

Five Faces of Training Development Distortion as Applied to Small Arms Training in the United States Coast Guard.

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The managers and developers of small arms (defined as firearms of .60 caliber or below) training for the United States Coast Guard face a continual rotation of political, social and economic influences that impact directly on planning decisions. The current era of loosely termed “downsizing” is a historical actuality of the U. S. Coast Guard and one that directly influences the direction of all training development.

Downsizing is more than a physical reduction of personnel and lowering of appropriations; it is an anchor on creativity and a harbor of indecision and usually the first to fall under economic pressures. The Coast Guard’s 1997 budget request is an excellent example. This budget entailed removing two million dollars from the small arms appropriation request using the rationale that changing military readiness policies mandated the reduction. However, small arms training was not a part of the Coast Guard’s military readiness functions but rather required for qualification in its law enforcement activities. The excuse was to reduce an unwanted training area by a Coast Guard that leaned toward functions that are less military, and more civil and regulatory, in nature. This is a reversal of thought from previous generations where Coast Guard officers considered proficiency with small arms a basic military hallmark skill for themselves as well as most enlisted men.

The Coast Guard’s trend away from a military posture is not a sudden development. Over the past two decades the Coast Guard moved into civil law enforcement dictated by political concerns. The move toward civilian-style law enforcement activities caused the review of basic small arms training resulting in a wide division, if not derision, of thought. The majority

of efforts to develop training followed civilian concepts most largely independent of any study or “systematic analysis” (Tannerhill and Janeksela, 1984). It was grocery shopping without a list where the developers took home what they wanted but not needed.

From its inception in 1790 to about the late 1970s the Coast Guard followed military training techniques of any given era. Whatever method popular at any given time became the Coast Guard’s training goals and each change embraced a new set of training parameters. For the most part, service needs did not figure into development but rather on the needs of a particular armed conflict or situation. Allison outlined that the “parameters of organizational behavior mostly persist” (1971) and when faced with nonstandard problems organizations search for and assimilate new techniques. At times, the searches simply followed existing procedures accompanied by minor, but often significant changes (McNaugher, 1979). The Coast Guard usually selected training criteria based on the *what-everybody-else-was-doing-factor* (author emphasis).

The exception to this came in the early 1930s when the Coast Guard took a national leadership role in small arms training. President Franklin Roosevelt mandated this training for the agents of the Treasury Department (for whom the Coast Guard worked) and the then new federal law enforcement agency later to become the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI). The Coast Guard adopted the best techniques of military and civil law enforcement style training. This training became the base for all future law enforcement style weapons training.

Unfortunately, with few exceptions, the lessons learned in the 1930s dissipated during World War II to be replaced by the former ideal that small arms’ training was, again, a basic military requirement and not a tool for operational use. The training policies also became more personally motivated rather than based upon organizational. Training policies developed from

the varying expertise, or whim, of the individual in charge of training development but rarely were there any conferences to gather divergent ideas. Ultimately each published training doctrine contained one or more of the five problematic areas of training development: 1) Selective perception, 2) Selective recall, 3) Wishful thinking, 4) Group-think/Peer-influenced misperception, and 5) Image rigidity (Rosen and Jones, 1977).

Any or all, used singularly or in combination, can distort attitudes and perceptions toward training policies and all have varying levels of exception and desire, whether conscious or unconscious, that affect training development:

Selective perception. This factor remains the core of the misconception in the majority of developmental procedures. This method, if it may be described as such, is simply the training developer seeing *only* what he, or she, wishes to see. This outlook of maintaining current standards demonstrates a perverse loyalty to a system and exemplifies a general lack of leadership ability. Within this perspective, the developer thrives on the misconception that in all situations all peoples are the same and therefore the system needs no changes. This perception is certainly myopic, commonly referred to as “tunnel vision” and lacks intellectual honesty that hampers constructive growth.

Selective Recall. An important feature when related to the individual theoretical, technical, or mechanical sections of training development. However, when selective recall is not derived from a number of individuals to form a cohesive training plan the results can be disastrous. Of course, a group can be like-minded. In this case, the group think selective recall may be uniform but equally insufficient for progressive training development. Even when a variety of opinions are available, if each “expert” champions an individual idea or component and excludes other ideas or concepts training development suffocates and dies from idea and

intellectual deprivation.

