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November/December 2012
MAGAZINE™

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Key Elements in Scenario Based Training

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Scenario based training is the future of canine in-service.

Many agencies have spent years doing in-service training where the emphasis is only on the dog's behaviors needed for certification and not on teamwork, team tactics, and problem solving - which are the most important parts of scenario training. Scenario training is not only designed to work on key behaviors for the dog, but it also helps to "put the pieces together" for the team as a whole to make them more deployment ready. Too often in K-9, what is done in in-service doesn't really resemble what is needed both behaviorally and tactically in a deployment. Scenario based training that is done well will help your K-9 teams be more street ready, tactically sound and safer. K-9 is one of the most dangerous divisions of law enforcement. As such, we need to spend time on team tactics and officer safety, as well as working on the trained behaviors of the dogs.

photos by Britney Pelletier

A scenario is a story.

Often scenario training is designed to mimic prior deployments where the team may have encountered some problems so that better tactics or use of the dog can be devised. Every story has key elements that must be considered in designing a good scenario. The scenario has an author who decides the purpose of the scenario. This is normally the unit trainer. The scenario itself has a beginning, which is the in-brief, including the set-up and how the dog starts. The middle of the scenario is the meat of the story where it all plays out. The end is how it concludes - usually with an apprehension, bite or cooperative subject. The trainer may know how the actors (decoys and back-up) will play out but the handler may not so that his tactical decision making can be tested or challenged.





The plot of the scenario is how the scenario will unfold,

including any twists designed by the trainer who wrote it. The players include the handler, dog, decoys and back-up. You must also consider their “costume”—do you gear up completely or not? If a true tactical approach is being considered, having all the tools of your trade available to you can be very important. Some scenarios can be practiced in parts and pieces before a full-blown run through with a complete gear up is conducted. If the handler or dog isn't ready for a full scenario, the parts can be trained without a full gear up.

Finally, every scenario needs a theme or a message. What point is the trainer trying to make about the canine's training, teamwork, tactics and control? It is important that scenarios are not just “geared up training” without a point. The teams should learn a lesson from the scenario training with respect to teamwork, tactics, control needed, and possible suspect behavior and how to handle it.



Breaking the Certification Mindset

One of the biggest reasons scenario training is not conducted regularly is the fact that most K-9 teams and agencies running K-9 teams have a certification mindset. Training is geared for the teams to pass the certification, not to exceed the certification requirements. Certification is a basic proficiency. It is not the level of training and operational proficiency we are shooting for. Your training should always exceed certification requirements.

Ideally, certification should involve elements of scenario training and some organizations are moving toward a more scenario driven certification. If certification authorities move more toward scenario based certifications, agencies looking to certify through them will naturally have to move their training toward scenario work to prepare.

As consumers of these third party certification organizations, agencies should push them to include scenario based evaluations. Change is incremental in the police world and if the consumers of the service demand it, it will happen more quickly.



Constructing Good Scenarios: Identifying the Purpose

The purpose of a scenario can be to challenge one particular aspect of the K-9 team, or perhaps to look at multiple issues. One area where scenarios are often used, is to evaluate and challenge the decision making of the handler. The K-9 handler is faced with decisions based on information given in the in-brief. The trainer who constructs the scenario must carefully give and leave out some information that will necessitate the handler to make judgments in handling or tactics.

Other parts of a scenario that must be designed are; available cover, concealment, communication between

handler and back-up officers, officer safety, managing the canine in terms of general control, weapon use and line use, less lethal combinations, and working the dog geared up. These things are often left out of most in-service training.

Another critical aspect of good scenario training is a dog with required foundation work and skills to be able to complete the scenario. Too often, one scenario is designed and all dogs of varying skill levels are asked to complete the scenario. The trainer must understand how to make adjustments to the scenario to account for younger, less experienced dogs in the unit and to challenge the dogs that have more street time.

The trainer who writes the scenario can often insert

himself in the role as a backup officer. This allows a close evaluation of the team and allows the trainer to step in and guide the training. Sometimes, assisting the process is more valuable than testing and debriefing the mistakes later. Just like dog training, setting the team up for success will increase confidence. There will be times you will want to challenge the team and test the decision-making, as this can be a very important experience for the handler.





Implementing a Scenario Training Exercise

Identify the purpose of the scenario: Are we challenging the K-9's skills or looking at decision making of the officer in identifying a sound tactical approach of the scenario, or both? The trainer should decide whether the K-9 and handler are ready to attempt such a scenario. Consider whether the dog's training and experience is up to completing the scenario, as well as the handler's level of experience. Don't test too many things at once, as it can lead to breakdown of the scenario. If you identify a weakness in the dog's ability, re-set the scenario to address it, as we don't want the dog to have a bad experience.

