



Retraining Cops after Two Years of “Wait and See” Neglect

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About two years ago, in the Spring of 2020, newly hired police recruits were about to begin their all-important field training program. They were ready to put their academy training to use in the field. But **the one-two punch of COVID-19 and the “no contact, no complaint” mentality that permeated the profession in the wake of civil unrest and calls for defunding the police lead to a training gap for far too many officers in far too many agencies.**

In 2020 and 2021, wave after wave of individuals joined the law enforcement profession. These brave men and women chose a law enforcement career during a period when being a law enforcement officer was very unpopular. They completed their academy training, in which they learned the most rudimentary skills required for law enforcement officers. Then, they graduated to field training with a field training officer (FTO), where they would be expected to begin practicing their basic skills in a real-world environment. They would learn how to make vehicle stops, handle calls for service, make arrests, complete the booking process, testify in court, identify suspicious circumstances, “read” people and de-escalate interpersonal conflicts, all under the tutelage of an experienced FTO.

They were to complete their field training period and then begin solo patrol, while still on probation, under the watchful coaching of street sergeants. These field supervisors would continue to provide training, guidance and feedback as the rookie officers completed their first years on the job, encountering many scenarios for the first time.

Unfortunately, far too many law enforcement officers hired over the last two years simply did not get that caliber of field training and field supervision experience. First, the pandemic hit. Traffic, crimes and calls for service declined during lockdowns. The jails discouraged agencies from

booking arrestees and many courts closed down most operations. Administrative functions within law enforcement agencies that could be performed remotely from home or one's patrol vehicle were encouraged so that personnel could avoid the police station. In-service training was canceled or shifted to online learning. **Proactive stops were discouraged. And thousands of new officers across the nation spent their crucial field training periods and rookie years standing by and doing remarkably little.**

Then, the civil unrest and “defund the police” protest movement gave these rookie officers some valuable civil disturbance experience, but denied them more routine policing experiences. The anti-police movement fostered a “no contact, no complaint” mentality among many experienced officers, which in turn denied rookie officers valuable field experience. Their FTOs often adopted this mentality and subsequently infected many of the rookie officers with the same mindset, as the avoidance of proactive policing became the norm within the agency, precinct or shift.

At the same time, high turnover in the law enforcement profession meant that thousands of officers moved up in the ranks to become new FTOs or sergeants across the nation. Instead of conducting proper field training and proactive shift work, however, their time was spent social distancing, managing protests and responding only to calls for service that could not be resolved over the phone. This was compounded by the impact had by months of anti-police rhetoric, talks of “reimagining” public safety by replacing cops with social workers and the defunding of municipal agencies, which ultimately damaged the morale of the officers these FTOs and sergeants were supposed to train and lead.

Now, two years later, agency leaders across the country are realizing that we have a real problem. The unintended consequences of these COVID safety measures and political pressures resulted in modified training and operational responses that often did not work. Critical skill development—professional responses to crimes in progress, traffic enforcement and field contacts—have been compromised. **We must, with a sense of urgency, foster and protect our investment in police talent. We must clarify the true mission of our agencies and restore confidence in officers' abilities to proficiently perform fundamental law enforcement tasks.**

A new group of officers that were denied valuable training, coaching, and experience in fundamental proactive police work was born. A new group of FTOs and field supervisors that were denied training and experience in how to lead in a proactive police work environment was also born. **As the pendulum swings back toward proactive policing, in response to the inevitable spikes in crime that de-policing fosters, many officers, FTOs and field supervisors are ill-equipped to take on revived proactive policing tasks. These groups of new officers are being labeled “COVID cops” within many agencies, and they are in desperate need of the training that they did not receive over the course of the last two years. Likewise, their newer front-**

line supervisors and FTOs were also denied similar guidance, experience, and training for their current roles.

Simply telling these officers to “go out there and get guns off the street” is not enough. Public safety and officer safety are imperiled when inexperienced officers jump into action without proper training and experience. Legal liability and damage to public trust is a regrettable and predictable outcome.

