

## **Training in Conflict Management for Police Officers**

During the 1960s, social scientists began to recognize the extent to which police are involved in interpersonal conflicts. Research indicated that many police injuries occur when they intervene in interpersonal conflicts between individuals who know one another. Also, as mental institutions began to discharge their patients in large numbers (a trend referred to as “deinstitutionalization”), police were called upon more than ever to deal with complex psychological problems. In addition, changes in many inner-city communities put heavy strains on police-community relations, and many people believed that lack of skill in managing interpersonal conflict on the part of the police either caused or exacerbated such strain.

All of these trends led to growing interest in teaching police how to resolve interpersonal conflict more effectively. Initially such efforts met with considerable opposition from tradition-bound police departments steeped in a military culture. However, they gradually gained acceptance, and today it would be difficult to find a large urban police department that has not used such training.

One of the first efforts to help police officers become more effective in managing interpersonal conflict was a program developed by Morton Bard at the City University of New York. In addition to helping participants become more competent in conflict management, this program included training in the competencies of influence, communication, empathy, and self-awareness. In one empirically-validated version of the program, police recruits attended 12 weekly half-day sessions for a total of 42 hours of training. Much of the training occurred in small groups that were led by graduate students in the CUNY clinical psychology program, with members of the police Family

Crisis Intervention Unit sometimes serving as co-leaders. Training procedures included group discussions, real-life simulations of interpersonal conflicts, role plays, and lectures. The program was designed to maximize “active experiential learning” by each participant. Unlike “sensitivity training,” which was another popular training method used with police during the late sixties and early seventies, this program focused on actual conflict situations that police are likely to experience in their daily work, with the goal of teaching them the social and emotional competencies that would help them to resolve such conflict effectively.

At the conclusion of the training, the participants were assigned to two large housing projects, and the experienced officers working in those projects were assigned elsewhere. This helped insure that there would be an occupational culture that supported the training once the participants began to apply it on the job. In addition, the participants returned to the university’s Psychological Center once weekly for 14 weeks for on-going “consultation.” During these follow-up sessions, each officer participated in one hour of individual consultation about conflicts he or she had managed during the previous week. Then the officer participated in a two-hour discussion group. The goal of these follow-up consultation sessions was to help the officers gain a greater understanding of the conflict interventions in which they were involved on the job, their effectiveness in handling them, and alternatives for handling similar situations. The consultations included personal issues as well as police cases.

In order to evaluate the efficacy of this program, recruits were randomly assigned to one of two groups. One group went through the program. The other group received the same amount of training (42 hours), but the aim was to provide a “well-rounded view

of human motivation and behavior,” rather than training in specific social and emotional competencies (Zacker & Bard, 1973, p. 203). This alternative training program relied heavily on the traditional lecture format. Topics covered included psychology, sociology, and anthropology. In addition to this “cognitive training” group, the trainees also were compared to a control group of officers who worked in two other housing projects with similar environments and levels of police activity.

The three groups of officers were compared on ten performance criteria deemed important by police officials, such as clearance rates (the number of incidents reported, divided by the number of arrests for such incidents), total number of arrests, number of misdemeanors, total crime, and a “danger-tension index” (calculated as total arrests divided by total sick days and multiplied by 100). These data were collected and analyzed for each of the housing projects for the year following the training as well as for the two previous years.

The results indicated that the housing projects patrolled by the officers who went through the conflict management training showed more improvement on every criterion variable. On the other hand, there was no significant difference between the cognitive training and control groups.

For more information on this and similar programs, see:

Zacker, J., & Bard, M. (1973). Effects of conflict management training on police performance. Journal of Applied Psychology, 58(2), 202-208.