Decoys are critical in scenario training as they often must make the adjustment to drop into a training mode and help the dog. If you brief the decoys to put a lot of pressure on the dog in a confined space for example, and the dog starts to exhibit "pre-avoidance" behaviors (See

the author's book *Controlled Aggression* pp. 39-43), the decoy must make an immediate adjustment to help the dog before the dog goes into avoidance and sets the training back. It is important for the trainer to brief the decoys on this, as well as use decoys that are educated well enough to read the dog when he starts to show some difficulty. Having your decoys attend proper decoy training where they are taught not only to mechanically catch dogs, but also to read their behavior during training scenarios, is critical for productive and efficient scenario training.

The trainer should be sure that if he is going to expect the dog to perform properly in a scenario that includes defensive pressure in a tight space, that such training has been done in advance. This is not the time to "see how the dog does." Just like a lawyer doesn't ask questions he doesn't know the answer to, a trainer shouldn't present the dog with a training scenario he doesn't already know the dog will be able to negotiate.



Example: Area Search Scenario with 2 Suspects in a Vehicle Impound Lot

The elements being tested in such a scenario could be; where to start, is the handler starting downwind of the search area or at the entrance gate because it is convenient and where will the handler place the back-up officers and what instructions will he give them? The trainer can have the handler brief the deployment and the tactical concept that he or she will follow. Some considerations would include whether the handler will allow the dog to search off leash, or use a clear, down and cover methodology on leash. The handler must explain why he would use the tactical concept he has chosen. Every tactical concept has pros and cons. There can be multiple correct solutions to any deployment. The handler must articulate the pros and cons of each in order to give the trainer the confidence that the handler is making sound tactical choices and not jeopardizing the canine team or back-up officers by choosing one concept over another.

For example, if the dog is to search off line, the dog may catch one subject's scent and run to the back of the lot and engage the threat. Which leaves the K-9 officer and back-up to hand search and move up. Case law tells us that if the subject is compliant after the dog engages, the dog must be removed as quickly as possible. If the handler chose to systematically search on line, this



could possibly be avoided. This type of search could provide officer safety and safety for the apprehended subject.

Another consideration of an off line search is if the dog is ready to stay on the grip during a slow tactical approach. This is necessitated by the tactical concept chosen by the officer. If the dog is only accustomed to biting for a short time, such a tactical concept might not be the best approach.

Further consideration must be given to the dog's prior training in dealing with multiple subjects. Suppose during the search the subject is located in a closed car and the dog alerts. Can the dog recall to cover and be quiet during a verbal challenge? Further, once decoy #1 is in custody, can the dog continue searching? If it's a bite, can the dog refocus and continue? How does the handler deal with the dog if it is obsessed with the first decoy? These should be subjects the dog and handler have already worked on in training before asking them to perform well in a training scenario, or in a deployment where the possibility exists of multiple subjects.

Even in a simple scenario such as this, there can be a lot to take into account so both the handler and dog have a good experience and learn from the scenario.

Training Parts of a Scenario Before Running a Full Scenario

In training, you can break a full scenario down to train each individual part. You can work on the beginning, middle and end separately before putting it all together.

As an example of training the beginning part, consider “acquiring a threat for an apprehension.” Start from a cover position and place a decoy in a sitting position (passive in a hidden sleeve) for a passive apprehension. If the dog can’t acquire the threat, the rest of the scenario is meaningless.

Many dogs are trained to notice movement only, as their decoys always agitate to get the dog to respond. When a decoy is passive with no equipment, the dog may look at back-up officers and not focus on the threat. If this is the case, simplify the scenario and remove back up to behind the K-9 team. Have the threat stand in front of the dog with the dog and handler deploying from behind cover. When the dog barks at the passive subject aggressively and is focused on him, send the dog. When the dog is half-way to the decoy, instruct the decoy to run away and the dog should bite.

Next, make the dog get closer and closer before the decoy moves. Always start with a solid alert and bark on the passive decoy and end with the decoy presenting the hidden sleeve to the dog, but not moving until the dog engages him.

Once the dog is on the grip, move out of scenario mode, break cover, and work on other elements of the dog’s training such as; grip, pushing into the bite, fighting the decoy on the ground with line tension to keep the grounded decoy safe, approach of back-up officers, and handcuffing procedures, tactical lift off or out, using the back-up officer as second line handlers to deliver an out

correction if needed to keep the dog clean.

