

Establishing a Mindset for Success Using Tactical Performance Imagery: Maximizing Physical and Mental Skill Sets for Law Enforcement Officers

By Stephen N. Luce

For a law enforcement officer, the ability to make split-second, informed decisions when dealing with a threat is an essential element in regards to officer safety. Just as important as making the proper, advantageous decision is the ability to perform the task tactically under increased levels of stress that will undoubtedly make the entire process more challenging. Regardless of the action taken by the officer, the addition of variables such as human emotion and stress levels, and uncontrollable factors such as the time, place, and circumstances of the encounter, officers will have to account for certain perceptual distortions such as diminished sound or intensified sounds, tunnel vision, time misperception, temporary paralysis, memory loss, dissociation, intrusive distracting thoughts, and perceptual distortions that will directly alter an officers view on reality and purpose in rapid succession (Artwohl, A. & Christensen, L.W., 1997).

Law enforcement officers have been advised throughout their careers that officer safety is paramount and that realistic, dynamic training coupled with a mindset for success will significantly assist them when faced with critical incidents. Officers must have prepared for the encounter, both mentally and physically, well before the incident occurs to ensure that the outcome of the event results in overall success for the officer involved. Though the information and argument above is common sense for practitioners of modern day policing, complacency and arrogance are two qualities that can literally be deadly for the men and women of the law enforcement community. It is critical that those that have taken on the responsibility to serve as instructors, mentors, and supervisors of these public servants, continue to stress the importance of training and professionalism from recruit officers at the basic academy level to established veterans. To maximize the officer's overall confidence in his or her abilities to effectively respond to a specific threat, successful efforts can be made to establish a winning mindset through Tactical Performance Imagery (TPI).

TPI, referred to as visualization at times throughout this text, is not a new psychological concept and has successfully been used as a means to increase human performance for many years. Since the early 1970s, successful implementation of visualization techniques has been utilized by sport psychologists to increase athletic performance for Olympic athletes (Siddle, 1995). Surveys conducted at the United States Olympic Training Center have shown that 90% of the athletes and 94% of the coaches using the Olympic training facilities have used visualization in their training programs (Asken, Christensen, & Grossman, 2010).

TPI and visualization has been referred to as mental imagery, creative visualization, and meditation to name a few. Regardless of what scholars call the actual technique, visualization per se is best defined by Hoffart and Keene (1998) as the "creation of mental images, or the devising of a story, and is one way to access the imagination, involving one, several, or all the senses as a bridge between mind, body, and spirit" (p. 44). The visualization techniques currently being used in sports psychology, as well as other disciplines, can easily be transferred over to law enforcement training as a means to increase levels of confidence and skill, thus assisting in the development of a successful mindset.

Remsburg (1986) referred to visualization under the term *crisis rehearsal* as a valuable tool for law enforcement training and more recent findings in regards to visualization by Murray (2004) are being recognized as a valuable training method for maximizing individual skill for military, law enforcement, and other first responders. Benefits of using visualization techniques for law enforcement officers include overall skill improvement, error analysis and correction, situation

simulation and response preparation, skills maintenance, and enhancing confidence (Asken et al., 2010).

Using visualization techniques to improve specific law enforcement skills such as defensive tactics, firearm proficiency, or more complex scenarios such as high risk warrant service will allow the officer to play out or practice the scenario in a series of mental sequences. These mental sequences allow the officers to control the scenario in their minds and allow for constant evaluation of the scenario allowing the officers to determine if the scenario can be successfully completed in a real-world situation. Visualization techniques have critical applications to enhance performance in complex cognitive task, physically dangerous task, and task where there is limited opportunity to practice required skills and tactics (Driskell & Johnston, 2006).

