



Rethinking How We Train Officers

Working the Night Shift

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During training sessions for law enforcement agencies across the country, **it is not difficult to spot the officers in attendance who have just worked the night shift. They rub their eyes, they yawn, and they stand in the back of the room to help keep themselves awake.** They often tell the instructor flat out, “I’m sorry if it seems like I’m drowsing back there. It’s not your training, it’s just that I didn’t know about this training until yesterday, and I worked all night.”

As most of those reading this already know, this is a common occurrence for law enforcement officers. This is particularly concerning when officers are attending training in areas such as liability, de-escalation, leadership, and other critical areas of development. They *should* be awake, alert, and capable of retaining new information that applies directly to their work. And yet, they are often in far less than ideal mental conditions to do so.

This reality is especially troublesome since, for most law enforcement agencies, **the officers who work nights are those most statistically likely to encounter higher call volumes, more critical incidents, and more high-risk encounters than any other group of officers on patrol.**^[1] Furthermore, in most agencies, **the first-line supervisors assigned to the night shifts are typically the newest and least experienced supervisors. These are exactly the**

supervisors who are in the most need of training to be better equipped to face the challenges that they face as supervisors.[2]

This begs the question: *Why do we do this? Why does so much of the training most needed by night shift officers and supervisors take place during the day shift hours?*

Enhancing Training and Minimizing Liability

A wealth of research indicates that sleep deprivation has substantially negative impacts on an individual's ability to learn. Sleep deprivation significantly impairs the recall of information and the learning of new information.

Sleep deprivation before or after being exposed to new information reduces the comprehension and memory of that newly learned material. Sleep deprivation also degrades the functioning of the parietal lobe, the part of the brain responsible for understanding the world around you and making sense of what you are seeing and hearing.[3] Having personnel attend training in a sleep-deprived state may sadly be a waste of training funds if the officers and supervisors in attendance are unlikely to actually learn much due to their sleep-deprived mental condition.

But what if night shift officers attended training in the evenings, either during a portion of, or a few hours before, their normal shifts? They would likely be operating in better, more rested states, and more capable of understanding, absorbing, and recalling the information and skills provided through the training.

Additionally, what is a department's leadership communicating to night shift officers and supervisors by exclusively scheduling training during the day shift? Scheduling training on the day shift for night shift officers does not seem likely to communicate that they, their time, and their professional development matter to the department's leadership. Denying officers their needed off-duty rest, disrupting their normal sleep patterns, and causing additional disruptions to child-care or other family life schedules does not seem to communicate that night shift personnel matter as much as the day shift or command staff in the department.

But consider the reverse situation. What if the agency's leadership scheduled training in the evenings? I realize that this is unusual and rare, but what would it communicate to night shift personnel? First, it would signal that the command staff values night shift personnel as much as

day shift personnel. Second, it would demonstrate the command staff's commitment to the training being delivered. In summary, **offering training to night shift personnel at times more convenient to them communicates: 1.) You matter to the department, and 2.) This training matters to the department.**

On the rare occasions when I have had the opportunity to train officers outside of the usual 8 a.m. to 5 p.m. paradigm, I have witnessed a significant increase in officers' unprompted participation. The night shift personnel in attendance have been far more engaged with the training, and seemed to get more out of the training, when the training was offered closer to their normal work schedule. In fact, they have frequently remarked on what a welcome change it is to attend training on something closer to *their* schedule, for all the reasons already discussed.

From a liability standpoint, night shift officers are often mandated to attend training which is intended, at least in part, to equip them with the information needed to perform their duties in accordance with legal mandates and best practices. Law enforcement agencies document that this training occurred and verify each officer's attendance to ensure that they have effectively equipped their personnel with these relevant skills. This documentation is intended to effectively defend agencies in the event that they encounter a lawsuit or allegation involving a failure to properly train personnel.

But if plaintiff attorneys were to analyze these training records, how often would they find that the training was provided to sleep-deprived officers immediately after having worked an 8, 10 ½, or 12-hour shift? How much liability is incurred if the argument that the training was ineffective is articulately made in front of a judge or jury composed of individuals who intuitively understand that training exhausted officers is *not* a reasonable means of teaching materials in a way that will be retained and applied?

It may be time to change the way that we think about how night shift personnel are trained. To stop training night shift personnel during the day shift simply because "that's the way we've always done it." To start offering training at times designed to allow them to benefit as much as possible from what is being taught—when they are awake, alert, and more capable of learning.

About the Author

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Matt Dolan is a licensed attorney who specializes in training and advising public safety agencies in matters of legal liability, risk management and ethical leadership. His training focuses on helping agency leaders create ethically and legally sound policies and procedures as a proactive means of minimizing liability and maximizing agency effectiveness.

A member of a law enforcement family dating back three generations, he serves as both Director and an instructor with Dolan Consulting Group. He has trained thousands of law enforcement professionals over the last decade.

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Disclaimer: This article is not intended to constitute legal advice on a specific case. The information herein is presented for informational purposes only. Individual legal cases should be referred to proper legal counsel.

References

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