

The ILEETATM Journal

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"I thought I was coming to learn new skills. Instead, I found a community."

A First-Timer's Love Letter to ILEETA p.6

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The Learning Loop: A Practical Framework for Training That Transfers

Jeff Johnsgaard

In most use-of-force encounters, the outcome is shaped in a few seconds or less. Yet much of our training still treats performance as if officers have time to think through decisions step by step, when they don't.

What they do have is a rapidly unfolding cycle of perception, sense-making, expectation, decision, and action. All happening fast, overlapping, and often outside of conscious awareness.

If we want training to transfer to the street, we need a way to see that process and most importantly coach it.

This article presents the “Learning Loop” and gives you a ‘coaching card’ to immediately help you shift your coaching. The Learning Loop is a framework I use to guide my coaching both real time and prior through training design. Understanding it helps me apply strategies to sharpen officer’s skills and decisions.

Not a Checklist - A Way to See Performance

The Learning Loop is not a step-by-step checklist. It is a way to observe, coach and shape what is already happening fast, overlapping, and often outside the learner’s (and instructors’) awareness.

In real-world encounters I believe:

- Officers are not consciously moving from step to step.
- They are continuously attempting to make sense of what’s happening.
- Trying to predict and anticipate what they believe is about to happen next.
- Trying to get ahead of those future events to negate them if possible or act immediately and decisively if unable to.

Sense-making linked to officer action under time pressure is what I think of as ‘Game IQ’. Not how much an officer knows but how effectively they read a situation and act within it.



Slowing Down What Happens Fast

Because these moments unfold so quickly, they can be difficult to coach in real time.

The Learning Loop allows us to slow the event down after the fact so we can understand:

- What the officer noticed.
- What they believed was happening.
- What they expected to happen next.
- Why they acted the way they did.
- And how they adapted when things changed.

In simple terms:

The Learning Loop helps us slow performance down after the fact so we can sharpen sense-making and decision-making under pressure.

A Simplified, Transfer-Oriented Model

For training purposes, the 8-stage process can be viewed in four connected functions:

1. Perception & Attention
What information was detected and what was prioritized?
2. Sense-Making & Expectation
How was the situation interpreted?

What did the officer believe was most likely to happen next?

3. Decision & Action
What option was selected and how did that action shape the situation?

4. Error Detection & Adaptation
Did the outcome match the expectation?

If not, how was behavior adjusted?

These are not separate steps.

They are continuously interacting, often in fractions of a second.

Why This Matters for Instructors

In my experience most performance breakdowns come from:

- Missed or misinterpreted information.
- Expectations that don't match reality, causing hesitation.
- Delayed or poorly timed decisions.
- Failure to adjust due to failure to recognize when something isn't working.

In other words, errors are not only physical skill execution problems, they are also **perception and sense-making problems**.

If we only coach mechanics, or if we just give more reps of the same training design, we miss the root cause.

The Learning Loop helps us shift from:

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About the Author

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The Learning Loop: A Practical Framework for Training That Transfers

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*“Fixing what they did” →
“Understanding why they did it”*

That’s where real improvement happens.

Coaching Through Questions, Not Answers

If the goal is better performance under pressure, our job is not to give better answers. It’s to ask better questions.

Please use the following post-course handout card to help apply these concepts more meaningfully in your training.

Transfer-First Debrief Card (Instructor Use)

Purpose: Help the learner discover why actions occurred, not just what occurred.

Rules:

- Ask 1–2 questions only.
- Use silence intentionally.
- Do not solve problems the learner has not experienced.
- Praise detection and adaptation, not perfection.

Debrief Flow

Perception

- What information told you it was time to act?
- What did you expect to see that you didn’t?

Attention / Emotion

- Where did your attention go under stress?

- What helped you stay task-focused?

Decision

- What options did you consider?
- What would have changed your decision?

Action

- What did your movement allow you to see next?
- What problem did that action solve?

Adaptation

When did you realize something needed to change?

Transfer

If this looked different next time, what would still apply?

Reminder:

These questions allow us to shape the learners perception, decision-making, and action under pressure.

The Instructor Shift

Using the Learning Loop requires a shift in how we see our role. We are not there to immediately correct or provide all the answers.

We are there to:

- Reveal how the officer is making sense of the environment
- Help them recognize when expectations don’t match reality
- Guide their ability to adapt in real time

That is what transfers.

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Setting the Stage for Better Training

When instructors view performance through this lens, training starts to change:

- Scenarios become less about “getting it right” and more about exposing meaningful problems
- Debriefs become less about critique and more about discovery
- Errors become a necessary part of effective learning

This leads to the next critical question I will address in a coming article:

*If performance is driven by perception,
expectation, and
decision-making under pressure;*

*Where do errors actually come from and how do
we design training to prevent them?*

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