

Restructuring Your Tactical Training Program

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One of the most challenging situations I face as a tactical instructor occurs when I am asked to help a SWAT team restructure their training program. I say challenging, not because the team is confrontational and won't listen, but because by the time I am contacted team members have become frustrated and angry. It takes very little work on my part to find out why emotions are running so high. Almost without fail, the stories are the same. Either team members feel that they are not progressing in tactical skills; or worse, the team has failed to succeed – or succeeded but only marginally so – in handling a real critical incident. At some point in time the team has, individually or as a collective, decided that the reason for their poor performance is that their training is not what it should be. This is what leads to the anger and frustration because, short of redoubling efforts while training, the team cannot see how to improve things. The irony is that if the team attempts to train harder without correcting the actual cause of the problems, the worse the situation will become. In SWAT this vicious, self-perpetuating cycle can become so oppressive that, without intervention, the team will become non-mission capable and generally fail to realize it until something catastrophic happens.

In most of the cases I have dealt with, poor performance is *rarely* caused by a lack of team effort while training or during a real critical incident. The fault is found in these three interrelated training mistakes:

- A. Training is not organized:** Poorly organized training is indicated by a lack of scheduling and planning. For instance, the team waits until the morning of training to decide that they want to work on hostage rescues. Unfortunately, because the team did not plan this training in advance, they have no location for the training, no role players and no itinerary to follow.
- B. Training is not focused:** Training that lacks focus means that a team is attempting to train on too many subjects without rhyme or reason. Training subjects change constantly and have no goals assigned to them.
- C. Training is not comprehensive:** Conversely, this detractor occurs when a team elects to work on a specific SWAT mission or technique but fails to address *all the specific skills* that might be needed to accomplish the mission. In other words, they are skipping the more mundane (but critically necessary) training skills for the exciting ones.

Separately, the above training mistakes can be bad enough on a team's performance and morale; however, if left un-corrected – as I usually find them to be – these practices will become entangled and begin to reinforce one another with devastating results. When this occurs, it is affectionately known as an “incestuous training mistake” (little training mistakes breeding off of each other to make a really catastrophic mistake).

Incestuous training is perhaps the single greatest reason a SWAT team fails to successfully accomplish a tactical mission or make advancements in training.

Venn Diagram Depicting Incestuous Training Mistakes

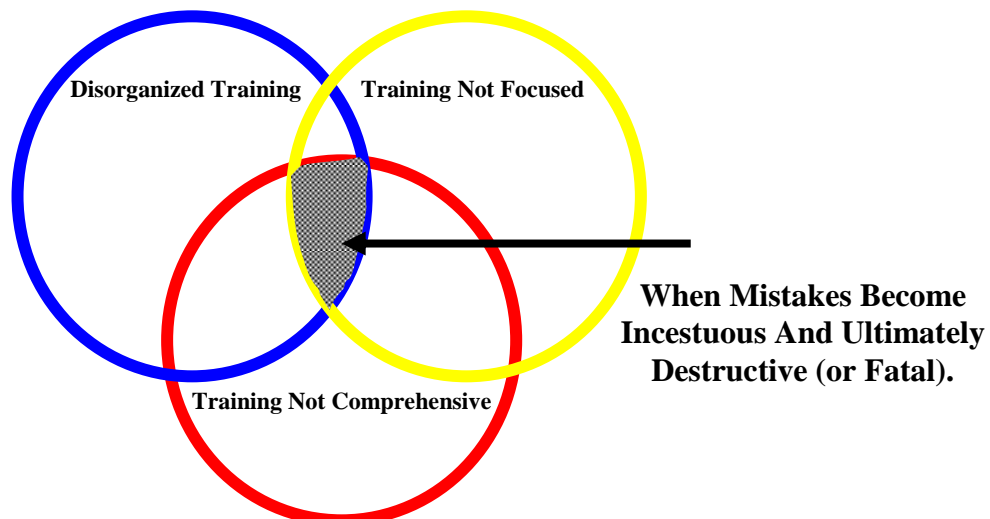


Figure 1

Before I can begin to repair (or help restructure) a training program, I must evaluate the team and identify exactly what problems they are having. I do this by:

- Doing an in-depth review of individual and team training records.
- Reviewing training schedules, training plans and training goals.
- Interviewing all team members.
- Interviewing the team as a group.
- Observe the team while they are conducting weekly (or monthly) training.
- Evaluating the team during a practice tactical scenario (of my choosing and design).

As an administrative note, I feel that I should point out that for me to be successful in assisting a team, team members must set aside their egos and open them-selves up to being evaluated – sometimes in a very severe manner. It takes a great deal of guts to allow such scrutiny, especially in the SWAT community where even constructive criticism is rarely well-received.

