

When Training Saves Lives

This new bimonthly department will focus on specific industries. For its debut, *Industry Focus* takes a look at law enforcement training—particularly, how the training division of an urban police department designed scenario-based simulations to teach sergeants how to supervise and resolve hostage situations.

Too often, the newspaper headlines tell a story like this: A distraught man takes his wife and child hostage. He barricades himself in their home for several hours, keeping police at bay by waving a gun and threatening to kill himself and his family. Or, a fired employee returns to take other workers hostage. Or, a foiled bank robbery turns into a hostage situation.

How do law enforcement people prepare for such eventualities? One way is the use of simulations by the education and training division of the Baltimore Police Department in Baltimore, Maryland.

The department decided to use simulations because they mimic real situations, without the danger. In short, a training simulation can provide a mechanism for practicing how to do something. It can help participants plan for different scenarios, as well as assess and improve their skills.

Simulations serve as models of reality. They can be inexpensive, and they have the added advantages of being safe, adaptable, and portable. They can also be stimulating and fun.

But designing simulations requires specialized skills. They include

- ▶ expertise in situational analysis
- ▶ the patience and interest to research the simulation's topic thoroughly
- ▶ the ability to write comprehensive, accurate, and easy-to-understand rules
- ▶ the ability to recruit people to test the simulation and get them enthused about their task
- ▶ the persistence to update the simulation as needed to keep it relevant and accurate.

Many prepackaged simulations are available, but not all can fulfill the needs of every trainer or organization. Many simulations are complex,

requiring a lot of time to understand and master. In addition, simulations on complex subjects—such as, war games based on actual conflicts—frequently require many hours to complete. In contrast, some simulations are superficial so that the instructor can offer only abstractions of the desired training goals instead of teaching specific skills.

A simulation in action

The Baltimore Police Department needed a way to teach first-line supervisors (police sergeants) the appropriate skills for handling hostage-barricade situations in which lives, literally, hang in the balance. The first hour of an incident is especially critical. It is then that a first-line supervisor must organize resources quickly and effi-

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ciently in order to achieve a successful resolution with no injuries or fatalities, if possible.

The training mechanism had to be replicable, reliable, relatively simple, and inexpensive. The education and training division decided on a simulation and created a three-dimensional game board built to resemble Baltimore's neighborhoods.

Participants enter a room where they're briefed on the hostage situation designed for the simulation. Then, they are directed to take charge of resolving the incident in the presence of an instructor (also called a referee), who is a veteran of dozens of similar, real-life incidents.

Each student (in law enforcement, *trainees* refer to new recruits) supervises various phases of two scenarios, one simple and the other difficult. The

exercise is designed to convey the vital necessity for clear thinking and decision making in a situation in which time is critical. The exercise also aims to condition supervisors to have a reflex action to a situation so that their approaches are consistent. It's essential that the supervisors meet their responsibilities according to a series of ordered priorities so that they minimize the risk to hostages and isolate suspects before trying to communicate with them. The correct decision-making approaches are reinforced by a checklist designed by members of the Quick Response Team and the Crisis Negotiation Team, who have participated in hundreds of actual incidents.

The checklist emphasizes the importance of a measured, controlled, and comprehensive response to a crisis. The checklist items include determining the suspects' location, ascertaining what crime has occurred, and establishing probable cause to proceed.

The simulation scenarios are based on elements common to many actual incidents, such as forced entry and taking people against their will, the presence of a weapon, the demonstrated propensity to use a weapon, and articulated threats.

To engage in the simulation, participants use color-coded game pieces that represent police officers, hostage-takers, and civilians. Students place the pieces representing both human and material resources on the game board in a tactical manner. They must also locate, safeguard, and interview witnesses (through the instructor); block intersections; arrange for communication with the hostage-takers; and locate a practical site for a command post and staging area (an open area, such as a vacant parking lot, where responding officers can leave their vehicles safely, respond to assignments, and debrief).

As students work to identify, isolate, and resolve problems, their actions are scrutinized by the instructor, who marks a checklist of essential actions and the order in which they should occur. Typically, the instructor points out participants' mistakes to

them in writing after they complete the simulation. That helps reinforce the knowledge they need to perform effectively in real-life situations. Or, the instructor can correct students' mistakes as they happen.

