

DEVELOPING LESS LETHAL WEAPONS FOR THE FUTURE OF
LAW ENFORCEMENT

Article

By

Captain Michael T. Idom
Cypress Police Department

Command College Class XXXV

Sacramento, California

November 2003

Developing Less Lethal Weapons for the Future of Law Enforcement

In the last thirty years, in almost every aspect of law enforcement, there have been tremendous advancements in technology. These advancements are very prevalent in the area of less lethal weapons. Back in the 1960s, there were very few options for law enforcement beyond lethal force.

Police executives have strived to maintain pace with the latest and newest developments in the equipment they purchase and provide to the police officers working in their respective cities. This race to maintain pace with these advancements is sometimes costly and unsuccessful. While most applications of force by a police officer result in a successful conclusion to an issue, each has the potential for disastrous results affecting the career of the police officer and the reputation and financial stability of the city and police agency. How police officers administer that force, and by what means, is critical to the mission of that organization.

Less lethal weapons were originally developed to provide law enforcement, corrections, and military personnel with an alternative to lethal force. The intent of a less lethal weapon is intended to incapacitate, confuse, delay, or restrain an adversary in a variety of situations. They have primarily been used during on-the-street confrontations and suicide interventions, but have also been applied in riots, prison disturbances, and hostage rescues.

For some small and medium size agencies, it may be difficult to maintain pace with continued improvements in technology. Every city is beginning to feel

the strain of budget cuts and dwindling grant funds. Typically, with many agencies, these grant funds are essential to purchase new weapons technology. Areas that need to be considered for the future are numerous. Is the agency buying tools that have been proven to be effective and field-tested? Is this weapon in the development stages and will there be a better item developed in the near future? What is the learning curve? What are the costs to purchase and maintain these weapons? What is the communities' expectation for their law enforcement agency to purchase and use these types of tools? What impact will the media have on the use of less lethal weapons?

Currently, most medium size police agencies have some type of less lethal weapon for the officers working at their agencies. With the wide variety of types, makes and price, there is no standard tool that all agencies deploy in the field. Additionally, with the continued advancements in technology, some agencies are finding they have less lethal weapons that are now outdated due to the development of newer models of the same weapon, or replacement by a weapon made by another manufacturer. There are some agencies, due to financial difficulties and past practice, that have resigned themselves to using these outdated and less effective weapons.

In the past law enforcement has generally failed to take full advantage of the latest technology available, opting instead to 'make do' with conventional and sometimes even obsolete tools.¹

¹ Sid Heal, Captain Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, Sheriff's Department Explores Technology, *Law and Order Magazine*, June 2000, 57

Successful agencies are frequently having their personnel evaluate the need for replacement and update of current weapons. This is necessary if they are to be good stewards of their money.

Police executives must constantly monitor technological advancements and make an educated decision regarding the purchase and implementation of that technology. The development of technology has never been faster than in the past thirty years. Technology continues to develop and improve faster than ever before. It seems that as soon as a product is developed and marketed, companies are already designing a replacement model. In the past, that window between state of the art and obsolescence was long enough that an agency was able to get full use out of the older item. That window continues to get smaller, and now it seems that by the time you buy the technology and implement it, it is already outdated.

The current political climate and support by the public favor changes in the force used by police officers. Agencies and individual officers are frequently critiqued and, many times, criticized for their actions. Politicians, the public, police agencies and police officers are, for the most part, accepting of change. Taking into account the terrorists events of September 11, 2001, and the support of the public and politicians, now is a perfect time to work with private agencies in developing new less lethal weapons. It is the responsibility of law enforcement, whenever possible, to assist, encourage, or make change happen.

Law enforcement should approach this issue in two ways. The first strategy will address the current environment and the selection of the best less

lethal weapon or weapons available to law enforcement. The second strategy will take a proactive approach in the development and design of future less lethal weapons that will be used by law enforcement officers.

Strategies

In Strategy One, police departments will take a proactive approach in marketing their agency to the community. Police officials will publicize and promote new and innovative tools and programs. In the past, police departments would select and implement technology without consultation of city councils and the public because law enforcement enjoyed unwavering favorable support from these two groups. Unfortunately, over the past fifteen years, police have lost that unconditional respect of the politicians and public.

Law enforcement now needs to spend more time marketing not only the profession, but also new programs and equipment. This can be best accomplished by involving community members in committees when possible. Police department have typically avoided this involvement with the public. By involving as many stakeholders as possible in the selection and decision process will only help in developing valuable partnerships and future support. It will also provide law enforcement with a completely different perspective regarding the future. If law enforcement only consults with members within its field, it is only tapping into a small portion of the important information available for future development. Some of the best inventions and ideas have come from individuals outside the field. Quite often, it is these individuals who can think “outside the box” and who are not locked into the law enforcement paradigm.

In this strategy, first-line supervisors, managers, and executives will develop and maintain a level of trust with line level sworn and civilian personnel. If there is a lack of trust, or a feeling that they are being left out of the process, line level personnel will be resistive to any change suggested or implemented by the supervisor and managers of the organization. It will be the line level personnel who will ultimately determine the success or failure of any new program or technology. As with the community, these individuals are important stakeholders. Involvement in the selection and decision process, when possible, is very important. Giving this group a say in the future of the organization is very important. Additionally, through training, education, and experience, you will find experts in the field who will be able to provide valuable information. By including all stakeholders, there will be less resistance to implement changes, and the cost will be minimal since you will be using outside individuals to supplement the committee.

