



# Who is Training Whom?

by Ken J. Good



Sometimes it is good to step back from the grind of the day-to-day routine and ask yourself a few questions (You know the Ol' forest and trees thing..)

- What is wrong with this picture?
- What can I do to improve the overall situation here?
- What biases have I internalized?
- What lies have I inadvertently accepted as the truth?

I have been in sort of an ongoing debate with some in the tactical training community regarding the concept of "High-level" Training verses "Lowest Common Denominator Training".

High-level being defined as challenging, difficult, slightly beyond the trainees capability, type of training where everybody does not necessarily "get it" right away; in some cases, never. Training that could be considered steak instead of the disgusting, blended carrots you spoon feed to a toddler.

Lowest Common Denominator Training (LCDT) being defined as the training that has one overarching directive; establish the training difficulty level for the "average" person (and in many cases the level is actually set at the lowest possible level) so that everybody is accounted for and somehow feels better. With LCDT, everybody can easily understand and achieve because quite simply it has no depth. Since everybody "gets it"; an underlying assumption of effectiveness is maintained. A false sense of security that the mission can be accomplished is held by the individual or group.

LCDT is generally presented and vehemently argued for when a system requires more training than folks are willing to invest to use a better approach. It is a fact of life in professional circles. In my view, this differentiation separates the ones who are merely collecting a pay check and the ones who understand that to be proficient in the wide scope of tasking takes serious commitment and training. It is a lifestyle, not a part time endeavor.

**"Failing to prepare is preparing for failure."**

- John Wooden

**"Everyone wants to win, but not everyone is willing to prepare to win."**

- Bob Knight

This debate if you will has been bounced off my fellow trainers at Strategos International (tactical training company). Many of the ideas presented here are the results of my frequent conversations with them and more specifically with Mark Warren who has years of practical street police experience in a patrol and SWAT capacity. He has military service under his belt as well. Mark is the training director for Strategos International. He and I share a true passion to see those that go in harms way receive the best training we can possibly deliver. We are constantly scrutinizing what we are presenting to our audience. It is a never-ending journey.

Let's step away from the professional at arms for a moment and look to professionals in another challenging arena. With the proliferation of Ultimate Fighting (UFC) Championships and Pride type tournaments, we have seen incredible athletes doing amazing things under the duress of combat in that particular arena.



Does anybody think for a minute that the fighters are trained with any sort of LCDT type of mentality anywhere in any credible training camp? I think not. Each dedicated athlete is preparing himself of the fight of his life. Each camp is searching for every possible advantage and nuance of understanding. An amazing amount of mental and physical effort is applied so that victory can be reasonably hoped for when the challenge is presented. The validity of their training regime is verified or the folly of their beliefs is exposed in the culmination of that training, with the actual fight itself.

**"In the heat of battle you don't remember very much, you don't think very fast. You act by instinct, which is really training. So you've got to be trained for battle so you react exactly the way you did in training."**

- Admiral Arleigh Burke, USN

Admiral Burke in this case is equating "instinct" to training.

The actual stakes in the UFC are not the high in comparison to those serving as a professional warrior or police officer.

In the "Octagon", you generally walk away if you make a mistake, maybe battered and bruised, but the limits of damage are for the most part pre-established. On the battlefield or a street confrontation, you simply do not operate in this realm. The relatively large margin for error is not there. As a professional at arms you are by the very nature of the occupation obligated to answer the call to save a partner, teammate, or an innocent party. That call may be answered with your own life. In my mind you have a moral imperative to step up. Not only to step up at the critical moment, but to step up prior to the event. Step up with the daily dedication and sacrifice that defines a true warrior.



**"You won't rise to the occasion - you'll default to your level of training."**

- Barrett Tillman, "The Sixth Battle"

Do you want your doctor dealing with your family based on a LCDT mentality or do you want that doctor to have his foundational understanding and ongoing approach to professional education based on a more difficult regime?

Whether you are SWAT, Patrol, SEAL, Ranger, Recon or Grunt, it is all about situational awareness, maneuver warfare, and the ability to function to task under duress. When bullets are flying the dynamic is the same in many regards.

If you have bought into the lie that LCDT is good enough, you may or may not have the skills to prevail in a confrontation. If you are a trainer, you are doing your trainees a great disservice. You have failed before you started. In this case good enough is never good enough.

It has been shown over and over in various studies of the human condition that when the bar is set high, people tend to find ways to make it over the bar even if not consciously thinking about it. When the bar is set low, the end result grows progressively worse...Additionally, you still have the same percentage of people "failing" and the same number of people complaining about how hard the standard is.

