

10 ROOKIE ERRORS

TO AVOID

DEPARTMENT TRAINING PROGRAMS ARE DESIGNED TO TEACH PROSPECTIVE OFFICERS THE ROPES, BUT SOME MISTAKES COULD END YOUR CAREER AT AN AGENCY BEFORE IT REALLY STARTS.

JODY KASPER

NEWLY APPOINTED police officers can find that it is quite challenging to transition from being a recruit officer in a boot-camp style police academy to working the street as a rookie police officer. Luckily, many agencies recognize this challenge and have well-established field training programs designed to help officers adjust to their new and unpredictable daily tasks.

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Police training programs have had a major impact on the quality and readiness of rookie officers. Long gone are the days when officers were handed a badge, gun, and cruiser keys and told, "OK, kid, get out there." Now, these systematic and standardized programs are in place to better prepare officers for their new career. Unfortunately, many officers fail to meet the required standards and may find their on the job training program to be an insurmountable hurdle. Consequently, many officers are terminated or quit while involved in this process.

While this may be good for departments that can more readily weed out individuals who may be a bad fit for the

job, it is frustrating for those rookies who have worked so hard to get there. There are a number of common rookie mistakes that contribute to officer loss during post-academy training programs. Knowing what they are is an important step in successfully avoiding them.

1. BEING A KNOW-IT-ALL

MANY ROOKIES, prior to getting their full-time appointment as police officers, have some job experience in their past related to the field of law enforcement. Some have experience as part-time officers, military police, other military assignments, correctional officers, or have family members who are police officers. One of the most

challenging types of rookies to train is the one who thinks he knows everything.

Remember, every agency does things a little differently and rookies will always find new things to learn. Having the "been there done that" attitude will impede your ability to learn and may stifle your Field Training Officer's willingness to teach new things. Additionally, FTOs simply don't like training rookies who claim to know it all.

2. FAILURE TO ASK QUESTIONS

WHILE GOING THROUGH the Field Training and Evaluation Program (FTEP), trainees are expected to have many questions. This is the time to learn, and the best teachers are experienced officers who are there to assist. New officers are sometimes tempted to impress their FTOs by trying to do too much too fast. But patience is critical, and recognizing that it is acceptable and expected to ask questions is the key to successfully navigating through an FTEP.

3. DISRESPECT FOR POLICE HIERARCHY

FIELD TRAINING OFFICERS are representative of the many types of police officers who have different policing styles. Areas of focus could include paperwork and report writing, motor vehicle law enforcement, community relationships, or drug enforcement. Anyone who has been through an FTEP has had the experience of working with different types of FTOs. Inevitably, a rookie will get paired with an FTO whose style they don't like or don't feel is "the right way" to be a police officer. The best departments out there are comprised of a great variety of officers who use different styles of policing. Police departments will have opportunities for promotion or assignment to specialty units such as SWAT teams, community policing bureaus, investigations, K-9 units, accreditation teams, juvenile crimes and crime scene services. Each one of these assignments requires a different type of person to best fit the position. If a rookie is paired with a trainer whose policing style he does not enjoy, appreciate those differences, learn from them and recognize the value that each officer brings to the department.

Beyond respect for the trainer's style, rookie officers need to understand that police departments are quasi-military organizations with a heavy emphasis on



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command structure and established hierarchies. Rookies should always address supervisors using their title, such as Sgt. Wilson, even if the supervisor is friendly and other officers call him or her by first name. Using people's first names comes with time, if at all.

4. MISUNDERSTANDING THE JOB

EVERYONE KNOWS SOMEONE WHO'S WATCHED one too many episodes of "COPS" or "Law & Order" and thinks every call is high-speed, high-action, and easy to solve, and that the difference between the "good guy" and the "bad guy" is as clear cut as night and day. Policing is grossly misrepresented by the mainstream media. This impacts the average citizen's expectations of the police, but also impacts new officers and their expectations of what it's like to be a police officer.

Becoming a police officer can be a long and challenging process. Competitive written exams, residency and age requirements, physical fitness standards, and interview panels can make getting a policing job difficult. It takes many people years to get on a department and they may spend a lot of time and money working toward that goal.

Before beginning the sometimes long and frustrating journey toward a policing career, it is wise to do everything possible to understand what the job is really like. There are several ways to do this. One suggestion is to find a department that has a ride-along program and to ride with a street-level patrol officer. Best practice would be to ride with an officer at the agency that you want to work for. This will provide the most realistic glimpse into the agency and is also a good way to make some connections and show interest.

Another strategy to better understand the job is to join a local Police Explorers Post or to work as a Special Police Officer or volunteer. Different areas of the country have different programs. If you want to learn more about policing at local departments, you can usually find information online about what opportunities are available.