The second strategy takes a proactive approach to future development of less lethal weapons. Law enforcement has always remained in the background regarding development of most technology. This applies to less lethal technology. History has shown that police departments have waited for the military and other private companies to design tools and weapons for law enforcement. Typically, law enforcement will sit back and watch as these developers conduct testing and research on potential new tools and future technology. This is as a result of the high costs associated with the research and design of a new technology. Consequently, law enforcement has virtually no

input into the design of that technology. They are faced with taking the technology as is, making modifications to suit the law enforcement arena.

The first goal will be to capitalize on the expertise and financial backing of the military. Law enforcement executives must team up with those in the military arena who are currently developing and testing less lethal tools. This will require that police personnel be assigned to military research and design centers to provide their expertise to the early stages of weapon development. Ideally, police officers who are experts in the field of tactical weapons use will be selected to participate in the development program.

Individual cities may not have the funding to conduct research and development. It is far too costly. By teaming up with other public and private entities, the funding would be minimal to the cities. In this strategy law enforcement will gain nationwide support from chiefs and sheriff's organizations for the implementation and funding of this program. Once law enforcement individuals are selected, it will be their responsibility to work alongside the weapons developers to design tools and technology that meet the needs of law enforcement and the military.

Currently, in Iraq, and other parts of the world, military personnel are performing urban warfare and police duties. So much so, that police tactical instructors are now training military units in police tactics in an urban environment. The design of better less lethal weapons to suit the needs of law enforcement will greatly benefit the current mission of soldiers and reduce injury and death in confrontations between the military and civilians.

In the second strategy, federal grant funding will be pursued so that small and medium size agencies are able to assign personnel to this type of research. The goal in putting together the law enforcement component of the development team will be to find the best the nation has to offer, regardless of how large an agency is. It will be crucial that the individuals selected look at the process as what is best for law enforcement and not what is best for their respective agencies. These individuals will need to have the ability to look at the assignment globally. The law enforcement individuals must be futures thinking. They cannot develop a weapon for today's needs.

Each of the two strategies discussed address the issue of less lethal technology and how the future can be affected by being proactive. Strategy One examines technology that is currently on the market. Strategy Two addresses taking a proactive approach in actually altering the development of technology to meet the future needs of law enforcement.

If law enforcement uses either strategy, they will be better off than maintaining the current practice of waiting for items to be designed and then, without any outside assistance, selecting what they feel is best. Too often, police department executives implement change in equipment, policy and training without the assistance of others. It is that failure to look outside of our own paradigm that causes programs to fail.

Both strategies require outside involvement from either private or government entities that are not typically, accepting of outside influences. Law

enforcement executives will need to convince military and civilian researchers that peace officers can contribute to the success of future weapons designs. Until law enforcement begins to participate in the design of their own weapons we may never see a less lethal weapon that is 100% effective on all individuals.

Conclusion

How organizations move from the current environment to the ideal future involves the strategic plan. Using those strategic and implementation plans will provide a road map for a smooth transition. Stakeholders must be identified, and these stakeholders must be utilized to implement the change and move the organization to the desired future.

As the leaders of our organizations, it is our responsibility to be visionaries and move our organizations toward a future goal. We have two choices. We can be reactive to events when they occur or be proactive in anticipating those future trends and events that will affect our organizations. Obviously, the optimum choice is using the future forecasting method. This will keep the organization well ahead of the problems and make the agency a leader in the field of law enforcement. Agencies must continually examine which less lethal weapons they will provide to their police officers and must not be afraid to be the first to change these tools or procedures. They must also examine their use of force procedures and policies and not hesitate to change or modify them when needed.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Adams, Eric. Shoot to not Kill, *Popular Science Magazine*, May 2003.
- Advanced Taser, 15 Feet of Takedown Power, Online Internet, 23 September 2001.
- Button, Peter D. Staff Sergeant, Less Lethal Force Technology, Online Report to training Section, February 2003.
- Cap-Stun Products, OC – A Breakthrough after 70 Years of Tear Gas and Chemical Agents, Online Internet, February 2003.
- Charrier, Kim. Sergeant, Marketing Strategies for Attracting and Retaining Generation X Police Officers, *The Police Chief*, December 2000
- Graham, Marty. Sheriff's Department gets \$500K for Less-Deadly Weapons, *The Californian Times*, Online Internet, 25 January 2000.
- Harker, Bob. The Baton Round A Brief History, Online Internet, February 2003.
- Hart, Sarah V., Honorable, Less than Lethal Weapons, Report to National Institute of Justice Office of Justice Programs, 2 May 2002.
- Heal, Sid. Captain Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, Sheriff's Department Explores Technology, *Law and Order Magazine*, June 2000.
- Heal, Sid. Los Angeles Sheriff's Department, Intervening with Less Lethal Technology, Power Point Lesson Training Plan, 22 March 2001.
- Hill, Lisa O'Neill. Mom Criticizes police Tactics in Son's Death, *The Press Enterprise*, 8 January 2003.
- Ijames, Steve. Less Lethal, *Law and Order Magazine*, August 2002.
- Ijames, Steve. Impact Projectile Update and Operational Review, Training Handout, 22 February 2002.
- Jones, Tony. Specialty Police Munitions: The Hottest New Ammunition, Weapons Platform, Devices, and Chemical Agents for Real World Law Enforcement, Paladin Press, July 2000.
- Laur, Darren. Sergeant, More Powerful but Still Less Lethal, *Law Enforcement Technologies Magazine*, October 1999.

BIBLIOGRAPHY (Continued)

Pasternak, Douglas. Weapons, *U.S. News & World Report Magazine*, 7 July 1997.

U.S. Department of Justice Office of Justice Programs, Less than Lethal Technologies, Online Internet Report, March 2003.

Wright, Steve. Non-Lethal Weapons' for the Millennium the Revolution in Flexible Tools of Political Control, Online Internet Report, April 2003