

The Comprehensive Approach for Preventing Excessive Use of Force **Neal Trautman, Ph.D.**

Many use-of-force instructors view use-of-force instruction only in terms of defensive tactics or some other psychomotor skills-related training. Yet the all-inclusive perspective involves much more. It includes teaching about recruitment, hiring, field training, accountability and leadership. Many aspects of use-of-force are much more suitable for the classroom, than the gym. If any of us are to literally do everything possible to prevent officers from destroying their careers over a thirty-second blast of anger, then we need to look at the “big picture,” for it offers many opportunities to be proactive.

There are several reasons that excessive use-of-force and other types of misconduct are likely to increase throughout the remainder of this decade. Understanding their causes and ramifications help to obtain the “buy in” needed to successfully address them.

Reason Number One: Many departments have hired personnel who should not be officers.

When the soaring economy of the 1990s caused the number of law enforcement employment applications to dwindle to a tiny fraction of those received in past years, the majority of administrators across America merely selected the best person from a small group of applicants. As a result, most agencies throughout the country have now hired officers that senior personnel say that would have never hired ten, fifteen or twenty years ago.

The consequences of appointing officers who should not have been hired are usually devastating. The character of a person does not change because he or she is suddenly wearing a uniform. If we employ a thief, the person is likely to steal on duty when a good opportunity presents itself. The same reality applies for hiring someone who is a bully, bigot or enjoys abusing women sexually.

Reason #Two: Those who should not have been hired are entering the misconduct-prone period.

Making the situation even more severe is that research reveals the average age of an officer who commits misconduct serious enough for their state certification to be revoked, is 32. The average years in law enforcement when the revocation offense occurs is 7.2 years. In other words, the officers the profession should have never hired during the late 1990s are now at the period most prone to serious corruption; the 5-10 year time span, when cynicism grows strong.

Reason #Three: Reasons for officers to be angry and frustrated have increased. Angry officers tend to commit more misconduct.

Because the economy has deteriorated, compared with a decade ago, many state and local budgets have had dramatic cuts. As a result, many agencies are not getting the additional officers they need or the increase in compensation they deserve. From the perspective of preventing misconduct, this is important because research has shown that most officers who destroy themselves rationalize their misconduct. The angrier, bitter and frustrated officers become, the more likely they are to commit misconduct. Combine an increase in anger and frustration with having hired officers that should have been hired in the first place and we have the prescription for trouble.

Key Leadership Solutions

Administrative Commitment

Chiefs and sheriffs should immediately make recruitment and hiring a high priority. All of us should have recognized what was occurring, and been outspoken enough until it stopped. Then we would have had time to make state-of-the-art recruitment seminars available across the country. We could have dedicated substantial resources into recruitment so an increase in the number of desirable applicants would be realized quickly, but we did not.

Stop Ignoring Obvious Ethical Problems

The second key solution is for top leaders to step forward and address the issue of integrity with honesty and courage. This has been lacking in the past. For instance, the vast majority of officers feel far more stress from their own organization, than from doing their job. Yet, most leaders act as if they don't know this. Administrators must stop ignoring the obvious ethical problems within their department. The majority of leaders pretend they don't know about the obvious ethical flaws. Common examples of what I am referring to include:

- Officers routinely being treated with disrespect by an arrogant, insecure supervisor,
- Promotions and discipline driven by favoritism, and
- Officers who should have been fired, arrested or decertified are quietly asked to resign.

Assess and Enhance Leadership

An honest assessment of leadership should be conducted and the needs be resolved. The types of questions that must be asked include:

Do most officers feel they are supported by the administration?

Do most officers feel that discipline is fair and consistent?

Do FTOs believe they are supported?

Has an FTO/Mentoring Program for New Sergeants been implemented?

Do leaders terminate recruits for continual, very low daily evaluations?

Do administrators discipline other leaders the same as non-supervisors?

Is the perception that the administration "plays favoritism" present?

Is communication and morale bad?

Do all leaders treat employees with respect and dignity?

Has the administration conducted an assessment of the agency's integrity needs?

The good news is that there has been more research about police corruption during the last decade than the entire preceding century. As a result, the new knowledge has exposed powerful insights about how to prevent misconduct and maintain integrity. If chiefs, sheriffs and superintendents will face the challenge "head on" by implementing the state-of-the-art training and strategies, others will follow their lead. Nothing is more influential than role-modeling.

Key Training Solutions

I use the term "career survival" in lieu of "ethics training" because it has been my experience that this title is both considerably more accurate and it is much more likely that personnel will want to attend when "ethics" is not used. Use-of-force classroom instruction can include candid debates, stressful role-playing and video dilemma simulation training. Topics should include subjects that are important but often overlooked, such as the code of silence when an incident occurs or how crucial it is for officers to intervene when a fellow officer is about to lose control.

Internal Training:

Have the majority of leaders received formal career survival training?

Has your agency conducted any agency-wide career survival training?

Have any officers been formally trained as career survival instructors?

Do FTOs and other trainers include the ethical perspective of every topic they teach?

Does the academy in your area include the ethical perspective of the topics they teach?

Has ethical dilemma video simulation training been conducted?

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