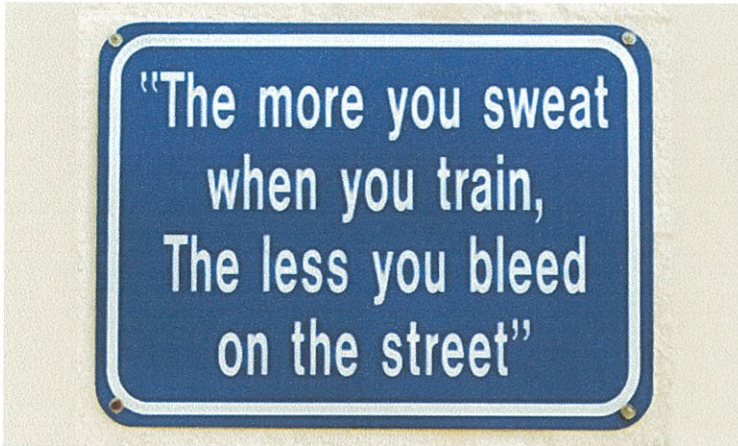


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Powerful Preparation

10 Ways to Improve Your Law Enforcement Training Program

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Texas alone has approximately 108 licensed academies and many more training providers, and every state has some model of Peace Officer Standards Training (P.O.S.T). Over the course of my career, I've been fortunate to be exposed to law enforcement training at

many levels. As a patrol officer, sergeant, criminal investigator, firearms instructor, chief of police, director of a regional police academy and now as a trainer/consultant, I've witnessed the gamut of training programs from good to bad. Often, I hear my fellow peace officers, training coordinators and law enforcement administrators complain that insufficient funding is the cause of their training woes. Although it's true that ample funding may help us provide better training, it's in no way causal relationship. It doesn't matter if you're a private training academy or a rural training provider: There are actions you can take to improve your training programs that require either little funding or themselves provide the funding. Following are 10 simple things you can do to improve your training program.

1. Think strategically: Take the time each year to decide and commit to writing what your training goals are going to be for the coming year. You should base this plan on the demonstrated needs of your target audience, both current and projected. Set a strategy and timeline for reaching these goals. Compare current resources to those required in order to have a reasonable expectation of meeting your strategic plan.

It's helpful to develop your training programs' vision, mission and core values and commit them to writing. "A vision is a realistic, credible, attractive future for your organization" or training program (Nanus, 1992). Your vision acts as a beacon on the horizon and guides your operations by communicating where you want to go and what you want to achieve. You're unlikely to get somewhere if you don't know where or why you're going there. Your mission speaks to these questions: What do we do? Whom do we serve? Why are we here? Goals are set based on the mission and vision. Objectives are accomplished in order to reach goals. Your strategies demonstrate how you plan to achieve your goals and objectives. Finally, you must consider your available and attainable resources. A strategic plan is like a

map. If you revisit it and adapt with the changing times, then it is more like a GPS. "Plans are worthless, planning is invaluable" (Covey, 1999).

2. Procedures and training program should directly relate: Commit to writing exactly what your operating procedures are in relation to your training program. This should include developing standards for all P.O.S.T. related files. Each state has P.O.S.T. rules that require the licensed training provider to maintain certain standards and related documentation. The required documents include files for instructor qualifications, lesson plans and evaluations tools, cadet files and in-service training. Training center operations that should be developed as policy include organizational certification and structure, records management, human resource management, physical resource management, student/cadet welfare and training program development and management. The operations of specialized, high-risk training must be included in the process as well. These specialized training systems include firearms, defensive tactics, police driving, physical fitness and reality based training (RBT). Each of these includes training functions that pose a potential physical risk to the instructors and students. High-risk, high-liability training operations such as RBT cannot be left to chance. Safety rituals must be incorporated both as policy and as culture (Murray, 2006).

If your training program requires assistance with this process, many states—such as Texas—have regional field agents that are available to any licensed training provider. If your state has this system of support, you can locate your field agent by going to the P.O.S.T. Web site. If the organizational development project you want to achieve is beyond the scope of services offered by the field agent, there are private consultants who can help. Either way, this is a must-do function that too many training providers fall behind the curve on.