Success in the simulation means directing law enforcement people so that they're being put to optimum use. Participants must also locate suspects, survey the premises, isolate the hostage site, brief responding police units, minimize the threat to innocent parties and bystanders, and act until all possible advantage is on the side of the law enforcers. The instructor can introduce variations on the simulation.

In effect, the instructor embodies the rules so that a manual of rules isn't necessary. His or her presence also facilitates game play. In a way, students compete against the instructor, who knows what the simulation is designed to teach.

First, conceptualize

In designing a simulation, you should first conceptualize it in terms of the topic and the skills and attitudes that you want it to teach. Remember: You are building a model of reality. Exercises and game play should integrate the desired behavior so that trainees put what they learn to work in the real world.

You should also ask some questions. Is the desired goal objective and measurable? Can it be attained? If the answers are yes, you need to determine the criteria for success—and the possible barriers.

In the simulations used by the Baltimore Police Department, most participants suffer at first from a kind of stage fright. After all, they are being asked to perform in front of their colleagues while having to adapt quickly to the nuances of an unfamiliar experience.

One scenario was designed to have the suspect point his weapon at the first responding officer—always a stomach-wrenching experience. In addition, both officers on the scene are in poor cover positions. The first one stands directly in front of the house where the gunman is. The back-up officer crouches behind the police vehicle at the rear of the house. The latter position would usu-

ally be safe. But in the scenario, the abode is a three-story rowhouse with big windows overlooking the back-up officer's cover.

Should the responding sergeant pull directly up to the suspect's house? Should he order the first responding officer to leave and report to him a half-block away? Should he order the back-up officer to retreat? Those are just some of the aspects in the simulation on which a participant's performance is measured.

It's adaptable

In many fields, using simulations make sense. They can accurately assess employees' abilities, protect an organization from potential liability for training mishaps, and provide opportunities to update policies and procedures.

Suppose that you want to create a simulation that teaches sales skills. The first step would be to identify what constitutes top-flight sales activity by referencing company data. In the simulation, such activity could be represented by points won by trainees for exhibiting the appropriate behavior. The next step would be to identify the impediments to success, such as defective products or poor customer service. Such factors should be part of the simulation so that it realistically reflects conditions that salespeople are likely to encounter.

In any simulation, participants should formulate a strategy at the outset, altering their plans to adapt to the twists and turns of game play. The idea is for participants to learn how to adapt to changing conditions fast and effectively in actual situations.

The playing environment can be as simple as a game board. It should depict both positive and negative factors of the situation that the simulation mimics—with bonus moves, penalties for errors, and provisions for unexpected occurrences.

Whatever the topic, a simulation should have a set time for completion. Play can be sequential or continuous, depending on whether the instructor evaluates trainees' behavior after each move or action. The instructor can share the results with trainees after each turn or at the conclusion of the simulation.

It's also important to construct and enforce fair and impartial rules. Simulations can be viewed as competitions, which can cause participants to be aggressive—an unwelcome offshoot. Instructors must be ready to step in to cool things off.

Adults learn best by doing, not listening. Hands-on learning imprints itself, and it is assimilated and recalled better. If a simulation reflects real conditions accurately—and if it "rewards" appropriate actions and "punishes" mistakes—trainees will go away better-equipped to be more effective in their jobs. And they're likely to be more receptive to learning the next time.

Within days of a simulation at the BPD, a sergeant confronted a suspect in a bank robbery, who had just taken another police officer hostage. From what he learned in the pre-simulation briefing, the sergeant was able to gauge the effectiveness of his cover in terms of the power and range of the suspect's handgun. He reacted accordingly and took the man into custody.

In another instance, a sergeant that had just completed training found himself in a hostage-barricade situation similar to the one in the simulation. Using the checklist, he was able to exert effective leadership skills quickly, mobilizing and deploying responding units. The incident was resolved peacefully.

"Before the training," he said, "I wouldn't have known what to do. It got me through the incident."

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