

Assessment of Conservation Agent Safety Training in Missouri

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Abstract: As a result of an increasing frequency of assaults on conservation agents performing their duties, administrators of the Protection Division of the Missouri Department of Conservation requested Conservation Agent Training Academy staff look at the current status of officer safety training offered to agents. The division also decided to complete an extensive assessment of all training provided for conservation agents. To satisfy immediate needs and prepare a way to meet long-term needs, a Safety Needs Assessment was completed. Results of the assessment revealed relatively small gaps in safety training as well as a viable method for evaluating any future training needs.

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Missouri conservation agents have been designated by the Conservation Commission of Missouri as the “front line” of the Department of Conservation. They are responsible for enforcing the rules and regulations protecting the forest, fish, and wildlife resources of the state. In addition, they must have a working knowledge of all areas of Department responsibilities. As with most other states, Missouri conservation agents carry out not only resource enforcement activities but resource management and public information activities as well. Community oriented policing is not a new term to Missouri conservation agents. They have practiced it since the beginning of our agency. Consequently, we make the extra effort to ensure these “ambassadors” are prepared for their work through extensive recruit level and in-service training programs.

Missouri has provided job-specific training for conservation agents since 1937. Protection Division is the only Division in the Department which provides extensive training for new employees. Basic training for the position of conservation agent lasts for a period of 6 months, during which trainees receive around 1,200 hours of training. The in-service or continuing education training program provides at least 40 hours annually of refresher training as well as new programs.

The Protection Division Operational Plan for fiscal years 1996–2000 (Mo. Dep. Conserv. 1995) mandates a detailed training needs assessment be conducted to improve and update Division training and thus strengthen the ability of conservation

agents to carry out their charge (Mo. Dep. Conserv. 1995). This is the first time this type of assessment will be undertaken by the Division. Prior to this, training was conducted “the way it has always been done,” what we thought we might need, or by the “crisis management principle.” This analysis was designed to increase the technical knowledge of Missouri conservation agents in all aspects of their duties and responsibilities (Mo. Dep. Conserv. 1995). It would also provide a way to insure against unnecessary training and objectively prioritize the Division’s training needs.

For the purposes of this study, the term “training need” is defined as the gap between what personnel perceive as the level of expertise needed to carry out their responsibilities in an optimum manner and what they perceive as the level of expertise they currently possess (FBI, U.S. Dep. Justice 1986 *a, b*). The training needs assessment, then, is a formal process which:

1. identifies the gaps,
2. prioritizes the gaps, and
3. selects the highest priority gaps for action.

R. G. Phillips (FBI, U. S. Dep. Justice 1986*a, b*) found that a needs assessment based solely on size of gap would provide insufficient information for prioritizing training needs. Phillips went on further to explain it was necessary to not only collect data on the size of the gap that existed for specific job activities, but also on the amount of time spent performing each activity and on the amount of harm which would most likely result from inadequate performance of the activity. In other words, a truly thorough needs assessment determines first of all what the gaps are by looking at what is currently taking place or the results. The process then compares these results with what the desired, or required, results are and selects the most critical of the gaps for closure. The desired or required results can be a product of unsatisfactory performance on the part of personnel, complaints from the public about service, reorganization, new technologies, etc.

Identification of Users and Their Needs

To begin a thorough needs assessment it must be first of all decided who are the users of this study and what are their needs? Users of a detailed Training Needs Assessment can be as numerous as are the positions in an agency. Line managers, training managers, instructors; and employees will all benefit from a well-planned assessment.

The number of violent assaults being committed against law enforcement officers is on the rise. This seems to hold true for all types of law enforcement, including the conservation officer. In Missouri, we have seen incidents of violent assaults against our agents steadily rise. During one specific period, 1990–1994, a series of occurrences opened our eyes dramatically. Our agents are becoming more and more involved with other than the “good ole’ boy” violator. They are dealing with hardened criminals, folks who do not seem to have any regard for the value of human life, much less respect for law enforcement authorities.

The incident in the video took place in 1990. Fortunately nobody was killed. Missouri agents had been involved in altercations prior to this time period, but usually without serious consequence or injury. In 1961, a man was killed as he tried to draw down on the agent who had caught him stringing fire in the Ozarks. This had been the only time in the history of the Missouri Department of Conservation that an agent has killed someone in the line of duty. Fortunately, none of our agents have made the ultimate sacrifice.

In 1995, as a way to bring to light the increasing dangers facing our agents, a panel of three agents, all exposed to deadly force assault situations during the 1990 through 1994 period, were given an opportunity to tell their stories to a gathering of all Protection Division personnel during our annual Division Conference. What came out of that panel discussion were the realizations that there may be some holes in the training offered to agents, but where were they?

