

## **Bang, Bang-You're Dead—A Case for Using Simulation in 9-1-1 Training**

*By Sue Pivetta*

He looked like one of those Police Chiefs who came up from the ranks, probably early 50s with an air of authority. We were discussing the challenges with firing and retention in his Communications division. "We don't use simulation in our training program; our dispatchers learn by observation," he said in a way that was intended to end our discussion on training.

I paused a moment—for effect, "Hmmm. When your officers go to the firing range to practice are they only allowed to stand behind an experienced officer?"

I cringe thinking that the first time a 22-year-old police cadet graduate drove a patrol car, fired a weapon, or wrestled with a drunk it was the first time they had "experienced" this event! Of course it isn't. Every academy training course has driving school, the firing range, and take down techniques practiced. And the same with EMT training where rubber babies are mercilessly gouged with endless needles. Fire departments set old houses on fire so their recruits can stumble around blindly in their new gear with other firefighters holding their tail.

So what about the other member of the Public Safety Team, the telecommunicator? How do they practice until they get it right? With unbelievable variety of call types with an infinite number of situations, sometimes all at once. Where immediate decisions on where, who, what, why, and when are made under pressure to be correct. Telecommunicators work with complex technology and have a broad range of skills and knowledge. Surely they must have time scheduled in their training where they get to "practice" or simulate so they can see how it feels. Right? Wrong!

In simulation training, we re-create events that require learners to show us actual skills, knowledge and training. A great majority of Emergency Communications training programs do not use re-creation training. Are we missing the target by not having console simulators in every agency or college training program? Yes, without this method of learning we're overlooking many essential components of adult learning. The part where judgment and common sense come from experience.

### **Judgement**

judg\*ment n. Also judge\*ment

1.a. The formation of an opinion after consideration or deliberation. b. mental ability to perceive and distinguish relationships; 2.a. The capacity to form an opinion by distinguishing and evaluating. b. The capacity to assess situations or circumstances and draw sound conclusions; good sense.

### **Common sense**

"Common sense is the measure of the possible; it is composed of experience and prevision; it is calculation applied to life."

-Henri-Frederic Amiel

The best way to develop good judgment and common sense is practice—immediately followed by feedback evaluation. I have heard 'learning' defined as a change of behavior brought about by acquiring

new information, insight experience. Experience (even simulated experience) creates a foundation for accurate insight, sound deliberation and quick consideration. Specially simulated experience becomes even more valuable because the situation can be evaluated and repeated until clarified.

Emergency Communication's traditional method of console training has not included putting the trainee into an intense, trainer-directed experiential situation. The experience they gain in observation training is over time, and events random and therefore experience haphazard. When learners observe, they practice recognizing not encountering, we learn to react from previous encounters. After observing, when the trainee is finally allowed to actually take a live call, there is a narrow time frame to evaluate his or her work for inaccuracy or oversights in the aftermath. In directed simulation training each call is afforded time to recall, evaluate, correct, advise and repeat. This process produces higher level learning prior to taking actual calls. A faster learning curve! Increase skills, decrease training time.

### **Learning in a Safe Environment**

Adult learning theory suggests that people learn better when they are in a safe environment. Safe means they are free to make necessary errors and receive timely evaluation, correction and guidance. In an intense "live" environment, the learner may feel pressured to perform perfectly, instead of learn through trial and error. The trainee then begins to act like a dispatcher, instead of think like a dispatcher. The learner goes through the motions at times not understanding the relevance. Simulation is a relief from this.

Adult learning theory also suggests having more than one way to approach learning. Understanding connections and grasping concepts are internal processes that a person gains through many varied sources, not one. We believe console training is the most potent learning—but it should be a refinement, fine tuning of a pre-programmed trainee who through simulation training has a basic understanding of what is being done and why.

Over the ten years I taught in the college setting we used simulation in a lab every day. Although instinctively Trainers, Supervisors and Directors know adding simulation to their program would be an advancement, they typically have questions. My experience may benefit by answering some of these commonly asked questions.