Once problem areas have been identified, the team has two choices. One choice is to correct the problems individually (as they are discovered) and then maintain the current training program without exploring further changes. The down side to this concept is that it was the team's *current training philosophy* that allowed the problems to start and take root. Not changing the training program will, eventually, open the door for future trouble. The second choice is to restructure the team's entire training program. While I believe this is the best approach, it is very time consuming and requires a high level of team dedication and patience to make it work. The following material outlines the

methodology needed to repair the listed training detractors regardless of which of the above choices a team makes.

A. Getting Your Training Organized. Based on personal preferences, many team leaders or team commanders set up training schedules with little or no regard for what the team might desire or need. As a former team leader and team commander myself, I admit that I rarely practiced democracy; however, in this case the needs of the team must come first. Keeping a majority of the team happy will help to foster team unity, morale and dedication; therefore, to get training organized, I recommend that a SWAT team (*as a group*) make the following decisions:

1. What training *cycle* will the team use? Recommended choices are; (a) a three-month cycle with every fourth month used as an evaluation period; (b) a five-month cycle with every sixth month used as an evaluation period; or (c) an eleven-month cycle with every twelfth month used for evaluations.

Note: The evaluation period does not take, as a rule, more than the last two weeks of the month. The preceding two weeks can be used as make-up time should training be missed during a cycle.

Before the team makes this decision, keep in mind that the more a team is under evaluation, the less likely problems will go unseen. The down side to frequent evaluations is that it is very difficult and time consuming to organize and develop a solid evaluation program / scenario. To ease that burden – but also to keep a team sharp – I suggest the five-month cycle.

Regardless of which cycle a team chooses to use, here is a short list of what should be evaluated during that month.

- Individual and team training records
- Training schedules, training plans and training goals
- Physical fitness scores (if applicable)
- Serviceability of equipment & weapons
- The team during a practice tactical scenario

2. What training *times and dates* are best for the team? There will always be team members with conflicting schedules; however, training times and dates are not flexible (without extreme mitigating circumstances) – if the team does not take the established times and dates seriously, then no one else will.

Team policy should be absolutely explicit in its guidance concerning what constitutes a justification for a team member to miss training. Routine absenteeism or constantly being late to training by an individual may be signs of a lack of dedication and should be dealt with immediately. It is better to run a team short, with well-trained dedicated officers than it is to have a full complement of team members – some with question marks next to their names.

When the training cycle, dates and times have been decided upon, the team commander should; (a) make sure each team member has a written copy of the of this information; (b) the schedule should be posted on the department bulletin board; (c) a copy of the schedule should be given to all division commanders (i.e. patrol) that might have to adjust personnel assignments to cover the training times. Training schedules should be posted for the entire training cycle at least 30 days before it begins (which means the tactical command staff should begin working on the new schedule half way through the completion of the current cycle). If there are changes to the schedule, written amendments detailing the changes should, as a courtesy, be forwarded to all concerned parties. Also as a courtesy, emails should be sent to commanders and shift supervisors at least 30 and 15 days out to remind them of the upcoming training dates. It's a lot of work; however, these little "reminders" will help ease tension when commanders and shift supervisors have to release tactical officers for training. Also, it will give the trainer leverage when a shift commander tries to use the standard "I didn't know the team was training" excuse when he/she refuses to allow a team member to attend training.

3. On a given training day, *how many hours* should a team train? As near as I can recall, I have read at least a dozen articles in the last few years concerning this issue. Many of the authors of these articles recommend that a full time team should train 32 hours a month (one eight hour training session a week) and a part time team should train 16 hours a month (broken down into what ever scheduling format they can come up with). My answer to this question is that it does not matter how many hours you are *supposed* to train as long as you are *really training* during those hours.

4. Locking on training locations can be one of the most exasperating and time-consuming undertakings a tactical trainer (or team leader) can experience. Because of this difficulty, many trainers wait until the last possible minute to look for, and secure, training locations. Also, it is not uncommon to have a location locked-on and then, for whatever reason, lose it the day before training.

The search to find quality training locations should begin months (not days or weeks) before the training is to take place. Posting training dates, times and *training subjects* (to be discussed in section B. Focusing Your Training), the trainer will know exactly what type of location is needed well in advance

For better time management, the trainer should use what resources he has available – the team. While delegating some of this responsibility to team members will help ease the burden, the trainer cannot afford to delegate and then not do any follow up. At a minimum the trainer must:

- Make sure the team members know what training dates and training subjects they need to find locations for.
- Describe to the officers exactly what is needed for a training location.
- Give the officers a suspense date (at least 30 days out) as to when they will provide this information.

- Request that the officers also have an alternate training location (a plan B) should the primary location fall through.