The Basics: Just Like Blocking and Tackling

Anyone who has ever closely watched a football game recognizes good blocking and tackling when they see it on the field. They can describe it and even identify when these actions are performed the right way or the wrong way. Executing an effective block or tackle on the football field, however, is an entirely different task. Blocking another player or tackling the ball carrier in a manner that is effective and does not result in a penalty takes practice, coaching and repetition. **The concepts of blocking and tackling may be simple, but the actual performance takes practice. The same is true for the basic skills of policing. We can teach the basic concepts in the academy, but the real learning happens through practice and repetition in the field.**

Adults learn best by doing. Failing to “do” results in a failure to learn. We achieve the greatest skill retention when we think, see, say, hear and perform skill tasks.¹ Retention is the measure of success in training, particularly when we can draw from those training lessons from our long-term memory while under stress because we have practiced the skill repeatedly. This is why it is so crucial to put FTOs and supervisors in the teaching mode to exponentially accelerate skill retention and improve operational outcomes. Proper training turns response into a reaction, instead of a thought process, and slows down the game with tenacity, assurance and boldness.

We must ask ourselves, have we abandoned the long-term retention of core competencies during this unprecedented time of COVID protocols and political pressures? Are we producing confident officers who can react confidently (and properly) to critical situations?

Just as is the case with football, success always begins with solid fundamentals. We must return to the basics to get back on track. The field training program is the gatekeeper of these fundamentals policing. Those who cannot demonstrate the fundamentals in the field need coaching or, if no improvement occurs, termination as a probationary officer. Many field training programs have been adversely impacted and trainees deprived of developing the knowledge, skills and ability to proficiently perform. Not only were traffic stops, field interrogations and physical arrests

¹ Campbell, M. A. (1993). The teacher-scholar fellowship as a model for attracting new faculty to undergraduate institutions. *Biochemical Education*, 21(4): 190–191; Molenda, M. (2004). Cone of experience. In A. Kovalchik & K. Dawson (Eds.). *Education and Technology* (161-165). Los Angeles, CA: ABCCLIO.

minimized, but simultaneously, patrol officers were directed *not* to enforce certain selected statutes and ordinances over the last two years. In many agencies, patrol personnel were directed to avoid reporting certain types of incidents, not respond to certain offenses and avoid engaging in proactive investigations or stops during their free patrol time. This contributed to the decrease or even termination of proactive, officer-initiated enforcement in some agencies. **“Reps” (repetitions) of the aforementioned skills lead to decision-making and problem solving, giving rookies the opportunity to receive feedback, in turn producing better outputs. This is how officers truly learn the core competencies of the profession. In many departments, because of the last two years, new officers have not experienced sufficient reps executed at the speed required to develop self-reliant and confident officers.**

No skill set is more fundamental than the use of force—the officer’s lawful attempt to gain compliance by physical means, based on the level of resistance presented. Control options for use of force must include verbal direction, compliance controls and physical controls—not just the intermediate level weapons and deadly force. Officers need to physically train for *all* control options. If they haven’t been properly trained in field training, then it is the task of front-line supervisors to train them. **Failing to close this training gap presents a huge set of liability, officer safety and public safety risks.**

In many agencies, some officers are reluctant to use force or make stops when it is appropriate to do so. At times, this hesitancy has been tolerated or even encouraged. This results in long term deprivation of repeatable law enforcement mechanics and confident skill execution. This reluctance exacerbates the problems posed by inexperienced officers and eliminates opportunities for them to develop confidence in their problem-solving and decision-making skills. It compromises the delivery of professional police services and puts both officers and citizens at significant risk. Furthermore, these conditions create an environment ripe for bad habits that will take much longer to correct than the time required to instill good habits in the first place.

What is predictable is often preventable, and we need to make up lost ground. We need to create a robust training infrastructure to reinstate the “blocking and tackling” fundamental skills of law enforcement to prevent tragedies. There are no mulligans or do-overs in law enforcement. Investment in our talent is absolutely imperative for officers to make safe, ethical and lawful decisions while citizens look to them to take control.

The Front-Line Leadership Gap

While many new officers were denied the proper field training experiences they needed over the last two years, new FTOs and sergeants began their new roles in a similarly problematic way. Lockdowns and social distancing caused many FTO and field supervisor training courses to be canceled. Even when training opportunities were available, personnel shortages due to COVID

and the demands of civil disturbances meant agencies could not spare any personnel to attend training. Just as many new officers need to be retrained (or receive the basic initial training they were denied), it is now time for individuals who became supervisors or FTOs over the last two years to learn the skills they need to lead officers in this environment of rising crime rates and heightened civil liability.

