

18

Feature



# Powers of persuasion

How can the power of persuasion, verbal skills and the ability to quickly read a situation provide an effective alternative to a weapon to gain compliance from potentially deadly suspects? Two major studies that could influence the way officers are trained across the UK and the world. Syreeta Lund talks exclusively to the project's leaders

Two new innovative studies due to be launched next month by the Force Science Research Center aim to change the way police officers are trained to use their verbal skills and to sharpen their street skills in a way that could reduce fatalities.

Dr Bill Lewinski, executive director of the Center at Minnesota State University-Mankato, which conducts unique lethal - force experiments, is lead researcher on both projects. He said the initiatives would ultimately allow the centre to recommend 'specific, vital changes for strengthening police training'.

He says that officer safety training has been based on traditions which date back to the 1960s and the new research could provide new insight and be very impactful.

The first project, funded by the Met Police Federation, is focused on verbal communication and persuasion and the second, funded by the Police Federation of England and Wales, is the Skills Enhancement Study, backed by the Police Federation of England and Wales, broadly examining training methods across the whole spectrum of policing skills - including verbal skills, empty-hand techniques, impact weapons and firearms.

"One of the most powerful tools is the power of persuasion. We want to know how we can help police officers become the most effective they can be both physically and psychologically when dealing with difficult subjects," says Mr Lewinski.

Both projects are expected to be up and running by January next year with each likely to run over a three-year period.

The first project will look at methods for teaching officers ways of verbally gaining cooperation and preventing violence from those who are difficult to control such as the mentally ill or those under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

**"The key, then, to short-circuiting potentially dangerous confrontations before they escalate to a violent level requiring force is to learn to 'read' the subject and the situation you are dealing with and tailor what you say to the persuasion style most likely to be successful under those conditions."**

The focus will be on three methods of persuasion: logical, emotional and characterlogical, which relates to a person's self image.

Mr Lewinski adds: "The key, then, to short-circuiting potentially dangerous confrontations before they escalate to a violent level requiring force is to learn to 'read' the subject and the situation you are dealing with and tailor what you say to the persuasion style most likely to be successful under those conditions."

He tells *Police* magazine that officers can often end up in difficult situations when they are not able to pick up

on particular 'cues' which could determine what persuasion style will be most effective.

It will focus on three phases. Phase one will include researchers looking into current police training to see what communication techniques are being taught and will include the use of focus groups with police personnel, academics and professionals who work in clinical settings with those such as the mentally ill.

#### The study will look at trying to identify:

- Specific behavioural cues to help officers determine the personality type they are dealing with
- How officers can read behavioural cues quicker
- The persuasion strategies most likely to be effective with the subject the officer is communication with
- How cues and effective techniques alike may vary from one cultural ethnic group to another
- The training methods most effective for enabling officers to master a range of techniques and be able to apply them effectively under stress in street situations

The second phase of the research involves developing effective tests to identify the best teaching style for students to learn effectively and the final stage will involve evaluation through simulations, role playing and 'street testing' while researchers look at which techniques work best in real life policing situations.

Dave Blocksidge, who is leading the project for the Met Police Federation, said: "You look outside of the police service, such as the NHS, where people are trained to deal with those with mental health issues and how to handle people properly. When you look at the use of Taser, for example, in around 80 percent of cases, you are dealing with someone with mental health issues so it's incredibly important police officers know how to communicate effectively with people in that situation."

He added that if the communication skills are right they could potentially 'reduce the number of fatalities' when it comes to police officers coming into contact with violent offenders and those who are more vulnerable.

The second project will be based around two advisory groups - one will be academics specialising in various aspects of human performance such as cognition and perception and another will include 40 to 50 police trainers who are considered experts in their force disciplines.

Research will be predominantly conducted in the UK and will explore how police trainees can reach their peak performance in a cost effective way.

continued page 21

Mr Lewinski says “We are looking at the human beings behind the tools they use – we are not just teaching firearms but teaching the human being who is using it about dealing with different situations and that means looking at things like pre-event cues.”

He adds that current training methods teach officers to a ‘level of competency’ but likens the techniques to a sports analogy where “we lob softballs at them in

training and expect them to defend their life on the street when they are up against a world-class pitcher who’s hurling hardballs at them at 90 miles an hour.”

He wants to train officers to a peak level where they do not have to think too long about their next move, it becomes almost automatic when dealing with a particular situation.



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**“We lob softballs at them in training and expect them to defend their life on the street when they are up against a world-class pitcher who’s hurling hardballs at them at 90 miles an hour.”**

“Ideally we want to train to a level of proficiency. That’s where you’ve developed your physical and mental abilities to the point where you can stay focused on the threat confronting you and no conscious thought is required to confidently and properly apply the skill that is required for a successful outcome.”