



# Law Enforcement Development Training

*Developing officer integrity from hire to retire*

## The #1 Tool for Getting Rid of Drama in Your Department

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

On its face, communication seems pretty straightforward. Your officer talks, the citizen listens. The citizen talks, your officer listens. Wouldn't it be nice if life were really like that? No misunderstandings. No arguments. No drama.

Of course, it's not even close to being that easy. To send a message to citizens, your officer encodes it using words and tone of voice. To receive it, citizens decode it using their own understanding of those words and tones. And back and forth.

Misunderstandings can compound quickly even in a brief conversation.

To add uncertainty to the situation, there's background noise interfering with the messages. It can literally be background noise—screaming kids, traffic, loud conversations nearby—so the officer and citizens miss important cues or meaning in their conversations.

Many times, it's noise from the backgrounds of the people interacting: their experiences, education level, economic status, opinions, fears, biases, race, gender, peer pressure, politics, influence of the media, and a lot of other things.

And if that weren't enough, there is some shared information between the people, like having grown up in the same neighborhood or region, shopping in similar places, and on and on. But even when people know the same information or have similar backgrounds, they're making their own assumptions and drawing their own conclusions.

Ok, enough already! This is complicated!

Yes, of course it is. That's why there can be so much drama in our communities. But I'm not done yet.

Throw on top of that an endless array of nonverbal communication:

- Facial expressions
- Head movements
- Hand movements
- Eye movements
- Posture
- Appearance
- Body contact

Moreover, communication is the backdrop on which everything happens. It touches every single aspect of the lives of your officers and citizens, so it's pretty important.

To add insult to injury, whether officers realize it or not, they are always communicating. Whether they are clear or not, they are always communicating.

It's easy to have a lot of drama in our lives. It's a small miracle anything gets done at all.

### **Know your mind and the rest will follow**

You're reading this because you want to help get your officers' minds around this communication thing and figure out how to reduce the drama in the life of your department, whether in-house or out on the streets. The first place to start is to understand where your department stands right now. This quick, two-part communication inventory will help sort out some fundamental issues:

- Are your officers wasting a lot of time and energy on drama?
- Are your command staff, supervisors, and officers getting pulled into department drama too often?
- Are your officers having drama at home that

negatively impacts their performance on the job?

- Does drama cause a lot of unwanted stress and negativity in your department?
- Do your officers know how to process their stress effectively in order to communicate better at work and at home?
- Are some of your officers unable to control their reactions to situations, frequently making them worse than they are?

If you answered yes to these questions, your department is like many. It's time to take steps to change your reality. And you can.

It's very useful to get the slate of the past as clean as possible so you don't keep reacting to old things and stay stuck in constant drama mode.

In order to do that, you have to get into the details of the specific issues as much as possible, face them, and move forward. The second part of the inventory addresses these issues:

- Are there important conversations your command staff, your supervisors, or your officers are avoiding? If so, with whom? About what?
- Are there important conversations your

command staff, your supervisors, or your officers keep messing up? If so, with whom? About what?

- Do your officers have relationships that need repairing? With whom?
- Do your people accurately understand the nature of the problem you have with the other person? If no, what can you do to understand it more fully?
- Do your officers owe anyone an apology? If yes, what steps can they take right now to get closer to giving an apology and improving communication?

Obviously, these questions are not exhaustive or comprehensive. Create your own inventory based on the situation in your own department.



### **Starting over**

The importance of clearing the slate should be obvious. Being

stubborn, having screaming matches, holding grudges, and avoiding people are a tremendous waste of time, energy, and spirit. In these cases, your officers spend their resources plotting to get even or figuring out how to avoid the target of our discomfort. In the process, they're putting up roadblocks to their own success.

Your officers can't make the kind of progress they need on the things that truly matter if they're distracted by bad relationships. Keep in mind that these untidy relationships take a toll on diet, health, sleep, other relationships, job performance, department morale, attitude, and many other things.

Understanding the drama in your department is about improving existing conditions and creating new conditions in which officers can go after their dreams and enjoy the happy, peaceful life (and retirement!) they long for. To do that, they have to get themselves in order.

