



May 2015

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The National Crisis in Law Enforcement Training: Research Findings from 151 Federal, State, and Local Agencies

Introduction

Law enforcement throughout the nation is being confronted with its biggest challenge in a century. Technology--specifically video technology--is shifting street-level policing from soft to hard, and from private to public, accountability, through the transparency it creates.

Historically, policing was performed in a largely non-transparent environment in which police behavior was rarely observed publicly, much less documented. For the most part, the police policed themselves. The radical shift to transparency through video is exposing law enforcement personnel to a level of scrutiny and accountability unprecedented in history.

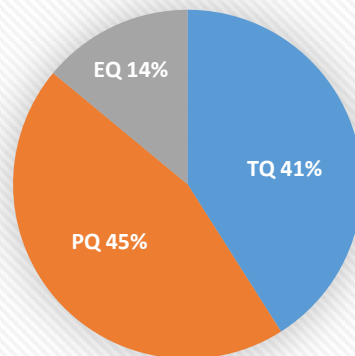
The PLE research team recently completed a survey of 151 local, state, and federal law enforcement agencies across the nation to delve into this issue. Specifically, we set out to understand how agencies are allocating training time in the current environment to address the demands of the new transparency. We further inquired into the general level of preparation for body cameras—a technology adoption that is slowly but surely sweeping the nation, and will in time inevitably become the norm.

Training Time: A Reflection of Priorities

To begin, we asked leaders and sworn officers at every level of the organization how they spend their training time: “Based on your own personal experience in law enforcement, what percentage of time in training have you spent in the following three categories of training?” We noted that percentages had to add to 100% of total allocated training time.

Respondents report spending 45% of all training time on “Professional skills, legal knowledge, policies and procedures, and basic skills.” This category of training generally relates to the cognitive development of professional knowledge, which we commonly refer to it as an officer’s “PQ” or Professional Quotient.

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Respondents further report spending another 41% on tactical and technical training. This category of training generally relates to the development of applied skills and psycho-motor competence with equipment and physical processes, such as using a gun or taking someone into custody. In the law enforcement lexicon, we commonly label this category “**TQ**” or Tactical Quotient for its tactical emphasis.

Finally, law enforcement agencies across the country allocate a mere 14% of total training time to social and emotional skills development, which we refer to as the “**EQ**” or Emotional Quotient category based on its emphasis on emotional intelligence and effectiveness in social interaction.

Where’s the Urgency to Redress the Imbalance?

Together, the training categories of PQ and TQ account for 86% of all training in law enforcement. This heavy emphasis in professional and tactical competence is clearly necessary, but the under-emphasis in the EQ category—social and emotional skills—is becoming a clear and urgent liability as law enforcement personnel increasingly face pressurized situations for which they are not prepared. A pressurized situation is an encounter in which there is high bodily and/or reputational risk, a low margin for error, and the law enforcement officer is forced to act in the moment.

What law enforcement agencies are slow to realize is that the relative EQ of an officer drives behavior in the moment. When an officer’s EQ is high, that emotional control and regulation allow the officer to draw on his or her tactical and professional training, and respond correctly based on the skills and muscle memory that have been created. On the other hand, low EQ leaders, though trained just as thoroughly in PQ and TQ, often mishandle tense and life-threatening situations because they lack the EQ to react with poise under pressure. They simply don’t possess the required emotion-regulating discipline, and are more prone to commit errors in judgment. Their fight, flight, or fright instincts take over and no amount of PQ and TQ will compensate for what they lack in EQ.

Video and the Age of Transparency

It's difficult to conclude that the general public is less law-abiding. Crime statistics don't necessarily support this argument. It's also difficult to say that law enforcement officers are suddenly less skilled and able to do their jobs. Certainly society continues to have bad actors on both sides—criminals who break the law and law enforcement officers who abuse or mishandle the job of enforcing the law. There is nothing new in these dynamics. The fundamental change is in technology.

Video technology is ushering in an age of transparency. Why is the public often becoming more hostile toward law enforcement? Why the escalating tension? What is inflaming public sentiment against those who are charged to enforce the laws? Where is the acrimony coming from?