**"Complainers change their complaints, but they never reduce the amount of time spent in complaining".**

- Mason Cooley



I clearly saw the high/low bar standard dynamic when I attend Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training (BUD/S) years ago. People did amazing things when pushed to do so. For the most part, everybody in the training class had 1 body with 2 arms, 2 legs, and one brain bucket.

The training actually had a fairly shallow drive upward, but it was constant. If you stayed with it mentally, were lucky enough to not get injured, the body would follow and you would graduate in peak physical condition, ready for more. From my perspective it was not physical, but primarily set of mental choices.

One particular training session is still embedded in my mind. It was called "pool competency". You put on the old SCUBA tanks with the old "Mike Nelson" hoses and dropped into the deep end with a partner. Instructors then proceeded to make you quite miserable by depriving you of oxygen in a rapid sequence of manipulations of your body and equipment. You were supposed to work out these problems with your partner.

You were told, "If you surface for air, prior to getting the thumbs up from the instructor, you were out of training...Kicked out...Gone". This was not an option for me. However, when I dropped below the surface, the games began on cue, but my dive buddy almost immediately began to panic. After a short period of time, oxygen was getting quite scarce. Although I had spent years in and around the water, I was rapidly approaching the panic stage myself. Lack of oxygen can do that to you. The punches to the abdomen from the instructors didn't really help that much either... When I needed my swim buddy to calm down and buddy-breathe he would not have any of it...His regulator was his and my regulator was his. I remember my world shrinking and shrinking knowing I was soon to be unconscious. But my mind settled and I remember clearly thinking, "They will revive me, I am not going up..." About that time a regulator was suddenly shoved into my mouth. I saw the thumbs up from one of the instructors...I didn't go up...I thought I had failed as I was now breathing off an instructors' rig.....He then emphatically motioned me to come up. I reluctantly rose to the surface thinking..."What am I going to tell my friends...I failed...I failed.."

Much to my surprise the instructor told me, "Great job, swim over there"...He was pointing to the success side of the pool. The other side had a few guys that had failed (maybe 4 or 5 trainees). A body of water separated the winners from the losers. Everybody standing on both sides of the pool was silent.

A few years later, I was back at BUD/s as an instructor for a few months as part of an active-duty commitment as a reservist. For some reason the standard for this particular evolution was changed from, if you fail your out of BUD/S, to you fail and you will be rolled back to the next convening class. Same bodies, same mental framework in terms of the types of people trying to become SEAL's, same basic conditions, with one notable exception. The consequences of failure were not as severe as the previous time I was exposed to this exercise. I remember seeing at least 15-20 people quickly give up and casually swim to the failed side of the pool. Students that failed were not the least bit concerned and talked among themselves.

I saw recently on Discovery Channel that this particular training session is now highly evolved and organized quite differently. There is great deal of emphasis placed on individual skill. Actual competency is critically judged and evaluated in what I consider a well-thought out process.

I ended up securing a civil service job with the Department of the Navy at a Naval Fleet Command managing quite a few small arms and physical security programs. Ultimately I inherited them from the previous manager who was an out of the box, take no prisoners kind of guy. His name was Robert Dawson, a former SWAT officer, helicopter pilot, shooter, hunter extraordinaire. Two of the programs were quite progressive and specifically dealt with teaching regular Fleet Sailors how to operate as small teams to thwart a wide variety of potential terrorist attacks. Initially in my mind, this was just a paying job. Shooting a few guns, kill a little time, collect a decent paycheck until something better came along. I mean after all, if you need a gun fighter, you don't look within the ranks of the Fleet Navy! Right? I am a SEAL, these were lowly Fleet Sailors and that was that. I would teach them enough to stop them from shooting themselves in the foot, and that would be sufficient.

Over time, my basic assumption and prejudices were challenged. I started noticing something very strange. As my attitude changed, as my commitment level to the students changed, the students were getting better. We were making the courses more and more difficult, yet the students were tracking right with the changes; interesting. The Trident I was mentally wearing on my chest was blinding me.

The implementation of these programs brought quite of bit of incoming fire from outside entities within the Navy itself.

I am referring to the core training institutions that constitute the training community. These new programs were considered "too unconventional", "too difficult to support", "personality driven", "not within the normal curriculum development and maintenance standards", "potentially unsafe", "unrealistic in their expectations" etc. etc. They sent various senior enlisted folks and various officers and program managers to our newly emerging world to rein us in so to speak. To a person, they were sent packing.

It all translated down to, these programs were outside the box and they didn't fit into a nice, neat package that was originally designed to hold technical information and support the never ending list of qualification check boxes as opposed to really teaching people to fight and defend their ships in this realm.