To ensure that all areas of officer safety or survival training were sufficiently covered, Protection Division Chief Ron Glover requested a review of existing officer survival training to ensure conservation agents were receiving the best possible training. It was then that this Officer Safety Training Needs Assessment was developed. We had our users identified and we were looking for their needs.

Determination of Focus

To insure efficiency in an assessment, the focus of the assessment must be determined. The focus can be one of several. A needs assessment can be used to determine methods to change employee performance, prepare for upcoming changes, such as a reorganization, or determine the value of current training. Our Training Needs Assessment was initiated to satisfy the latter of these.

As an avenue toward meeting the Operational Plan mandate for a detailed Training Needs Assessment, as well as the request of Protection Division Administration for a review of current officer survival training, a Training Needs Assessment based solely on officer safety issues was proposed. In addition to this providing a clear picture of the safety needs recognized by Division Personnel, it would be used as a trial run for a much more detailed assessment of all agent duties.

Data Collection

Data necessary to conduct a needs analysis can be collected through personal interviews with affected parties. Information can be obtained through group discussions or "brainstorming" sessions. Questionnaires are also a viable means for obtaining what you need to know although they can be extremely time-consuming. It was the questionnaire method of collecting data which was utilized for this study.

Methods

A listing of the activities associated with officer safety was developed. While there may have been more activities to list, it was decided that the 23 activities on

the list were sufficient to provide a clear picture of the perceived needs of Division employees. Each commissioned employee was provided a list of activity statements, a blank answer form and detailed instructions on how to complete the assessment. Instead of asking for a listing of what employees felt their training needs were, it was decided this method would be more apt to determine true needs instead of wants.

For each activity statement, the employee answered three separate questions. The questions asked amounts of time they spent on each activity, the amount of harm which would most likely result from an inadequate performance of the activity and what they felt to be the size of training gap for the activity. The seven possible response selections ranged from very small or zero to very large. To allow statistical analysis of the data, the response selections were assigned a numerical value ranging from zero through 6. Mean scores were calculated for each activity statement for amount of time spent on the activity, amount of harm that might result from inadequate performance, and size of training gap for the activity.

Answer sheets also had sections to indicate region, job position, and gender. The information gained from these sections would be helpful in determining specific needs according to location, duties, and gender. A total of 173 responses were received from the 204 questionnaires sent out. This represented an 85% response level.

Data were analyzed using a training need index which was adapted from Phillips (1986a, b) and calculated utilizing all 3 scores:

$$\text{Training Need} = (\text{Harm minus Time}) \text{ plus Gap}$$

However, comparison of the index scores to gap mean scores revealed that the index score was virtually a "shadow" of the gap score. Use of the gap score as an indicator of training need had intuitive appeal because the scores were tied to word anchors ("very small," "small," etc.); thus, the mean gap score was used to illustrate where training needs existed.

The gaps were compared regionally to allow the appropriate Regional Training Specialist to prioritize continuing education or in service training needs on a regional basis. Data were also compared by gender to determine if there were inconsistencies in training female versus male agents. The data did not reveal any negative correlations. Data was also compiled to show the relationship between the time, gap, and harm measurements.

The Next Step

This form of assessment obtained the required results. Specifically a satisfactory tool for determining training needs was developed. The process revealed the biggest safety training need recognized by Missouri Conservation Agents was in the area of dealing with persons carrying edged weapons. To fill this gap, a course in defending against spontaneous knife attacks has been added to both our basic and in service curriculum.

We also recognized a significant gap in the ability of our officers to deal with critical incident stress or post traumatic stress disorder. Consequently, we have embarked on the development of a peer counseling program to assist in filling this gap.

We are in the developmental stages of a complete training needs assessment for all conservation agent activities. As soon as this extensive list of activities is finalized, we will again begin the assessment process.

The possibility of utilizing this assessment to assist in evaluating the status of conservation agent trainees is also being considered. In other words, we will provide an assessment questionnaire to each "recruit" to allow them the opportunity to show us where they perceive their gaps to be.

Summary

A Training Needs Assessment is an iterative process. In order to ensure your program is on the cutting edge of what is needed for your situation, you have got to be continually evaluating where you are and where you want to be. If your evaluation of performance needs reveals a new policy or procedure needs to be implemented, those solutions may have implications for training. Even if amount of gap is indicated from your analysis, formal training may not be necessary. Perhaps that gap can be closed through changes in policy.

We all must come to the realization that training is an absolute necessity for the modern wildlife law enforcement professional. Yes, training can eat up a large portion of time and money, two commodities which we guard viciously, but it is much less costly than the consequences of doing nothing. To ensure you are making the most efficient use of your budget allocated to training, perhaps a formalized training needs assessment is in order.

Literature Cited

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