

**ADULT LEARNING STYLE TRAINING IN POLICE DEPARTMENT  
FIELD TRAINING PROGRAMS**

By

Captain Michael Massoni

South San Francisco Police Department

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One may think learning is simply learning; however, there is a difference between an adult's learning style and a child's learning style. Andragogy<sup>1</sup> is the art and science of helping adults learn. An adult student and a child student are quite different in many respects. Although adult learners are more mature and focused than their younger counterparts, barriers against participation in learning require educators to have certain skills to maintain adult learner motivation in the classroom. This concept also has an impact on the Field Training Officer (FTO)/trainee relationship. The FTO's need to have the skills that will keep the trainee focused on the task and be able to tailor their training style to meet the learning style of the recruit.

We will explore a problem with field training experienced by a police department with success in their field training program, and how using adult learning concepts created an unprecedented level of success. We will learn about how a trainee's learning style might impact their ability to respond to a trainer, and how the use of profile performance assessment instruments was a key component to the creation of the success of the training program. As you read, think of your agency's issues and consider it might also be a gap between the adult learner and their "educator" to see if there are ways you could also enhance your success.

### **The Issue**

In 2002, South San Francisco CA Police Department (SSFPD) Chief of Police Mark Raffaelli recognized there was a problem with how the field training officer (FTO) program for the department was working. The failure rate for recruit officers in the F.T.O. program was approaching the 50% level. This was a cause of concern because of

the difficulty in finding qualified recruits and the time and expense that went along with the entire hiring process.

Chief Raffaelli had just attended a seminar where the issue of adult learning was discussed. During the seminar, discussion centered on how adults learn differently from children. To optimize the learning experience with adult trainees, it was asserted, one needed to train and teach to that style. Chief Raffaelli felt this might be a solution to the issue the Department had been experiencing with the training of new recruits. When he returned, he met with the Training Manager for the department and they explored the concept of utilizing the Adult Learning Style in the training program.

At this point, Raffaelli and his staff recognized the need for an expert in the field of adult learning to assist with program development. He contacted Mr. Bruce Grantham, an administrator of adult education for the South San Francisco Unified School District. Grantham and Raffaelli ultimately developed a program to train all current department F.T.O.'s in the adult learning style. To capitalize on this reality, a plan was developed where Grantham would meet with all the Department FTO's where they individually identified their particular learning style. They then met as a group with other FTO's that shared the same learning style. These four groups then developed strategies on how they learned best, and what made them more comfortable in a learning environment.

Grantham then met the new recruits to identify their particular learning style. He also gave them strategies to maximize their learning in the field training environment. Each recruit then met with his or her FTO prior to starting the training phase. Together, they developed a plan to maximize the training experience using what was learned in the process of identifying learning styles and strategies. The recruits meet with Grantham

during the in house portion of the training program before they start the actual in-car training. This program continues today and is part of the Field Training Program. The program has not changed from its original inception; however, a review of the program is planned and will become a regular part on a semi annual basis. Considering the positive outcomes seen thus far, it is informative to see how the Department arrived at this point.

### **The Process**

In November 2006, the Department held a brainstorming session on the new generation of police recruits. Members identified several issues that were perceived to be critical to the new generation of police officers<sup>2</sup>. It became clear many of the FTO's today are baby boomers and do not identify with Generation X'ers and the Millennials, who comprise the majority of new police officer candidates.

The key to getting students engaged in learning is to understand learning style preferences. According to the article Learning Styles<sup>3</sup>, there are many different ways to classify learning styles; however, they fall into three distinct categories: perceptual modalities, information processing and personality patterns. The teacher needs to know the motivation of the adult learner, the barriers to adult learning, differences between men and women's learning styles as well as how to design a curriculum and interact in the classroom. The Department team also recognized the differences in the generations in the workplace would have an impact on the development and deployment of any intended solution.

### **The Generations**

Claire Raines' website Generations, at Work<sup>4</sup>, identifies the following issues as important to the new generation: they have a different work ethic, and they have a job

versus a career and expect instant gratification/feedback. Interestingly, they also have a more balanced concept of the job. They also are from the “digital age” and are used to receiving instant feedback on everything that they do.

The panel felt that all of these issues could be dealt with effectively by utilizing the adult learning techniques in training. The recruit will have a sense they are more than just a body taking up space, will have input in their training and expect what is important to them will be considered. They need instant feedback regarding their performance on a call, just like they do when playing a video game.

The Generation X’ers and the Millennial pose a new challenge for the FTO’s. By focusing on their particular learning style, the South San Francisco Police Department realized they needed to develop a new and thorough process for their FTO program. Before a new program can be successful, it is imperative to have some understanding and knowledge of the social and culture components of both generations.

### **Generation Xers — Born 1965 to 1980<sup>5</sup>**

As with baby boomers, certain societal events and norms impacted how the Generation X’ers view the world. Many of them are products of divorce, have parents who were laid off after years of dedicated service to a company, witnessed major challenges to the Presidency and grew up with religious and corporate scandals. This has resulted in a large sense of skepticism and distrust of institutions. Because they don't expect employer loyalty, they see no problem changing jobs to advance professionally. They are technologically savvy, having ushered in the era of video games and personal computers during their formative years.

