A professional portrait of Darrell L. Sanders, a middle-aged man with short, graying hair and light-colored eyes. He is wearing a dark blue police uniform jacket with gold buttons, a white shirt, and a dark tie. On his left chest is a silver star-shaped badge with a blue center. On his right chest is a name tag that reads "SANDERS". On his left sleeve, there is a blue patch with a white emblem. He is sitting on a brown leather chair, with his hands resting on his lap. The background is a dark, textured blue.

IACP's
New President:
Darrell L. Sanders

The Police Chief

THE PROFESSIONAL VOICE OF LAW ENFORCEMENT

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The Need for a New Learning Culture in Law Enforcement

By Stephen M. Ramirez, Director of Police, St. Mary's University, San Antonio, Texas

Can you remember your first days as a law enforcement officer? Do you recall that sensation of exhilaration and the yearning to learn everything you could about this profession? Most law enforcement officers begin their careers with a thirst for knowledge and a commitment to make a difference.

Unfortunately, after several years of service, many officers begin to feel trapped in a seemingly endless cycle of arresting the same criminals, filing the same reports and making very little real impact on the community's problems. Even with the best of intentions, we are not as effective as we could be in the effort to make our communities safer. Many law enforcement agencies are simply muddling through, crisis to crisis, forever attempting to circle the wagons. The most talented officers are being lost to attrition or the dulling of their spirits. As with many other areas of society, our environment is changing at an accelerated rate. Law enforcement culture should be promoting a learning environment that—through the use of vision and experimentation—helps us to meet the challenges of today and tomorrow.

A Focus on Learning, Not Training

If we are to create a learning culture, the first thing we must accomplish is to define what learning really is. Dr. Jack Mezirow of Columbia University has defined learning as "perspective transformation." This means that learning has taken place if the learner's perspective is changed by the assimilation of new knowledge. If we accept this definition as valid and apply it to current law enforcement training, we may find that training does not always result in learning.

The format for most law enforcement training is based upon the "Behaviorist Paradigm." The assumption is made that "the facilitator's task is to ensure that

learners attain previously defined learning objectives, many of which are specified in terms of clearly observable, behavioral outcomes." In other words, the instructor feeds information to dependent learners, who are then expected to reproduce the information on an examination or skills test.

An organization's ability to learn and use that learning to meet future demands may be its only competitive edge. Change is in the wind, and if we don't begin to produce real results, we will eventually be replaced.

In learning theory, this is referred to as a "pedagogical" approach to instruction. This type of training is most often used to teach children. Although it has some validity in "task-oriented, instrumental learning," such as basic firearm instruction, it does not take into account the fact that the student may have experiences that can be a valuable resource for learning.

Consider for a moment the different assumptions presented by Dr. Malcolm Knowles (see figure 1 on page 26).

Law enforcement trainers are in the business of teaching concepts and skills to adults, not children. These adults have a broad base of personal experience and are often self-directed in their learning endeavors. In order to facilitate learning, the

instruction should be learner-centered, rather than teacher-centered.

Empowerment

Modern law enforcement training should strive to empower the learner. The most important skill we can offer our employees is the ability to learn, think and solve problems in a self-directed manner. The current trends in law enforcement training tend to focus on the completion of an arbitrary number of contact hours, followed by the reproduction of certain facts or behaviors. These outcomes are in no way indicative of learning that will translate to dynamic, "real-life" circumstances. In law enforcement, a failure of training to translate to "real-life" success can result in the loss of a human life. Rigid reliance on a pre-planned format "may be the safest and most institutionally approved mode of facilitation, but it may inhibit rather than enhance adults' learning."³

To move toward a learning environment, we must first change the way we approach training. By embracing the Humanistic Paradigm, which presents the instructor as a collaborative facilitator who works with the learners in creating objectives, methods and evaluative criteria,⁴ law enforcement training can begin to give more validity to the experiences and perspectives that the students bring with them. Facilitators need to encourage students to question and challenge the subject matter being presented.

You Made a Mistake! Good, What Did We Learn?

