



Custom Training, Consulting, and Research to Build Public Trust

Beyond De-Escalation: The T3 Approach to Building Trust and Safety

**Jonathan M. Wender, Ph.D.
President and CEO, Polis Solutions Inc.**

The report by a Presidential Commission established in the aftermath of deadly riots between police and African-American protestors states that “unless carried out with courtesy and with understanding of the community, even the most enlightened patrol practices will degenerate into what residents will come to regard as harassment” (161). Among many other recommendations, the report’s authors call for better guidelines “to assist officers in making critical decisions in areas where police conduct can create tension” (164). And on the topic of police training, the report cautions, “although conventional instruction is a minimum requirement, full understanding can only be achieved by intensive, small-group training involving simulation” (165).

Sound familiar? If you think these quotes come from the post-Ferguson 2015 Report of the President’s Task Force on 21st Century Policing, guess again: they appear in the 1968 report of the Kerner Commission, which was established in 1967 by President Lyndon Johnson following months of urban riots that killed scores of people and injured thousands of others across the United States. The Kerner Commission Report highlights that we already knew over half a century ago how to improve officer and public safety: community engagement, better police decision-making, empathy, more realistic training, and so on. As the law enforcement profession continues to evolve, we must remember that while society changes in unforeseen ways, the principles of excellent policing remain constant.

The core mission for those of us who train and educate law enforcement officers is therefore not to “reinvent the wheel,” but rather to transform the ways in which we implement what we have long known. Unfortunately, this point often gets lost in the current national debate on de-escalation and policing, which is so distracted by controversial instances of the use of force that it largely ignores the deeper challenge of improving the outcome of *all* police-community interactions. While it is undoubtedly true that we must strive to eliminate unnecessary and excessive force, doing so by itself fails to address the deeper question of how to improve overall public trust in the police. Indeed, there are many instances of clearly justifiable force that nonetheless generate public outrage rooted in a fundamental mistrust of the police.

In any relationship, trust is gained and lost one interaction at a time. This is true for personal, professional, and public relationships alike. And this is why *every* police-community interaction has strategic implications for both officer and public safety. As my colleagues and I put it in our T3 – Tact, Tactics, and Trust courses, “trust is safety, and safety is trust.” The ultimate challenge we face in policing isn’t physical danger, but rather public mistrust. Mistrust is a basic precursor of personal and political violence: people don’t act violently in situations where trust is high. But when people mistrust the police, we lose their confidence, cooperation, and compliance. This not only leads to more violent confrontations that injure and kill officers and citizen alike, but also erodes public support and appreciation of the police and the sacrifices we make to protect and serve the community.

Therefore, the most urgent question we need to ask is not, “how can we do a better job of de-escalating conflict?” but rather, “how we can deliberately work to create a safe, lawful, and ethical outcome to every police-community interaction? Unlike other professions, people judge the entire law enforcement profession based on the actions of individual officers. For better or for worse, every police-community interaction creates a ripple effect that influences both public and officer safety. At the end of the day, public confidence in the police is no better than the worst officer’s last contact. This is why we must have the discipline and skills to take every opportunity to strengthen the trust-safety relationship.

T3 training focuses on building officers’ capacity to do just that. Unlike de-escalation training, T3 takes a holistic, evidence-based approach to creating positive outcomes across the full spectrum of police-community interactions. Whether the situation is a victim interview, potentially lethal encounter, mental health crisis, or traffic stop with an irate motorist, the skills we teach and practice in T3 make officers more agile, adaptable, and creative. The scientific foundation of T3 rests on the principle that the key to improving outcomes of policing-community interactions is better decision-making skills. Rather than artificially separating verbal, psychological, and physical skills, we teach officers that every interaction requires them to continuously balance influence and control in adaptive response to changing conditions.

While skills of influence are ultimately more conducive to building long-term trust, control tactics are an essential means of resolving some interactions. To help prevent unnecessary injuries and deaths, T3 therefore teaches officers to detect and control threats before they become severe, and when lawful and justifiable to apply lower levels of force early in encounters to avoid having to use more force later because a situation has spiraled out of control. We continuously challenge officers to find better ways to exercise restraint, patience, and empathy; and we challenge them just as hard to act forcefully when they are justified in doing so to protect the public and themselves. While T3 has a strong foundation in the latest scientific research on decision-making and the dynamics of human interaction, we always tell officers in the opening minutes of class that there is nothing we can teach them about the basics of communication and tactics that people didn’t already know thousands of years ago. The gap we face on the street isn’t one of knowledge, but of practice and performance.

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Reference:

Report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders, accessed at <https://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015000225410&view=1up&seq=15>.

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or visit our website at <https://www.polis-solutions.net>**