In contrast to the baby boomers' work ethic of 50-60 hour work weeks, Generation X'ers believe that work isn't the most important thing in their lives. They're resourceful and hardworking, but once five o'clock hits, they'd rather pursue other interests.

### **Millennials — Born 1981 to 1999**

Many in this generation are still in school, but the oldest Millennials are recent college graduates just now entering the workforce. These are kids who've had access to cell phones, pagers and personal computers all their lives.

Millennials are eager to learn and enjoy questioning things. They're confident and have high self-esteem. They're collaborators and favor teamwork, having functioned in groups in school, organized sports and extracurricular activities from a very young age. They reject the notion that they have to stay within the rigid confines of a job description. Expect them to keep their career options open. As opposed to generation X'ers who change jobs, Millennials are more likely to make entire career changes or to build parallel careers.<sup>6</sup>

During the review of the “old” program in contrast to what was being proposed in the new program it became clear what the problem was. The FTO's were not focusing on how the recruits were learning. They were only attempting to get their training topic covered. This type of training was successful for some recruits but did not work for all. It was at best a hit and miss proposition. If trainers were speaking to the recruits in a manner that focused on their learning style, it worked. If it was the wrong learning style then it failed. This would also change from trainer to trainer; each trainer would train in a manner that was comfortable to them and not the recruit. The recruits could face four

different styles of training during their time in the program. This has the potential to cause confusion in the recruits and definitely had an impact on the failure rate.

Armed with the knowledge of behaviors and norms of the new Generations, SSFPD began to study and review the overall teaching format and realized why many of the trainees were failing. For example, they revamped the delivery of the FTO program to conform to effective adult learning models to address the 50% failure rate for new recruits. The primary structure of the program was not changed, but interaction with the trainees increased significantly. FTO Corporal Chetcutti<sup>7</sup> recalled when he was a new trainee; reflecting, “There were times I was frustrated during the training. My FTO would tell me how to do something, and then criticize me when I was not able to perform the task. I now realize if he had focused on performance of the task, my FTO training would have been much less stressful and more productive.”

The results of this program have been astounding. Since its implementation, the Department had approximately thirty recruits complete the program; only three have failed. Recruits praise the program as being easy to learn from as it addresses their needs. Corporal Ken Chetcutti<sup>8</sup> states, “The training of new recruits is much easier with the new program.” “I can align my training to the most effective learning style for the particular recruit.” This minimizes the frustration for both the FTO and recruit when the training was not going to well. For those interested in replicating this level of success, a short primer follows on the tenets of Adult Learning and how they may apply to a police FTO setting.

## **ADULT LEARNING-DEVELOPING THE SOLUTION**

Adult learners take in information verbally, visually logically/mathematically, spatially, bodily/kinesthetically and or interpersonally<sup>9</sup>. An adult learner may use one or more ways to take in information. The adult learners should know or be aware of which learning style is best for him or her in order to choose the instructional method accordingly. This became vividly clear in the model adopted by the SSFPD.

Adult students vary in age, life stage and experience. According to Ron and Susan Zemke<sup>10</sup>, adult learners need to be able to integrate new ideas with what they already know if they are going to keep and use the new information. Adults tend to take errors personally and are more likely to let them affect self-esteem. Therefore, they stick to tried and true solutions and take fewer risks. The Zemke's also say the concept needs to be anchored or explained from more than one value set and appeal to more than one developmental life stage.

### **Goals for FTO Program Format Change**

Knowing how adults learn is conquering one battle. The next battle is curriculum design and how to interest adult students. The teacher of adult learners needs to remember that each person brings their experience and life's lessons to the classroom and each person sees the world in a completely different way. There are many ways to learn and many ways to teach. It is about finding the right combination and balance for the group. Litzinger and Osif define learning styles as "the different ways in which children and adults think and learn". Adults develop a "preferred and consistent set of behaviors or approaches to learning", and in order to better understand the learning process, Litzinger and Osif break down the several processes into the following:

1. Cognitive – how one acquires knowledge
2. Conceptualization – how one processes information. There are those who always look for connections among unrelated events. Meanwhile for others, each event triggers a multitude of new ideas.
3. Affective – people’s motivation, decision-making styles, values, and emotional preferences will also help to define their learning styles.

One very effective tool utilized by the SSFPD in their new FTO program was the Kaleidoscope Profile performance test. Designed by Performance Learning Systems, this instrument allows individuals to discover preferences about how people learn, and how individuals’ work as well as individual styles when performing a job and learning new procedures. According to Performance Learning Systems<sup>11</sup>, “learning styles refers to the highly individualized ways we take information. SSFPD found a remarkable difference in how FTO’s and recruits train and learn together after using this test.

Our preferred learning style is the natural channel we use to learn most quickly and effectively. Once a recruit enters the formal in-car training, they already know, based on their meeting with Grantham, what teaching style will assist them and have the potential to be most successful in the Field Training Program. The F.T.O.’s have received the information on the particular recruit they are going to be training and are well versed on what style they will need to focus on in order to have the best chance for success with this particular recruit.