#### **1. Can the simulation exercises be realistic enough?**

Yes, the caller can be another student, an actor or the trainer and can assume the same demeanor, with the same information as the callers the student will face on real 9-1-1 lines. Daily exercises can be as uncomplicated or convoluted as the trainer determines. Fast learners can accelerate, slower ones can learn step by step. You can increase realism by adding sound effects or pre-recorded 9-1-1 hang-ups.

#### **2. How are simulated calls evaluated?**

Here is how it worked in the college. The instructor modeled the calls required. Then certain call types were completed by the student. Next the teacher and the student, or the entire class, assessed the calls informally, showing the student what the work looks like. A grading sheet that contained step by step tasks for each call type was used. As the call is listened to, each task was checked off. Tone, voice, speed, accuracy and control were discussed and evaluated. The call was given a percentage based on the boxes checked and the value given each task.

#### **3. Is a simulation lab a good thing to have in an agency training program?**

It's a must-have! Console simulators teach critical thinking, good judgment, common sense and quick reactions to immediate events. There is no better way to gain a high level of skill and thought process

prior to doing the work than using a simulator. This call taking and dispatch mock console allows student and trainer to practice, evaluate, educate—then practice, evaluate, educate again, and again. Or industry must move to current training practices.

#### **4. Where can I find a simulator?**

When we began our college program our goal was to have ten workstations of a phone, radio and computer. We stumbled around storage rooms to find old consoles then charmed, hired or begged technicians to set them up. For the most part they worked, until we had to find replacement parts or a person or budget to repair them. The functionality was close in my lab but never exact. I never had ALI or integrated phones and radio but I was willing to use two tin cans and string if I had to. There are dispatch simulations for purchase on the market. These units are advertised in emergency communications publications at a variety of price and functionality ranges.

#### **5. How could simulation training protect us?**

I have worked as an expert witness in court cases where dispatcher error has led to injury or death. Lawyers routinely begin their investigation by requesting a tape, training records, and evaluations for the employee. Their goal is to see if this error was from any lack of training, supervision, retraining, failure to evaluate on the part of the Com Center. With simulation you could provide not only evidence that the employee was trained but took similar calls with feedback and correction. This is assuming that your simulation training program is organized and provides a complete range of simulated call situations and recordings of the sessions.

#### **6. What are the components of a workable simulator console?**

Equipment that allows the trainee to re-create the work as closely as possible. And it is very important to have the ability to record the phones and radio for evaluation and a "tape trail" of student progress. The difficult part of learning this work is not pushing buttons, flipping switches—it's thinking, making judgment, multi-tasking, interacting with humans—so what the simulator looks like is not important unless you're intent on having an impressive looking lab.

#### **Conclusion**

Often it feels as though Emergency Communications is playing catch-up with the rest of the world. It's not that our training programs haven't produced exceptional Telecommunicators, of course they have. We have wished to be able to provide training as we thought it should be done; with the luxury of time to produce a complete program, with practice and evaluation. This was an investment many decision-makers were unable or unwilling to make. More and more communications agencies, new college programs and academies are recognizing the need to allot a realistic budget to training. Simulation consoles or training labs return much more than the initial investment. And isn't it about admitting that when you begin to add up all the benefits, it just makes good sense?

*Sue Pivetta is president of professional Pride Training Company, Inc. Professional Pride designed and manufactured a complete portable tabletop console simulator called 911 StarZ – Simulation Training and Response Zone. 911 StarZ is available through NENA, 1-800-332-3911. Sue is also the founder of "911 People Inc.," a consulting group focusing on the human side of 9-1-1; training and hiring program analysis, dispute mediation, leadership coaching, and teambuilding. For information on training books, videos or other training products or services call Professional Pride Training Company at 1.800.830.8228, e mail [propride@aol.com](mailto:propride@aol.com).*