### **Where does drama come from?**

It's not too difficult to figure out where drama comes from. There are four basic sources:

- Officers' behavior
- Other people's responses to officers
- Other people's behavior
- Officers' responses to them

This may seem obvious but it's not simple. If you think about it, these four sources essentially cover everything: officers' fears, the way they were raised, their experiences, their relationships, the words they choose to use, and a whole lot more.

These four sources also influence the way they brought all that information—all that baggage—from the past to the present and what they do with it now on a daily basis.

How the four sources relate and interact determines the kind of drama they have in their lives and whether they allow themselves to be dragged into other people's drama.

I can hear you now: "This is too much! It's dizzying just thinking about all of those connections, interactions, and relationships. I can't control all of these influences in the lives of my people. I can't control anyone else. I can't force them to change. How can I make real and lasting change in my department and community?" The good news is you don't have to.

You have to find a way to simplify all of this complexity. And you can, by reducing the problem to one sentence:

*Your officers' drama comes from them not knowing what they want and how to get it.*

## How to change the conversation

Pete is a police detective and he frequently loses his temper. Well, he used to.

When things didn't go his way, when people didn't behave the way he expected them to, when his kids didn't pay attention, he would explode.

Do you think Pete wanted to lose his temper? It's just a response he learned growing up, watching his father. He didn't really know any other way.

Pete told me what he experienced on his way to losing control.

"I clench my fists. The muscles in my arms tighten. My face gets red. And my ears get hot."

"And what happens next?" I ask.

"I lose my temper," he says.

"How many times would you say you lose your temper after you go through that process?"

"Every single time."

"So, the thousand times that's happened in the past, you exploded a thousand times."

"Yep."

"It's predictable, then."

"Guaranteed. If that stuff happens, I'm going to lose my temper."

"Why don't you hit the pause button?"

"What's that?" Pete asks.

"The pause button is a device, a tool, something you can use to change

your situation. Do you like losing your temper?"

"Of course not."

"So what you do is, when you feel yourself clench your fists, you hit the pause button. That means you find a way to short circuit your usual response process. It's a way to change our behavior and get what we want. If we want to get something we've never had, we have to do something we've never done, right? You already know exactly what happens when you lose your temper. It happens the same way every time. So you can pick a spot early on in that process and hit the pause button."

From the look on his face, Pete apparently had never considered such a thing. I continued.

"The pause button can be anything you want it to be as long as it interrupts what's happening at that moment. You could excuse yourself and say, 'I'd really like to continue this conversation, but I have to go to the men's room. I'll be back in a second.' Then you leave the room and go somewhere to calm down for a minute. Or you can count to 10. Or you can ask questions of the person to get more information; maybe you don't have the full story yet. There are a lot of things you can do; it almost doesn't matter what it is as long as you have a simple, conscious, and constructive way to change your usual response."



### **The choices we make**

I'm happy to say that Pete really took to the idea of the pause button. He even printed out a big red pause button and put a copy on his desk and on his partner John's desk.

If one of them gets frustrated and starts to lose his patience, the other leans over the desk and taps on the pause button. Before long, they won't need the paper pause button anymore.

It's not only Pete's work life that changed. His temper was most powerful at home. After a short time with the pause button and other tools, he started responding differently. We can see from Pete's situation that changing the choices he makes is going to have a huge impact on his life. That's powerful stuff.

Let's say you were on the receiving end of one of Pete's tirades. What would your officers do? Would they call him names and swear at him? Would they yell back at him? Would they lose their temper, too?

When someone escalates to the point of yelling, the officer may escalate with him, convincing himself he's being disrespected. The officer may decide that he can't tolerate someone treating him that way, and so he fires back. The officer will rationalize it with statements like, "He made me so mad," "He ruined my day," "He made me lose my temper." Sometimes the officer will say he had to defend himself or had to put the other person in his place.

In point of fact, the officer—and only the officer—made the choice to escalate. The other person didn't force the officer. He didn't command the officer's mouth to open, voice to shout, or body to flail about in anger. As convenient and comforting as it may be to blame the other person, the officer is the only one responsible for his own actions. The officer is the only one 100% responsible for his own life.

### **How to turn around situations before they become a problem**

It's great to know that when a situation is quickly deteriorating you have simple and effective tools like the pause button. You can identify the physical signs of increasing stress and take measures to short circuit your usual, unproductive response to it.

