



Spring Edition

Volume 7
Edition 2

2017

The ILEETA Journal



ILEETA★

International Law Enforcement
Educators and Trainers Association

Law Enforcement's "F" Word: Changing the Dialogue

By Steven M Sheridan and Jeff Golden



Public opinion impacts how effectively law

enforcement can do its job, and the media heavily dictates the tone of that conversation. These two factors have combined to create a perfect storm: law enforcement's use of force policies and procedures are being scrutinized to a degree never before seen. Many departments are examining this phenomenon; however, few are looking at language as the root of the problem.

Prior to the mid-20th century, law enforcement was considered a trade; today, it is recognized as a profession. This transition has been accomplished through required continuing education, accreditation programs, and an emphasis on training, among other factors. However, law enforcement officers and leadership are still speaking a tradesman language; our terminology is vague, out of date and not accurate. This has a significant impact on how today's police officer interacts with members of the public. So how do we address this problem?

First, we must properly define the prominent terms we use. We'll start with the word force.

Merriam-Webster's Dictionary defines force as "power or violence used on a person or thing," and we see the word force again in several common definitions for violence. These words are clearly associated with each other; knowing that, one can understand the public's unease with law enforcement's use of the word force in describing how citizen interactions are managed.

Law enforcement officers are trained to respond to resistance, not automatically bring violence. This is an essential distinction with serious consequences that affect officers, departments and the municipalities that hire and insure them. An important consequence is a negative

public reaction and a loss of trust, especially after legitimate force is used -- regardless of whether the force was in complete compliance with policies and procedures. For example, consider the following statement:

"The officer's use of force was in compliance with policy, procedure and the law."

as opposed to the following statement:

"The officer's response to your client's resistance was in compliance with policy, procedure, and the law."

Which statement better reflects what law enforcement does? Which communication would you rather have issued about your department?

Consider what the public expects from good law enforcement. Should police officers bring the violence or respond to situations and/or resistance? The latter allows for a variety of appropriate and escalating options, including appropriate responses for someone who fails to respond to verbal requests, actively refuse to comply with verbal commands or responds with heightened physical resistance.

With the definition of force in mind, let's examine some of the language law enforcement uses to describe what it does and its main responsibilities:

- The Use of Force Matrix
- Force Continuum
- Use of Force Scale
- Force Response
- Use of Force Wheel

The common denominator is the word force. When we look at a generic Use of Force Continuum, most of our time, energy and resources are on training skills for physical control and deadly force; little to none is spent on skills to effectively use officer presence and verbal communication, which are the only continuous aspects

Dialogue ...con't

throughout every contact for almost every officer.

Consider the common definitions of the term *de-escalation* - to decrease in extent, volume, or scope or to reduce the level or intensity of something (someone). In the simplest terms, law enforcement officers are trained to prevent, reduce and/or stop resistance during every encounter. The entire continuum is about *de-escalation*; at each point we are trying to prevent the person from becoming agitated or trying to reduce their resistance. There are very few instances in which police officers are taught to respond with violence; the most notable exception is when deadly force is used against law enforcement.

Studies show changing a single word in a sentence will change how the sentence is interpreted and most importantly, how both parties respond. Knowing this, are we properly describing our response process when we include the word *force*? Has our constant training in and reiteration to the public about our use of force helped us or hurt us?

To advance as a profession and rebuild relationships with the public, law enforcement must revisit its terminology. *De-escalation* should be used to describe all positions in the response continuum, including presence, communication, empty hands, less lethal tools, intermediate tools and lethal response. Words have power, and law enforcement must step up to set the correct tone instead of ceding that responsibility to the media and the public. We must do a better job of articulating exactly what we do.

Stay safe. **ILEETA**

References

James Pennebaker <http://www.lifejournal.com/articles/the-power-of-words-research-by-james-pennebaker/>
Power of Words <http://creativethinking.net/the-power-of-words/#sthash.wLwZGfSn.dpbs>
Words Can Change your Brain <https://psychcentral.com/blog/archives/2013/11/30/words-can-change-your-brain/>
Power Communication: Psychology of Words and Language Revealed
http://www.science20.com/erin039s_spin/power_communication_psychology_words_and_language_revealed
Single Words Can Alter Perceptions <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/the-athletes-way/201308/scientists-find-single-word-can-alter-perceptions>

About the Authors

Dr. Jeff Golden is Executive Director of DE-ESCALATE, a specialized de-escalation program designed by, with and for the professionals in the fields in which it is used. Extensively taught, used and evaluated with law enforcement, the program has also been developed for corrections, probation, parole and security officers as well as for teachers in schools and colleges. Dr. Golden is a former prosecutor, and was Chief of the Juvenile Justice Division of the Nebraska Commission on Law Enforcement and Criminal Justice. Upon moving to Florida he served as a Chief of Policy for the Florida Department of Juvenile Justice (Residential Services) and was appointed by the Governor to the state's Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention State Advisory Group.

Steven M. Sheridan M. Ed. – Steve is a retired state of Florida law enforcement Lieutenant after over 14 years of service. He has been teaching self-defense for over 30 years, developing programs for students, families, police agencies, and corporations nationwide. He has over 20 years of teaching experience as a certified Defensive Tactics and over 10 years as an instructor for Florida's State Police Academy. He has supervised and trained the state's Special Operations Group (SOG), an integral part of Florida's Homeland Security initiative. He continues his law enforcement career as a Leon County Reserve Deputy, maintaining his state certifications as a Defensive Tactics and Firearms instructor. He is currently the state's BOW Personal Safety Instructor (Becoming an Outdoor Woman Program). He is the founder of the Fortress Fighting System® and holds Black Belts in Taekwondo and Hapkido. Steve has a B.S. degree in Sociology with a minor in Criminology from FSU (1994), and he holds a Masters in Adult Education from University of Phoenix (2010). He is also the founder and president of the Leadership and Training