



# Law Enforcement Development Training

*Developing officer integrity from hire to retire*

## The #1 Reason Your Officers Don't Get What They Want

**By Joe Serio, Ph.D.**

As a Chief or Sheriff, you know your officers have dreams, wishes, hopes, and desires.

They may want more money, more friends, more happiness, and more peace. And they deserve all of those things.

But your officers probably find themselves wondering why they aren't getting all they want out of life or even the things they really need. The frustration can be, well, pretty frustrating.

While dissatisfied officers may blame others for their lack of career progress or happiness at home, the fact is most officers sabotage themselves. Here's a list of simple questions that begins to help officers understand their situations:

- Do you find yourself in front of the television for hours on end when you should be doing something else?
- Do you spend weeks getting started on a project that

only takes a few hours or a few days to complete?

- Do you find yourself overeating when you're nervous about something?
- Do you snap at supervisors or talk behind their backs whenever they criticize you?
- Do you have a reputation for being intolerant of community members or your peers?
- Do you explode with rage when people don't do what you expect them to do?

When it comes to getting what we want in life, experts frequently tell us we need to stop sabotaging ourselves, improve our time management, and get better at communication. We need to work smarter, not harder. We need to learn perseverance. That's great advice, but that still doesn't get to the heart of the matter.

There's a more basic and profound reason people—including your officers—don't get what they want. And it affects everything in their lives.

Look at the list of questions again. It seems to be asking about different parts of life, but they are all

expressions of the same thing, which is the #1 reason your officers don't get what they want: Fear.

Whether we know it or not, we have fear of a lot of different things: fear of making mistakes, fear of being embarrassed, fear of being abandoned, fear of not fitting in, fear of losing control, fear of failure, and even fear of success.

One of the most painful is a fear of not being enough.

For most of us, fear really means "Forget Everything And Run" or maybe "Forever Escaping And Retreating."

We can pretend in front of strangers, friends, and even family members, but we can't kid ourselves. We've been turning away from our true selves, losing opportunities in order to stay safe in our comfort zone.

Everything becomes possible outside our comfort zone, but we're doing everything to stay inside it because we're afraid. This is a huge realization for most people.

### **Dealing with fear when you're in a job where you have to be tough**

Fear may be a strange topic to talk about with police officers. They are frequently known for putting themselves in harm's way, risking all to protect others. They are generally Type A personalities who can't afford to show weakness. They do a job that few people can and they have to live

with the reality that few people understand how difficult the job is. All of this, unfortunately, encourages many officers to avoid, ignore, or even fully understand their own fear and how it's impacting their lives on and off the street.



### **Beyond sweaty palms**

Your officers might be most aware of fear when it shows itself in physical ways. Their stomachs might be in knots. They might get headaches. They might have sweaty palms. These signs are difficult to ignore.

We notice physical discomfort and want to ease the pain.

But fear shows up a lot more often in ways officers may not be aware of, but that you may be quick to notice, like excuses, blame, constant criticism, negativity, perfectionism, procrastination, guilt, anxiety, and more. These, of course, are symptoms of fear, showing us what we're experiencing below the surface.

These symptoms of fear are easier to ignore than the physical. In fact, we frequently hang on to these symptoms because, in the short run,

they seem to make us feel better. We watch too much television, eat too much junk food, gossip too much, and blame others for our own situations because it's easier than facing things that really freak us out.

For example, perfectionism is frequently driven by the belief that if we make mistakes we won't be worthy of love. Deep down, we know that perfection is impossible but we haven't changed our belief system.

That need for love, driven by perfectionism, soon turns into procrastination. We become caught in the struggle between knowing that mistakes are normal and wanting to be "perfect" in order to get love and approval from those around us.

We feel guilt when we aren't living up to what we think other people want, even when we aren't entirely clear what their expectations are. And on and on.

And then we loop back to the physical: overeating out of anxiety or nervousness; excessive drinking or even alcoholism; increased sick time; uncontrollable temper; and many others.

Failure to deal with underlying fear can lead to dramatic consequences. One officer in my trainings was very tough and had no fear, or so he said. Unfortunately, his real underlying fear (what we usually disguise under the name of 'stress') came out in the form of physical violence against his son. The officer

was arrested, investigated, and stripped of his law enforcement license; he moved out of state to become an officer somewhere else.

### **Five myths about our fear**

We need to put fear in perspective. Once we start to debunk the myths, we'll find ourselves in a position to change our beliefs and enjoy the incredible benefits we get from facing our fear. When the change happens, everything is possible.

Here are five basic myths about our fear:

#### *1. Our interpretations are always right*

A lot of our fear comes from our interpretations of the world around us, especially when we were growing up. We thought because people around us—the people we trusted most—were yelling at us, we must have done something wrong. We didn't want to feel embarrassed. We didn't want to lose that connection. We didn't want to lose their love, so we started creating ways to avoid the pain. We started ducking out of situations where we might risk losing.

Fear dictated what we would and would not do, who we would and would not become. Some people used fear to accomplish goals in order to feel worthy of love. Others used fear to keep from making mistakes so they

would feel worthy of love. Both interpretations avoid the central issue. Avoidance is the disease; non-avoidance is the cure.

