

## **Increasing Situational Awareness: Lessons Learned and Technology**

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Both the military and the police operate in worlds where the next minute may find members at great risk. The uncertainty and diversity of experiences attracts many of the people who work in these worlds. Success in these worlds is needed to preserve the safety of communities and the nation. At a personal level, success in these worlds is necessary for preserving the safety of individuals. Learning lessons from our actions and being able to share them with others who come behind us has always been useful. The method of after action review has been a mainstay for improvement in organizations. However, does after action review still meet the need for our organizations to analyze what we have done and ensure the lessons from the past are communicated to the members of our organization who need to know?

As the world changes under us, many of us are finding the ways we have successfully done things for years are starting to fail. We find ourselves struggling to cope with new problems and old problems with new twists. How can we keep up? How can we build the skills necessary to be effective in the coming world and not be left behind? How can our new members achieve competence fast enough to become contributors rather than casualties? Today demands we be better and tomorrow will expect even more. How will we succeed? Working together and sharing lessons learned seems to be a characteristic that survives time and the changes associated with time. But how are we to work together and share the

problems we face and the solutions we find?

In policing, the management of information is becoming a reality for many departments. Policing is increasingly able to bring the strength of the great quantities of information collected to bear against problems. Our crime report databases contain a wealth of information about the who, what, when, where, why and how of incidents that happened. In the very recent past, many of our crime/incident reports were on paper that went into files, never again to see the light of day. A small number of officers might be tasked or take the initiative to know all about a department's police activities, but the majority of officers knew about some small, fractional portion. The collective knowledge of most departments was unreachable. However, that has changed today. Searchable records management systems available to any or all of a department's members now give to more people a greater chance to see the big picture about problems faced by the police in a community. Some departments have been able to transport this search capability to the street so officers in real time can check police involvement of people, property, and entities. In the high-intensity world of policing, capturing the activity in a way it can be researched later is often a challenge in itself.

Jane Doe hears a noise during the night that wakes her up. Is the problem a rapist coming through her window or a bird that can't tell the difference between an open or closed window? She calls 911 because she is scared. An officer responds and checks the area, the yard, the house, if she wants, and determines that there is no breach of her home and no evidence of anyone trying to enter. She calms down and goes back to sleep. In most police departments across America, the officer leaves and no written

report is generated other than an electronic record (or maybe it's still paper in some places) of the incident in the dispatch center. It may have some notes recorded by the dispatcher provided by the responding officer or, perhaps, the dispatcher overhears the radio traffic and adds a few comments to the incident record. However, the officer does nothing formal other than handle the call and return to service for the next call. Will this piece of the puzzle be saved or lost?

Suppose we add a small change to that scenario. Jane Doe hears a noise during the night that wakes her up. Someone is trying to enter her home. A drunk who thinks he is at his own house doesn't understand why his key won't work in the door. He starts trying to break the door down due to his lack of anger control and intoxication. He succeeds in forcing the door open and is going inside just as officers arrive. The officers take him into custody and likely charge him with trespassing or burglary or whatever law was broken. Now that a crime has occurred, a crime report will likely be generated in most any police department in America. The purpose of the crime report is to memorialize what happened contemporaneously with the event and the response of the police. Officers will collect information about location, time, the victim's name, the arrestee's name, property damaged, all sorts of identification information, etc. This is for the purpose of documenting the facts of the incident because the officers will be going to court later, and the reports are often used to make prosecution decisions, refresh officers' memories, provide insurance companies with people to sue for damages, and to provide an internal record of what was done that can be reviewed by supervisors to be certain the police work was properly done. This puzzle piece will

likely be saved but can it be found later in another situation when it might benefit another officer with a similar problem?

In the police department I joined many years ago, both of the above scenarios would have been lost to all but the responding officers. Paper records were a storage problem, not the collective knowledge of the police department. However, in the police department we have become today, the records from these scenarios are easily located by computerized records management and dispatch systems for review. As technology matures, even the lessons from the most insignificant incident can be found and communicated to the most junior officer of the department.

What sort of technology does this? It is technology that provides the information to the point of need. Officers responding to emergency calls don't have time to stop on the way and research a location, person, or problem. Technology exists today that can do that for the officer by sweeping department and public databases for locations, people associated with a location and problems at a location and then making comparisons to warrant files, alert files, NCIC, etc. The "hits" from those searches create raw information for the officer that can be reviewed for interpretation after a few screen touches. This information can be available to any authorized officer with access to the records management system. But to accommodate the emergency nature of policing, where the time to plan often is minutes and a plan is formulated on the emergency drive to the call, the information needs to be available at any time and anywhere officers happen to find themselves.

Situational awareness is a significant advantage for an officer in the field. Increased situational awareness enhances officer safety. Capabilities exist today for computerized records

management systems to add great value to the information collected by a police department. When these systems can provide lessons learned to the officers on the street in real time no matter where they are, their value is great. This is the future we have been talking about for years, and it's here today for some police departments.