It has been suggested that the use of visualization, referred to as Tactical Performance Imagery by Michael J. Asken, PhD., in training scenarios or actual real world critical incidents will help to review specific sequences of actions taken by officers and clearly assist the officers in defining points of uncertainty, confusion, or mistake. Asken suggests that using visualization for error analysis and correction will help officers *reprogram* a more successful response for future encounters with similar threats (Asken, 2006). This type of quality control can be used by officers on a regular basis to improve decision making, increase reaction time, and instill confidence in their overall abilities to respond to a critical incident.

Visualization exercises are ultimately controlled by the individual and allow for specific customization within one's mind when formulating specific scenarios or circumstances. For the law enforcement officer, this type of *mental rehearsal* is invaluable and allows the officer to control every aspect of the scenario such as the circumstances of the call or mission, number of threats, general environment, and other possible stressors that may be encountered. Referred to as Situation Simulation and Response Preparation (Asken, 2006), it has been suggested that this type of application of visualization be used to provide exposure or mental experience to situations that may be difficult to reproduce in the training environment.

Many of the skill sets required of law enforcement officers need constant training and evaluation. Some of the training methods to strengthen a specific skill set might not always be readily available through traditional training means and require the officer to take a different approach to maintaining these skills. It has been suggested that using visualization training will greatly assist in keeping these skill sets fresh (Murphy 2005). Murray (2004) says that "even when you don't have the resources to actually practice a skill, positive mental imagery is a tool that those who are at the top of their game use to maintain and improve proficiency" (p. 33). A great example of the use of skills maintenance through visualization is explained by Murphy (2005) of an American Prisoner of War (POW) that passed the time of incarceration by playing a daily round of golf in his mind. The story explains that upon the POW's release he returned home to play a round of golf at his home course and shot par, despite having not physically played golf for several years. Though this story may be part legend and not much is known about the POW, the underlying message is that one's skills can be maintained and/or improved through visualization exercises regardless of the circumstances.

As stated earlier, mental preparation is a large piece of the puzzle for success and it is often what is being done between formal training sessions that will ultimately make the difference regarding an officer's choice of action. A strong, prepared mindset must have been established prior to any mission or call to ensure that an officer has the greatest chances of succeeding. Visualization can be used to enhance feelings of confidence and research has shown that anxiety levels decrease, motivation increases, and that overall effectiveness improves through the use of visualization (Morris, Spittle, & Watt, 2005). Enhancing an officer's confidence is the direct result of effective mental preparation using techniques such as visualization but can also be greatly

improved if the officer imagines the actual human emotions that may become apparent and needed during a critical incident (Asken, 2006).

The term Tactical Performance Imagery is preferred over visualization due to the fact visualization only implies what is seen when applying these techniques. TPI suggest that all of the senses are engaged allowing the officer to think about what is seen, heard, felt (physically and emotionally), smelled, and even tasted during a critical incident. This allows the officer to transfer what is experienced during mental rehearsal into real life situations, ideally preventing possible sensory overload. Also, TPI suggests that two perspectives be used to mentally prepare an officer for a critical incident. The third person perspective allows the officer to view the scenario as if watching a videotape and the first person perspective is as if the scenario plays out looking through one's own eyes. Research has suggested that the first person perspective is the most effective perspective to improve overall performance; however, both perspectives should be used to allow the officer to get a better feel for the entire situation and environment. This use of first and third person perspectives will maximize the overall use of TPI for the officer and should be used interchangeably.

Just like any training effort, TPI should be performed with discipline and focus. It is critical that officers apply themselves correctly when using TPI and not become complacent or use incorrect images, so as to avoid confusion or the use of unrelated material when using TPI. It is suggested that officers using TPI rehearse the scenarios at various speeds, ultimately building up to real time speed so that the exercises can be carried over to real world applications. Officers using TPI should incorporate difficult situations that require the officer to work through a problem. These unanticipated events will allow the officer to work through the possible malfunction, injury, or logistical error and will move the officer toward successful solutions, essentially continuing to expand an officer's mindset for success (Asken, 2006).