5. LACK OF RESPECT AND PROFESSIONALISM

BEING A POLICE OFFICER is an extremely dangerous and serious job. People's lives will literally come and go in front of an

officer's eyes and recognition of the seriousness of this duty is imperative. Rookies who come to work with a cup of coffee in hand, a sloppy uniform, and a newspaper under one arm convey an inappropriate attitude as a new officer. Rookies who show up to work in this state will often receive poor ratings in the Daily Observation Report regarding appearance and attitude toward the job.

6. INABILITY TO MOVE BEYOND MISTAKES

MISTAKES will be made. Mistakes should be made. Rookie officers don't know it all and making errors is part of the learning process. Early on in the FTEP it is normal to receive poor scores in certain areas. If every score were rated as acceptable, then there would be no reason to be in a training program.

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As you move through the FTEP, the unacceptable scores should diminish as your skills improve. That is the normal progression through any training program. Rookie officers may tend to dwell on errors and it can negatively impact their behavior for the remainder of the shift or even into the next few shifts. You need to accept mistakes, learn from them, and move on.

7. FAILURE TO PROPERLY PREPARE FOR THE JOB

OFFICERS who are in FTEPs should expect to spend a minimum of 40 hours a week on the job working and up to 20 hours a week engaged in other activities related to their training. These activities involve uniform and equipment preparation, law and ordinance familiarization, review of policies and procedures and, most definitely, familiarization with the physical layout of their jurisdictions.

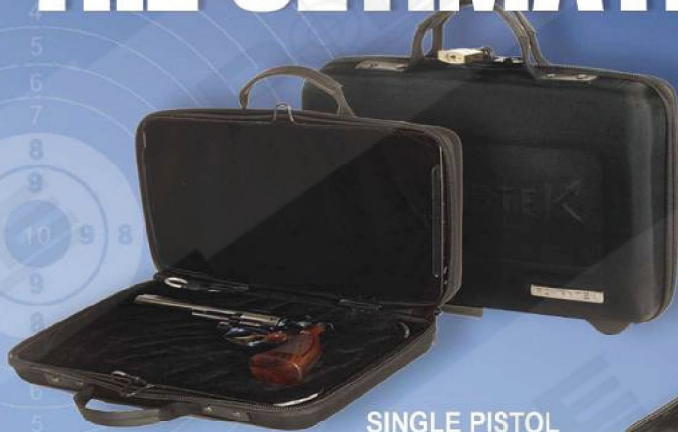
If you are hired by an agency in a community you're not familiar with, you need to spend off-duty time driving around the city and learning street



names, locations of major businesses, and other key locations such as hospitals, jails, schools, and courthouses. City orientation takes time, but FTOs cannot

spend the 40-hour work week testing a rookie's knowledge of street locations. There are other important tasks to focus on and new officers must take it upon

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themselves to familiarize themselves with their communities.

8. PAPERWORK AND REPORT WRITING

MANY ROOKIES may struggle with this part of the job. For every event, there is often an associated piece of paperwork or a required entry in a computer system. From traffic tickets, to shopliftings, to child endangerment cases, there is paperwork. It is critical that you be able to complete your reports in a timely and accurate way. A common problem with rookie officers is poor report writing skills and even poor penmanship.

Writing skills can be challenging to improve, but it is essential that you avoid getting tripped up in this area. Some methods you can use to improve these skills include reading more, writing more, and using a dictionary or thesaurus when necessary.

9. LACK OF COMMAND PRESENCE AND INITIATIVE

WHILE IT IS REASONABLE for brand new of-

ficers in their first phase of training to be cautious and reluctant to make decisions, decision-making is a skill that needs to develop over time. Once a uniformed officer arrives on a call, people expect that the officer will take control and make decisions. It is a critical skill that can be difficult to teach.

Additionally, new officers need to seek out activity, even if it may be outside of their comfort zone, so that they can get comfortable completing different tasks. You can show initiative by conducting motor vehicle stops, investigating suspicious activity, and by volunteering to take the lead on multi-officer calls.

10. LYING

WHEN ROOKIES LIE during training programs it is commonly done to cover up errors. An FTO may ask you if you remembered to fill out a specific form, searched a certain location, or pat frisked a person for weapons. Not wanting to get in trouble for an error, an officer may be tempted to cover up a mistake with what

seems like a simple lie. Don't.

Remember, errors are expected and rookies in training will make mistakes. Lying about them, however, is unacceptable behavior. It may result in termination or can quickly cast a shadow over a new officer's career. A key characteristic of any police officer is honesty. It's important for positive relationships with peers, trustworthiness, and can become a factor in report writing and courtroom testimony.

Being a new officer in a post-academy training program can be a stressful experience. But it is an important step in the process of becoming an effective police officer. It takes an incredible amount of hard work, preparation, and commitment but it is a career that is well worth the effort and can be incredibly rewarding, interesting, fun and challenging. **PR**

Jody Kasper is a police sergeant in Massachusetts who has worked in the field of law enforcement for 15 years, many as an FTO. She is also an adjunct professor at Elms College where she teaches criminal justice.

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