

Why police shouldn't use the 'F' word to describe use of force

Could language be the root cause of the public's misconception about the use of force in law enforcement?

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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 with law enforcement's [use of force](#) policies and procedures being scrutinized to an unparalleled degree.



Studies show changing a single word in a sentence will change how the sentence is interpreted and, most important, how both parties respond. (Photo/Pixabay)

Many departments are examining this phenomenon; however, few are looking at language as the root cause of the problem.

ONCE A TRADE, NOW A PROFESSION

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 factors such as mandatory continuing education, accreditation programs and an emphasis on training. However, law enforcement officers and leadership still speak 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 Our terminology is vague, out of date and not accurate.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?

HOW TO DESCRIBE A POLICE OFFICER'S RESPONSIBILITIES

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* in several common definitions for violence.

These words are clearly associated with each other. Knowing that, you 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 impacts officers, departments and the municipalities hiring and insuring them.

An important consequence is the 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.”

Now consider 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?

DEFINING THE RESPONSE CONTINUUM

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 spent on training skills for physical control and deadly force; little to no time is spent on skills to effectively use officer presence and verbal communication, which are the only continuous aspects 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 important, 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.

About the authors

Steven M. Sheridan, MEd, is a retired state of Florida law enforcement officer with over 14 years of service. He has 30 years of teaching experience, with over 14 years as a lead instructor for Florida's State Police Academy, designing and implementing highly specialized courses and programs in firearms, defensive tactics, and high risk vehicle and vessel stops. He has also 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 assigned to the training division. He was inducted into the Police Hall of Fame for Life Saving in 2010.

He has been teaching crisis prevention, target-hardening and self-defense for over 30 years, developing programs for students, families, agencies and corporations nationwide. He is currently a BOW Personal Safety Instructor (Becoming an Outdoor Woman) for Florida. He is the founder of the Fortress Fighting System. Steve holds a Black Belt in Taekwondo, Combat Hapkido and Fortress Fighting, and is a high rank in Kenpo Karate and grappling. He is also the founder and president of the Leadership and Training Research Institute in Tallahassee, Florida, and Director of Training for DE-ESCALATE, LLC, which teaches de-escalation skills to Police and Corrections, Schools, Security Personnel and Hospitals. He owns and operates Arsenal Martial Arts in Tallahassee, Florida, and teaches safety and A.W.A.R.E. classes free of charge to the community.

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