

# BLUE



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# LINE

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# Decision-making strategies

Jeff Johnsgaard

**D**ecision-making in use of force situations often comes with time pressures and an incomplete understanding of the totality of the events.

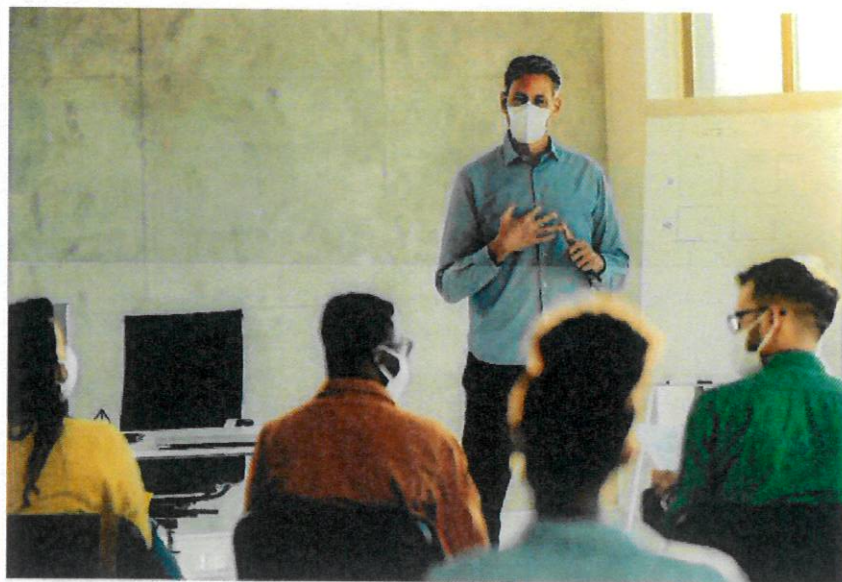
Gary Klein, an experimental cognitive psychologist who studies high performers in the military and law enforcement, believes that decision-making is driven by the expert's perception of information. He developed the Recognition-Primed Decision model, which relies on individuals picking up salient cues, filtering the information in their environment and focusing only on important cues. The goal of this method is to create recognizable patterns that result in driving familiar responses and pre-learned patterns that lead to rapid decision-making.

## Training rapid decision-making

One low cost method for training officers is utilizing officer dashboard/body camera videos. Any venue that offers a decision-making scenario to assess an individual's viewpoint and allow for analysis of perception and internal processing, can be useful to law enforcement leaders. Within my agency, we used this technique and ran several pilot projects utilizing training simulators. Most officers reported finding the training beneficial and post-training reports confirmed carryover into improved decision-making on duty.

The training utilized a large screen that allowed the group to view the video for real-time analysis and dialogue with an expert facilitator and previously trained high-performers. The manner and specific language used by the facilitator proved to greatly affect the success of the model. We used a format that came directly from the training of Ken Murray of the Reality Based Training Association (RBTA). Murray encourages a specific way of speaking during a debriefing and uses the Socratic method to lead students to examine options. The methodology in both the presentation and facilitation are the key to optimizing the decision-making process.

When implementing a similar model, start by setting the context for the type of call officers will view (i.e. "uniform patrol call for service" and state any dispatch in-



Debriefing using the Socratic method leads students to examine scenarios more thoroughly.

formation). Then, play the video, pausing for analysis throughout. The facilitator/expert can describe what they saw, what relevance it had and how that drove their thinking toward certain options and actions. It is essential to involve the group in the discussion. This is the discovery phase. There are no "wrong" answers at this point in the training. Ask the participants to consider the following:

1. What were they focusing on?
2. What relevance does it have in helping the participants consider looking at other things?
3. What actions are participants prepared to take in order to gain advantage and control of the situation?

If the analysis is being conducted with experienced officers, the facilitator may also start by going around the room listening to the officers describe their views and considerations for the three questions first. If the main points of a high-performer are not brought up, the facilitator should look to utilize the specific language and techniques previously mentioned to bring attention to these areas. Using the "frame" of curiosity, the facilitator can open dialogues of other possibilities (free of judgmental tone or sounding preachy). This is essential. An instructor must be

able to articulate all aspects of the program well, while also being able to demonstrate/perform the skills optimally to pass on the knowledge to students effectively.

