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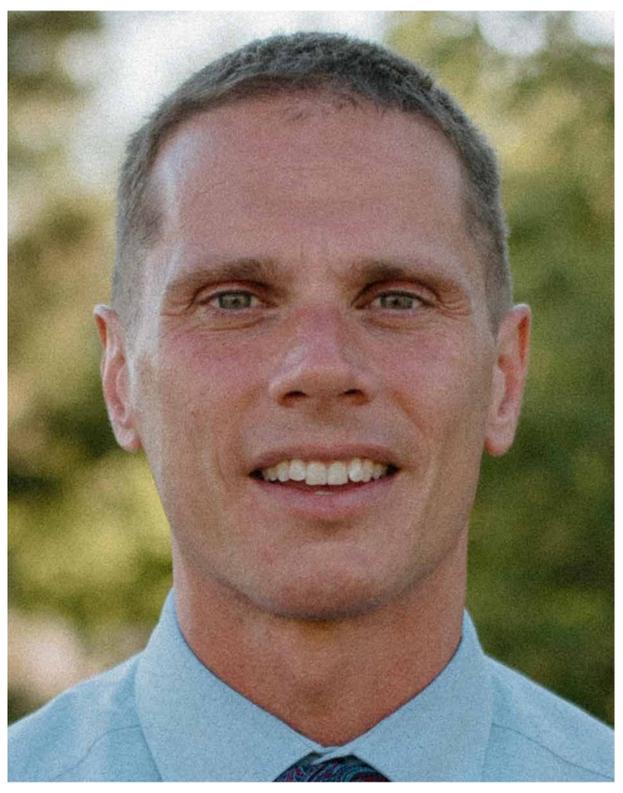
Training shapes outcomes. It influences decisions made under pressure, performance in moments that matter, and the safety of officers and the communities they serve. The Journal provides a platform for trainers and educators to share lessons learned, tested ideas, research, and practical insights that improve how law enforcement training is delivered worldwide.

More than a collection of articles, the ILEETA Journal is a professional conversation. It reflects our shared responsibility to learn continuously, teach intentionally, and **inspire excellence in law enforcement training**.

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Skills & Decision-Making: On Purpose, By Design

by Jeff Johnsgaard

Police training often begins with good intentions but poor sequencing. We teach learners *how* to execute a skill or use a tool before teaching them *when* that skill is even an option. The assumption is that officers must “build the skill first” before making decisions around it.

But that sequencing reverses how people actually perform. Skills transfer into the field only when they are built around the ability to detect critical cues, filter irrelevant information, and choose actions that are legal, moral, and ethical.

Decision-making does not come after skill training.
Decision-making is what develops the skill.

This is the core of *Training on Purpose, By Design*.

Start with Context: “Where the Skill Lives in Real Life”

Skills do not exist in isolation. They arise as a response to something the officer perceives: a behavior, a threat cue, a rapid change in a person or the environment. Officers must first understand two things because they experienced them, not because they had a PowerPoint on them.

1. **What problem the skill solves**
2. **What cues signal the need for that skill in the first place**

Early context matters because it establishes the **why** and **when** behind every skill—and therefore the decision-making around it.

Before drilling a takedown, an officer needs to see and feel the pre-assault cues that precede violence. Before practicing a pistol draw, they need some experience with the distances and behaviors where a firearm is appropriate. Before practicing de-escalation, they must recognize the emotional, physiological, and environmental markers that tell them it is the right tool.

When officers anchor a skill to its context, they learn:

- Where the skill “lives” in a real encounter
- What information matters, and when
- What information does *not* matter, in that moment
- How their understanding of the situation shapes their actions

Context creates the foundation for everything that follows.

Decision-Making Drives Skill Development

Once officers understand context, training must immediately require **choices**, not just correct actions. Increasing variability and complexity is key (a topic for another article). Skills grow stronger when officers must:

- Notice task-relevant information
- Make sense of unfolding events
- Select an appropriate response (legal, moral, ethical)
- Act with timing and purpose

Decision-making creates the motor demands that shape the skill. The brain learns to filter non-essential information and recognize meaningful patterns.

In this framework:

Skills and decision-making grow together.

Representative Design: Pressure Through Relevance

Context alone is not enough. The environment must also reflect the real decision space. Representative design means embedding environmental factors that shape perception and guide decision-making, such as:

- movement
- distance
- timing
- speed of assaults
- uncertainty
- competing tasks
- incomplete information
- emotional pressure

Importantly, representative design does **not** mean chaos or trying to stress the learner. It means structuring drills so the environment naturally produces the cues officers must interpret so they can practice ‘finding the solution’ that is best for them.

The goal:

Offer problems to make officers choose from a set of possible options and not to just execute a predetermined selection.

Examples

1. Firearms Draw

Instead of standing static on a line facing a paper target:

- Present ambiguous threat cues at varying distances. Consider using video and pausing as subjects escalate or de-escalate.
- Officers must decide: verbalization, movement, disengagement, empty-hand control, or firearm access.
- Have them *act* on the decision when possible. Move, draw or change positions rather than simply verbalizing. This has shown greater transfer in sports research.

Once decision-making is established, tightening technique with a few isolated reps becomes meaningful. Or if the option the officers chooses is less optimal you can replay the drill with the more optimal response (how to coach that specific point is the topic of another article).

2. Takedown or Control Technique

Start with pre-assault indicators, natural human movement, and contextual factors. Example, feeling a subject tense up once the decision for hands-on arrest is appropriate.

Officers must choose: create space, manage hands, verbalize, or initiate control.

Only after the context is understood do you refine the mechanics of the takedown.

3. Medical / Tourniquet Application

Begin with an ambiguous scene: potential threat, bystanders, communication demands, environmental hazards.

The decision to treat, move, or secure the environment becomes the first training task.

Once they understand *when* the tool is appropriate, isolated reps can improve speed and efficiency.

Emotional Regulation

Though not the focus of this article, emotional regulation underpins everything above. Officers must learn to detect their own physiological shifts, manage them, and remain functional under pressure. This is done through attentional control, focusing on task-relevant information, and effective breathing strategies.

Contextual pressure is added by trainers for the purpose of strengthening the officer's ability to **re-direct their attention** and **regulate arousal**. These are foundational skills that need to be introduced as early as possible in training and reinforced in every training evolution from that day onward. In my experience, those two abilities form the absolute foundation of high-level performance.

Training That Transfers

A skill performed well in practice does not guarantee transfer to the street. Transfer increases when officers:

- Understand what information matters and when
- Can make pattern matches and accurate predictions
- Have trained with variability and contextual pressure
- Have made decisions, not merely performed techniques

When training is built On Purpose, By Design:

- **Context** sets the stage, the why and when for a skill
- **Decision-making** drives skill learning
- **Representative environments** refine perception
- **Adaptability** increases

Within this framework, I urge you to consider how you can train skills and decision-making to grow at the same time, because one cannot exist without the other in the real world.

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