

## **Training to the Lowest Level: Are We Handicapping Our Officers?**

By Bennie Cooley

As law enforcement firearms trainers, we are responsible for passing on lifesaving information. In fact, the critical nature of our subject matter demands that we teach realistic, cutting-edge applications for officers to use on the street. In order to stay ahead of the curve, we must continually search for ways to refine and improve the manner in which we teach, as well as the subjects and approach to the ever-evolving threats we face.

Normally, this struggle for improvement will require us to step outside of our personal comfort zones and readily embrace change. It is within this area, “readily embrace change” that I believe we fall seriously short. It’s important to understand that the “we” I am referring to is the entire organization, including administrators, supervisors, trainers and officers. The heart and drive of the law enforcement organization must be unified. The administration and supervisors must work for the good of the troops at all times. And, the troops must embrace the direction of the leadership and reflect their guidance. This does not mean that officers can’t disagree with the administration’s decisions—they most certainly have that option. However, until departmental policies are changed, we must be unified and stand together to succeed. There is no other way; we must work as a single unit.

As firearms trainers, our desire to improve should have nothing to do with how big our budget is or what type of equipment we have. Because our hope for improvement is a measurement of our heart and will, none of us can take on the “poor me” attitude. We *must* take the higher road in order to see real improvement. Optimally, our desire to excel must be instilled in our core values at every level. Success in maintaining these values will only be met through our willingness to sacrifice to improve ourselves. Sacrifice will be essential if we are to achieve our goals.

Again, I stress that the “we” includes everyone in the department. All of us must be willing to do whatever it takes to accomplish the mission, as long as it fits within the guidelines established by the organization. Don’t allow yourself to become sidetracked! If the actions required to accomplish the mission are outside of the boundaries, it is quite possible that the boundaries should be re-evaluated.

When it comes to physical performance, all too often, we lower our standards to accommodate our weakest performers. This is an extremely unwise practice and one we should guard against. Our shooting qualifications provide concrete examples of what happens when we lower our standards. More often than not, the physical constraints and accuracy required of our officers are far less than what they will be expected to accomplish on the street. While sugar-coating the standards by establishing more elaborate time frames and larger, easier-to-hit targets may improve hit ratios, we all *know* it weakens the officer’s ability to survive.

Unfortunately, every law enforcement agency in America has officers who will only fire their weapon when they are required to qualify (in some cases, only once or twice per year). If our officers are not required to practice, and just attempt to squeak by, meeting the lowest expectations, I guarantee that the standards to which they are tested don't truly resemble what they will be faced with on the street. We *know* that this practice/standard is not acceptable, and so do most officers and administrators within the department. However, for whatever reason we choose *not* to change it. In *knowing* that the practice is unacceptable and continuing to do it regardless of the consequences, "we" are really saying, "we don't care" or "it won't happen!" Our lack of initiative to make necessary changes simply is not acceptable. We know that law enforcement officers' safety and well being is important and we must make concessions to improve their standard of training, and make them rise to a higher level.

Before we place all of the blame on the administrators and trainers, remember, many officers refuse to go the extra mile themselves. Apparently, they have a misconception that they don't have to put in extra time or they aren't really worried about having to use their weapon during their career. Some have the false impression that they are good enough shooters, and don't need to practice. Self-assuredness is a good thing. However, when it truly counts, the only way you will be able to have confidence in your actions, equipment and decision-making ability is to have put in the practice time. There are no short cuts.

Imagine that we have a crystal ball that will allow us to see into the future. Through this crystal ball, you can see that you will have a deadly force encounter three weeks from today. If you could see that a certain technique, tactic or aspect of physical training would keep you alive, would you venture out of your personal comfort zone to obtain the necessary skills, would you sacrifice whatever (time, money, attention span) was needed or would it be too much trouble? If you, as a trainer, could see that one of your officers would be involved in a gunfight, would you be a little more persistent in making him rise to the level of training that you know he will need to survive? Absolutely! Would you increase his level of training or would you just let him slide by, firing only the minimum number of rounds in a stress-free environment? We need to ask ourselves if the level of training we are providing is really adequate? Is it truly what we believe in? Is it good enough when our officers encounter a deadly threat? If not, we need to make some changes, and we need to make them now!