Consider the following situational example:

An officer, dealing with an angry male outside the front doors of your police service, requests another unit to attend. As the video plays, the officer's body camera view turns the corner of the building and shows another officer on the ground about 20 yards away and a male standing over the officer.

When showed the scenario, many participant's initial reaction was to rush over to the officer but, as we began discussing the various options, we received a drastically wide range of perceptions and considerations. Some reacted by getting a "final-firing grip" on their pistol while keeping it in the holster, having noticed the officer on the ground did not appear to be moving, meaning their firearm could have been taken. Having a final firing grip on their pistol meant that they were able to react faster if needed. While starting to run over to the officer they also radioed for additional units. Some indicated that they would be scanning for the holster of the officer as a



priority upon approach. Others said they did not perceive any overt attack from the individual but noted that, with the officer incapacitated, an attack was possible. Some also voiced caution noting a second person could be at scene, armed but still out of view.

This brief example led us to identify several issues for further training and development. We realized many officers lacked effectiveness in operating their radio to deliver a quickly-formed statement about the events in real time. This led to a discovery that our agency had never brought the skills together before in formal training (we do now). We also found that emergency transmission skills were known to the officers but they did not optimally integrate the skill to create advantage when closing distance to a situation where they would need full attention and both hands free. Providing these insights helped officers better understand that, if they became caught up in a physical confrontation while responding to a situation, using effective communication early would ensure there

were further resources coming. Should the situation de-escalate or be resolved, they always have the option to cancel the backup.

Because we utilize a pre-recorded video, officers may voice their thoughts and explain what actions they would take at that point (the pause point), but the next part of the video could quickly change the trajectory of responses. This is fine and often reflects reality. As things begin to take a different shape or direction, the “pause and describe/question” process is repeated. Each time, the goal is to highlight key points that many officers may not immediately consider. In order to tie it all together, once the initial scenario is complete and the “optimal decisions” are extracted, officers then demonstrate their knowledge in real time. They must “ace” the scenario (in front of their peers) to successfully complete the training.

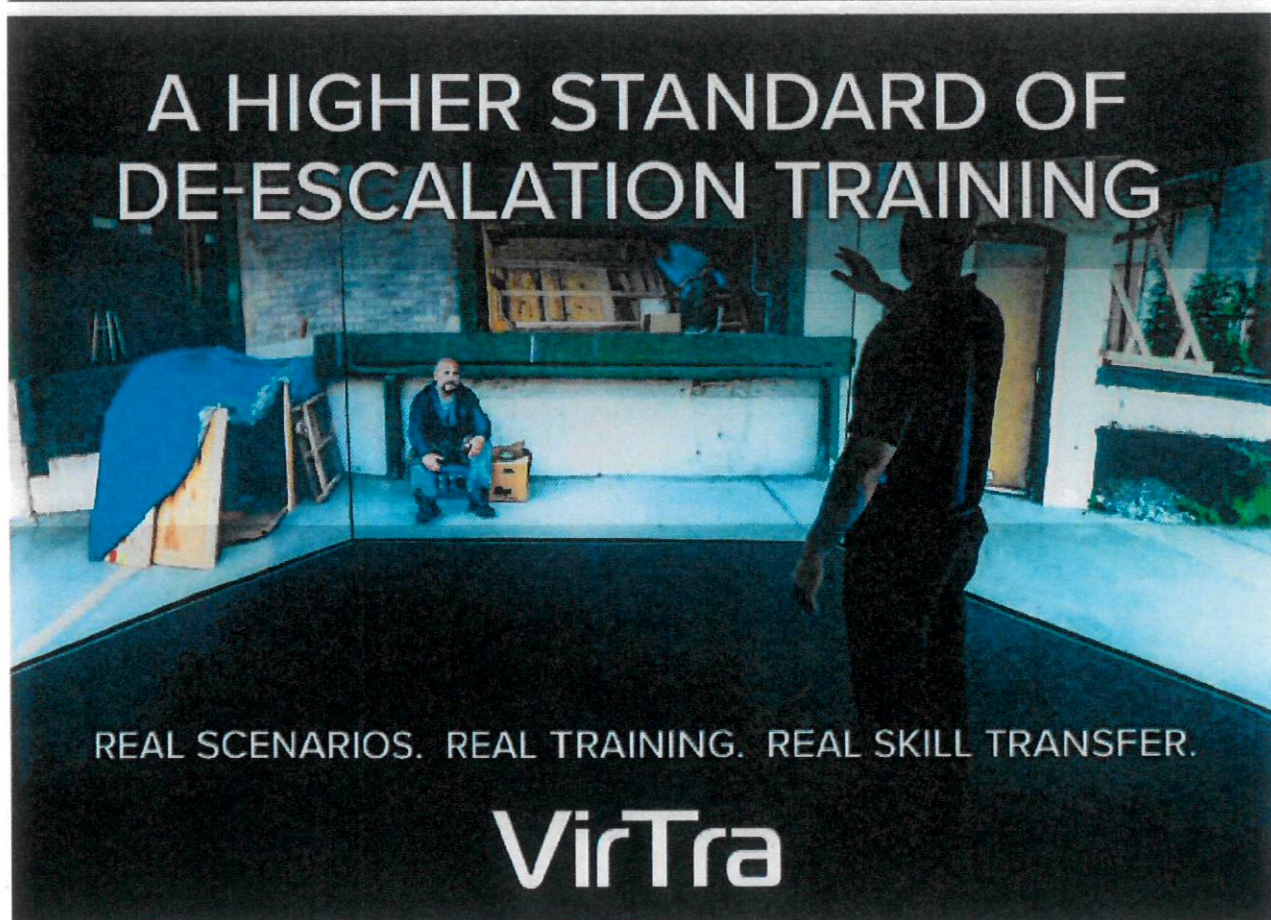
Our training sessions last about 20 to 40 minutes. An overwhelming majority of officers said they found it beneficial—specifically by replicating “optimal” scenarios and understanding the situation better. They

