

Ethical Guidelines for Use of Force Trainers: When the trainee is “Troubled”

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Steve has been very late for use of force training the last two times it has been held. Susan seems distant when you talk with her about use of force training. John seemed very angry as he performed several defensive tactics techniques you were teaching. Ron appears angry at you and makes several verbal “cheap shots” as you are teaching.

These and other circumstances should be viewed as tips and cues to a use of force trainer. They are messages sent intentionally or unintentionally from officers when something is wrong.

Both academy trainees and veteran officers may experience strong feelings or emotional distress when their security is threatened, they have unmet physiological needs or when they feel isolated, unworthy or disliked. These difficult situations become their trainer’s responsibility when it is impacting instruction or the instructor feels an obligation to bring the situation to the attention of the officer’s supervisor.

The perspective for use of force instructors to have when facing a difficult counseling situation is to follow a process, rather than simply say whatever “pops in their mind.” For our purposes, the process is a series of guidelines presented later in this article. The guidelines help you to rise above any frustration or aggravation you may have with the officer because he may have embarrassed you in class or taken some other unfair action. Taking the “high road” at such moments may be making the difference to an officer who really needs someone to lean on at that time in their life.

Look At Where Trainees Have Been To See Where They Are Coming From

Rookie officers are hired because your department’s hiring process identified them as having the most potential to become excellent officers. They are sworn in, having come from a world of which you have no knowledge of. Their experiences may have been very similar to or unlike your own.

Each trainee’s experiences will be unique and private. You may be thrown into unexpected challenging situations, as use of force related instruction has a way of revealing undesirable behavior. Only by getting into and dealing with their past experiences will you be an effective counselor. As you help them sort through their feelings and beliefs, they will choose to accept or reject the counseling. This is the way it should be. As a counselor, never pressure a trainee to do anything they do not feel comfortable doing.

Ethical Guidelines

1. Whenever you are in doubt about what to do about a serious counseling situation, immediately request the assistance of a professional counselor.

2. Be aware of your own values and attitudes. Avoid imposing them upon a trainee.
3. Recognize the importance of finding ways to update your knowledge and skills.
4. Be aware of your own needs and understand what you are getting from your role as a counselor.
5. Understand the boundaries of your competence. If you feel you have reached your limit as a counselor, seek qualified assistance through your chain of command.
6. Realize you teach trainees through a modeling process. Always attempt to practice in your own life what you encourage your trainees to do in theirs.

Source: Gerald Corey, *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy*, Brooks/Cole Publishing Co., Monterey, CA, 1982, pg. 264-266.

The Right Things to Do and Say

Have a positive feeling about yourself

If you don't like yourself, there is a greater probability those you teach won't feel good about you either. A positive self-image is a crucial element for effective counseling.

Passive listening

The very best professional counselors spend much of their time simply listening. This may be a concept that is difficult for some inexperienced counselors to accept and use.

Passive listening can also be referred to as silence. Combined with facial expressions that convey sincerity, silence is a powerful, non-verbal message that will tell a trainee they are accepted and encouraged to continue talking.

Listen with empathy

Exceptional trainers sometimes counsel by empathizing with trainees and asking questions to ensure they understand what the trainee means and feels.

Feedback

Although silence acknowledges responses, a much deeper level of interaction is necessary for good counseling. Use of force is one of the most difficult topics to teach. You must let your students know they not only understand and accept them, but they must prove they understand. The most effective feedback will be generated by instructors:

1. Who experience the feelings of their trainee as if they were their own, yet don't let them become their own,
2. Respecting the confidentiality of what a trainee tells them,
3. Genuinely accepts the feelings of their trainee, no matter how different from their own,
4. Who understand that feelings can quickly change and exist only for the moment, and
5. Who trust the trainee's ability to solve their own problem.

Giving Feedback

Invite trainees to talk

Sometimes the difference between a beneficial counseling session and an unproductive one is merely a little additional encouragement a trainer gives to a troubled officer. Such statements should be open-ended and non-judgmental of the officer.

Emphasizing and underscoring

Changing your tone of voice, emphasizing facial expressions or repeating a statement to heighten impact may be useful to enhance understanding.

Information-giving

Providing useful facts or data at a time during counseling when it helps a officer realize they have a misunderstanding is virtually always beneficial.

Exploring and drawing-out

Helping a trainee grasp circumstances more clearly by asking questions is often a wise counseling technique. The objective is to guide the officer to discover answers and solutions themselves. The trainee's ego must be preserved because they cannot be helped until they want to be.

Summarizing or reviewing important material

Trainees may sometimes be overwhelmed by what they perceive to be insurmountable circumstances. Use of force trainers can direct counseling on the essential focal points by summarizing issues. It's all right to take written notes during a counseling session.

Effecting completeness

Tying up the loose ends of a counseling session usually helps trainees to feel less apprehensive and insecure about their situation. Sometimes referred to as "effecting closure," this form of summarizing concentrates on how problems or issues have been resolved.

Source: Dr. Wayne Dyer and Dr. John Vriend, *Counseling Techniques That Work*, The American Personnel and Guidance Association, Toronto, Canada, 1977, pg. 26-28.

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