

Selecting Effective Trainers

By Thomas J. Cline

The need for good trainers in all areas has never been greater. There is a resource crisis in law enforcement today that is growing. So many resources have been redirected into anti terrorism efforts that agencies are finding it increasingly difficult to keep up with local crime and COP programs. Now, more than ever, agencies must get the most from their resources and people. There are few agencies not suffering a budget crisis. Federal monies pumped into law enforcement in the nineties have dried up. Downsizing is no longer particular to the private sector. An article by Fox Butterfield in the New York Times says that Cleveland has laid off 250 police officers, more than 1/6th of its force. Pittsburgh has lost 25% and Saginaw, Michigan a third of their sworn personnel.

Law enforcers are expected to do more with less. Duties once handled by specialists are now done by all and under greater scrutiny by watchdogs. Training is more important than ever. It must be accurate, practical and engage participants. Personnel must be able to accomplish the training objectives. Much of the burden for ensuring that training is effective lies with the trainer. In house trainers who have the skill and expertise to be effective in several areas are invaluable. Here are some questions to ask about your trainers and some guidelines in selecting new trainers to help identify the cream of the crop.

How are trainers identified in your agency? How are they selected? Unfortunately, some become trainers because they are politically connected or worse; no one else wants the job. Shouldn't good trainers be sought after and recruited because they have the skills, background and experience?

Is there a process? What qualifications are being sought? Are people who know about training and all of its complexities doing the interviews? Some agencies may want an in-house trainer but feel they lack highly qualified applicants. A possible answer to this is to select a person with average skills and a strong desire to learn. Send this person to the best train the trainer seminars affordable.

Two courses in the marketplace that can be helpful on a basic level are the Dale Carnegie course or the similar, but much less expensive, Christopher Leadership Course. Langevin (<http://207.107.10.214/>) has a variety of courses that specialize in training and/or instructional design.

The rest of this article provides guidelines and identifiers to use if you are in a position of influencing trainer selection.

First and foremost a trainer must be personable, even likable. Their interpersonal skill level must be high. If trainees like the trainer they will place their confidence in him/her. Willingness to learn and retain material will increase. A trainer's attitude and demeanor should be upbeat and even enthusiastic. They are salespeople in a certain respect because they must constantly persuade (sell) the trainees to spend the time and effort necessary to accept information and practice skills.

Additionally, they must have a very good command of the language. We are not talking about just a large vocabulary, but the ability to use grammatically correct language at a level appropriate and acceptable to the group. They must be able to adjust their

language to the group. I do not mean that they should be able to cuss up a storm to keep the attention and respect of the group. Their language must be professional, absent the four letter words that are all too common and often accepted in law enforcement circles. It is an art to choose the right words that don't overwhelm novices and at the same time keep the interest of those with higher knowledge or skill levels.

Writing skills are essential also. Trainers should be able to develop professional handouts, facilitation guides, lesson plans, evaluation instruments and any other documents related to the training. A minimum level of proficiency in the use of Word and Power Point is necessary to create and implement training programs.

Listening skills are another consideration. Training is most effective when tailored to the audience. Listening to and reading the participants should be constant and on-going so as to fill in the learning gaps, repeating material and practicing skills as necessary for a group. Listening to, understanding and acting upon participant feedback is critical. This often moves participants to be more responsive and engaged in a training session.

A critical area in trainer selection is presenting. A person may be terrific one on one but not on the platform. It is obvious that presenting in an engaging, personable way is necessary for successful training, yet how many times have you been to a training session where you were bored to tears. A subject matter expert may have the highest level of knowledge or skill in his/her field, but can this expert pass these things to others in training?

A ten to fifteen minute presentation done by an applicant can usually give you an idea of his/her skill level, particularly if you provide the person with a lesson plan for the audition. Ideally, this skill should be present in your trainer when selected. Presenting also includes the ability to do several things at once. The classroom can be very demanding in that there is setup of computer, projector(s), vcr, dvd and/or other technical aides. I have had to do a class that required using power point and an overhead projector while checking on groups that were working together and field questions from individuals. It was exhausting to say the least.

Selecting a trainer also requires that you determine how accepting or adverse the prospect is to change. Does the person have a willingness, even enthusiasm for learning new things? Can he/she adapt to changing situations, technology, laws, research findings and staff changes? It is best to know up front.

Trainers should have the necessary degrees, certifications, or experience. Are they a SME (Subject Matter Expert) in something?

It can be difficult to find someone who has both classroom skills and command of the variety of subjects to be trained. If your selection is someone who has expertise or experience in many of the subjects in the curriculum you can send him/her through a good presenter/classroom skills program. Actually, people with skills in several areas are common in law enforcement personnel having more than a dozen years experience. The FBI often rehires retired agents good in their area(s) of expertise as trainers. If your agency cannot spare someone as a trainer, perhaps it can consider bringing in retired personnel as consultants. The cost is relatively inexpensive in that they are paid a fee only, without the expense of benefits and they are brought in only when needed.

There are many retired cops, excellent in particular areas, who are quite bored after six months in retirement. I suspect they would be thrilled to teach something they know and love for \$30 to \$60 per hour rather than guarding the local bank at \$10 to \$20 an hour.

If you find an individual who has a high level of presentation skills he/she can usually be taught materials by another trainer or SME (Subject Matter Expert).

Last, here are a few sample interview questions to help your team make a good decision from final candidates.

Describe the training and instructional experience you have had.

What do you know about the requirements of this position

Why do you want this position?

What about this position is most attractive to you? (least attractive?)

What can you offer that others cannot?

Explain the different learning styles (Visual, Auditory, and Kinesthetic/Tactile) and give an example of a classroom technique used for engaging each type of learning style.

Would the fact that a class is mandatory for participants change your approach?

How would you handle a situation where you have very advanced students in the same class as novices? Can you use stronger participants to help the slower ones? How? How do you learn new material? (Those who learn by doing are more likely to teach in that style.)

Can you provide references from and course evaluations from classes you have taught?

Your trainers have a tremendous impact and influence on your agency. Be sure they are the best available. Treat them well because it is ethical and their attitude is transferred to all they train.

Ref: Dr. Melissa Bledsoe is an assistant professor in the Department of Technology at Northern Kentucky University and co-owner of Spectrum Learning Centers of Greater Cincinnati. bledsoem@exchange.nku.edu