began looking for specific things in the scenario that they would not have considered previously. Recreating and simulating various scenarios has proven create durable, reproducible learning models.

Training police officers to use the ‘salient cues’ Klein referenced in his research by recreating and simulating various scenarios has proven create durable, reproducible learning models. We found the highest level of success was fostered through unrushed, thought-stimulating discussions that can only occur in a non-judgmental learning environment. The process for then facilitating the questioning of officers and examining their thought process has been the biggest driver in yielding the best results. ■

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The image shows a virtual training environment. In the foreground, a person's silhouette is visible from the back, looking into a large, dark, rectangular screen. Inside the screen, a virtual scene is displayed. On the left, there is a blue tent-like structure. In the center, a man in a dark uniform is sitting on a bench. To the right, there is a doorway and some furniture. The overall scene is dimly lit, with the primary light source being the screen itself. The text "A HIGHER STANDARD OF DE-ESCALATION TRAINING" is overlaid in large, white, sans-serif capital letters at the top. At the bottom, the text "REAL SCENARIOS. REAL TRAINING. REAL SKILL TRANSFER." is overlaid in smaller, white, sans-serif capital letters. Below that, the word "VirTra" is written in a large, white, stylized font.

A HIGHER STANDARD OF  
DE-ESCALATION TRAINING

REAL SCENARIOS. REAL TRAINING. REAL SKILL TRANSFER.

VirTra



❖ Here is the Blue Line Magazine article in its unedited form (extra 650 words and references).

### **Passing Along the Decision-Making Strategies of High-Performers**

By Det/Sgt Jeff Johnsgaard

As law enforcement professionals, we are under ever-growing scrutiny for our actions. Recent events have shown us that even a single event can catapult a community and a country into protest drastically altering the resources of a department. This article looks to highlight one cost effective way to pass along the decision-making strategies of experienced, high performing officers. These decision-making strategies can be in reference to whatever topics you prefer including driving, use of force, and even the management of personnel as a supervisor. Within our own agency, and because use of force and de-escalation are such hotbeds currently, we applied our decision-making training to that area and have had very positive results.