B. Focusing Your Training. SWAT teams often believe that they have a focused training routine, when in fact they do not. Saying “we train every Thursday from 0800 to 1700 hrs.” sounds great (especially if it is true); but having a consistent training program is *not* the same thing as having a focused (structured) training regime.

1. Here is an example of an old training schedule from a team I assisted two years ago.

10-04-05	0800 – 1700 hrs.	Hostage Rescue	House
10-11-05	0800 – 1700 hrs.	Shooting	Range
10-18-05	0800 – 1700 hrs.	Rappelling	Fire Tower
10-24-05	0800 – 1700 hrs.	Entry work	TBD

Figure 2

Many written training schedules (when written training schedules are used) look pretty much like the one above. At first glance this training schedule looks fairly encompassing with four different subjects to be trained on during the month of October 2005. The problem is that the training subject changes every week and therefore lacks any type of focus (and continuity with the other subjects). Hence, a team using this manner of scheduling cannot truly master any of the listed subjects. The old axiom “jack of all trades; master of none” best describes this training methodology.

2. Choosing the focus (or theme) for a training cycle (or part of a cycle) can seem rather daunting. In SWAT there are so many techniques, skills and pieces of equipment to train on that it is easy to become overwhelmed and distracted. Once this happens many trainers will toss any semblance of an organized training regime and start adlibbing training subjects from week to week. To avoid this fate we need to make training more manageable. To do this, we can break our tactical missions down into three basic categories; these are:

- Hazardous Warrants / Apprehensions
- Barricaded Suspect
- Hostage Rescue

There are other missions such as Dignitary Protection, Riot Control, Reaction to Sniper Fire and High Risk Stake-outs that *also require intense* tactical training; but are not considered one of our *basic* primary missions. In other words, we do not do them very often. Looking at the “big three” many teams immediately become fixated with training for a hostage rescue. And in concept, I agree. The mother of all SWAT missions is the hostage rescue and though the dynamics are greatly enhanced, many of the skills needed to successfully accomplish a hostage rescue – are the same skills needed to accomplish Hazardous Warrants / Apprehensions and Barricaded Suspect missions. So with that thought in mind, why not make the focus for all tactical training center on hostage rescue skills? There are two very good answers to this question.

- First. When learning any type of tactical skill, we must follow the logical progression of crawl, walk and then run. *Keep in mind that all tactical skills are perishable.* This means that even a veteran tactical team must reinforce their tactical skills by constantly revisiting the basics. If the training focus is only on hostage rescue skills, the team will eventually begin to neglect the basics as, well, being too basic for their level of perceived experience.
- Second. Even though a hostage rescue may encompass many of the same skills as the other two primary missions; there are vast differences (in every-thing from mind-set to hands-on techniques) between the three. Therefore equal training and effort must be given to each.

3. To have a truly focused training regime requires a more detailed, goal oriented, mentality. The training schedule below is an example of such. In this case, *all* of the training “*Subjects*” listed in the third column are trained on as they *relate* to a Hazardous Warrants / Apprehensions mission.

Focus (or Theme): Hazardous Warrants / Apprehensions.

Subjects.

10-04-05	0800 – 1700 hrs.	Entry & Clearing Dynamic Techniques	House
10-11-05	0800 – 1700 hrs.	Entry & Clearing Shooting Techniques	Range
10-18-05	0800 – 1700 hrs.	Entry & Clearing Stealth Techniques	SWAT House
10-24-05	0800 – 1700 hrs.	Entry & Clearing Large Area	High School Gym

Figure 3

4. Once training subjects are decided upon, the trainer must decide what the training is to accomplish. Stating that the goal of your training is to apprehend the suspects during a Hazardous Warrants / Apprehensions raid is simplistically correct; however, it is also far too vague. Therefore each of the above listed subjects should have numerous obtainable *performance goals* assigned to it – goals that the team must be able to complete and properly demonstrate by the end of the training day. Using the first subject (Entry & Clearing – Dynamic Techniques) on the above training schedule, here is an example of what the performance goals might be like for this one subject.

Performance Goals:

- From the van, correctly approach the entry point
- Properly stack up at the door

- Use proper entry techniques
- Correctly use dynamic movement and proper room clearing techniques
- Locate and apprehend the suspects
- Correctly egress out of the target location

The desired performance is clearly defined and made understandable by these six points. The team, as individuals and as a collective, should have no trouble comprehending exactly what skills and techniques the training will involve and what will be expected of them by the end of the training day.