It would be even better if you could prevent the stress from occurring at all. There is a great tool I

call a filter that helps prevent drama from starting.

In one of my previous lives, I worked as an organizer and host of criminal justice conferences and seminars. It was my fifth day at a new job and I was already hosting a conference. In other words, I had no idea what I was doing.

Between featured speakers, I was at the front of the room making announcements when a woman stood up and took me to task in front of the audience of 150 women. If I had found myself in this position years earlier, I would have been instantly embarrassed. My brain would have shut down because I would have been so panicked about how to respond. I would have been so worried about what the audience would think of me.

But as soon as she stood up, my filters automatically activated.

- She chose to stand up and say something. That's not about me. No need to be embarrassed or respond. Filter it out.
- She chose the words to say. That's not about me. No need to be embarrassed or respond. Filter it out.
- She chose the tone she used. That's not about me. No need to be embarrassed or respond. Filter it out.

She had given me nothing to respond to and no reason to be embarrassed. So far, none of what she said or did was about me. I was simply waiting to find out what actually had to be fixed.

Finally, she made her point about the conference, and then I had a choice to make. I could either get angry at her for calling me out in front of everyone or I could have thanked her for pointing out the inadequacies of the conference.



The only thing I could control in that moment was to own what was mine to own and do my best to let go of the rest. Having that awareness meant I was well on my way to avoiding drama.

When we choose our responses, we always have an option

to give an extreme negative response, an extreme positive response, or anything in between.

I could have responded in a hostile way, but what would I have gained? For a few seconds I might have felt good about putting the participant “in her place.” After that it would have been all downhill. At least some, if not many, in the audience would have been upset. Someone likely would have called my boss. I would have paid for that remark for days and possibly weeks or months thereafter.

Worse, I wouldn’t have gotten what I really want: job stability, monthly income, good relationships, success.

More importantly, had I given a response like that, I know it would have been driven by fear. I would have gone into self-protect mode, felt embarrassed, and tried to get my revenge. There is nothing productive about a response like that.

There was no negative fallout from that experience because I chose the extreme positive response. “Thank you so much for your input. I appreciate that. I’ll look into it immediately.” Zero drama.

### **One more story**

Stories about reducing drama help officers see themselves in their own situations and show them that alternative responses are available.

The techniques your officers learn can be used on the streets, in the department, or at home.

This last story comes from a wonderful book called, *How to Talk So Teens Will Listen & Listen So Teens Will Talk*, by Adele Faber and Elaine Mazlish. It's an account by a mother who was having an encounter with her daughter.

"I took my daughter shopping for jeans. Big mistake. Nothing she tried on was 'right.' It wasn't the right fit, or the right color, or the right designer label. Finally, she found a pair she liked: a low-cut, skintight number that she could barely zip up and that outlined every part of her bottom.

"I didn't say a word. I just left her in the dressing room and went out to look for a larger size. When I came back, she was still admiring herself in the mirror. She took one look at the pants I held up for her and started yelling, 'I'm not trying those on! You want me to look like a nerd! Just because you're fat, you think everyone should wear big clothes. Well, I'm not gonna hide my body the way you do!'

"I was so hurt, so angry, I came very close to calling her a little bitch. But I didn't. I said, 'I'll wait for you outside.'

"She said, 'What about my jeans?'

"I repeated, 'I'll wait for you outside,' and left her in the dressing room.

"When she finally came out, the last thing I wanted to do was 'acknowledge her feelings,' but I did anyway. I said, 'I know you liked those jeans. And I know you're upset because I don't approve of them.' Then I let her know how I felt. 'When I'm spoken to that way, something in me shuts down. I don't feel like shopping anymore, or helping anymore, or even talking anymore.'

"Neither one of us said anything on the whole ride home. But just before we got to the house, she mumbled, 'Sorry.'

"It wasn't much of an apology, but still, I was glad to hear it. I was also glad I hadn't said anything to her that I would've had to apologize for."

There's so much we could discuss about this story, but let's make just three quick points.

First, the mother stuck to her principles and didn't give in just because it would have been easier. She didn't cave.

Second, she chose her response and maintained her composure. Yes, she was pretty annoyed, but she hit the pause button and removed herself from the intensity of the moment, just like Pete the detective learned to do.