Decision-making in use of force situations will often come with time pressure and an incomplete understanding of the totality of the events. Dr. Gary Klein is a psychologist who extensively studied high-performers in the military, law enforcement and fire departments in an effort to discern what makes an expert decision-maker. It is important to note that he studied these experts in real situations and not simplistic, manufactured tabletop exercises. Dr. Klein described what he found was not fitting to traditional decision-making where one weighs the pros and cons of various types of actions before deciding. He found more intuitive and spontaneous decision-making was used. This decision-making was driven by the expert's perception of very specific information in their environment. He has put forward a model which he states relies on the person picking up "salient cues" in the environment (Klein 2008; Klein, 2015). When I asked Dr. Klein what this meant he said that we must teach a person to filter all the information in their environment down to highly important cues, and that those cues will combine to make patterns which will be recognized, thereby driving familiar responses. Basically to teach an officer what things to pay attention to that may trigger familiar, pre-learned patterns that will lead to rapid decision-making.

An example of traditional skill development would be someone learning the motor skills for hockey or tennis. Having the ability to pass the puck or serve the ball is required, but in a game situation the skills must be combined into proper sequences. Decisions must be made about when to move, where to move and how to enact the skills. By simply watching Wayne Gretzky in a hockey game or Roger Federer on the tennis court we can only observe their movements and their technical skills, but we do not see the cues they are paying attention to. Further, we do not see the meaning they give to those cues and the patterns they identify unfolding which drive their next actions. So how do we give officers the eyes and experience of more experienced and higher performing officers?

One way of teaching this is done by the London Metropolitan Police Service (MPS). MPS is widely regarded as having some of the best driver training in the world. They utilize a specific "rolling monologue" technique in their training where the expert instructor will drive and call out exactly what they are looking at and if time permits (speed dependent) the evaluation that information has on their decision-making. This way the student understands exactly what information the instructor is paying attention to and what relevance that information has in relation to their next movements with the tool (the car). The students then mimic this process to the instructor so the instructor can verify learning has



occurred. They will hear and confirm that the student is attending to the correct information, forming the optimal opinions on that information, and influencing the proper decisions in order to prioritize safety for all.

One low cost method for training officers in other, non-driving situations would be to utilize a video simulator or officer dashboard/body camera videos (we also use live/videotaped training scenarios i.e. opposed force training). Any venue that offers a scenario for consideration of options and the ability to offer an "expert's" viewpoint and direct explanation of the internal processing can be useful. I was able to take the following technique and run several pilot projects within local agencies utilizing training simulators and other videos of officer use of force incidents. We ran 8 to 10 officers at the same time through the training and the results were overwhelmingly positive. The officers self-reported they felt the training was extremely beneficial, but more importantly the post-training reports confirmed real carryover into improved decision-making on duty.

The physical setup for this process is quite simple. All that is needed is a large enough screen for the group to view the video and the ability to pause/resume the video. The setup for the facilitator is slightly more in depth as they must have a thorough understanding of the points an expert performer would be accessing in the given situation. To accomplish this you can have several high performers present for the purposes of describing what they see and what their evaluation is, as with the MPS driver training. Or you can have those points recorded for reference by the facilitator. Lastly, we found the manner the facilitator conducted the session and specifically the language used with the various students worked best when in a certain format. The format came directly from the training of Ken Murray of the Reality Based Training Association (RBTA). Ken Murray, author of the 2006 book *Training at the Speed of Life Vol 1* and co-author for the 2020 book, *Use of Force Training in Law Enforcement: A Reality Based Training Approach* has a very specific way of speaking during a debriefing that uses questions in a Socratic method to lead students to examine options. We tried this after learning of a study done in Australia with Murray's technique for training law enforcement and the military where it led to dramatic increases in learning, retention and performance over traditional methods. It cannot be understated that the methodology in both the presentation and the un-rushed facilitation are the key to gaining such dramatic results and optimization of decision-making in contrast to the more traditional "tell not ask" methods employed by many trainers.

Start by setting the context for the type of call they are going to be viewing. Such as, "Uniform patrol call for service", and any dispatch information if required. Then play the video out slightly and pause it. The facilitator/expert can describe what they saw, what relevance it had and how that drove their thinking toward certain options and actions. It is essential to involve the group in the discussion rather than simply having a single person responding. There are no "wrong" answers during this phase, but rather it is a journey of discovery for all.

1. What were they focusing on?
2. What relevance does that have in helping the participants consider looking at other things?
3. What actions do they want to take or what actions are they now prepared to take in order to create opportunity on the side of the police?

