

call in motor vehicle stops. Officers may skip roll call, not pay attention to legal updates, and not turn in motor vehicle summonses on time. Reports may sit unwritten for days.

While not deadly in itself, this general malaise creates a culture of lowered standards that may prove lethal under certain circumstances. That is, when these officers meet offenders who are not relaxed. By then, skills taught in the academy have atrophied to the point of being useless. These officers have relaxed too soon for too long.

To counteract this, supervisors must correct such behavior in their charges. Leaders of departments must remain watchful and intervene at the first sign of this malady. Only through example and constant contact with their officers can managers instill the importance of never relaxing too soon.

5) MISSING DANGER SIGNS

In this profession, the danger signs occur everywhere. Each day officers are injured or avoid harm by quick thinking. In both cases, lessons should be learned and passed along. Books, journals, videotapes, and seminars exist that officers should consult to become aware of danger signs. In addition, websites, such as the Officer Down Memorial Page (www.odmp.org), honor fallen officers by giving a brief narrative surrounding their demise. Officers should mourn their loss but make sure that if they find themselves in a similar position, the outcome is different. To this end, officers should consider some basic aspects of danger signs.

Hidden Weapons—Officers should know the types of hidden weapons available to offenders. They can peruse the Internet to see what the market offers. This can increase their knowledge and expand the scope of their searches.

Current Crime Information—Before commencing patrol, officers should arm themselves with the most current crime information and trends. They should receive a “hot sheet” at roll call enumerating the crimes that have occurred in the last 24 to 48 hours. Officers should know about any local crime trends, suspicious vehicles, and wanted persons.

Classes or Seminars—Officers should remain current and adroit by taking classes or seminars. A local academy may offer in-service classes, and a number of private firms provide free or affordable training. An officer who neglects to take a tactical class or one in identifying deceptive behavior may miss a danger sign and not even know it.

Proactive Supervision—Supervisors must ride along on calls to observe officers in action and learn any danger signs displayed by their charges. If an officer involved in a disproportionate number of motor vehicle crashes receives no remedial driving training, the supervisor may have missed a danger sign. If an officer transports a handcuffed, compliant, misdemeanor suspect to headquarters at dangerous speeds with lights and sirens activated, the supervisor must address this danger sign. If an officer’s suspects always arrive at headquarters bleeding, the supervisor faces another danger sign. A supervisor who has not counseled an officer who repeatedly commits any of the 10 Deadly Errors is missing a danger sign.

Administration Misses—Departments can miss danger signs as well. Examples can range from failing to schedule additional traffic officers for a parade to not actively recruiting new members when faced with an aging work force. Of even graver concern involves not taking action when officers constantly request not to work with one particular officer.

Officer Suicide—Sadly, those in law enforcement must recognize other types of danger signs, those of officer suicide. Profound stress, high rates of divorce and alcohol consumption, and easy access to firearms put law enforcement professionals at risk. Statistics indicate that those in law enforcement are two to three times more likely to commit suicide than to be killed in the line of duty.⁶ Coworkers and supervisors must learn the danger signs of police suicide. Missing these can have truly tragic consequences for the entire profession. The signs include:

- a high number of off-duty accidents;
- a rise in citizen complaints about aggressiveness;
- a change in personality wherein a quiet officer becomes very talkative or an outgoing one becomes withdrawn; and
- a behavioral or verbal clue (e.g., officers give away equipment, tell others how much they will be missed, or suddenly make a will).

Officer Accountability—Officers should not rely solely on supervisors and coworkers to advise them of danger

signs. For instance, when the switch from summer to winter uniforms reveals that the shirt does not quite button, it probably is not due to a build up of solid muscle mass. This event coupled with walking up a flight of steps and being out of breath should not require officers to rely on anyone to advise them that these are danger signs. Officers must accept responsibility for their own well-being and lifestyle choices.

Proper Preparation—Just as dangerous as missing a danger sign is failing to properly prepare for a hazardous event. Alert officers should constantly consider what to do if a certain situation arose. For example, when stopped at a light in front of a convenience store, they should think about what they would do if a suspect suddenly ran out waving a gun or if the car in front of them was wanted in connection with an armed bank robbery. What is the first thing they would do? What action would they take?

This mental exercise can help officers hone their tactical response skills. When an actual crisis arises, they will have thought through similar hypothetical situations. Such activity also helps officers develop better problem-solving skills.

Moreover, officers should discuss scenarios and possible responses with senior officers and supervisors. Their feedback can prove valuable and help officers improve their thought processes when situations occur requiring a quick, precise response.

6) TAKING A BAD POSITION

Taking a bad position may hinge on many different factors. Officers must recognize all threats present, their proximity to them, and how the scene is progressing. On a motor vehicle stop, for example, they may assume that the threat is the offending driver when, in fact, passing traffic poses the real danger. Officers do not have to complete accident reports in the intersection where they occurred. They could move to a better position around the corner, away from traffic. Conducting a domestic dispute investigation in a kitchen, garage, or tool shed poses added dangers due to easy access to items that subjects could utilize as weapons.

During field interviews, officers should not stand directly in front of suspects or with their backs to a hostile crowd. They always should have subjects write their names, dates of birth, or other personal information. This allows officers to watch from a safe distance and encumbers the suspect’s hands. Officers should contact offending motorists from the passenger side of the vehicle and never turn their backs to moving traffic when laying out a flare line. Finding themselves in a stairway looking up at a subject constitutes one of the worst situations.

Officers should review circumstances that have led to other officers being injured and note the different, less obvious, threats in these incidents. The proliferation of police video shows on television has provided one source of studying officer positioning. Supervisors or members of a squad can make tapes of these for review during roll call.

Objectively critiquing these can help others avoid taking a bad position when confronted with a similar situation.

Whether officers initially take a bad position or find themselves in one, they face severe consequences and should remember the one friend always available, distance. They should create distance, reassess the threat, and take a safe position.

7) FAILURE TO WATCH THEIR HANDS

Seasoned officers will recognize a flaw in this deadly error. They do not want to watch the hands; they want to see the palms of a suspect’s hands. Many offenders are skilled in cupping items in their hands, giving the appearance of compliance when actually concealing contraband. Officers should master techniques of observing subjects’ hands during motor vehicle stops. They should practice approaching on the passenger side and using the right-side exterior mirror to see the driver’s hands prior to approaching the kill zone.⁷ With minimal effort, officers should be able to view the offender’s hands from a position parallel to the backseat. If not, they can issue a verbal command. If the subject ignores this, officers should create distance, reassess the threat, and proceed from a safe position.



MARRIED LIFE 1

Married life can be very frustrating.

In the first year of marriage, the man speaks and the woman listens.

In the second year, the woman speaks and the man listens.

In the third year, they both speak and the neighbors listen.

MARRIED LIFE 2

One evening, a wife drew her husband’s attention to the couple next door and said, “Do you see that couple? How devoted they are? He kisses her every time they meet. Why don’t you do that?”

“I would love to,” replied the husband, “but I don’t know her that well.”

November 1986: Deadly Error #6?

Efforts to stop a suspect for speeding resulted in a high-speed chase by officers from three jurisdictions. In an attempt to stop the subject, a trooper blocked the two lanes of an interstate highway with his patrol unit. He exited the vehicle and signaled the violator to stop. Reportedly, the suspect intentionally drove his vehicle down the shoulder of the road, striking and killing the trooper. The driver was arrested and charged with murder and reckless homicide.

Source: U.S. Department of Justice, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Law Enforcement Officers Killed and Assaulted, 1986 (Washington, DC, 1987).

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