obviously that writer got the definition from someone who believes in magic.

Veteran street officers and trainers would tell you de-escalation is the result of a

combination of communication, empathy, instinct, and sound officer safety tactics. And its goal is to help the officer achieve a good outcome where neither the officer nor the subject is injured. They would stress that not every subject is willing to play along and officers have to be ready to use force, even deadly force, if necessary.

De-escalation training is not new nor innovative. The philosophy behind the training is that officers need to take every opportunity to slow down a situation when possible.

A good de-escalation training program includes ways to improve communication skills, discussion of how to assess a subject's situation, how to know when you need backup, and proven officer safety tactics. Unfortunately, the quality of such training is often affected by politics and other non-officer safety factors.

In-Service Training

The NYPD was one of the first cities to revise its police training programs in the post-Ferguson era. Its new in-service training program was implemented after the rise of the Black Lives Matter movement following Ferguson and the death of Eric Garner during an arrest. And it got off to a bad start when local tabloids used anonymous statements from attendees to ridicule the department. At the time the program reportedly included such tactically unsound advice as officers should close their eyes and take a deep breath before confronting a subject in the street. Officers were understandably not receptive to the idea of closing their eyes at the beginning of a potentially violent engagement. Nobody seemed to mind the part about taking a deep breath. The program has since been revised and receives much better officer response.

Other large agencies are now stressing de-escalation in their training programs. The Seattle Police Department even wrote de-escalation into its policy manual. It reads: "When safe under the totality of circumstances and time and circumstances permit, officers shall use de-escalation tactics in order to reduce the need for force."

Seattle's de-escalation training focuses on communication with the subject. Officers

are taught to respond to agitated subjects with open-ended questions, paraphrase what the person is saying and repeat it back to them to show they are listening, and to express empathy.

Dallas Police Chief David Brown says his agency's de-escalation training, which is taught through reality-based scenarios has yielded extremely impressive results. The Dallas Police Department reported 147 complaints of excessive force by officers in 2009. Last year only 13 such complaints had been lodged against Dallas officers from January to the middle of November.

Brown has credited the training with the precipitous drop in complaints, but skeptics point out that Dallas officers now wear body cameras on duty and investigations of the 2015 complaints showed them to be unfounded. So it's likely the drop in complaints is the result of a combination of the de-escalation training and fewer false accusations against officers because the incidents are being recorded. But that doesn't mean the impact of the training should be discounted. And the department is serious about it, as Dallas officers now attend reality-based training, including de-escalation training, every year now instead of every two years.

The Dallas model is one that many agencies are trying to emulate. But some are clearly putting the cart before the horse. For example, the Albuquerque Journal reported last month that the Albuquerque Police Department has implemented de-escalation as a policy but has yet to provide the majority of its officers with training. As of mid-February only 100 of the agency's approximately 1,000 officers had received the new training. Albuquerque Police Union head Shaun Willoughby said his officers are not fighting the new policy but the lack of training is making them nervous since they are required to adhere to the new rules.

Trainers nationwide say one of the major problems with de-escalation training is the same problem with all law enforcement training: There's no money for it. "When the public and the media clamor police officers need more training. They are really singing the song of the street officers. I've never met one officer who has told me we have too much training," says Dr. Ron Martinelli, a retired California police detective who now

heads a forensic use-of-force investigation team and trains officers in use of force.

Learning to Read Them

Martinelli has been teaching de-escalation training since the 1991 Rodney King incident. He says what officers most need to know about such programs is that they are not contrary to what some officers believe politically correct piles of steer droppings and that the techniques and tactics taught in them are sorely needed because of America's mental health crisis. "We put these people out on the street. Then they become ticking time bombs. They go off their meds; they start decompensating, people call in the police, and now you have to deal with them," Martinelli says.

Officers called to a disturbance of an agitated or erratic person have to understand they may be facing someone who has serious mental problems from illness or drugs. And Martinelli advises officers to stop rushing in and doing "stupid things."

He says officers are hungry for good de-escalation training and his classes are often standing-room only. The all-day program covers five major points including:

1. Officers need to know how their brains and bodies react under stress. "If you are not in control of yourself, you cannot seek to control others," Martinelli says. "The subject is agitated, chaotic, and resisting. The officer cannot become emotionally captured and react emotionally to the resistance. That just makes things worse."
2. Assessing the subject before approaching. Martinelli stresses that it's not always wise to get closer to the subject and before an officer moves in he or she should perform a mental inventory and analysis of the subject. The inventory includes: Are they saying anything? What are they saying? What is their appearance? Are they dirty or disheveled? How are they acting? What are they wearing? Are they naked indicating possible hyperthermia from a drug reaction?

