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# Survival Mindset: The Difference Between 'Victor' And 'Victim' Is In The Mind

By Richard Kay

The need for proper mindset is essential for officer safety in a profession characterised by dangerous, dynamic, unpredictable and ambiguous encounters.

The modern 'bad guy' is different, possessing characteristics that add to his or her potential lethality. They are more likely to have been exposed to or raised in an intense culture and philosophy of violence and to have had prior frequent exposure to criminal acts. This background has often provided practise, planning and training in criminal survival skills, and engagement in prior violent behaviour may not be unusual. Increased violent action and resistance may be fuelled by drug use, deprivation with either a 'nothing to lose attitude' or an enhancement of (macho) status, coupled with a lack of adequate consequences. Desensitisation and skill enhancement by video games and the media are other factors.

Because a violent confrontation is a realistic possibility in public safety work, officers must prepare mentally in order to win. This is called 'crisis rehearsal'. Since it is difficult to identify with the level of violence that is incurred, officers may under-react in a confrontation, which has the potential to increase the risk of harm.

Officers may under-react in violent confrontations for a number of reasons:

- Failure to be mentally prepared; officers do not expect violence to happen, so they do not have a plan and are unprepared for action

- Failure to understand the dynamics of confrontations (speed, level of violence and so on)
- Failure to be confident and familiar with equipment
- Moral repulsion against using force.

Considering that officers suffer from 'lag time' because they usually react to subject action, officers are often at a disadvantage in a violent confrontation. Officers can save time by accepting that they will be in a confrontation immediately. Officers must think "When I am in a situation..." as opposed to "If I am in a violent confrontation..."

Officers can also reduce the 'lag' factor by formulating a plan before the incident. Evaluate in advance things that can go wrong; visualise the event. Live the experience in the mind's eye; see the picture, then jump into it and live it; hear the sounds, feel the emotions; rehearse the event mentally, seeing oneself winning the encounter.

Through mental preparation, officers can learn tactics and techniques so they become second nature to them during a critical incident. It will help them become more familiar with the look and feel of a critical incident and consequently defuse the stress and shock. Mental rehearsal will create a learned response in the mind so that under pressure, the subconscious will guide the physical actions.

The majority of officers harmed in violent confrontations most likely could have emerged alive if they:

- Understood the dynamics of violent confrontation
- Evaluated properly the risks they were facing
- Planned what to do in the event of a deadly threat
- Knew, and through practise, mastered appropriate survival tactics.

## Developing A Winning Mindset

A winning mindset is a positive thought process that leads to demonstrable increases in physical performance. A person possessed of the winning mindset will act rather than react, thinking positively and affirmatively. This thought process is applicable and useful in all human endeavours. The goal of a winning mindset is to eliminate fear – the basis of defensive, reactive thinking. Without fear, they are free to act immediately and directly. There is no internal debate or indecision. They make things happen when they need to happen.

The difference between offensive and defensive thinking is as simple to understand as action versus reaction, cause versus effect. Defensive thought is concerned with reacting to actions that have already occurred, taking external stimuli and turning inward – concerned with the effect on self (worrying). Offensive

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thought is the cause of effects – creating strategies within the mind and moving them outward into the physical world as action, taking the same external stimuli and making decisions, which are executed as actions to affect the source of the stimuli in the manner most appropriate and advantageous to the situation.

A winning mindset is developed through two processes, psychological and physical modelling, which involve managing fear by using proactive linguistics to change thought patterns and then anchoring those thought patterns through physical action.

Words have emotional weight, dependent on the situation in which we learned those words, and associated ideas. The words we use to describe things affect the way we feel about those things. If a word has a connection to a mental picture whose emotional content is fearful, then we must replace it with a fearless word in order to achieve a winning mindset. The new terminology is then reinforced through the modelling of proactive physical structure. Take an action and convert it from a thought problem to the real, physical world, to anchor the changes in the thought process.

The ‘battle of the mind’ hinges on a trainer’s ability to overcome an officer’s initial resistance to harming another human being so that they can deliver force when it’s required. That type of resistance can constitute a formidable mental roadblock, as there are ever greater numbers of people in public safety who are not inclined to use force. In reviewing violent encounters, one frequently sees ‘fateful submission’ from officers being attacked by human predators. The officer who needs to display a proactive mindset in order to survive is suddenly a civil servant more concerned about what he’s not supposed to do than he is with protecting himself.

If trainers merely produce ‘social workers with a weapon’ who don’t accept that using force may be a critical part of their job, there is a problem. Public safety needs proactive thinkers who can be trained to use negotiation when that skill-set is needed and who understand the distinction between talking at the right time and acting at the right time. The brutal truth is that there exist violent offenders

whose actions need to be controlled with force or they will continue to harm innocent people.

Besides cultivating the commitment to use proper force decisively, trainers need to instil a winning mindset that makes an officer commit to a successful outcome. Motivating officers to win is superior to just training them to survive. There is a difference between surviving and prevailing. Officers need to come out of life-threatening clashes, not just alive, but sufficiently intact physically, emotionally and legally that after the event they have a quality of life worth surviving.

In studying the mindset of survivors of all kinds of situations, from airplane crash survivors to surviving being lost in extreme climates, it appears that they share common characteristics in their battles to survive, overcome and win.

Survivors maintain a strong situational awareness and are sensitive to cues of danger, and their personal radar scans for any relevant information they can use. Survivors stay in the here and now, accepting and working with given conditions rather than wishing that things were different. They set small manageable goals, leading to overall survival and winning. Survivors recognise the reality, gravity and often urgency of their situation and therefore are willing to be creative, innovative and think outside the box; they are willing to consider a variety of possible actions. They are able to resist the stress-related tendency to jump to conclusions or seize upon the first plan that seems as though it might work. Alternatives are always open.

The bedrock of the survival mindset is the expectation that something can be done and that there is something worth the struggle to survive, fight and win. Survivors never give up. A major way in which these characteristics are expressed is in the thinking or self-talk that is part of this mindset. Thoughts are focussed on motivating survival, on the goal of getting home and back to what and who they care about, and on ways to make that happen. They seem to live by the dictum for success – do what you can with what you have, where you are.

## Commitment To Survival

The proper mindset is a critical buffer against one of the most dangerous conditions for officers –

complacency. Whether on or off the job, you cannot have the proper mindset and be complacent; they are mutually exclusive states. Cultivating the proper mindset prevents complacency.

Because it is difficult to stay vigilant constantly, officers can use a reminder everyday before work that prepares them mentally and focusses them on the task at hand. An example might be:

“I am aware that being involved in a violent incident is a realistic possibility in my job. I will continually demonstrate my commitment to avoid becoming a victim of such an incident because I will always:

- Approach all subjects anticipating a confrontation, regardless of the circumstances
- Never underestimate a subject
- Think “cover” and be aware constantly of its presence
- Evaluate the need to approach a subject or subject location
- Watch my subject’s hands
- Handcuff my subject, behind their backs
- Search slowly and thoroughly
- Wear body armour if appropriate
- Value the importance of skill excellence
- Anticipate the worst and be prepared with a plan
- Deploy my tools effectively in justifiable use
- Survive the street and win any violent confrontation!”

Mental preparation for a violent confrontation is the key to winning that encounter. Accept nothing less than victory by practising and rehearsing for such an event with the same dedication that a professional athlete practises for a big game. Without proper preparation, the subject holds all of the cards, leaving the officer relying on luck. ■

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