



## Pick Your FTOs Carefully

[Richard R. Johnson, Ph.D.](#)

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Field Training Officers (FTOs) play a crucial role in preparing new officers for the complexity of the job, and transmitting the police department culture to these new officers. **In the police academy, recruits develop a foundational “book knowledge,” but it is the field training portion that teaches them how to fairly and impartially apply all they have learned to real-world situations.** FTOs cultivate in new officers a set of values and priorities that the new officers use as a lens through which to view the job, the department, and the community. The FTO teaches the new officer what behaviors and attitudes are accepted by the department – officially or unofficially. **Since FTOs play such an important role in the formation and transmission of the agency’s culture, law enforcement agencies should be very careful about who they select as FTOs. Agencies need to devote careful attention to the selection, training, and ongoing supervision of their FTOs.**

One might anticipate that those officers selected to become FTOs are among the best patrol officers on the department. One might imagine FTOs display ethical standards, positivity, and performance at a higher rate than their peers. This, however, is not always the case. Criminologist Ivan Sun studied FTOs within two large city police departments. As one would expect, his research revealed that, in general, the FTOs were more proactive than non-FTOs in attempting to locate suspects and witnesses. They were also more likely than their peers to display problem-solving skills when handling calls for service.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Sun, I. Y. (2002). Police officer attitudes toward peers, supervisors, and citizens: a comparison between field training officers and regular officers. *American Journal of Criminal Justice*, 27(1), 69-83; Sun, I. Y. (2003). A comparison of police field training officers’ and nontraining officers’ conflict resolution styles: controlling versus supportive strategies. *Police Quarterly*, 6(1), 22-50; Sun, I. Y. (2003). Officer proactivity: a comparison between police field training officers and non-field training officers. *Journal of Criminal Justice*, 31(3), 265-277.

FTOs did not differ from non-FTOs, however, in a number of other areas. In level of proactivity for security checks, field interrogations, and traffic stops, FTOs and non-FTOs also were generally very similar. FTOs and non-training officers also were similar in their frequency or severity of use of force, and in their attitudes toward co-workers and members of the public. Of the two police departments Dr. Sun studied, on one department he found that the FTOs were generally more critical of their immediate supervisors and their department's command staff than were non-training officers. While all officers gripe at times, these FTOs were much more likely than non-training officers to criticize the department.<sup>2</sup>

Consider the impact such a situation would have, as disgruntled officers with insubordinate attitudes are training the next generation of patrol officers. In fact, **several researchers, from the 1970s to the 2000s, have documented examples of FTOs directing new officers to “forget everything they learned in the academy” and indoctrinating them in a new set of values not fully supported by management.**<sup>3</sup>

Two studies illustrate the influence FTOs can have on the generation of officers they train. The first study, conducted by Criminologist Allison Chappell of Old Dominion University, examined an attempt to implement community problem-oriented policing into one city police department. Despite that fact that all of the existing officers received a short training course on community policing, departmental policies changed to reflect this new policing strategy, and new recruits in the academy received extensive community policing training, the department struggled to change its philosophy. Dr. Chappell's research revealed that one significant hindrance to the acceptance of community problem-oriented policing was the lack of buy-in by the department's FTOs. These FTOs failed to model community policing behavior and discouraged rookie officers from engaging in community policing activities, communicating “we don't do that crap.”<sup>4</sup>

The second study was conducted by a criminologist and former law enforcement officer, Ryan Getty of California State University Sacramento. Dr. Getty studied 218 new officers on one large city police department, tracking their performance across their first two years on the job. Despite the fact this police department had a very stringent FTO selection process, Dr. Getty found that not all of the department's FTOs produced good outcomes. He found that who an officer had as an FTO strongly predicted whether or not that officer would receive citizen complaints during his or her first two years of work experience. If a rookie officer had experience riding with one

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<sup>2</sup> Sun (2002); Sun (2003).

<sup>3</sup> Chappell, A. T. (2007). Community policing: Is field training the missing link? *Policing: An International Journal of Police Strategies & Management*, 30, 498-517; Ford, R. E. (2003). Saying one thing, meaning another: the role of parables in police training, *Police Quarterly*, 6(1), 84-110; Van Maanen, J. (1973). Observations on the making of policeman. *Human Organization*, 32, 407-418; Van Maanen, J. (1974). Working the street: A developmental view of police behavior. In H. Jacob (Ed.), *The Potential for Reform of Criminal Justice* (pp. 90-92). Beverly Hills, CA: SAGE.

<sup>4</sup> Chappell (2007).

of a couple of specific FTOs, they had a higher likelihood of receiving a citizen complaint than did rookies who never rode with these specific FTOs.<sup>5</sup>

As all of the officers in field training had to spend time riding along with at least three different FTOs, many officers had exposure to these troublesome FTOs. Still, officers who had never ridden with these troublesome FTOs were less likely to earn citizen complaints when they were cut loose to patrol on their own. Not surprisingly, Dr. Getty found that the more rides a rookie officer had with one of the troublesome FTOs, the greater the odds the rookie would receive citizen complaints.<sup>6</sup>

Unfortunately, Dr. Getty's study did not delve further to learn exactly what these troublesome FTOs were doing differently. On the department that was studied, the FTO selection and review process was very stringent (thus the reason for the study), and officers could be removed from the FTO assignment if they accumulated a substantiated citizen complaint. As a result, it was unlikely these troublesome FTOs were engaging in significant misconduct. It could have been that the troublesome FTOs were possibly modeling improper attitudes towards departmental policies and/or the community. For example, it's possible that after dealing with a particularly difficult citizen, and doing so appropriately, the FTO later vented to the rookie officer, "If I had not been wearing a body camera I would have tuned that guy up for talking to me that way." The FTO may have been simply blowing off steam and may never have engaged in unnecessary force, but such a statement may be interpreted by the impressionable rookie as a cultural value that it is okay to use unnecessary force as long as one can safely get away with it.

The problem might also have been something different. Instead of modeling negative values, the troublesome FTOs might have failed to address the rookies' negative values. The FTOs might have been timid, burned out, or did not feel empowered (felt the department had their backs), causing them to be reluctant to reign in some troublesome behaviors they might have seen in their trainees. Regardless of the mechanism, these few FTOs contributed to the rough career starts of some rookie officers and some unnecessarily negative police-citizen interactions.

Clearly the field training process plays an important role in the development of new officers. Therefore **it is crucial that only FTOs who will convey the proper work behaviors and attitudes should be assigned to this job. Your agency needs to carefully select FTOs who portray the work behaviors you want to see in all of your officers.** Your agency needs to carefully select FTOs who share the values and attitudes you want to see in all of your officers. Your agency needs to carefully train FTOs how to properly teach new officers and remind them that they are constantly being observed and modeled by their rookies. Your agency needs to monitor your FTOs to ensure they are not getting burned out or their attitudes have changed over the years.

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<sup>5</sup> Getty, R., Worrall, J. L., & Morris, R. G. (2016). How far from the tree does the apple fall? Field training officers, their trainees, and allegations of misconduct. *Crime and Delinquency*, 62(6), 821-839.

<sup>6</sup> Getty et al. (2016).

**Finally, your agency needs to empower your FTOs so that they can be confident that they will be supported when they confront inappropriate rookie behaviors or attitudes, even to the point of terminating the rookie. After all, FTOs are often in the best position to determine if a new officer is, or is not, a salvageable member of the agency. For better or worse, FTOs play a crucial role in determining the future work culture and success of your department.**