The necessity of “leading from the front” is difficult to over-emphasize in this area. If sergeants have allowed their personnel to fall into the trap of a purely reactive policing strategy of “no contact, no complaint”, the way forward begins with a change in their own actions in the field. Courageous leadership is required to show officers what proactive patrol strategies look like. Supervisors cannot credibly critique subordinates for failure to engage when they are also guilty of the very same behavior.

Front-line supervisors must “inspect what they expect” on a regular basis and be willing to confront lack of activity or inappropriate behaviors when they observe them. **Front-line supervisors and FTOs may not have caused the present crisis of COVID Cops who lack the skill set necessary to engage in proactive police work, but it largely falls to them to correct the deficiencies that they see.**

The Liability Associated with Skill Depreciation

Any police-public contact can potentially become a high-risk situation. Lack of repeated encounters with the public, especially under difficult circumstances, means that when high-risk incidents occur, officers are less prepared to act in the best manner possible. Because they lack the ‘reps’ performing in these situations, they are more likely to make mistakes that pose a threat to officer safety, public safety and trigger liability. Common sense dictates that officers with little or no experience dealing with X, or have not shown proficiency in performing X, will make costly mistakes when encountering X for the first time in years, or for the first time in their careers.

One of the most concerning examples of this skill depreciation is the problem of officers who do not have the training, practice and confidence necessary to effectively gain compliance – either through verbal de-escalation when possible or effective use of physical control techniques when necessary. Presumably, basic weapons training (firearms, baton, ECD, etc.) has been conducted to meet agency and state standards, even for the COVID Cops. But if that is all that they have been effectively trained to do, it is tragically unsurprising when they fail to recognize other use of force options to gain lawful compliance that lie between verbal de-escalation and the use of a firearm.

This basic lack of repetition leading to insufficient skill sets, and in turn leading to critical performance failures, is not unique to law enforcement. Imagine suffering from an ailment that requires heart surgery. Which surgeon do you want to conduct the procedure? One who

has conducted hundreds of heart surgeries over the last three years? Or one who has conducted only two surgeries over the last three years, out of an abundance of caution because, after all, heart surgeries are risky and could invite lawsuits when conducted incorrectly?

Now apply this same concept to law enforcement. If a loved one is in a heated dispute with a hostile neighbor, customer or employee, which officer do you want responding to the call for service? An officer who has successfully handled hundreds of disputes of varying kinds with varying dynamic threats over the course of the last two years? Or a COVID Cop who has only attended a few disturbances, mostly as the backup officer, and has never actually gone “hands on” with a subject over the course of his two-and-a-half years in law enforcement? Which of these two officers is more likely to deal with an assailant competently and which is more likely to trigger liability and risk the safety of everyone involved?

No Time is Better than the Present

Front-line supervisors, FTOs and the officers that they lead, need retraining and they need it as soon as possible. Habits are being formed that will only become harder and harder to break. We cannot get back the last two years, but we can mitigate the skill depreciation and training failures by revving up efforts to enhance training—particularly in the areas of tactical and front-line leadership training.

For many agency leaders, there is a temptation to relax training standards in the face of staffing shortages and a sense that the “pressure is off” compared to what the national dialogue was a year ago. But this is exactly the time when agency leaders should be prioritizing training—especially for the most inexperienced officers—as much as possible.

With the current trajectory of crime, assaults on officers, serious traffic accidents, drug overdoses and declining quality-of-life, law enforcement leaders must make an immediate and dramatic impact with proactive patrol strategies. Replace the reactive policing strategies of the pandemic with a clearly enunciated statement of support for their officers and a commitment to proactive, professional policing. Re-fund police training to fill the aforementioned gaps. Commit to dynamic, realistic, evidence-based and relevant training based on practice and repetition. Give officers a frame of reference, contextual conditioning and stress inoculation to slow down the game and build the professional confidence to consistently resolve any problem. **It is time to make up for the training deficiencies the policing profession incurred over the last two years. It is time to get back to work.**

About the Authors



Lt. Dan Lind has more than 33 years of law enforcement experience and retired after 30 years with the Grand Rapids Police Department. He served as the Training Bureau Commander for 20 years, and previously held Sergeant (Team Leader) on the Department's full-time SWAT and Street Crimes Unit. Additional assignments included Detective Unit Fugitive Apprehension Team, Patrol, Background Investigator, Recruiter, FTO, and Instructor. The vast majority of his career has been dedicated to Tactical Operations, Training, Personnel Development and most notably the development and implementation of dynamic scenario-based training.

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