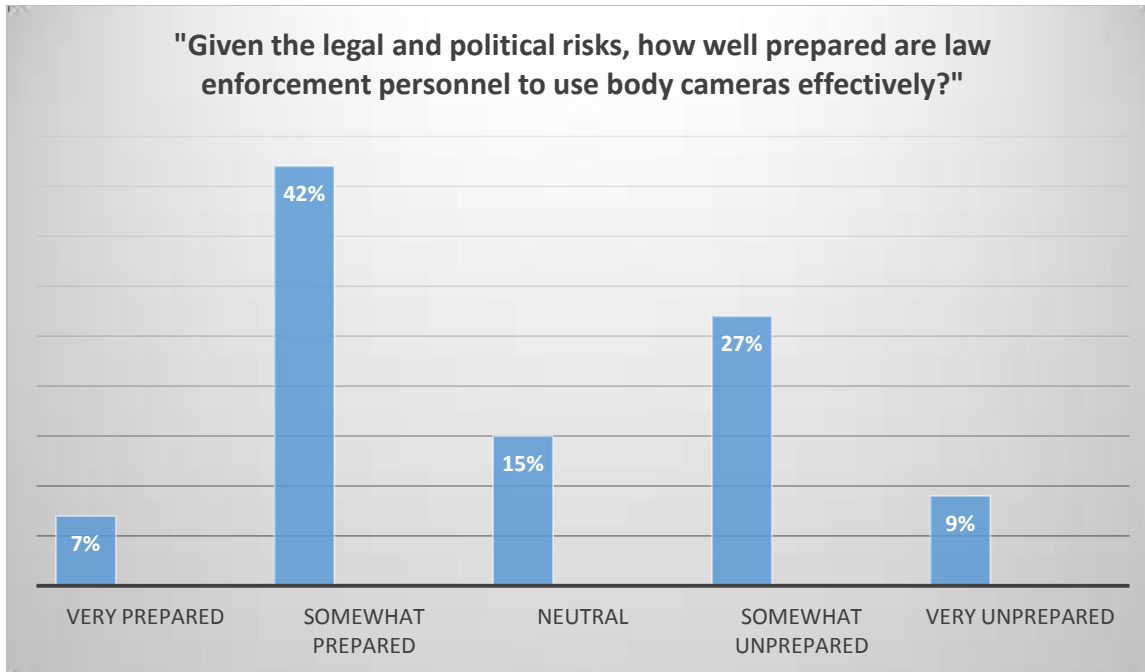
It's coming from transparency, enabled by technology. For the first time in history, the public is able to witness police behavior first hand. On balance, police brutality, rudeness, incivility, and poor judgment remain the exception, but it's the accessible video of the poorly-handled, albeit infrequent, incidents that creates vivid memory and the resulting antipathy toward law enforcement.

The bottom line is that law enforcement as a sector is unprepared for this new level of accountability and scrutiny that is fast becoming the norm. And despite the seeming unfairness of focusing on the more infrequent cases of police misconduct, the public mind is more likely to be colored by the documented occasions in which officers do misbehave. Increasingly, law enforcement will be evaluated and judged based on the exceptions. We will continue to see an accumulation of video assets depicting the unflattering behavior of law enforcement personnel as they interact with the public. This must be the operating assumption, and law enforcement agencies around the nation should move quickly to get beyond denial and begin to establish a new standard of conduct that assumes 24/7 documented observation by the public. Furthermore, the notion that an officer is off-duty when he or she not working must be utterly abolished. There simply is no such thing as off-duty in a technology-driven era of transparency. By virtue of their fiduciary responsibility to the public, they are never truly off duty.

Are We Ready for Body Cams?

Whether law enforcement is ready or not, body cams are here to stay. And, yes, there are risks. There are first amendment rights issues, patient rights issues, budget issues, and training issues. The list goes on, but make no mistake, the adoption of body cameras will continue to march forward.

Are law enforcement personnel prepared? The answer is an unequivocal no. In our study, we asked leaders and officers the question: "Given the legal and political risks, how well prepared are law enforcement personnel to use body cameras effectively?" A mere 7% of those surveyed say law enforcement personnel are "very prepared." A larger portion (42%) indicate they are "somewhat prepared." Fifteen percent (15%) are neutral, 27% respond "somewhat unprepared," and finally, 9% register a "very unprepared" response.

