

The Value of Effective, Recurrent Dispatch Training



Dispatchers Don't Need Training – Right?

Emergency Dispatch Centers (911) across the United States employ many unsung heroes of events in which decisions made under high stress can be the difference between life and death. These decisions are no less critical than those made by police officers or fire fighters in the field; yet emergency dispatchers rarely receive the same level of recognition. Hence, emergency dispatchers often do not receive the ongoing perishable skills training that is often mandated for their higher profile co-workers.

An emergency dispatcher's environment is unique, as very few jobs require such attention to detail and task accuracy performed in an expedited manner. Calls for police, fire or EMS response require precision and care, often under difficult circumstances. A wrong address, or missed word from a complainant, or failure to get pertinent information from officers in distress may lead to serious injury or death for those involved. When expectations of performance perfection are coupled with the stress generated by a screaming caller, shots fired, or a mass casualty call, the potential for human error increases drastically, due in part to what is commonly referred to as the "fight or flight" response.

Fight or Flight: Dispatchers too?

Humans are error-prone. In everyday life we slip, fall, break things, forget, miss turns, and even fail to see things right in front of us. It's common knowledge that error potential increases drastically in high stress environments, where the body's natural fight or flight mechanism is activated. Yes – fight or flight applies to the emergency dispatch environment as much as any other stress related field. ***Fight or flight is*** simply a descriptive term for ***internal reaction to stress***. Our response to stress can cause deficits in cognition, attention, motor skills, and memory. While it may have been essential for our caveman ancestor's survival, it can make modern stress-related tasks more difficult. We have options to reduce these deficits, and stress-based training has been identified as most effective.

Stress Inoculation Training:

Stress is defined by 3 elements: Perceived demand, perceived ability to cope, and the perception of the importance of being able to cope with the demand.

Demand - Ability to Cope - Importance

Using this definition, stress in a given situation is as much about an individual's perception as it is about the actual incident. Training, preferably in a realistic environment, can mitigate the stress that dispatchers experience, and increase their performance while reducing human error. The goal is to ***decrease*** the individual's perceived demand, and ***increase*** their ability to cope, while maintaining task importance. One method of controlling the stress response is through mental toughness. Mental toughness can be seen as:

The Value of Effective, Recurrent Dispatch Training



- 1. Flexibility:** The ability to absorb the unexpected and remain flexible and non-defensive. Additionally, one must be open to continuous re-education, even in the basics. Exercise caution in defensively falling back on ideas you know are comfortable and look for new ways of improving.
- 2. Responsiveness:** The ability to remain engaged with a situation when under pressure, and actively assess threats in the environment.
- 3. Inner Strength:** The ability to exert and resist great force when under pressure, and to keep going against insurmountable odds.
- 4. Courage and ethics:** Always do the right thing for the organization and the team. Suppress the temptation to cut corners or to undermine others so you come out on top. Have the courage to make the hard, but right decisions for the organization.
- 5. Resiliency:** Rebound from disappointments, mistakes and missed opportunities. Remain optimistic in the face of adversity and quickly change when necessary. Resolve to make things better and figure out ways to do more with fewer resources.

A simple technique used by Special Operations Forces is known as the “Big 5.”

- 1. Goal Setting.** Allows you to stay focused completely on the task of the moment, and to keep emotions that may interfere with rational thought in check.
- 2. Visualization.** Imagine yourself performing an activity. Visualization activates the exact same neural pathways that are activated by performing an action, but at a lower level. This provides two benefits. If done immediately before the event, the nervous system is warmed up, and waits in a holding pattern for the activation command. Visualization also allows for mental preparation and performance planning. In addition, a sequence of actions can be rehearsed; task goals clarified, potential problems identified, and effective procedures can be planned.
- 3. Positive Self-talk.** Self-talk originates in the frontal lobe, and sends a calming signal to the emotional center of the brain. This allows rational thought, without the interference caused by emotions or feelings. Negative thoughts signal the emotional center to react in a negative way, and further fuel the fight-or-flight response.
- 4. Breathing Control.** Slow, deep breathing helps activate a branch of the nervous system which acts as an antidote for the fight or flight reaction. This causes your heart rate to slow down, and gets the prefrontal cortex back on-line. When you recognize you are being triggered, BREATHE. (3 sec. in - 3 sec. hold – 3 sec. out).
- 5. Stress Inoculation.** Repeated exposure to an acute stressor decreases the future response and allows constant evaluation by the frontal lobe. To use our physical tools, we must be emotionally prepared. Stress inoculation is about emotional preparedness.

The Value of Effective, Recurrent Dispatch Training



Creating stress inoculation training in an emergency dispatch environment varies from very simple to much more complex reality-based training. One example of a low cost and expedient repetitive training opportunity is the inclusion of on-duty dispatchers in departmental training. Fire and Police Departments conduct extensive training scenarios several times a year in which they use an instructor as a proxy for a dispatcher. The inclusion of dispatch (training channel) in a scenario requires no more than a bit of scripting. Consideration for keeping this dispatcher available for real world calls is also important as it will keep the scenario situation stressful and realistic. Currently, emergency responder scenario training should be identified as a dispatch center's most prolific missed opportunity for training.

Errors at the dispatch level often result in deadly consequences. The subsequent civil liability may far exceed the cost of effective yearly training. It is critical that Command Staff as well as line employees understand the limits of human performance under stressful conditions. Providing the appropriate training to mitigate deficits will save lives, will save careers, and will save money over time.

Repetitive, stress based, realistic training is a great method of reducing human error. Make sure your emergency dispatch center is included in your yearly training matrix.

The BSCC/STC and CA Commission on POST offers a PLAN 3, fully reimbursable course on **HUMAN FACTORS** that covers the ins and outs of **threat and error management**. The Course Control numbers are STC 8803-072916, and POST 1095-10801-xxxxx. Additional information can be found at <http://www.cti-home.com/courses-registration/>.

Authors:

Dave Blake, M.Sc., is a 16 year veteran of state and federal law enforcement. He is currently an instructor with California Training Institute (CTI), delivering the CA POST certified courses HUMAN FACTORS: Threat and Error Management, and FORCE ENCOUNTERS ANALYSIS: Understanding Human Performance during Critical Incidents. He is a Regional Training Instructor with the Alameda County Sheriff's Office, Adjunct Criminal Justice Professor, and Academy Instructor at San Joaquin Delta College. Dave is also the founder at Blake Consulting and Training Group.

Lesli Prado is a Supervising Public Safety Dispatcher with 30 years of dispatching experience. She is also CA POST certified as a Communications Training Officer, Crime Scene Specialist, Tactical Dispatcher, Hostage Negotiator, Critical Incident Stress Management and Background Investigations. Additionally, she serves as her department's Citizen's Police Academy Coordinator