

# Is it time to rethink our Field Training Officer Program?

by Richard Whitehead CPM



Over the past twenty plus years of training Field Training Officer's and building FTO programs I have come to a realization why so many trainers and

administrators are frustrated with their programs.

First let's define what we want: "Our Field Training Officer Program is designed and purposed to train and produce the best product possible. By drawing on the skills of their trainers the trainee will develop and refine the best from the best." Our motives are all similar to this; Right?

## WHERE WE ARE and WHY THE FRUSTRATION

Trainers blame their frustration on "them" (the administration) for second guessing their recommendations or endlessly extending the program until the trainee finally passes. The Administration blames their frustration on their FTO's. They think the FTO's are both lazy and producing an inferior product or overly critical and think no one is worthy. Administrators are confused as the background looked great and the hiring interview was flawless, so how can they be wrong, it must be the FTO's and/or the program.

In short FTO programs fail for two reasons and two reasons only: First; the FTO's have become disillusioned, frustrated, and/or burned out causing them to quit caring and are now just pencil whipping the paperwork or they've digressed into "Survival of the Fittest" and there are very few who do. Two; the administration has lost confidence in their program and recommendations from their FTO's so they keep extending trainees and moving them to new trainers until they find someone that will sign off on passing them, after all they interviewed great.

This is a very vicious cycle and no one is happy with the results. We inevitably end up with an officer, who is now off of probation, and has reoccurring issues to address, or does something worthy of termination during FTO and while on probation, but now we're stuck with them. You probably don't have to think about this very long before "that guy" pops into your head?

So how do we change it? Our program has been around for decades? Well you're not still driving decades old cars or using decades old computers are you? Then why are we using a training program that was designed decades ago?

## PROGRAMS

Regardless of the program you currently use it probably has these elements: A daily scoring mechanism, usually 1-7, and a minimum score has to be maintained for the trainee to remain in the program from phase to phase; A documentation area for "Most Acceptable" and "Least Acceptable"; Performance Categories numbering into the 30's, and; Requirements for a failing score for the day if a "safety" error is made. Or the opposite end of that scale where the FTO does seemly endless writing about the training day, exhausting the FTO. Does this sound familiar?

Let me ask a few questions for you to ponder as you read:

- Why do we score someone when we are not ready to turn them loose yet?

Most of you probably answered with "we must have a way to monitor their progression and retention of their learning".

- When you went school did you not get to learn the material before you were tested and given a score?

Grading someone from day one requires a false passing score for them to continue as little has been taught. This

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also tends to make our trainers operate in a “Critiquing” mindset instead of a “Training” mindset.

- At what point do we transition from the false scores to the real scores?

Does the trainee understand this? Do the trainers understand this? Is this addressed in an SOG?

- How would we monitor progress without a grade?

Might I suggest articulable documentation related to the performance category and tracking the categories and their frequency of mention?

## TIME FOR A CHANGE

Trainees, our personnel, departments, our citizens are all different from days gone by. They think differently, learn differently, and respond to decision making differently. So logic would dictate that our training programs must also evolve.

We have all been to that training where we talked about the different generations and their perceptions, learning styles, etc. In our world of everybody makes the team, gets to play, gets a trophy, graduates, etc. would it not seem necessary and logical to address this new group with a learning environment that is more suited to their needs?

The KEY is a willingness to say or maybe admit “this isn’t working anymore”.

I have witnessed this transformation of training time and time again with agencies across the country, big and small, (law enforcement, communications, corrections, fire). As of this writing, Dallas TX PD is in the final approval process for adoption of these key elements: separating Evaluation from Training; condensing the number of performance categories; easily and succinctly tracking all activity and relating specific documentation to the categories in which errors are made; articulating immediate remedial training along with the trainee’s

response. All while addressing the specific liability and other needs of the agency. Programs of this nature have avoided legal challenges for over twenty years due to the method of documentation along with other checks and balances.

FTO’s call it “a truly common sense approach to training” and Administrator’s like it due to the thoroughness of the documentation which thoroughly supports retention or termination decisions and provides proven bullet proof liability protection.

With a little effort and some retooling we can proclaim “Our Field Training Officer Program is designed and purposed to train and produce the best product possible”. **ILEETA**



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# New Supervisor Field Training Programs

by Richard Whitehead, CPM



**H**ow many agencies can you think of that have a Field Training Program for their new supervisors, Ten, Two, Zero?

This is an area historically overlooked since the inception of Field Training Programs. In their absence where does the expected knowledge, experience, and confidence that should equip a supervisor come from? I am not talking of the skills of leadership but rather the day to day understanding required to fulfill the new supervisory duties such as: answering questions, assigning personnel, scheduling, approving reports, time sheets, and call out notifications, etc. Typically, this bestowing is assumed through the pinning of stripes that must contain everything they need and acts like a nicotine patch. How well is this current method working? With the scrutiny of our agencies being at an all-time high, this would be a good time to review how we train, placing a higher emphasis on our supervisory ranks.

