

Officer Accountability—Self-Improvement

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Abstract: The stressful nature of law enforcement requires specialized selection and training for those who seek to make it a career. In recent years, psychological testing has been used by psychologists and law enforcement administrators as an aid in selecting successful candidates. An additional use for such testing might be to improve training in social interaction through self-understanding.

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Since law enforcement is one of the most stressful occupations in this country, personality testing has been used as an aid in selecting emotionally stable candidates who will be capable of handling the rigorous requirements of the profession. Unfortunately, once the individual has been selected, his testing is finished and his test results are usually placed in his personnel file and forgotten, unless some significant occurrence such as litigation or a stress-related illness prompts further testing or counseling.

Administrators sometimes overlook the additional use of psychological tests in training. Properly selected psychological tests could be used at in-service training programs to promote self-understanding. Since many of man's deepest satisfactions come through improving his own understanding and competency, it would follow that any test capable of improving insight would be satisfying and lead to increased competence. Moreover, if the test were designed with an emphasis on social interaction, it would greatly aid in improving the professionalism of the officer as well as help to make up for a lack of training in a vital area.

A paradox in training for law enforcement officers exists. Studies indicate that 70% to 90% of police training is devoted to crime control, laws, and police procedures, while frequently 70% to 90% of subsequent job duties are devoted to interpersonal communication and interaction (Stratton 1982). Often officers are expected to perform professional services similar to those offered by social workers, lawyers, and even doctors, but they are only

given limited training time to perfect these skills. Professional training for an officer varies from a few short weeks to an upward limit of approximately 6 months. Under present Virginia standards, an officer who completes 30 years of service can expect to have less than 1,000 hours of classroom training during his entire career. Ironically, law enforcement officers are expected to provide a diversity of professional services with little more training than semi-skilled workers receive.

How can the agency or the officer seek to make up the deficit of training? One possible solution is through a self-improvement program using psychological testing to provide the officer with a better understanding of himself. If the program is successful, the effort will assure improved professionalism and the officer and his organization will benefit.

Since man is a social being, any improvement in understanding his own feelings and emotions and their relationship in determining behavior will be a positive step in understanding others. Often introspection produces knowledge and understanding which facilitate personal growth and self-actualization (the common basic need of every individual to improve, to grow, and to achieve his or her potential).

Unfortunately, in attempting to actualize individuals in a self-improvement program, personalities may have to be criticized. It is an undeniable fact that in each person there is room for some improvement, but a heated debate would probably develop as to what needed improving. It has been stated very accurately that most people would rather be ruined by praise than cured by criticism. The problem experienced by the officer is finding an acceptable method of obtaining the necessary objective criticism to facilitate personal growth and self-actualization. Without objectivity, ego-defense mechanisms would surely present barriers to any self-improvement strategy.

All behavior is a function of an individual's perceptions; that is, people behave according to how things seem to them and, as perceptions change, so too does behavior. It follows that with a new perception of oneself, provided by psychological testing, one might behave differently.

Within this conceptual framework, a program was designed by the Virginia Commission of Game and Inland Fisheries to help the officer drop his defenses, acknowledge his actual experience, perceive himself as he really was, and achieve needed competence for personal choice, growth, and fulfillment. In order to accomplish this task, a psychological test had to be selected that would minimize the psychological threat while at the same time maximize the information about the officer's personality. In addition, the test had to be easily understood so that it might readily be used by the officer.

The *California Psychological Inventory* (CPI) was the test which was selected according to these criteria. It was administered to every law enforcement officer as part of the Commission's 1981 in-service training program.

The CPI is a 480-item true-false questionnaire for normal individuals which provides 18 scales measuring easily-understood and socially-desirable behavioral tendencies rather than esoteric and pathological characteristics. The CPI is used where there is an interest in identifying and maximizing the positive and favorable personality assests of individuals. To overcome the subject's natural ego-defense mechanisms which are designed primarily for dealing with inner hurt, anxiety, and self-devaluation, and to make the subject acknowledge his actual experience, the CPI "alters" the subject's perception of himself. The CPI does not actually change the subject's perception of himself, but only reflects his actual characteristics. In responding to an ambiguous stimulus, each statement, the subject's unique response of *true* or *false* is based on his learning and experience and accurately reflects his own characteristics or personality. If a psychological profile is developed from the 18 scales on the CPI, the officer can actually predict what he will do in a specified context and/or describe himself as others who know him well would do. This description provides an accurate and objective psychological profile which is, in essence, an altered perception of the officer. When provided with this insight, the officer has a better understanding of himself and has a choice for personal growth and self-actualization.

Since there are no special controls for valid administration and there are no restrictions against asking questions of the proctor, the CPI is very non-threatening. The test maximizes the information about the officer and provides this information in the form of 18 easily understood concepts, such as *responsibility, socialization, self-control, flexibility, tolerance, self-acceptance, and intellectual efficiency*. If the officer uses this information in an effective self-evaluation process, the CPI would appear to fulfill the test criteria and implement the program design.

The self-evaluation program designed by the Commission consisted of bringing the officers together at district meetings. At these meetings, the CPI and the test scales were interpreted and explained to the officers. Each officer could compare his profile to that of the "average" profile developed for the entire law enforcement division. Materials were given to the officer to permit him to make comparisons with various other professions for which profiles have been developed. Finally, each officer could determine his ranking by comparing his standard scores to the range of scores for the entire law enforcement division.

With this information about himself, the officer now had a psychological yardstick or benchmark by which he might objectively judge himself. If the officer was honest and candid in his self-evaluation, he had the opportunity to make improvements in areas where improvement was indicated and to build upon his strengths. All that was required of the officer was a commitment to the goals and purposes of the program.

Most successful people realize the need to take reasonable and calculated risks in order to achieve desired goals. The officer who is unwilling to make an attempt at self-improvement is falling far short of his goal of becoming a professional law enforcement officer and a well-integrated person, and he is held accountable by the public whom he serves.

Literature Cited

Stratton, J. G. 1982. Psychological services for police. *J. Police Sci. and Adm.* 8: 31-39.