

“Show your hands!”

How important is the wording of our orders?

Imagine a person with their hands in their pockets. An officer makes contact and orders the person to, “Show me your hands.” The person complies and in their hands is a weapon; a knife, a firearm, anything really. This action is taken as a threat and force is utilized. A lawsuit is filed, and now the officer must explain why force was utilized on a subject.

Lawyer: “Why did you use force on my client?” Officer: “The subject produced a weapon.” Lawyer: “You told my client to show you hands and a weapon was in my client's hand.” One can see where this is going. During recent in-service training at the Cedar Rapids Police Department officers participated in three scenarios. These scenarios were designed to surprise the officer(s) and make intervention necessary. In two of the scenarios officers were faced with subjects that had hands concealed. In one the suspect possessed a knife, the other a firearm. A number of officers, likely exceeding 50% used some variation of the order, “Show your hands.” In retrospect we probably should have kept closer tally of just how prevalent it was. This wasn’t linked to age or years of service. The problem spanned from recruit officers all the way up to thirty-year veterans.

Following the training many theories pertaining to why officers choose this phrase were discussed. Although this may be interesting to figure out, I have yet to hear someone who does not agree there are major pitfalls of this language, and its use should be halted. Regardless of the presence of a weapon, when officers tell the suspect to move, and then use force because they moved that is problematic. It doesn’t even have to be a weapon. Research by Thomas Aveni estimate 18 to 33% of police shootings are mistake of fact shootings. This is where a threat of some sort, possibly a weapon, is perceived and later is found to not be the case. When these stories hit the news, it only serves to erode public confidence and trust in the police.

Are there better choices? “STOP,” “FREEZE,” “POLICE DON’T MOVE,” etc. Ordering a person to halt action will serve to prevent any issue with using force on someone because of how they moved. If they halt movement and comply it has the added benefit of slowing the pace allowing more time for information processing and decision making. This also allows for gathering resources increasing the probability of successful de-escalation and improving officer safety. If a person runs and they were told to stop, if a person fights and they were told to freeze, or if a weapon is produced and they were told not to move any intervention would seem that much more reasonable.

In our training we should be striving for these better commands and designing scenarios to reinforce this in officers. Scenarios can and should be paused and replayed so officers get reps on proper verbiage. Simulator training is also a great way to train this. A simulator has the added benefit of being

able to stop and replay a situation multiple times without as much hassle as live scenarios. Video review in roll call training can serve to foster conversations about better phrases in different situations and doesn't take much time. This may be a difficult habit to break but it is low cost to train and worth the effort. A change in language may or may not prevent the need to utilize force. However, improving the wording could affect how a use of force is perceived in the aftermath.

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