

9 Strategies on Implementing Gracie Survival Tactics (GST) at Your Agency

By Charles Fernandez

How many law enforcement officers have gone through a Gracie Survival Tactics (GST) course, been amazed at the effectiveness of the system, couldn't wait to get back to their agency to share their newfound enthusiasm with their brothers/sisters in arms, only to have their testimonial ignored? The decision makers rebuff their efforts to adopt the GST system by claiming, "We already have a system" or "we can't use that kind of stuff" or, "that stuff isn't good for law enforcement".

Over the years, many officers have approached me complaining about ineffective or unrealistic defensive tactics systems and the lack of willingness to address the deficiencies. These officers relied on the department's experts to train them to effectively control people and defend themselves in the field. Then, they became disillusioned when the techniques failed them. In the end, they became dissatisfied or openly critical of the training. Most important, they still lacked the skills they needed to survive a violent encounter with a suspect. The few who sought more additional training, usually at their own expense, often found the techniques were no more effective or were inapplicable due to limitations on legal use of force. The officers reported:

"...I remembered hitting the suspect just like I was trained and he didn't even flinch....I didn't know what else to do...."

"...I was able to apply handcuffs in two seconds during training.it didn't work on the street I felt totally exposed....."

".....even with two of us there we couldn't control him....he was a big guy....it took a polyester pile to finish it...."

So, how can we be part of the solution - ensuring your agency employs a system that balances the tactical effectiveness required for the officer to prevail in a confrontation, while at the same time using proportional force in achieving lawful objectives? Wouldn't it be great if you had a "volume control" by which to adjust the level of force used? What if the system didn't depend on strength and worked with smaller statured officers? The solution is using proven methods that actually subdue resisting suspects with the least amount of force.

THE PROBLEM

INABILITY TO EVALUATE THE SYSTEM. Some "systems" are in place because a self-appointed defensive tactics expert established the program in the distant past and the agency leaders simply had no ability or inclination to assess its effectiveness. Too often, a system "briefs well," but fails in application. Let's face it; there are many systems out there that have charismatic instructors, even if the techniques are ineffective. I have seen many officers "drink the kool-aid" of a particular program because they were mesmerized by the instructor's personality.

WRONG APPROACH. Many defensive tactics systems advocate what I call the “Harder! Faster! Stronger!” approach relying on physical attributes such as speed, strength and explosiveness. The problem is that not all officers will ever have these attributes. There is an old saying, “you can’t teach an elephant to be a gazelle and you can’t teach a race horse to be an ox.” No matter how hard you try, you will not be able to teach a 100 pound officer to be bigger and stronger in order to successfully and consistently overpower an athletic 250-pound determined attacker. This “Harder! Faster! Stronger!” approach may also increase the likelihood of excessive force allegations.

FEAR OF CHANGE. I realize that no two law enforcement agencies are alike, but here are some common organizational obstacles we face when attempting to reform defensive tactics programs.

Changing a DT program involves taking some risk. Whenever an agency head changes methods, they expose themselves to criticism as they now “own” any new problems that arise as a result of their decision. DT training must balance tactical effectiveness with proportional force. The law enforcement profession is inherently conservative. For many, it is safer and easier to stay with the herd than be eaten by the litigious wolves.

In most cases, one person oversees the defensive tactics (DT) in any agency. They are usually in that position because the chief views them as a subject matter expert. Most chiefs are too busy with other duties to spend any time analyzing their DT program, so the appointed DT expert usually has a powerful vote on any changes to an existing system and often views any attempts to reform the system as a personal attack on their expertise and credibility.

Finally realize that, especially in larger departments, you are probably not the first to approach your DT Coordinator with news about the effectiveness of a new program or new technique(s). You must first understand how the above factors affect your DT coordinator in order to tailor a strategy to address them. Now that we understand the problem, we must get to work solving it.

THE SOLUTION

After many years of frustration and failure, I finally was able to implement an effective, efficient, legally defensible, and flexible defensive tactics system that worked for all officers. The following nine actions were the keys to success.

1. Always realize the importance of your mission: Bringing effective techniques to the officers at your agency. Keep this front and center to maintain your motivation when you face the challenges and setbacks that you will surely encounter.
2. Get the most out of your training : In order to sell, organize, teach, and defend the system from criticism, you must first be very familiar with the system. For example: You might hear someone say "*The Gracies always want to go to the Guard, and we all know that's bad for Law Enforcement.*" If you understand the system, you can enlighten them by telling them that the Gracies also prefer to stay on top in a fight and that they only train from the bottom in the event they are forced there by a bigger, stronger opponent. I strongly encourage taking copious notes at your next GST seminar. Even if you don't think that you need to take notes, you can always learn something new, even if it is

just a better way to explain an aspect of the system or the training. Your audience will sense your confidence and enthusiasm in the system.