## *2. Other people don't have fear*

When we find ourselves in the middle of our fear, we often turn to self-pity, victimhood, and a focus on what we lack. We often think we're weaker than everyone else or we're more scared than everyone else. In that state of mind, it's easy to distort reality.

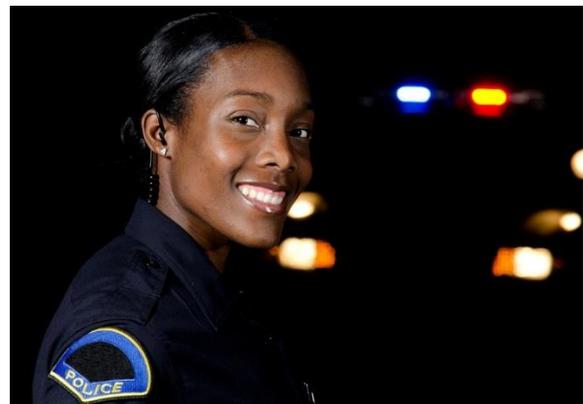
The fact of the matter is other people—family, friends, fellow officers, and citizens—also have fear. They may not have fear around the same things we do, or they don't let their fear stop them, and so we think they are confident and self-assured. The problem is we're comparing how we feel on the inside to how they look on the outside. I've learned in dealing with my own fear that we are not alone: we are not the worst, we are not the only ones who have fear, we are not unworthy of love.

## *3. Our worth is equal to our performance*

Our fear is fueled by our beliefs about ourselves, how we interpret our environment and the perspectives of the people around us. We are judged throughout our lives: others make opinions about the friends we keep,

the clothes we wear, the grades we get, the way we do this and the way we do that.

We often equate our performance with our worth—and worthiness—as a person. If we are not accepted by and acceptable to those around us, there must be something wrong with us. Guilt, shame, anxiety, procrastination, and many other feelings start to creep in. Over time, they become “normal” for us. The problem is we frequently don't allow ourselves to question the assumptions or the opinions of those around us.



## *4. Mistakes are personal*

The fear of making mistakes is one of the most potent factors in keeping us from getting what we want. If we make a mistake, we may be criticized. If we make a mistake, we may feel embarrassment. If we make a mistake, people will judge us as unworthy. After all, if we make mistakes, what do we think that says about us? We're not good enough.

But the truth is, all important learning comes from making mistakes, from our “failures.” Mistakes are really the doorways to opportunity. They help sharpen our focus, change our perspective, and move forward faster than we would have otherwise. The fear of making mistakes—the fear of what others will think and say about our mistakes—keeps us from moving beyond our comfort zone. But our mistakes say far less about us than we might think.

### *5. Perfection exists*

We take our interpretations of the world around us, our desire to be accepted and loved, our beliefs about mistakes and how they’re tied to our worth, and we conclude that we have to be perfect. We believe that if we can be perfect, we will be loved, not rejected. And so, some of us let our fear drive us to “prove” our worthiness by accomplishing incredible things, to get our pat on the head, and be declared the perfect son or daughter, husband or wife. Others of us can be paralyzed by the idea of needing to be perfect, taking few, if any, steps to realize our potential, to share what’s inside of us and to become who we truly are.

In dealing with fear as a recovering perfectionist, I learned that perfection doesn’t exist. There are so many different beliefs, perspectives, opinions, experiences, languages, and

cultures—what could perfection possibly mean? Perfection is an illusion. What one person calls perfect, someone else doesn’t like. It’s impossible to please everyone and it’s impossible to be perfect.

### **How these myths work against your officers**

Even before you started reading this article, you had a pretty good idea how the myths of fear have been working against your officers. The reason you’ve read this far into the article is probably that, to some extent, you’re dissatisfied with what’s going on in your department today, and you want to find out what to do about it.

Let’s make a quick list of the ways in which fear holds us back and then I’ll give you a couple of great tools to use to help your officers start facing fear.

Fear can:

- Encourage us to hang on to the negative messages we tell ourselves
- Help us create excuses for not facing the things we really need to face
- Keep us from deciding on a course of action and committing to it
- Encourage us to be perfect, a standard that doesn’t exist

- Result in a huge waste of time because of procrastination
- Keep us from making the progress that is so easily within our grasp

Fighting our fears is serious business. It means we have to further develop our self-awareness and reinterpret the conclusions we've made about ourselves to this point.

That doesn't sound like fun, but the benefits of working on our fears are huge. Our lives will never be the same. When you give your officers the tools to do the work, they can:

- Experience real freedom
- Change their relationships
- Reach their goals
- Improve their health
- Change their attitude
- Become a leader

### **Three powerful tools you can share with your officers to help them address fear**

There are numerous insights, tools, and exercises that can help people face their fear. Here are three simple yet powerful ways you can get your officers started:

#### *1. Show them how to shift their judgment*

Much of our fear comes from our judgment of events occurring around us.