C. Making Training Comprehensive. SWAT training often starts at the final moments of a tactical mission. Officers find themselves getting ready to make entry at the door with absolutely no consideration as to how they got into position. The excuse I hear most often for this lack of attention to a critical detail is that “our team does this all the time, so why should we practice it?” The strongest arguments I can make against this erroneous belief is (a) as I have stated, all tactical skills are perishable; (b) there is no such thing as a valueless basic skill; and (c) you may be doing a technique all of the time; but you may not be doing it *right* all of the time! Until an entire SWAT team can demonstrate a technique or skill flawlessly 100% of the time (which is an impossibility), the question of whether or not to train on that skill or technique is a moot point. In light of these three arguments, training must be made so comprehensive (or in-depth) that it covers all the tactics, skills and techniques down to their lowest level of action. There are three tools that will help achieve this. These tools are; 1) the trainer’s itinerary; 2) a team common skills and task list; and 3) the individual common skills and task list.

Note: For brevity sake, we will use the first performance goal listed in section B, paragraph 4 (From the van, correctly approach the entry point).

1. The trainer’s itinerary is developed by literally breaking down each of the performance goals into subcategories. These “subcategories” are the possible actions that the team might have to take when, in this case, approaching an entry point.

Focus (or Theme): Hazardous Warrants / Apprehensions

Subject: Entry & Clearing - Dynamic Techniques

Performance Goal # 1: From the van correctly approach the entry point.

Subcategories.

0800 to 0830 hrs.	Approach Unencumbered
0830 to 0900 hrs.	Egress Under Fire (Team Peel Only)
0900 to 0930 hrs.	Hold Position Under Fire
0930 to 1000 hrs.	Assault Under Fire
1000 to 1030 hrs.	No Joy Drill
1030 to 1100 hrs.	React / Recover A Down Officer

Figure 4 (partial list of actions and possibilities)

2) Somewhat like the trainers itinerary, the team common skills and task list is a comprehensive checklist of the above subcategories broken down into team collective task (and skills) that must be adequately performed by the team when functioning as a group. Rather than attempting to make training corrections from memory, the trainer now has something in hand to help him/her recall even the most basic team-oriented tactical skill or task.

Focus (or Theme): Hazardous Warrants / Apprehensions

Subject: Entry & Clearing - Dynamic Techniques

Performance Goal # 1: From the van correctly approach the entry point.

Subcategory: Approaching (the objective) unencumbered.

Team Common Skills & Task List:

Y/N	Team common skills & task list for approaching (the objective) unencumbered
	The team picks up proper dispersion (or formation) and individual positions as it exits the van.
	Team members (excluding the breach-man) are moving by using a proper “walking technique” (all weapons are up in the medium high ready gun position).
	Team members’ heads are on a swivel, scanning the area for threats.
	All team members display good muzzle control.
	As the team moves closer to the target, weapons are covering windows.
	The team consolidates as it approaches the entry point.

Figure 5 (partial list of team skills and task)

3. The individual common skills and task list focuses on specific team positions (such as point man). Remember; an inability to perform any one task properly can lead directly to incestuous mistakes (if not addressed and immediately corrected); therefore a thorough individual common skills and task list is by far one of the very best training tools available to a tactical trainer and the *tactical officer*, who, with this list in hand, will understand what skills he/she must master.

Focus (or Theme): Hazardous Warrants / Apprehensions

Subject: Entry & Clearing - Dynamic Techniques

Performance Goal # 1: From the van correctly approach the entry point.

Subcategory: Approaching (the target location) unencumbered.

Point man: Individual Common Skills & Task List

Y/N	Point man common skills & task list for approaching (the objective) unencumbered
	As the point man exits the van, his focus is wide spectrum on the objective.
	By using proper movement/walking techniques, the point man moves toward the objective entry location.
	Point man focuses on the primary entry location as he moves closer to the target.
	As the point man closes with the entry location, he scans for booby-traps or signs of barricade.

Figure 6 (partial list of individual skills and task for the position of point man)

If put together with enough attention to detail, the individual common skills and task list will easily integrate with a team's current qualifications requirements. If done correctly, it will also help expand those original qualifications to encompass specific aspects of SWAT. Furthermore, by *listing* all of the required skills a tactical officer must have and be able to properly demonstrate, the trainer will promote standards for all team positions – something severely lacking with many tactical teams.

Conclusion: The single greatest complaint I hear when I help a SWAT trainer or a tactical commander restructure a training program is how time consuming its construction is. That's the downside – yes, it does take a lot of time, effort and dedication. The upside is that once it's done, it's done. From time to time the material will need to be reviewed; but for the most part it's a finished product *specifically designed for that team*.

I hope that the information that I have provided in this article will assist teams that are in need of help. Always keep in mind that the more *organized, focused* and *comprehensive* a training program is, the greater a team's operational capability can become. Teams that have grown angry and frustrated by a real or a perceived level of stagnation in their skills can, by revamping their training program, achieve incredible victories.

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