3. Create your own GAPP list: The Gracie Academy understands that an agency may not have the resources to train the entire GST system. So they compiled a smaller list called “GAPP (Gracie Academy Premium Picks) techniques” and a compressed four-hour lesson plan for use when that you have limited time and resources. Because you may not be allowed to teach the entire system, you should compile your own premium picks. If you could only teach a few techniques, what would they be? This list should be based on your agency's unique needs. If those needs are successfully met, it is likely that your agency will adopt more of the system.
4. Know your own policies: I have consulted with several officers about adopting the program at their agency and I have always been surprised to learn they do not know their own policies in regards to this subject. Is it written in policy that they can only do a particular system? Are any types of techniques forbidden? What is their Use of Force Continuum or Response Options Wheel or Response to Resistance Matrix? It is vital to know this because you should not concentrate your efforts on something that is explicitly forbidden in policy, (changing policy is a longer range and more difficult goal). Remember, to win in any arena you must first know the rules of the game.
5. Become familiar with Use of Force case law: When people say that you can't use GST, you should refute them by citing Federal and State/local Case law, in addition to (as already addressed above) department policy. Study Supreme Court case law as it universally applies to the entire nation. The Circuit Court of Appeals and the Federal District Court in your area are also important, as are relevant state and local court rulings. At a minimum, you should be familiar with the primary Supreme Court ruling regarding police use of force; *Graham v. Connor*, 490 U.S. 386 (1989) which lays out the guidelines for application of force by introducing the Objective Reasonableness Standard. Additionally, knowledge of case law will also help you design your training. You can train the officer to use a particular technique with the appropriate stimulus or level of resistance that is consistent with case law. It will also help you if you instruct officers, because questions will inevitably come up regarding the parameters of application, as well as, how they should document it. Finally, knowledge of case law will increase your credibility with your DT coordinator/Chief by showing them that you are also addressing the legal/liability side of this issue.
6. Learn how to write a lesson plan and properly document your training: Every state has a licensing department or commission. In California they have POST (Peace Officer Standards and Training) and in Texas we have TCLEOSE (Texas Commission on Law Enforcement Officer Standards and Education). Contact your state's training standards office and learn how to properly document your training. Being a certified instructor and having a properly written lesson plan will add to your credibility. Credibility is everything.
7. Co-op the DT Coordinator - don't threaten him: The DT Coordinator is accustomed to others trying to undermine him or to take his position. Consequently, it is natural for the DT Coordinator to

become somewhat guarded when approached with new ideas. The best way to make an ally of the DT Coordinator is to have him attend a GST seminar with you. 'A prophet is not respected in his own land' holds true here. Whereas he/she may not listen to you, another expert (such as a Gracie Academy instructor) can say the same thing and will be listened to without the same level of resistance. Remember, patience and tact is paramount!

8. Move Incrementally: Chiefs and DT coordinators are generally averse to large scale change. In the police culture, it's considered unprofessional to press an issue once the chief has made a decision. A more viable approach than attempting to make a major change in the DT program is to make changes in incremental steps. For example, introduce the most essential technique – one that is least likely to be rejected – like defending from being mounted with the attacker choking the officer. If the technique is framed / introduced properly, it very hard to refute its proportionality and effectiveness. In other words, make sure you place every technique in the proper context. Once the agency is comfortable with those initial techniques, you can gradually add more techniques until the complete system is in place.
9. Always know your target audience: Who you are talking to usually falls into two groups: The rank-and-file officers and the administrators. The rank-and-file group is primarily concerned with tactical effectiveness, what works and what does not. When speaking with someone from this group you should emphasize how the GST system has a long documented history of being effective against resisting opponents. The second group, administrators, must answer to City Hall, the media and the public for the actions of any of the officers within their purview. With administrators, you can emphasize how humane the system is and that it's very "camera-friendly". I usually start by stating that an officer can be 100% justified in their use of force, but if it "looks bad" to the uneducated observer, the department and officer will have a tough road ahead regardless of how righteous they may have been. Administrators identify quickly with this phenomenon because they want to avoid the nightmare scenario of an excessive force law suit on the evening news.

These nine strategies will help any law enforcement officer in bringing about positive changes in their agency. While each agency will be different, these basic strategies are adaptable and can be applied at any agency. Expect it to be a long hard road. But, in the end, the officers in your agency deserve nothing less!

Charles Fernandez holds a Bachelor Degree from the University of Texas system. Charles has been a municipal police officer in a large metropolitan agency in Texas since 1992 and has served as a Defensive Tactics Instructor, Firearms Instructor, Tactics Instructor and In-service Training Coordinator since 2002. He has been practitioner of martial arts since age 8. He has played a key role bringing Gracie Survival Tactics to his own agency and assisted many others incorporate GST at their agency.