Law enforcement officers at all levels are fond of saying that "one mistake can erase 100 good deeds." Promoting this culture is possibly the biggest mistake we as leaders can commit. As Dr. Peter Senge of the MIT Sloan School of Management has pointed out, "Human beings are designed for learning."⁵ Anyone who has

ever raised children will agree that they have a strong natural desire to experiment and explore. Now consider what happens to the children as they pass through our various institutions. From grade school to the workplace, the institution's focus is oriented toward controlling behavior. Children are told to color within the lines; the adult police officer is told, "Don't rock the boat." Natural curiosity and experimentation are generally suppressed by our institutional culture. The result is a patrol officer who starts out full of ideas and creative energy, and develops into a "company man" who is devoid of vision. Where there is no growth, there is death. Many law enforcement agencies are dying from the inside out as a result of over-reliance on "the way we've always done it."

Law enforcement organizations are currently being subjected to environmental changes that are both rapid and constant. An organization's ability to learn and use that learning to meet future demands may be its only competitive edge. Change is in the wind, and if we don't begin to produce real results, we will eventually be replaced.

The new culture in law enforcement should work to promote "systems thinking." Every member of the organization, from the newest patrol officer to the director, should be considering how his decisions affect the organization, its future and its environment. Problems must be viewed as opportunities for learning growth. Failed projects and interventions should be reported system-wide, emphasizing the positive aspect of what was learned. The cultural pressure today in law enforcement is to report only success. This mentality negates the value of experimentation. Without learning and growth, there exists only a state of decomposition. The negative results of this trend on the effectiveness of law enforcement training could be significant.

The Evaluation Process

If we are going to change and, hopefully, improve the learning environment surrounding law enforcement training, we must also modify and improve our evaluation systems. In much of current law enforcement training, the only evaluation is a post-test in which the learner is expected to reproduce certain facts or behaviors. Of course, there are also the ever-present "smile sheets," which ask the learner innocuous questions such as, "Was the coffee hot and were the donuts fresh?" When the officer returns to work, the only evaluation of the training may be the question, "So, did you have a good time?" Training is too often used as a reward or break from work, and there may be very


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little real evaluation of the learning experience.

Training should have built into it evaluation systems on at least two levels. The first is the evaluation of the training program itself. Formative evaluation is the process instructors use to make the training more effective.⁶ In this stage, the instructor collects data from the learners to determine its effectiveness. The analysis of these data provides the basis for the revision of the instructional program.

The summative evaluation is done after the final instructional product is tested on learners. It is used to evaluate the course of instruction relative to other similar programs. The second form of evaluation concerns whether or not learning has occurred. Training is of little value if learning and retention have not occurred. Pre- and post-tests are one way to judge the learning experience. Some form of follow-up evaluation should also be developed in order to track the rate of retention of new skills or knowledge.

Life Among the "Perfect People"

We need to be leaders who look toward the horizon and not the bottom line.⁷ As both individuals and organizations, we must continually learn, experi-

	Assumptions	
	Pedagogical	Andragogical
Concept of learner	Dependent personality	Increasingly self-directed
Role of learner's experience	To be built upon, more than used as resource	Rich resource for learning by self and others
Readiness to learn	Uniform by age level and curriculum	Develops from life tasks and problems
Orientation to learning	Subject-centered	Task- or problem-centered
Motivation	External rewards and punishments	Internal incentives, curiosity

ment and search for the newest "truth." We should construct our training to promote free thinking, experimentation, systems thinking and the value of all experiences.

It is a truism that sometimes every profession must step back and engage in honest self-critique before moving forward. We are at a crossroads in the evolution of law enforcement. We have decisions to make and paths to choose. Now is the moment for all of us to take that step back, and then begin moving forward by implementing a new learning

culture in law enforcement. ❖

¹ P.M. Cunningham and S.B. Merriam, *Handbook of Adult and Continuing Education* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1989).