Sentimentality also plays an important role in selective recall. The Coast Guard is no exception. In the 1970s a group advocated the re-adoption of the revolver for law enforcement work while others wished to retain the then service semi-automatic. Both groups were incorrect in their recall and the possibility that some other weapon may fulfill the need for work and training went unnoticed. The same problem arose when the Department of Defense had to choose between a domestic or foreign designed sidearm as a replacement for the then standard pistol. The selective idea that “American” made was best did not prove out when foreign manufacturers used this concept as a weapon and offered a product superior in concept and function to any American brand.

The impact on training is obvious. Selective recall, in all its varying forms such as sentimentality or personal bias, generally manifests itself in choosing one method or style, however minute, over another. The result causes conflicts in training standards where some dismiss the practices and insert their own beliefs or standards borne, once again, on selective recall.

Wishful Thinking. This strategy is escapism and tends to avoid a problem that will eventually need attention (Bruner, 1966). The best example is the 1960s adoption of the M16 service rifle. Although the rifle had early mechanical problems, it quickly proved its worth in many armed-conflicts around the world. However, the general hope that the rifle would simply go away or prove worthless as a general service arm hampered training. These training developers longed for what was to them a better day were but are one segment of the wishful thinkers. Another example grouping, which may make up more than half of all, is the “thing” yearners. This grouping rushes to inactivity because they do not have the “things” they perceive

they need to develop adequate training. They usually cite the lack of people, time and money to be effective and use the dictum that “we could do better only if . . .” In either case, image of what procedures to correct, initiate or enhance training become widely distorted resulting in an overall inaction or deficient doctrine. Wishful thinkers are poor leaders and will act only when prodded by extraordinary events. The Coast Guard small arms training program seems headed in this direction because of the excuse of reduced budgets and personnel.

Group-Think/Peer-Influenced Misperception. The most powerful and widely used of all the encumbrances to curriculum development. The group as a whole agrees that training is adequate and has been for a number of years (also see Selective Recall). This type of thinking stifles individual growth and continued to do so until the need to augment personal needs forced a change to another form of group think (Benne and Muntyan, 1951). Small arms training within the Coast Guard followed this type of system for over six decades. The "group" would change its perception only after a forced change and then *that* change became the mandated perception. A common misperception associated within the group think style was the social perception of the weaknesses of women involved in small arms training. The group believed that women should be trained on some "lighter" (in actual weight and recoil) weapon. This perception had a negative impact on the male trainees some of whom were smaller, in physical and mental stature, than some female trainees. Application of bias toward ethnic, racial, and social (economic) groups often entered the formula of this group. Like the previous category changes in sentiment toward a particular style of training occurs frequently and the group may embrace a stance of perception that radically alters the former stance. Advocates of change, especially radical, can generate peer pressure. The "out with the old" group think practitioners effect overall training development as much as the old group. Group think has been paralleled to the "Old Boy"

system, however, it can also be tied to the "New Boy" system that is just as effective at preventing innovation in curriculum development. The Coast Guard had both types within its organization and the stratified groups rarely reached consensus.

Image rigidity. This group follows many of the precepts of the "Group thinkers" but also contains perceptions of absolutes crafted from factors that most training issues are black and white. This perception finds few gray areas in social or professional areas. Hostility to the values, techniques, and mechanical devices of either side is the usual result and are usually long standing and developed over extended blocks of time and circumstance. The inflexibility of this pattern fostered a "*my way is better than your way*" (also known as the "my way or the highway") attitude that was not conducive to building student confidence or curriculum development. The pigeonholed attitudes helped maintain group think classifications.

Diversity of opinion is one of the greatest aids in the development of any form of training curriculum. However, strong leadership must play a large role in that development to combine the five factors into useful attribute called experience. Singularly they are destructive and impede progress.

The curriculum developer must accept the past and apply the best parts to the present. In the manner of the Roman mythological Janus, (god of gates, doors, doorways, beginnings, and endings) the ability to "look" both ways before crossing the educational street comes from a fair interpretation of the attitudes and applying them to a broader definition of the term training. The Coast Guard maintained the attitude that firearms' training was a procession of simple skills for a single purpose (Bass and Vaughan, 1966). The increased use of firearms on a daily basis precluded any simple definition and must be expanded to include the socio-emotional affects of actual use of firearms.

The five catalysts to the distortion of training standards will exist until there is a willingness to accept that training is not the end itself, but only the means and the effect of curriculum development is to plan how that training will affect people.

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