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On Language, Communication, and Leadership
with John Bowden

A formula for trainers: Experience + Observation = Perception

Training is a big and critical part of our business. We all know what happens when it hits the fan and someone gets hurt. The lawyers line up like a row of carrion feeders over a road kill skunk, just waiting for their turn to eat. For anyone who has been touched by a civil suit, you know what I mean. The end result is they track it back to the trainer.

For Example: The robber refused to stop, the officer used force, the robber was stopped and taken to the hospital. Next, the questions are asked; was the force appropriate for the situation; was the officer properly trained, and did the trainer insure that the officer understood the technique and its proper application? All good questions, can you answer them and are you sure your student got the correct message.

One of the things that we as trainers must do is make sure the correct message gets across to the trainee and the trainee actually understands or perceives the idea correctly. The following is a list of the communication barriers we must contend with in training our students that may prevent them from accurately understanding the information received by the senses and in turn will prevent their learning. These barriers are standing in the way of their perception and therefore their understanding.

Discrimination

Discrimination means to choose. An officer is watching traffic as it rolls down the road. Five cars are speeding in a pack as they zip along. You can only choose one. The officer must pick one or discriminate. This choice is based on past experience, knowledge or self reasoning, the officer discriminates. Sometime it may be merely the last car in line, because it is the closest or maybe you flip a mental coin. One thing is for sure, later on, someone is going to analyze the stop to find the basis of the discrimination. It is already happening in many jurisdictions.

Expectation

Expectation is what a person expects to see, hear, feel, etc. For instance; you have responded to an alarm at a business. As you check the perimeter of the building, you expect to see a see a person breaking into the building. You turn the corner and see a business owner fumbling with the keys at the door and draw down on him as a burglar. You saw a burglar because you expected to see one. There have been many people shot because this mistaken identity.

Recognition

Recognition is where a person recognizes an item or situation based on experience. For example; an officer is searching a vehicle for contraband, drugs, weapons, firearms etc. He sees a box of candy with each piece wrapped in a gold foil, sitting in a form fitting plastic holder. He ignores the box and the candy, moving on in the search. The officer did not realize the crack cocaine had been shaped to appear like the candy, colored brown and wrapped in the gold foil. He did not recognize one of the many shapes that drugs may take.

Perception

What is perception? It is when discrimination, expectation, and recognition all come together to render a result

which is the culmination and interpretation of our observation. It is the physical sensation interpreted in the light of experience and is expressed by the following formula:

Past Experience + Observation = Perception

Past experience and perception blend together to form the interpretation of the event, this is why people hear the same information and get a different perception or interpretation.

The following is an example that demonstrates this phenomenon.

A field training officer and his recruit were on patrol in a drug neighborhood. It was late at night and the drug dealers were doing a brisk business. At one location, an old abandoned and vacant house, the dealers were selling crack cocaine in front, while the users would go around to the rear to smoke their purchases.

The FTO and his trainee parked their patrol car a block away, and moved quietly in the dark, to the back of the house. In the rear of the house, a man was smoking his crack in a homemade crack pipe. The pipe was made of an old, plastic liquor bottle. When the FTO and the recruit approached, they flashed their lights on the subject. He dropped his crack pipe, turned and slowly walked away.

The FTO moved in to stop the smoker and told the trainee to pickup the pipe. The trainee was standing over the homemade pipe, looking at the ground. She looked at the FTO and said she could not find it. The FTO pointed at the ground and told her it was right in front of her. She looked down and back up at the FTO with a puzzled expression on her face.

With the drug-smoker cuffed and in tow, the FTO walked over and touched the pipe, bottle, with his foot and said right there. The trainee looked down, now frustrated and afraid of screwing up, and said, "Where?"

The FTO then said, "There, that bottle."

The trainee picked up the homemade pipe made out of the bottle, looked at it and asked, "This?" The FTO answered yes and they continued on to jail to book the offender. After booking, the FTO sat down with the trainee to discuss the pipe/bottle. The trainee had never seen a pipe made out of a bottle and did not recognize it as a "crack pipe." The FTO, with vast experience in making drug arrest, readily recognized it as a common style, homemade crack pipe. The FTO asked the trainee if she saw the arrestee smoking the pipe.

Reluctantly, she answered no. When asked what she saw, she answered she thought the subject was putting drops in his eye, using the butane lighter to illuminate what he was doing. She had never seen anyone smoking a crack pipe and did not recognize what he was doing. However, she wears contacts and puts drops in her eyes on a regular basis. Her mind took the visual image and compared it to her own past experiences. The closest thing the behavior matched was putting drops in the eye. Also, having never seen the type of homemade crack pipe being used, she did not recognize it when it was lying on the ground.

In her experience she was looking for a classic tobacco smoking pipe. When she saw the crack pipe (a converted miniature liquor bottle) on the ground she mentally discarded it as trash, and continued to look for the image of the pipe she had in her mind. After a discussion of drug paraphernalia, she was able to expand her knowledge and therefore her ability to recognize various instruments to ingest drugs.

Because of the possibility of the trainee's misinterpretation due to inexperience and perception, it is the trainer's job to ensure the trainee perceives the information correctly. This is why we should always be checking, not just for a nod of understanding, but what is their understanding and perception. Do not assume the trainee has the right perception, just because they say they understand. Ask questions and have the trainee explain the concepts back to you, to insure their understanding.

This way, we will ensure that the trainee has the proper tools to do the job, and when the carrion feeders line up for the lawsuit, we can confidently say the trainee understood the proper technique.

About the author

John Bowden is the founder and director of Applied Police Training and Certification (APTAC). John retired from the Orlando Police Department as a Master Police Officer In 1994. His career spans a period of 21 years in law enforcement overlapping 25 years of law enforcement instruction. His total of more than 37 years of experience includes all aspects of law enforcement to include: uniform crime scene technician, patrol operations, investigations, undercover operations, planning and research for departmental development, academy coordinator, field training officer, and field training supervisor. As the director of APTAC, John is responsible for coordinating operations and conducting training for law enforcement organizations across the United States. APTAC clients include law enforcement agencies, state police academies, sheriff departments, correctional institutions, military law enforcement, as well as colleges and universities across the United States. John has written numerous books, including *Report Writing for Law Enforcement & Corrections*, *Management Techniques for Criminal Justice*, *Today's Field Training Officer*, and others. [Contact John Bowden](#)

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