3. Standardize your lesson plan format: Although this may not be required by your state, a standardized lesson plan format can help guide instructors and simplifies the role of the training coordinator in reviewing and approving each lesson plan. Quality control is a top priority when it comes to delivering safe and effective law enforcement training. While there is considerable leeway as to the format you choose, each lesson plan should cover the five stages of lesson plan development: introduction, presentation, application, summary and evaluation (Woodall, 2004).

By standardizing your lesson plan format, you are also helping to guide your instructors in classroom management and quality control. The beginning of the formatted lesson plan should include a section that identifies the instructor, the person reviewing the lesson plan, the target audience and the date of each time the lesson plan was updated. Within your format, you should include an area that designates the physical requirements of the training program. These include technology, physical location, classroom or field training set up, exercises, handouts, artifacts and other items that enrich the training process. Insure that each lesson plan has a formatted area for the instructor to provide a list of references that were drawn upon on the development of the course. The heart of the plan is the learning objectives. By pre-formatting each dimension of the training process, you are helping the instructor in program development and management while instituting a method for quality assurance. This process works best if the training coordinator uses instructor input while developing the formatted lesson plan. It is always better to create change with people, rather than imposing it on them.

4. Develop standards for selection, evaluation, retention: Develop, implement and commit to writing, your standards and process for the selection, evaluation and retention of your instructors. Remember, the P.O.S.T. mandated basic instructor course is a starting point, not the end state.

Instructor selection standards should address such criteria as training and education, experience, ability, attitude and inclination. What does each of these criteria encompass? First, each instructor applicant needs to have the prerequisite training and education in the area they are intending to teach. Likewise, experience both as a peace officer and in the subject matter they are instructing are both essential. Unless you have some related references about the instructor's ability to teach, you will have to discover this through the active evaluation process.

When developing an instructor evaluation system, focus on formative evaluation as much as possible. Formative evaluation includes utilizing the data in a nonthreatening manner to help the instructor in his/her efforts to improve professionally. Annually, instructors should complete a self-evaluation that reflects the format of student-based and training coordinator-based evaluations. In this way, the training coordinator is able to gain a more complete picture of the instructor's strengths and areas for growth. If over time, the instructor is not showing that he/she is delivering effective training, the training coordinator must have the courage to reassign or remove that person.

5. Have an effective instructor development program: It should be tied to employee evaluation, rewards and retention. It's not enough to simply hire an instructor and then let the status quo flow. An instructor development program should be in place that is both established, yet fluid as the needs of the peace officers you're training are ever-changing. This development program should address such issues as instructional techniques, adult learning theory and current and emerging instructional technologies.

6. Physical fitness/wellness: If you have a basic peace officer/basic corrections officer (BPOC/BCOC) training program, make sure that a validated, cadet centered, consistent, physical fitness/wellness program is an integral part of the training. If you are an in-service training provider, do the same for your officers and work toward wellness and fitness as an integral part of your organizational culture and employee rewards program. A good source of information for the development of a valid and effective program is the Cooper Aerobics, Health and Wellness Center in Dallas.

7. Use proper safety, training and development: Ensure that all high-risk training and evaluation is conducted in a manner that includes the use of proper safety rituals, mechanics of reality based training (RBT) and scenario development (Murray, 2006). These standards need to be a written part of standard operating procedures that are supported by instructor development training. The days of "scenario" training that was "made up" on the fly by Officer Jones should be long gone. Unfortunately, they are not. RBT is a vital and integral part of effective law enforcement learning programs. The variable involved in such training and the risks that are inherent in RBT are too serious to leave to chance. Put simply, if RBT is done without proper planning, procedures (safety ritual), instructor training and delivery, at the very least you are teaching the wrong skills. At the most, students are injured or killed. Each RBT should have a lesson plan that insures both effectiveness (valid learning objectives) and safety (proper safety rituals). When developing a series of RBT exercises, do not forget that you have the opportunity to integrate learning. For example, a domestic violence RBT has the potential to reinforce learning related to the following: tactics, handcuffing, penal code, family code, communications, multiculturalism, ethics, critical thinking and problem solving, report writing and the list goes on. By planning RBT, you increase your opportunities for greater learning and ultimately improved officer confidences and performance.