Two friends can witness the same event, but they will experience it differently. Their experience of that event comes from their beliefs, their previous experiences, the environment they grew up in, their education, and a host of other factors.

Two people can have the same fear for different reasons.

Several people can witness or experience the same event and have different feelings about it, some judging it as "good" and some judging it "bad."

Our response to events is driven by feelings, experiences, judgments—and fears—that usually run deeper than the event itself. These might include fear of dying, fear of loss of control, fear of commitment, fear of being able to measure up, and so on.

Whether we realize it or not, we get to choose how we respond to each event that happens.

It's important to understand that events are value neutral. They just "are." Our conditioning will influence to a large extent how we respond.

Here's a simple equation that can change officers' lives:  $E + R = O$ .

E is the Event that occurs, R is our Response to the Event, and O is the Outcome they are getting in their lives.

Your officers can't change the Event once it's happened. They can't change other people; that's up to the people themselves. It is the officers' Response to the Event that they can change to get different Outcomes in their lives.

Your officers will change their responses through greater self-awareness: understanding what their responses have been, why they respond as they do, and being very clear about what it is they want out of life.

For example, one officer who attended my classes started improving his self-awareness and examined his life through the lens of  $E + R = O$ . He realized he wasn't getting what he wanted in life. His most obvious and urgent challenge was his weight. When he became more clear about what he wanted, he went to the doctor, changed his diet, started exercising, and lost 35 lbs. The unanticipated benefit was an improved attitude at work, better job performance, and better relationships at home.

## *2. Ask them to make an assessment of their lives*

It's very difficult to understand what we're not getting in our lives if we don't understand where we've been and what we have now.



In my workshops, I use a very simple exercise to help people get a quick, but impactful, visual depiction of their lives in less than a minute. I'm going to show you right now how to teach that exercise yourself.

Ask your officers to draw a circle with eight segments in it, like a pizza cut in eight slices. Each slice should have a label at the end, on the outside curve of the slice. Have them label the eight sections: health, family and friends, romance, personal growth, fun and recreation, physical environment, business/career, and finances.

Inside each slice, they should create a scale ranging from one at the

center point of the pizza to ten at the outer edge.

Then, they simply circle the number that best represents where they are in their life today.

For example, if their relationships with their family and friends are great, they circle number nine or ten. If their health is just so-so, they circle number five. If their finances are in the pits, they circle number one.

After they have graded each of the eight categories, reflecting how they think they're doing in life, they then connect each number they've circled to the next with a line, going around the pizza. In this way, each officer is connecting the marks and making a wheel of his or her own life.

If things are really strong in each area of their lives, their marks will all be up in the eight-to-ten range.

Most of us, however, have one or several areas where things just aren't quite up to par. We're in debt and doing nothing to fix it. Our eating and sleeping habits are such that we're unhealthy and frequently sick. We work too much, and don't take time for fun and recreation. Here, our marks are typically below five.

When there are several categories with low marks, the wheel hardly resembles a circle. Your officers are trying to run their lives on a bumpy tire.

They can start to face fear when they get clarity around the things they

need to fix and start to put a plan in place.

### *3. Ask them to decide what they want*

Determining what we want is one of the most important tools we have. Without a specific goal, destination, or final objective, we'll find ourselves running aimlessly or stalled out. We will end up somewhere, but it may not be a place we want to be.

Many of us don't take the time to really decide what we want, partly because of the fear attached to uncertainty or the fear of what others would think about us. The key is getting your officers to ask themselves some basic questions to decide where they might want to go.

- What are my career ambitions in the department?
- Do I need specialized training in order to compete for the job I want?
- What path have other officers who successfully advanced their career followed?
- What kind of lifestyle do I want to have for myself and my family?
- How do I best prepare for this lifestyle on our current family income?

- Do I need to have a second job in order to create the kind of life I want?
- How early should I prepare for retirement?
- At what age and with how many dollars do I want to retire?
- What will I do after retirement?

It may be surprising how much your officers can begin to put their fear in perspective when they start asking themselves specific questions about what they want. Part of dealing with fear is preparation and taking action, showing oneself what's possible. The first ingredient in taking action is asking questions to know what action to take.

Give them these three powerful tools to try. These tools will start to bring your officers clarity around where they are, what they want, and how to start reining in their fear.

It's time to change our understanding of fear. Instead of "Failure Expected And Received," we now must "Face Everything And Recover." As Helen Keller said, "The best way out is always through."

As I bring this to a close, there are a couple of things I think your officers should know:

- While it may not always feel like it, there are people who are rooting for them.
- While they may not always believe it, they have amazing things to offer.
- While they may not always be able to admit it, they deserve happiness and fulfillment.
- While it may not be fun to face it, self-awareness and diligence are critical to the process.

Let's start them moving forward in order to get through. Who knows, maybe you will be part of how officers think about fear and help them improve their lives dramatically.

### **About Joe Serio**

Joe Serio is a leadership trainer, keynote speaker, and author. Through his company, Law Enforcement Development Training, he provides leadership training to help officers overcome barriers and improve performance so they can be happier and more successful at work and at home.

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