Officer “Response-ability” When Conflict Looms

A Statement of Concern & Clarification

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“Defusing” tense situations with “calming communication” is taking hold in public discourse as the key means by which law enforcement can create or restore trust in communities outraged by what they perceive are unjust uses of force.

Any reasonable person would like to see “de-escalation” tactics employed effectively to prevent officer-involved shootings or other violent actions, including attacks on officers themselves. But this ideal, increasingly promoted now as the expectation for police, must be framed within a context of reality.

We have begun to introduce a concept into our certification course on Force Science Analysis that may help illuminate the current national debate about police decision-making and performance. The concept has to do with the fundamental dynamics of police-citizen encounters.

Responsibility/Response-ability

Any scene at which an officer makes contact with a civilian constitutes an Area of Responsibility for that officer. That is, he is responsible for resolving whatever issue resulted in his being there, hopefully with the safety of all parties intact.

However, the scene also comprises what we term a “Zone of Response-ability”: What professional skills and tactics is the officer capable of employing within his sphere of influence to fulfill his responsibility, given the location, individual(s), and circumstances confronting him?

Response-ability can be— is likely to be—a matter of significant complexity. It will involve a host of interactive elements, including time, distance, environment, training, adeptness, experience, safety, judgment, anticipation, perception, prediction—plus, a critical factor, the actions of the person or persons the officer is dealing with.

Real-world limitations

Even assuming that talent, training, and technology have equipped the officer with the ability to use any or all options in the proverbial “police tool box,” these real-world variables may impose severe strictures on his choices.
Many officers are quite skilled at applying a practical, street-savvy psychology to defuse volatile situations. But it takes time, and usually proximity, to establish rapport, build trust, and influence an uncooperative subject’s behavior, while still protecting an officer’s personal safety and that of others in the process.

A potential assailant plays a very important role in the interaction. His behavior can allow the officer to use de-escalation techniques—or rob him of that strategy. An officer may be a skilled and dedicated communicator, but if the suspect suddenly produces a gun or charges at him with a knife, determined to kill him, talking becomes a moot option. The officer is then time-pressed to react defensively with what would not have been his first choice under less urgent circumstances.

The Zone of Response-ability is in reality quite fluid, potentially changing in a nanosecond as circumstances shift and change in a tense, uncertain, and rapidly unfolding encounter, and may potentially require an officer to employ multiples skills to control the event.

**Realistic advocacy**

Given the complex realities that shape an officer’s Response-ability, the advocacy of any singular answer for reducing “police violence” is fraught with the risk of increasing public frustration and disappointment because of its limitations.

Certainly good crisis de-escalation (by whatever terminology) can and should play a critical role in effective force management. But it is by no means a quick-fix cure-all, or even possible in many situations. Enlightened police professionals from patrol officers to chief executives need to help the media, the public, and the broader law enforcement community itself understand the true, complex dynamics of police encounters with difficult people.

Much like a physician diagnosing and treating a health malady, a police officer in today’s world needs to operate as a *clinician* with an array of “curative” resources at his command to fulfill his sworn responsibility to keep the peace. The support and expansion of well-crafted academy and in-service training that helps officers hone the ability to *integrate* multiple skills of “diagnosis” and “treatment” is what our advocacy needs to emphasize to meaningfully strengthen police-citizen outcomes.

Nothing in this world is more complex than human behavior. Learning to manage its extremes, as police are called on daily to do, is no simple task. Buzz words du jour and bumper sticker “solutions” are tempting detours along the rigorous path of improvement. But staying the course of reality and candidly educating others about it will, in the long run, prove more productive.

Thoughts? Comments? Please feel free to e-mail us at: editor@forcescience.org