8. Seek out grant funding: Funding is available through state and federal Grants as well as other sources. This funding may help you close the gap between the resources you have

and those you need to achieve your training objectives. Each state will have some variation of the grant application process and federal grants can be accessed on their respective Web site. In Texas, most criminal justice grants are funneled through your regional Councils of Government (COGs). Each COG criminal justice division offers free guidance of how to apply for and manage these grants. The issue here is that you need to ensure that you complete the entire grant cycle. In summer, check with your COG Web site to find out how you can take part in the community planning process for your county. Most COGs require that a grant applicant make at least one community planning meeting in order to qualify for the grant scoring process. Usually in the fall, the community plans are completed and the COGs begin to offer free training on the grant application process. Grants are written, reviewed and submitted to the office of the governor, criminal justice division in spring of each year. Check the governor's criminal justice division Web site for details. The 421 Texas State Law Enforcement Block Grant is available, along with several federal grants such as Stop Violence Against Women (VAWA), Safe and Drug Free Schools (SADFS), Juvenile Justice Delinquency Prevention (JJDP), and Victims of Crime (VOCA). Follow the directions on the request for proposal (RFP) on the governor's Web site. If you are funded, you may gain from several thousand dollars to several hundred thousand dollars for your program and its objective. If you are not funded, you gained valuable insight into the process and will most likely do better the next time you apply. All it costs is your time and effort.

9. Use self-directed work teams: Use SDWTs to develop, implement and assess new initiatives. Remember: If you're not growing, it means you're dead. SDWTs have been utilized in corporate America for years, but are relatively untapped by law enforcement. SDWTs act to produce a specific product or service for your program by utilizing the combined efforts of organizational members. They are not committees. SDWTs have a specific structure and ground rules for operation that work to ensure the best product or service is achieved. SDWTs also promote better communication and "ownership" between agency members. As a chief of police and regional training academy director, I have utilized SDWTs with great results. Many books as well as consultants can be utilized to help your agency develop and manage SDWTs.

10. Lead by example: Learners should not be required to do anything that instructors and senior leadership either have not done or could not do. During my timeserving in the U.S. Marines, I saw servant leadership by example in action as a matter of course and culture. Too often in law enforcement training, we see the instructor teaching the "fitness and wellness" block while obviously suffering from "Dunlops Disease" (their belly dun-lopped over there belt). If they run, you run. If they shoot, you should be able to shoot the same course being taught. Be honest about mistakes you have made and lessons learned from them. The power of the "sea story" is not in the swelling of the instructor's ego, but in the transferal of knowledge and setting the example. Have passion for our profession and the impact of training on our brother and sister peace officers. Never accept the minimum standard. In fact, average means you lose 50 percent of the time. In law enforcement, neither the law-abiding citizens nor the officers can afford to lose 50 percent of the time.

The bottom line: These suggestions are a starting point, and a path that will lead toward the improvement of your law enforcement training program, irrespective of budget or politics. Good luck!

Steve Ramirez has been in law enforcement for more than 27 years, beginning with the U.S. Marines, with which he protected dignitaries, heads of state and military leaders in Europe and Africa. Steve is a certified peace officer in four states and a Master Texas Peace

Officer. He has worked his way up the ranks from patrol officer to investigator, investigator sergeant, patrol sergeant, commander and chief of police, a position which he held for approximately 10 years. Ramirez has also served five years as the Alamo-area criminal justice director, leading the Regional Law Enforcement Training Academy. He holds a master's in human resource development/training and has completed post graduate studies in adult education. Steve is a published author and has presented nationally on the topics of leadership; organizational development and design; ethics and police culture; adult education and training; self-directed work team development; training responses to terrorism; and special events security operations. Ramirez is currently a fulltime freelance writer and the senior consultant of "Lighthouse Training & Consulting," which provides organizational and human resource development services to criminal justice agencies.

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