² *Ibid.*

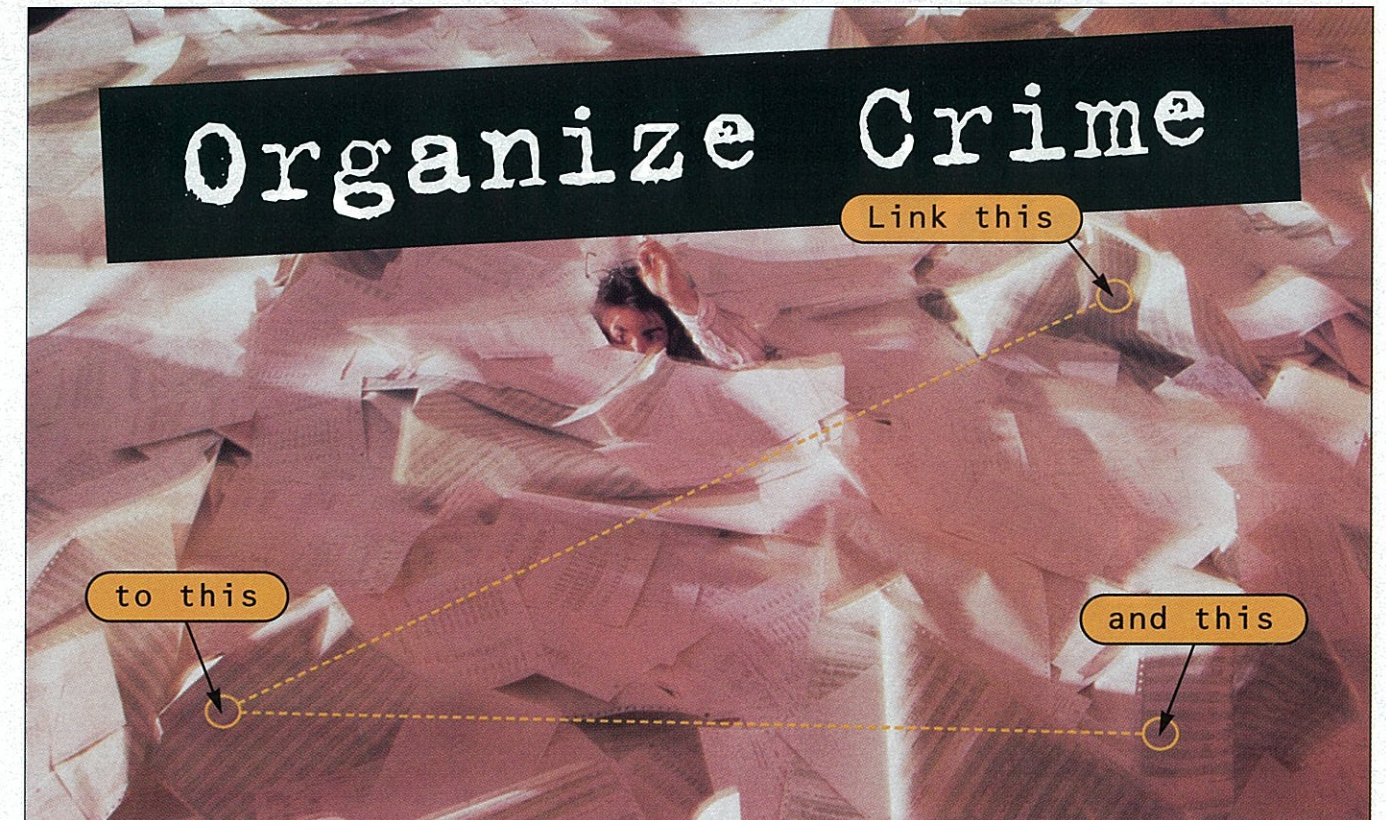
³ *Ibid.*

⁴ *Ibid.*

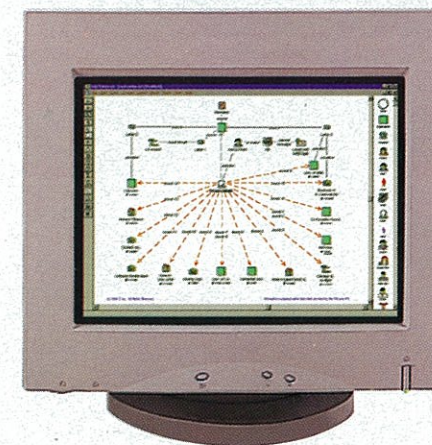
⁵ P.M. Senge, "The Leader's New Work: Building Learning Organizations," in *Sloan Management Review*, 1990, Vol. 32, No. 1.

⁶ W. Dick and L. Carey, *The Systematic Design of Instruction* (New York, NY: Harper Collins, 1990).

⁷ W. Bennis, *Why Leaders Can't Lead: The Unconscious Conspiracy Continues* (San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass, 1989).



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