If there is a room of experienced officers the facilitator can start by going around the room listening to the officers describe their views and considerations for the three questions above first. Then, if the main points of a high performer are not brought up, the facilitator should look to utilize the specific language



and techniques previously mentioned to bring attention to these areas. Using the “frame” of curiosity, the facilitator can open dialogues of other possibilities, being cautious to abandon judgmental tone or sound preachy. One of the main stumbling blocks we had was that many facilitators were either unaware of the expert performers’ points or were unable to articulate them if they were taking the actions themselves. They might perform optimally but might not have the skill-set of how to pass this information effectively to others. This required us to re-examine our training for instructors and field trainers to ensure they had the requisite high ability and also optimal facilitation skill to optimally pass on the learning.

The following is a brief situational example to clarify what we experienced.

Hearing that an officer is dealing with an angry male outside the front doors of your police service and requests another unit to attend. As the video plays the camera view (your view) turns the corner of the building to see an officer on the ground about 20 yards away, with a male standing over the officer, bending down toward them.

Immediately, many of our participants had a strong desire to rush over to the officer. But when we began discussing the considerations in the minds of those officers, we got a drastically different range of perceptions and considerations. Some reacted by getting a “final firing grip” on their pistol while keeping it in the holster, explaining that they knew that an officer on the ground who did not appear to be moving meant that their firearm could have been taken. Having a final firing grip on their pistol meant that they were able to react faster if needed, while starting to run over to the officer they also radioed for additional units. Some indicated that they would be scanning for the holster of the officer as a priority upon approach. Some suggested that they could not perceive any overt attack from the person bending over top of the officer, but that person could possibly attack the officer that did not appear to be fully able to defend themselves. There were considerations that another, second person could be at scene, armed and still out of view and the person over the officer could be helping them.

This brief example led to our identifying several issues for further training and development. One was identifying that many officers lacked effectiveness in operating their radio and deliver a quickly formed statement about the events they were now closing in on. This led to a discovery that our agency had never brought the skills together before in formal training (which we do now). Training on clear precise radio speak such as, “Unit XYZ calling, one officer down, unknown status, suspect unknown at this time, need additional units”. We found that emergency transmission skills were known to the officers but they did not optimally integrate that skill to create advantage when closing distance to a situation where they would need full attention and probably both hands free. Providing these insights helped officers to understand much better that if they became caught up in a physical confrontation as they rushed toward a situation, using effective transmissions early could help to ensure there was already further resources coming. If all were okay, they could cancel them. But if needed time was optimized early to bring resources which could mean higher degrees of force may not be necessary later.

Back to the scenario. Because we are utilizing a pre-recorded video, officers may state their considerations and what actions they would take at that point (the pause point), but the next part of the video could quickly change the trajectory of responses. That is fine and mimics life in that the suspect’s actions are not prescribed. As things begin to take a different shape or direction, the “pause and describe/question” process is repeated. Each time highlighting key points that many officers may not consider or are not able to combine together as well as higher performers might. An effective way of

tying it all together once the initial scenario is finished and the “optimal decisions” are extracted, we had two officers run through the scenario they just saw and got a 100% optimal run through with everyone watching. If it is a roll call type scenario on video instead of a simulator, or a version of Reality Based Training where role players are being utilized, this part is not done.

After 20 to 40 minutes the session ended. The interesting thing is that an overwhelming majority of officers said that practicing doing a scenario they already knew was a huge benefit to them. They got to replicate “optimal” and understood exactly why. Further they were looking at and for specific things in the scenario that they were not prior. We believe this is exactly what salient cues Dr. Klein referred to. From all of this, we were able to replicate the training lessons learned and had our technical team create scenarios for our simulator to create durable, reproducible learning models.

I realize this has been a quick example. I would like to reiterate the process for facilitating the questioning of the officers and eliciting their contemplations for decision-making is what we found to be the main driver for results. Unrushed, thought stimulating facilitated discussion that occurs in a non-judgmental learning environment is what we found to create the highest level of success within our test subjects. If you have any questions or want to do a deeper dive into this methodology, please feel free to contact me and I can give you more specifics.

Klein, G. (2008). *Naturalistic Decision Making*. *Human Factors: The Journal of the Human Factors and Ergonomics Society*, 50(3), 456-460.

Klein, G. (2015). *A Naturalistic Decision Making Perspective on Studying Intuitive Decision Making*. *Journal of Applied Research in Memory and Cognition*, 4(3), 164-168.

## END

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