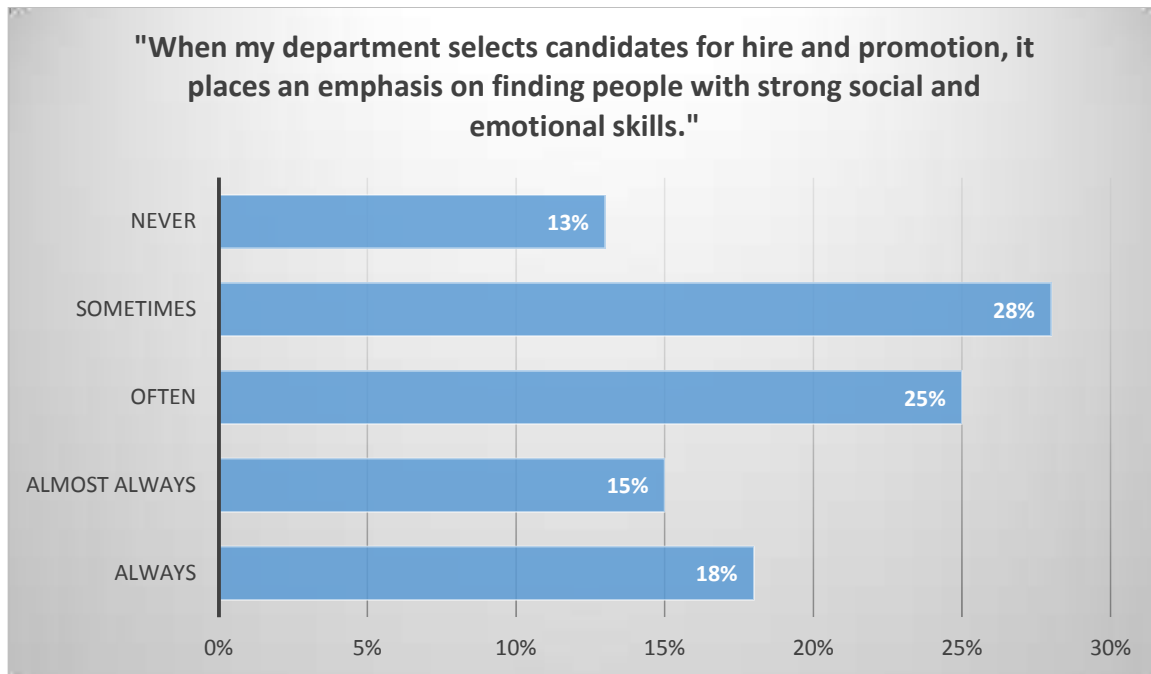


In part, these findings underscore the need for agencies to devote more time and resources to the EQ category of training. Legislatures and courts will address the legal issues, but law enforcement agencies, themselves, must address the political risks and liabilities associated with the individual behavior of their officers.

Selecting Candidates for Social and Emotional Skills

We further probed to understand the degree to which law enforcement agencies acknowledge and place importance on social and emotional skills when they hire new officers or promote officers to positions of leadership: "When my department selects candidates for hire or promotion, it places an emphasis on finding people with strong social and emotional skills."

Strikingly, of those surveyed, a mere 18% report that their agencies "always" place an emphasis on finding people with strong social and emotional skills." Another 15% of respondents say they "almost always" do. One quarter of respondents indicate their agencies "often" have this emphasis, while 28% say their agencies do "sometimes." Finally, 13% report that their agencies "never" consider social and emotional skills for hire and promotion.



When agencies fail to consider social and emotional skills in candidates for hire and promotion, by default, they rely on professional quotient (PQ) and tactical quotient (TQ) as selection criteria. Unofficially, they often rely on political connections, cronyism, and nepotism as unacknowledged selection criteria.

Because law enforcement remains a bastion of seniority in many parts of the country, time-in-grade, unfortunately, continues to be a key criteria for promotion, and a key determining factor in perpetuating a culture of mediocrity and entitlement.

As we continue to transition from soft to hard accountability based on transparency, there will be greater urgency to create true merit-based systems for hiring and promotion that emphasize PQ, TQ, and EQ, and weight them equally.

Conclusion

We concluded our study by asking law enforcement leaders and officers the following question: "In your opinion, what is the most important thing that can be done to improve the quality of policing in society today?"

We gathered some excellent feedback, but a recurring theme that runs through the verbatim responses is the idea that the general public needs to change its unrealistic expectations. Perhaps not surprisingly, many who responded to the survey deflect responsibility to the media or the public, issuing calls for fair treatment, civility, and reform. We emphatically agree, but what is law enforcement's stewardship going forward? How can law enforcement prepare itself for an era of unprecedented transparency and the hard accountability and relentless scrutiny that go with it?

Here is a sample of responses that address themes we believe are most promising as we look into the future:

- “Move away from rigid hierarchy toward more of a shared leadership model of policing.”
- “Actively recruit female and minority officers who demonstrate high social and emotional skills.”
- “Innovate with new forms of community outreach.”
- “Raise the bar in officer conduct with much stricter internal accountability.”
- “Shift the entire sector from a reactive to a proactive culture.”
- “Abandon the militarization mentality. Treat the public as a consumer and elevate to new levels of customer service.”
- “Create better pay and benefits packages that will attract a higher level of talent.”

Law enforcement is a high hazard industry and a noble profession. Most of those who do it, do it exceptionally well, and are to be commended for preserving the public trust as they protect civil society. However, an age of transparency is making demands which the industry is finding itself ill-prepared to address.