This can be extended to a seated decoy, a prone decoy, or a seated decoy draped in a sheet or tarp. For a prone decoy, I prefer slick floors with the dog on a line to ensure decoy safety. The possibilities are endless to increase the challenge to the dog. Scenarios can emphasize the beginning, middle or end to work on training deficiencies or just to challenge the dog.

Another example might be working on the end of a scenario. Suppose a building search scenario where the dog alerts on a closet door with a subject hiding inside and you wa

nt to practice calling the dog to cover (a K-9 skill) and verbally challenging. The decoy is briefed to come out of the room and either cooperate or not during the officer’s instructions (testing handler skill on releasing the dog and making a tactical approach to apprehend, communication with back-up, and handcuffing procedures).

This scenario need not incorporate an entire building search. In other words, the beginning and middle can be shortened so that the dog can be worked on the end part of the scenario a few times. Choosing a good location where there are multiple angles from which the dog can be released to search (keeping the search short and easy and the decoy in the same hiding place where he created the scent cone) for more repetitions. Then, there is an opportunity to do 3 or 4 verbal challenges, apprehensions (you could even put a hidden sleeve under a bite jacket so you can work on equipment orientation drills during the apprehension), and handcuffing procedures, rather than one long building search scenario, what we call “one and done.”



To concentrate on the middle of a scenario, like a building search, make the start and the end easy, and work on skills related to the searching. Decoy placement for optimal search patterning, multiple apprehensions where the dog must re-focus to continue searching, and practicing elements of clear down and cover with handler and cover moving through the search. Then, when you feel confident that you have worked the beginning, middle and end of a scenario successfully, string it all together in a continuous scenario, where you are geared up from briefing through the last apprehension.

By breaking down the scenarios into pieces, and then putting the pieces together, you will train more efficiently - gaining multiple repetitions on each part of the scenario, just like you train components of behaviors and then string them together in a chain of complex behaviors for your dog's benefit.

Introducing Scenario Elements to Young Dogs

Elements of scenario training should be started early in a dog's training. We do too much standing on a soccer field, and holding a dog for bite work on a 6 foot leash. In early bite work sessions, start early deploying from cover positions so it becomes second nature for your dog. Once he is on the grip, break cover and work your developmental session. If you are going to slip a sleeve to a dog, have the decoy go to ground first, post a tight line, and have the trainer come in and act as back up. The trainer should act as if he were going to do a handcuffing procedure to de-condition the dog to back up guys, decoys going to ground, and commands to the suspect like "get on the ground" and "show me your hands!"

In obedience, practice heeling in a crouch, kneeling with the dog next to you, being called up to heel while you are kneeling in a cover position, and other tactical positions where you want your dog to be comfortable. If your dog only sees heeling when you are standing and wailing in a field, he won't know what you are doing if you are heeling with your weapon in low-ready and moving slowly in a crouch. Create meaningful context in your scenarios for maximum effect.

Let your dog start to see back-up officers in position when you are behind cover with your dog as your bite work session starts. Have the decoy start the basic bite session sitting in a chair or prone on the ground. When the dog alerts, the decoy pops up to work the developmental session and cover guys become part of the dog's every day work. Later on, this will make passive biting much easier and your dog will already be accustomed to back-up guys behind cover and will be able to focus on the threat that might be passive. Almost all foundation training can be done in this environment rather than on a sterile field with only a decoy agitating in front of the dog.





Conclusion

Scenario training is the future. It is also a lot of fun, but isn't just playing dress up and doing a K-9 activity. It must be carefully planned. Questions must be answered. What are the goals of the scenario? Are they dog-related, i.e. canine skills? Are they handler related, as in decision making, tactical decisions, and management of the K-9 for maximum officer safety? Is the dog ready for the complexity of the scenario? Will it require full gear as that will add something important to the training at hand?

A good rule of thumb is to break the scenario down, train the parts of the scenario successfully and add complexity by adjusting one variable at a time. When you feel confident in the beginning, middle and end being trained successfully, bring it together as in a full deployment scenario in full gear, from in-brief to apprehension. Make sure you debrief the scenario (it is best to video the scenario for deconstruction) and focus on K-9 performance, handler performance, tactics, officer safety, and any other element of the theme of the scenario you created.

Always maintain foundation and skills proficiency during scenario training and never operate without a way to influence the dog's behavior! Behavior is reliable if it is conditioned. Make foundation and skills a habit so that when the scenario training takes place, you have confidence in your dog's ability! ■