The performance level in which we test our officers' effectiveness while on duty is ultimately approved by the administration, and was probably largely influenced by the subject-matter experts in the department. As such, we all have ownership in the scenario listed above and the final product. Although most of the training and decisions are usually adequate, I believe that when it comes to the tactics and firearms section, we may be seriously lacking. While I believe that all instructors will teach to the best of their ability, some may be lacking in their knowledge base of skills. This is normally not the fault of the instructor, as many departments may not have the resources (funding, management, support) to allow them to learn outside of their department. If this is the case, there is a high probability that they will become inbred in their skills. Without cross

training, involving different agencies and organizations, there is no sense of balance. There is no system of measurement to gage if they are on the right track. Also, if all our instructors teach to the basic level, their knowledge will soon reflect their teaching. We must continue to learn and cross train.

The second part of the equation is the individual officer's will and internal drive to learn and train. We have to train. Regardless of our workload or the support of our management, we have to train. It has been said, "In a crisis, you will not rise to the occasion, but merely *default* to your level of training." One common dilemma is the fact that firearms trainers never have a chance to train their officers past the basics. There are several reasons for this, most of which can be attributed to a lack of training time, or not being organized enough to maximize the allotted time they do have. The other reason is that we, as firearms instructors, do not believe that most of the officers we're training are intelligent enough or committed enough to understand or become proficient with what we consider to be advanced tactics or shooting drills. Do not make this mistake!

Firearms and tactical instructors must not restrict their students' knowledge base by believing that they won't rise to the occasion. We must not limit them by convincing them that they are not intelligent or motivated enough to try. If anything, we must give them too many options for success, and let *them* decide how to implement what they have learned. I would rather teach them to a higher level and make them rise to the challenge, than to stay at the basic level and cheat them out of options they may need in order to win a gunfight and go home safely to their family.

Will some techniques require more practice? Absolutely. However, as long as safety is not a concern, this should be the student's decision; they should have the choice of expending the time and energy to master the skill. While teaching a class to a group of firearms/tactical instructors, one of the trainers commented that he could never teach the technique to his officers because it was far too advanced. When I asked him if it was beyond their ability to mentally understand or physically perform, he answered "no." He believed that it was too advanced for them because it would require them to train more than twice a year to become proficient. Basically, this instructor was making the assumption that the officers would not train on the technique because they were lazy. Granted, there are officers who are less than energetic. However, are you sure you want to make the decision for them and withhold information that could keep them alive? Let's say that only 20% of the officers in a department will truly train. That's great! We are 20% closer to success if we teach them to the best of our knowledge, rather than if we withhold what we think are advanced tactics because we don't believe they can grasp them. When the class was asked if they would like me to assume the same philosophy with them (that they were too lazy, or too dense to learn), the answer was an overwhelming "no." In fact, it was just the opposite; they wanted me to transfer all of the knowledge that I possessed, and allow *them* to decide what was important. You must do the same with your officers.

*Knowledge that is not shared is ignorance. We must understand that no one owns anything in this environment, as doing so will only get others killed.*

Another pitfall is that each department will have ridiculously large numbers of officers fall into the ever-popular “if the department isn’t going to pay me to train, I’m not going to do it on my own” category. This is a huge mistake because ultimately, you are hurting your family, your community and yourself. Don’t get me wrong, I believe the organization should provide training time and compensation. However, this rarely comes to pass. We must face facts: most departments are understaffed and underbudgeted. Therefore, we must take the initiative to train *on our own*. From a departmental standpoint, a lack of resources should become a priority to change and improve over time, because failure to take steps to raise the bar amounts to stepping in the wrong direction. Firearms standards must be established to test the officer’s ability to perform under the kinds of stress he will face on the street.

Firearms training (even advanced techniques) are not beyond the officer’s ability to mentally understand or physically execute. The only two reasons officers will fail to become proficient is that fighting with a firearm at a higher level is not important to them, or they are not willing to put in the time and energy it takes to raise their performance level. There is no middle ground here. As an organization, we cannot allow poor performance to drive our standards. We cannot handicap our officers by restricting what they are allowed to learn because we think they are not intelligent enough to know when to use a certain piece of equipment, or because we don’t think they will train enough to become proficient in advanced techniques. We must teach to a high standard, always encouraging our students to better themselves. We must allow them to make the decision as to how important a tactic is, how important it may be late one night in a dark alley, in the middle of a deadly force encounter. We must allow them to be in control of their own destiny and utilize a multitude of options in a gunfight. Once we have provided our officers with the necessary tools and training, the standards should never drop. They should be maintained and improved upon. This will allow us to take a closer look at our selection process and the tools for removing officers from their positions when “less than adequate” performance is noted.

Being a firearms trainer/instructor is not an easy job. It involves much more than just scripting out a firing course and running students through the motions on a static range. We owe it to our officers and communities to teach to a higher level and to continue to expect optimum performance.