Third, she was able to take the apology her daughter offered, even if "it wasn't much of an apology." So often, we create an expectation in our minds of what a response from someone else should be and when we don't get it, our reaction kicks in. The



mother realized that the daughter was apologizing in the only way she knew or could muster in that particular moment, and the mother accepted it.

### **The number one way to get rid of drama**

It's not about anyone else. It's about us, the choices we make, the things we accept, and the places we put ourselves.

But making the right choices is not the first step we take. There is an indispensable step prior to that, a step most people skip over. It's the #1 way to get rid of drama. I call this step Thinking in Advance.

We must define very clearly and very specifically what we want. Everything flows from Thinking in Advance.

If we want to get rid of drama, we need to understand how drama shows up in our lives.

Let's take a close look at one example. Let's say we want peace in our lives. That's a perfectly reasonable desire. We may be tempted to think we have now done our Thinking in Advance—we want peace. But that's not how it works.

In order to have peace in our lives, we have to decide what that looks like in our daily lives. Does it mean no yelling? Practicing meditation? Not watching violence on television? Exercising regularly? What

does the thing you're trying to achieve look like?

If we have a sibling, relative, or friend who is always upset with us and the relationship is strained, that takes some of our peace away. We need to determine if the situation was caused by something we did and if we need to give an apology. If we need to give an apology, we want to Think in Advance how to do it most effectively and genuinely. The goal is to restore our peace. And then we make choices about how to interact with that person in the future.

In order to have peace in our lives we need to decide what's important to us, how we're going to respond if we don't have it, whether lack of peace is due to our own actions and choices, and what next steps are necessary.



The Thinking in Advance exercise will show us the kinds of responses we need to use. For example, if your officer and his or her significant other decide that peace in their lives means no yelling—and

they're both committed to that—then yelling is no longer an option. They will need to decide how you will resolve issues in the future without yelling.

But, you can't decide these things effectively in the heat of battle. Do it beforehand.

An officer in one of my classes talked about the stress of an upcoming family reunion. Knowing that going to his family reunion would be a highly stressful experience, one in which people usually start yelling or pushing your buttons, he had to do some Thinking in Advance:

- Should I go?
- Am I going in order to satisfy other people's needs or do I really want to be there?
- How will I respond if I go and someone gets up in my face?
- How will I respond to people's questions or attacks if I don't go?

In order to effectively get rid of drama in our lives, we have to make our choices before we get into the heat of the moment. The following questions are a great place for your officers to start Thinking in Advance:

- Am I clear about what I want and how I'm going to get it?
- What am I willing to tolerate? What is unacceptable?
- How do I want people to treat me? Am I treating them

the way they want to be treated?

- Is my current response getting me what I want?
- What specific effects or outcomes do I want?
- What kind of environment do I want at home? What kind of workplace do I want? What kind of relationship do I want with my spouse, partner, kids, or siblings?
- How will I respond when things don't go my way? How will I respond when someone is rude to me? If I respond in kind, I won't get the peace in life I want.
- What tools are available to short circuit my usual responses and create more positive, healthy responses?
- What do the people closest to me need? Am I sensitive to their needs and am I doing my best to give that?
- Am I going to get involved in things that don't concern me? How will I respond when people try to drag me into their drama?

In essence, Thinking in Advance helps you create a vision for the life you would like to lead. It's about personal leadership, time management, communication, and addressing your fears.

Once you put in a system of Thinking in Advance, your life will change and you will be on your way to living your dreams.

In closing, here are some additional tips for your officers on reducing drama as you set out on your way to improve your department:

- You don't have to accept an invitation to an argument.
- You don't have to react to everything people say.
- You can decide that not everything is about you.
- You don't have to agree with or believe other people's opinions.
- You don't have to own other people's drama.
- You don't have to intervene whenever someone wants you to.
- You don't have to try to change other people.
- You will likely misunderstand the other person if you try to be a mind reader. Reduce drama by asking questions.
- You can't decide what you want and how you're going to get it when you're in the middle of an emotional situation. Think in Advance to get everything you want.

If your officers can put some of these techniques in place and remember to hit the pause button, they will be well on their way to having the relationships and success they want, both at work and at home.

### **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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