Miller (2007) suggests that the use of vivid imagery in TPI greatly assists officers to prepare for potential life and death situations. Miller describes an imagery scenario called "Loved-Ones-In-Danger" in an attempt to trigger emotional response in a lethal scenario for officers using TPI (p. 90). The goal of the scenario is to have the officer channel thoughts, feelings, and actions that are worth fighting for, dying for, but most importantly, living for (Asken et al., 2010). Though vivid imagery can be uncomfortable for officers to imagine, it greatly assists with the realism and benefits of TPI. A great example of vivid imagery is provided to Dave Grossman by WWII Veteran Keith Kreitman below in regards to a hostile environment:

It involves blurred vision from sweaty eyes, the acrid choking smells of gunpowder smoke, ear bursting horrific noises, the kinetic nerve vibrations from exploding mortars, hand grenade and shells, the screams of humans, the cries of the wounded, the piercing whine of ricochet of bullets and shrapnel, hiding or stepping over bodies of perhaps someone you know. All at one time. (Asken et al., 2010, p. 160)

Regarding the physiological process that occurs during TPI, studies have shown that small but measureable neuro-electrical signals are activated in the brain and sent throughout the body when individuals mentally rehearse performing a physical skill. This form of repetitive practice helps to create a distinct connection between the mind and the body ultimately increasing accuracy and reaction time. TPI also reduces the element of surprise when faced with a threat by allowing the officer to recognize the situation earlier and again react accordingly. TPI is a logical, systematic method of training that allows the officer to focus on skills that need improvement. Finally, as discussed earlier, TPI allows the officer to focus human emotion in a positive manner during intense, emotional charged situations, reducing emotional instinctive responses that could be detrimental (Suinn, 1985).

There have been several points of caution concerning the use of TPI (Morris et al., 2005; Murphy, 2005). TPI should not replace actual physical practice if the skill is dependent on a motor response. TPI should be used to supplement the training regimen for these physical skills and will help these skills transfer into real-world applications. Additionally, the use of TPI may cause some level of anxiety, especially for first time users or undisciplined users. To avoid unnecessary levels of anxiety, instructors should emphasize the importance of control and focus to generate quality imagery that is conducive to successful performance (Asken et al., 2010). It has also been reported that the use of TPI can lead to overconfidence in one's skills and abilities. Referred to as *imagination inflation*, officers using TPI must be able to incorporate imagery that is realistic and experienced based, avoiding unrealistic thoughts that may create confusion between reality and fantasy (Ramsey, Cummings et al., 2006).

Several studies have been conducted displaying the benefits and direct applicability of both visualization and TPI into human performance. Clark's (1960) study is one of the most cited studies in sports psychology involving basketball players and the use of visualization to improve free throw percentages. The study concluded that physical practice and the use of mental imagery improved overall free throw percentages for participants.

Another study involving civilian CPR training conducted by Starr (1987) showed how psychological preparation can greatly improve emergency medical skills. The study concluded that the civilians that used imagery techniques retained more correct CPR skills after a six month period averaging 93.3% correct skills as compared to 75.6% correct skills for the group that received no imagery training during CPR certification. At the end of 12 months, the results drastically lowered for the group that received no imagery training to 53.3% while the group that had received imagery training dropped only slightly to 88% respectively.

Whitestone's (1996) study focused on the use of mental imagery in developing shooting accuracy skills with a group of police cadets. The results showed that the group that received imagery training showed greater overall gains in accuracy and higher final average scores.

Shiple and Baranski (2002) performed a study looking at a form of imagery training called Visuo-Motor Behavioral Rehearsal (VMBR) with force-on-force scenarios using simunitions. Half of the test subjects received VMBR training that consisted of relaxation and imagery training approximately thirty minutes prior to the simunition scenarios. The results showed that group that received VMBR training reported lower anxiety levels, scored more simunition hits on target, and were ultimately hit less with simunition rounds than the group that did not receive VMBR training.