The faster FTO’s identify learning style preferences, the more quickly they can begin to use specific strategies to advance the trainees ability to learn, recall new information and perform better. Students will gain greater self-confidence, achieve

greater self-respect and understand how to learn more effectively. In addition, FTO's can "provide the most effective training methods, improve communication and relationships, build strong teams and recognize preferences and work styles of potential employees.

Once an agency understands how to redesign the FTO curriculum, the next step is to understand the five key components to facilitate learning for adults. According to Joye Norris<sup>12</sup>, the five keys to facilitate learning are:

1. Set the learning environment - get the room ready and have all materials in place before the training session begins.
2. "Activate" prior to learning. Norris states "we all learn by applying new information to what we already know; so to help participants more easily grasp new information, we can activate what we already know about it, either indirectly or in a related way". Field training officers should encourage trainees to absorb and relate their knowledge into past personal experiences.
3. Use a variety of approaches. Facilitators must appeal to a variety of learners such as the visual, auditory, and the kinesthetic preferences of learners. Norris continues with providing examples such as showing a brief video for visual learners or practice strategies to involve a kinesthetic component.
4. Engage learners in dialogue. When trainees talk about what they are learning, they can relate it to their own experiences and grasp a better understanding of the material.
5. The final key is to reinforce the learning. This is very important so trainees do not forget what they have learned. Norris states, "Learners review the material to prepare for the interaction, and then give voice to their understanding and check it

with someone else, thus reinforcing the learning”. As trainees talk about what they are learning, the field-training officer also has the chance to listen to how the material is being conveyed to make sure that the trainee has a clear understanding. Using these keys, along with a structured program of identifying learning styles and designing interventions, has been a significant factor in the success seen since the change to adult learning. Those involved in the program give first-hand testimonial to the effectiveness of the process and its impact on trainees.

### **EXPERT TESTIMONIAL-OUTCOMES**

At SSFPD, the envisioned outcomes were to show the new officers learned and retained information better and clearer. The result was nothing short of astounding. Several recruits interviewed after completing the program all commented they felt very comfortable throughout the FTO program, because the trainers were aware of how they learned best and focused on this style. It is critical program managers remain focused on design, intent and outcomes- what were the steps taken, what was the goal, and how much was it exceeded? The reader gets a frame for their own thinking if they have data.

Bruce Grantham<sup>13</sup> stated, “the Police Department FTO programs have the most potential to be successful” as compared to a classroom setting, where a teacher must deal with each of the learning styles for an entire class. Field Training Officers only need to deal with the style of the particular recruit they are training. In addition, the F.T.O. program is a one-on-one situation where immediate feedback is given to the trainee regarding performance on a particular call.

FTO Corporal Dave Kennan<sup>14</sup> was a Department FTO prior to the implementation of the Adult Learning training and continues to be a FTO. He stated he

is a much more effective trainer now. He saw first-hand the frustration with the trainers because many of the recruits could not perform many of the critical tasks in various phases of the older model FTO curriculum. The frustration has significantly diminished for both the trainer and the recruit resulting in a more flexible learning climate.

Officer Dave Stahler<sup>15</sup> was a recruit in 2002 and is now a Department FTO. They were receptive to his needs and went out of their way to make sure he was receiving the training in the way that would assist him in learning. Now as a department FTO, he strives to train in the most effective manner- adapting to individual learning styles and utilizing facilitation-learning skills with strikingly great results.

Chief Raffaelli<sup>16</sup> expressed his praise by noting, “The initial cost and time commitment to implementing this program was well worth it. The Field Training Officers have a better sense of how to train and the recruits feel that their needs are being met”.

### **CONCLUSION-What The Future Might Hold**

The concept of Adult Learning is not something new - it has been around for quite some time. Jean Piaget<sup>17</sup> recognized the concept of people learning differently as they grow older in the early part of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. He recognized that as children became older, they learn differently. It only makes sense that this “different learning” continues into adulthood. From elementary to college classrooms, individual learning styles have been adopted by many teachers across the nation.

If Police Departments adopt adult learning principles in their FTO programs, the SSFPD experience attests to the belief there will be a significant success rate in what the recruits learn. P.O.S.T. has required that any person teaching in a basic police academy must complete the Learning Focused Instruction Course. Academy training has

transitioned to active learning in the classroom that emphasizes problem-solving and critical thinking skills and conflict resolution competence. It seems only logical that if this instruction is required in the Basic Police Academy, Police Department FTO programs should implement the same requirement. Since the new recruits are seeing this focus in the Police Academy, they will be comfortable with this concept in the Field Training Program.

This is a relatively simple fix to a rather complex problem that will pay great dividends to all involved. Each Police Department will need to assess how their F.T.O. program is working today. Are we getting the most out of our programs and can we do better. Departments need to evaluate if the Adult Learning Style of training can help a program that has high failure rate in their training program. This program has proven to be successful in the South San Francisco Police Department with very little initial expense and with a very high success rate for the recruits.

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