## History

We have had FTO programs for new hires since the 1970's, why not for the sergeant? Failure to Train is one of the seven links to civil liability. Once an officer receives promotion it is normally recommended or required they attend a "new supervisor" course. Often the focus is on leadership and neglecting the daily burdens of the position only learned through the agency. Repeatedly, I have seen brand new supervisors show up on their first day left solely to their own devices. With other supervisors that could, or more importantly should, have been available to mentor them being unavailable for various reasons. Throwing a new supervisor into this pool is subjecting them to the pain and frustration found in the school of hard knocks, which is costly to the new supervisor, fails the public, troops, and the administration.

So back to my question of; how many agencies can you

think of that have a new supervisor FTP, and why not? Too hard? Don't know where to start? Too much work? No one to take the lead? Any other reason that may be keeping it at bay?

## The Answer

The answer is; it is not that difficult! Programs are easily modeled from what we already know, and the department, the community, and most importantly your new supervisors reap the rewards.

We start with a Job Task Analysis of the position which produces our Performance Categories. Additional analysis will yield Tasks for the Checklist. We then build our Daily Observation and subsequent forms based on what is familiar, customized to the new supervisor's role, and what is left is creating the requisite policy and SOP.

I have created and witnessed implementation of these programs in other agencies, divisions, and off-line positions as well, such as: Fire/EMS, Communications, Corrections, SWAT, Traffic, etc.



As of this writing, the [Post Falls ID Police Department](#), known for staying on the cutting edge of innovation, has just adopted their "[New Sergeant Field Training Program](#)" as well as the Hays County TX Sheriff's Office. The implementation received high praise from all ranks and I am personally honored to have created them. New Supervisor Field Training Programs can be created

# New Supervisor Training ...con't

and implemented in just under two weeks, obtaining your agency specific: Checklist, Forms, Policy and SOP. This safety net will under-gird the aspiring troop considering promotion, reduce risk and liability cost, and ensure all personnel are trained consistently and thoroughly.

Now is the time to address this deficit to ensure confident, secure, capable supervisors offering stability and reducing risk for our communities!

## **ILEETA**

### **About the Author**

*Richard Whitehead is a retired law enforcement commander after devoting 30+ years to public safety. He built his first FTO program in 1992 and accompanying curriculum the following year. He currently trains and consults, on a wide variety of topics through his firm [Richard Whitehead & Assoc. LLC](#), and his FTOP and concepts have been widely adopted across the country.*



# Field Training Program & Software Comparison

## Whitehead Model

- 14 Performance Categories
  - Common Sense Combinations
- Through yet Succinct Documentation
  - 3-pronged approach leading to
- Bullet Proof Liability Protection

### Automatically

- Tracks ALL aspects of training exposure
  - Calls for Service by type\*
    - # of Reports written
    - # of Arrests
    - # of Use of Force events
  - Traffic
    - # of Citations/Summons
  - Scenarios Performed
  - Important Discussions
  - Categories where Training occurred
    - Sorted by those:
      - Needing Correction
      - Performed well
  - Field Training Manual Checklist\*\*
  - # of hours with FTO per day
  - # of hours OIT drove per day
- Tracks OIT's response to all training:
  - Mistakes / Poor Decisions
  - Corrective Training
  - OIT's response to correction

### Training Focused

- Daily Training & Response Documented
  - All Phases
- Performance Scored
  - Only during Evaluation Phase
  - Must Pass each category twice
    - Pass (can do the job)
    - Fail (cannot do the job)
      - Removes argument about numbers (1-7) which are not clearly defined.

**Software** does all this from **one page**, completed during the day as it happens, leaving only signatures to capture at the end of shift. = **Zero OT.**

## San Jose Model

- 28+ Performance Categories
  - Redundant areas
- Brief & Summarized Documentation
  - Leading to
- Weak Liability Protection

### Optionally

- Tracks Calls for Service
- Safety Concerns
- Remedial Training
- Categories where training occurred
- Field Training Manual Checklist

### Critique Focused

- Daily Performance Scored
  - Must maintain a "3" to advance
    - 1-7 scale not fully defined
    - Allows for personal definitions
      - Subjective
  - Documentation only required when scores are not mid-range.
  - Default is mid-range scoring
  - Requires finding fault daily with "Least Satisfactory" Performance
  - Requires a Failing score if a mistake is made in safety. Does NOT allow OIT to overcome mistake and pass.

**Software** requires navigating **multiple pages**, (DOR, Call Entries, Call Tracking, Officer Safety Report, Remedial Training). DOR can only be competed at end of shift and depending on the scores given (critiquing) can be time intensive. = **OT daily**