Tactical Performance Imagery and dynamic, realistic hands-on practical exercises can greatly assist officers in establishing a mindset for success. The studies and examples listed above show that almost immediate and positive effects have been the result of Tactical Performance Imagery incorporation into training regimens for law enforcement officers and military personnel. Like any training method, Tactical Performance Imagery should be taken seriously and used appropriately to enhance an officer's skills and abilities. It is highly recommended that further studies be conducted to show the correlation between an individual's thought process and physical performance under high levels of stress, to include how the use of Tactical Performance Imagery assisted or hindered the overall decision making process. Continued studies and advancements in technology will undoubtedly uncover more quantifiable data that will continue to support the use of Tactical Performance Imagery. Current law enforcement instructors should emphasize the power of Tactical Performance Imagery to their students and encourage the use of Tactical Performance Imagery to assist them in developing a mindset for success on a daily basis, not just when in a formal training environment.

References

- Artwohl, A. & Christensen, L.W. (1997). *Deadly force encounters: What cops need to know to mentally and physically prepare for and survive a gunfight*. Boulder, CO.: Paladin Press.
- Asken, M. J., Christensen, L. W., & Grossman, D. (2010). *Warrior mindset: Mental toughness skills for a nation's defenders: Performance psychology applied to combat*. Millstadt, IL.: Human Factor Research Group.
- Asken, M.J. (2006). TPI: What you see (hear, feel, taste, and smell) is what you get. *The Tactical Edge, Winter*, 45-48.
- Clark, L. (1960). Effects of mental practice on the development of a certain motor skill. *Research Quarterly*, 31, 560-569.
- Cumming, J., Olphin, T. et al., (2007). Self-reported psychological states and physiological responses to different types of motivational general imagery. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 29, 629-644.
- Driskell, J., Salas, E., & Johnston, J. (2006). Decision making and performance under stress. T. Britt, C. Castro, & A.Adler (Eds.). *Military Life: The Psychology of Serving in Peace and Combat. Volume 1: Military Performance*, 128-154.
- Hoffart, M.B. & Keene, E.P. (1998). Body-mind-spirit: The benefits of visualization. *The American Journal of Nursing*, 98(12), 44-47.
- Miller, L. (2007). *Mettle: Mental toughness training for law enforcement*. Flushing, NY.: Looseleaf Law Publications.
- Morris, T., Spittle, M., & Watt, A. (2005) *Imagery in sport*. Champaign, IL.: Human Kinetics.

- Murphy, S. (2005). *Imagery: Inner theatre becomes reality*. The Sport Science Handbook. Champaign, IL.: Human Kinetics.
- Murray, K. (2004) *Training at the speed of life: The definitive textbook for military and law enforcement reality based training*. Gotha, FL.: Arming Publications.
- Ramsey, R., & Cummings, J., et al., (2006). *Mental imagery inflates performance expectations but not actual performance of a novel and challenging motor task*. NASPSPA Abstracts 2006. *Journal of Sport and Exercise Psychology*, 28, S148-149.
- Rensberg, C. (1986). *The tactical edge*. Northbrook, IL.: Calibre Press.
- Shiple, P., & Baranski, J., (2002). Police officer performance under stress: A pilot study on the effects of visuo-motor behavioral rehearsal. *International Journal of Stress Management*, 9(2), 71-80.
- Siddle, B.K. (1995). *Sharpening the warrior's edge: The psychology & science of training (10th Ed.)*. Belleville, IL. PPCT Research Publications.
- Starr, L. (1987). *Stress inoculation training applied to cardiopulmonary resuscitation*. Paper presented at the 95th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association, New York, NY.
- Suinn, R. (1985). Imagery rehearsal applications to performance enhancement. *The Behavior Therapist*, 8(9), 179-183.
- Whetstone, T. (1996). Mental practice enhances recruit police officers acquisition of critical psychomotor skills. *Police Stress*, 19(1), 19-43.