The goal of this pre-contact threat assessment is to determine if you can handle this

subject. In order to take this person into custody, you will likely have to execute five actions: approach, communicate, lay hands on, arrest and control, and search and transport. If you can't do these five things, Martinelli says you need to call in help such as additional officers or crisis intervention team (CIT) members.

"I'm not saying walk away," Martinelli adds. "What I am saying is keep this person under surveillance and give yourself some time and distance to get more resources. If you go in and make that contact and throw fate to the wind, you are going to get injured or killed or do something unnecessary to that other person."

3. How to talk to people who are in crisis. Martinelli cautions that the words and how they are delivered must harmonize. In other words, don't scream "Calm down!" at a subject and expect it to work. "You can't make a difference when talking to them if you are disharmonious," he says.

4. What are the protocols in different circumstances. There are a variety of protocols for dealing with people in crisis, depending on their situation. You could be dealing with someone who is having a really bad day, a medical emergency such as a diabetic reaction, a person reacting to drugs, or someone who is mentally ill. Know what to do for each before you take action.

5. Learn to give yourself time and distance. "Time and distance compression never favors the officer," Martinelli says. "If you can avoid it, don't get close to them."

Officer Discretion

Martinelli adds that officers need to throw away any macho beliefs that they always have to triumph over the subject. He points out that in most states officers have very few duties to make an arrest even for serious crimes and sometimes it's better to be a good witness and pick the guy up later on a warrant.

He says officers have to be especially cautious about foot chases. "Sometimes you have to let them go," he says. "Remember when you catch them, they catch you, too."

When that happens you better be on better drugs or a better fighter or you are going to get hurt."

Even though Martinelli is a big advocate of de-escalation training he cautions agencies against taking away officer discretion because not every situation allows for de-escalation. "You have to have latitude to be proactive. Things evolve very quickly out on the street, and you don't always have time to de-escalate or disengage. If a guy is running around stabbing people, you have to make a force selection and immediately engage that person."

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1. Leonard March 04, 2016 @ 6:24 AM

Excellent article. Our officers need and deserve the training that will keep them safe as well as the suspects. Training needs to be consistent across all agencies.

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Berkeley Police Face Staffing Crisis as Police Exit California City (/500040/berkeley-police-face-staffing-crisis-as-police-exit-california-city)

Many officers say BPD is a very different place today than it once was. Those who left did so for a variety of reasons, but themes that emerged included the lack of political and community support; inadequate staffing, with days off denied and forced overtime; heavy caseloads for investigators; shrinking chances for special assignments; and sinking morale. Many who are still at BPD have expressed similar grievances.

NEWS (/NEWS)

Texas Department Wants to Eliminate College Requirement for Officers (/487098/texas-department-wants-to-eliminate-college-requirement-for-officers)

In an effort to increase the number of potential new recruits eligible to join the agency, the Dallas Police Department wants to eliminate the requirement that recruits complete 45 hours of college credit.

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It is tough to have effective training when the troops are not receptive to the message.

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Application Rate for Jobs at U.S. Agencies Plummet (/486479/application-rate-for-jobs-at-u-s-agencies-plummet)

“There’s an increased potential for officers to be criminally liable for making a good-faith mistake,” said Terry Sult, the police chief in Hampton, Va. “We’re seeing a lot more media coverage of officers being prosecuted, and that weighs heavily on a lot of officers' hearts. ... That’s a stressor on whether I want to stay in this position or not.”

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Training K-9 Bomb Hunters Gallery (/486713/training-k-9-

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(/486713

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North Carolina-based company K2 Solutions has trademarked its Person-Borne Explosives Detection Dogs. The term means the dog can detect explosives being carried on the body of a moving person. Click through to see these K-9s at work. To find out more about K2 Solutions' Person-Borne Explosive Detection Dogs, read "Training the BombHunters."

NEWS (/NEWS)

NRA Multi-State Regional Police Competition to be Held in Texas Nov. 30 and Dec. 1 (/486540/nra-multi-state-regional-police-competition-to-be-held-in-texas-nov-30-and-dec-1)

Known by the initials TPC, the NRA's Tactical Police Competition program was created to provide law enforcement agencies and their officers a cost effective way to expand their training opportunities in preparation for today's challenging environment where officers must make split-second lifesaving decisions when dealing with violent

situations in order to protect the communities they serve, the NRA says.

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Person-Borne Explosives Detection Dogs can detect explosives being carried on the body of a moving person.

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