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## Editor's Corner

with PoliceOne Senior Editor Doug Wyllie

### IACP Digest: Traffic school for cops

Captain Mike Parker of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department spoke with me before his presentation — Education-Based Discipline — and said something I hadn't thought about since high school. The root of the word discipline is disciple.

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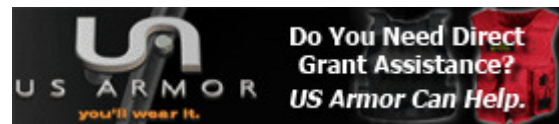
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A disciple is one who is cultivated and molded in the image of the teacher. A disciple is someone who can then take up the mission when that instructor passes on. Consequently, discipline is about education and mentorship. The problem with most instances of officer discipline, Parker said, is that a suspension without pay is strictly putative, not constructive or instructive.

"What's a guy going to learn from five days off without pay? He's going to learn what it's like to sit around the house for five days. Does that make him a better officer? Probably not."

But when you ask most line officers about their perception of discipline, their immediately reply is: "Punishment." When you ask what the perception of the word 'discipline' is among management, said Parker, you get a different answer.

Parker showed a slide with an image a three-foot tall stack of paperwork. "That look a little like your weekend?" The room — packed 250+ people — roared with laughter.

"Sometimes our heroes make a mistake, and when they do, we have to have processes in place to respond and remediate," Parker said. Five months ago, the Los Angeles County Sheriff's office, under the direction of Sheriff Lee Baca, rolled out a program to do just that. Parker called it "traffic school for cops."

The agency had conducted a study of the disciplinary actions taken in its department and discovered that full three quarters of the suspensions without pay were for a duration of five days, and three quarters of those were the only suspension that the officer ever had. Parker used a parable — the Cheerios guy — to illustrate the point he was driving at.

"Let's say you've got one of your top guys, he's a hard-charging cop, he's always hooking and booking, and he's just one of the best in your department. But one day, he's got a call early in his shift that results in a dead child. He responds, the baby's not breathing, he can't save the baby. Later that same day, he's gets a call to a gang fight where there's some gun play. No shots are fired but guys have got guns out and it's a stressful call. So, his shift ends, and he goes home to the wife and family he loves, and his wife says, 'Hey you promised to pick up a box of Cheerios at the store on your way home.' But with that day he just had, well, he had forgotten all about the Cheerios. But he's a good man and he goes out to the supermarket to get the Cheerios. He gets there and in the cereal aisle he discovers that there's only one box of Cheerios left. As he's reaching for the box of Cheerios, somebody that most of us would describe as a dirt-bag grabs for that same box of Cheerios. Okay, where do you think that guy's head is at? What do you think he does? He moves his jacket aside just a little bit and reveals on his belt that badge and that gun. Dirt-bag Cheerios guys backs off and walks away: 'Your Cheerios,' he says."

Was that an inappropriate display of the firearm? Was it improper application of the authority of the badge? Parker said, yes, it probably was both of those things.

Parker then asked the rhetorical question, 'now what?'

"That same dirt-bag just happens to be in a popular rock band, and he also happens to be the son of a high-profile someone in the area. Next thing you know, the citizen complaint comes in, and now the chief has to deal with this thing — a bad decision at the end of a bad day by one of the agency's very best cops. Does five days suspension sound like a logical solution to the problem?"

For a five-day suspension, your agency is probably looking at several months of activity, none of which is working to correct the problem that caused the disciplinary action in the first place. This, said Parker, doesn't make much sense.

"We've had some guys ask us, 'What if I go to briefing and talk about what I did and tell the guys how I screwed up and what I'd do differently?' On a scale of one to ten, what do you think the recall and recognition is going to be for the officers who listen to that talk? Something in the area of a ten, right?"

And you can do lots of different things like that which will work to help correct a behavior and hopefully prevent future mistakes. "I had a chief tell me that he had an article he liked and knew would help instruct an officer who had a disciplinary situation. He told the officer to read the article and write a two-page report about it. Then they talked about the article and the officer's report."

That counts as education-based discipline just as much as a formal class does.

"The core value is fairness. That is the key word that the Sheriff uses all the time," said Parker. Ordinarily when you're dealing with a disciplinary action, you're looking at around a five day suspension, Parker said. "Depending on the offense, you're talking about five days, one day, maybe a month of time off without pay. Your officer gets that letter of intent, the bitterness already is started. Then the grievance process begins."

Since rolling out the education-based discipline program five months ago, Los Angeles Sheriff's Department has offered the option to 49 employees. Four dozen have elected to attend the training — only one has chosen to take the suspension.

"He was about to ship off to Iraq, so I don't even think you can count him as refusing the training. He just wanted a couple more days vacation."

With only one exception, all the classes in the LASD program already existed. The one class they created — the Lieutenants Interactive Forum for Education, or LIFE Class — is a hybrid of Steven Covey's Seven Habits of Highly Successful People and some other concepts on decision-making. Every officer who chooses the EBD path takes this class, what Parker called EBD 101. For the most part, officers who choose to go with the EBD option, they're going to be away from the street for half the time they'd have served on suspension without pay.

"That's flexible though, and in some cases you will have both — you'll have some education classes and you'll have some time off, but it's dependent on that specific situation," Parker said. "It is very rare that you have Chiefs, Sheriffs, Lieutenants, and Line Officers all agree on something, but on this program, that's exactly what you have. The only people who don't like this are the attorneys, who are losing out on billable hours in because of officers not pursuing the grievance process."

This program doesn't cost the officer money — they're not getting days off without pay, and they're not paying for the classes themselves — and in fact, even though the training costs the department money, the cost of losing taking that officer off the street is diminished.

Not to get too deep into the weeds on the math, the analysis looks like this. If an agency figures to pay five days of time-and-a-half for the officer taking the place of the one who's been suspended, and compares that with paying time-and-a-half for two days while that same officer is attending training (even with the added cost of the professional development class), the agency is probably breaking even, if not even saving some money.

Oh yeah, and that cop who had the encounter with the Cheerios guy in the grocery store is probably going to be a smarter, better, safer, more effective officer because of the two days of classes he took on tactical communications and decision-making.

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A veteran of more than ten years in online and print journalism, Doug Wyllie was writing about digital music before Napster, streaming video before YouTube, and wireless technology since the original Palm Pilot debuted. As senior editor of PoliceOne, Doug is responsible for the editorial direction of the PoliceOne website. In addition to his editorial and managerial responsibilities, Doug writes on a broad range of topics and trends that affect the law enforcement community.

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