Being the compliant individual that I am, we drove on. I learned to fight fire with fire. On the administrative front I generated uncompromising point papers, scheduled meetings with key decision-makers to let them see and experience what we were doing and why. I made people in the chain-of-command acutely aware of the consequences of not supporting these programs. In the meantime I ensured folks within our program targeted key awards and qualifications so that our unit was saturated with accolades. I made enemies, but I made key allies as well. It was a whole bunch of effort, but it paid off. Instead of struggling with us, folks around us began to duplicate our style and approach.



Over time, our East Coast counter parts decided to replicate the programs there. Although our firearms programs were actually quite difficult in terms of the final tests, we had a large percentage of supposedly non-tactical, non-firearms oriented Fleet Sailors buzzing through them with a high degree of success. They actually knew what they were doing in the midst of some challenging stress courses of fire. They were required to run, reload, clear pre-staged weapons with malfunctions induced, fire standing, kneeling, prone, left and right-handed, single and two-handed, in and around no-shoot targets, use barricades properly with multiple weapons all in the same final battle problem. This course of fire had to be completed in X amount of time with Y amount of accuracy with 100% compliance to safe weapons handling practices.

What was interesting was the fact that the East Coast cadre initially elected not to engage our staff in terms of implementing the program. They simply took the existing curriculums in the written form, read them, asked a few questions and started their program. A few months later, some follow-up phone calls started trickling in.

- What ratio of pass/fail with the students are you experiencing? (They were at 85% failure rate)
- Why are your standards so difficult? We think they are unreasonable, can you lower them?
- Why are you doing this and that?
- How come you are doing so many force-on-force exercises with so many imbedded problems?

It turned out that they were getting a high percentage of student failures in the weapons week of training, as in over 85% student failures. As the course curriculum model manager we were now getting pressure from several sources to significantly lower the weapons standards and reduce the practical time drilling the students in FOF. The usual litany of reasons was cited. Again, being the submissive individual that I am, I refused to do so.

I eventually flew out to the training locations and immediately discovered what the issue was. It was not the students, it was the trainers. The trainers were under the misguided impression that it was not appropriate to shoot in front of the students. Why? If you missed, failed, or made a mistake, it would reflect negatively in their minds. So let me get this straight. You are going to teach somebody how to fight, but you are not going to use the tools you need to fight in front of your students, because essentially you are scared to do so.

Do not be afraid to be human in front of your students. Being a human being means making mistakes. Don't put yourself on a pedestal, instead roll up your sleeves and get dirty with the students. Don't just tell them from Mount Olympus on high. Travel down to Earth, tell them, show them, and literally inspire them with your performance. You are looking to draw out the hidden capabilities within your students. Attempt to make them better than you. This means you actually have to know what you speak of and you actually have to have capability to do it on demand. If you can't, you better train yourself if you are expecting to get results from others.

The accompanying program to this weapons program was essentially one of the earliest Force-on-Force (Reality-Based-Training) programs developed in the United States. We had our own ship to use as a training platform. Countless myths of what happens when projectiles are flying were shattered on this platform over a 10-year period (that is another story).



When I started with the program, 36 students were firing maybe 100 rounds total in anger over the course of the week long training in highly structured, basically lame scenarios. There was a strong minimalist approach with those that originally structured and managed the program. With the driving force of another former Navy SEAL, Dave Maynard; we ended up reshaping the practical exercises and drills to the point that it was not unusual for us to fire 10 thousand plus rounds with the same number of students in the same time frame. What it meant is that our students were in the midst of a highly intensive, highly challenging, often chaotic practical drilling environment.

At the end of the training, they were far more mission-capable. They were relatively calm as rounds whizzed all about them. They had faced a highly skilled opposition force that gave them no quarter whatsoever. On several occasions these same students had the opportunity to re-face in an oppositional exercise a specialized military unit or Law Enforcement SWAT team that were at the platform for training. The sailors more than held their own. In some cases the contrast was dramatic. No flinching, ducking, indecision, or hiding out of the sailors. They suppressed the incoming fire, communicated, moved to engage and finished the job much to the dismay of their opponents. The difficulty of dealing with the experienced, unrelenting instructor cadre had prepared them for the new oppositional force.

There is a fancy psychological principle called the "Rosenthal Effect" (learned that from our resident staff expert, Dr. Anthony Semone...Thanx Doc!) that basically captures the concept that if you set the standard low...All members of that group gravitate to that standard. If you set the standard high, all members of that group gravitate to that standard. It is a deeply ingrained human trait that we are not necessarily consciously aware of.

Quoting from the August edition of FORCE SCIENCE NEWS: Transmission #50

*In his report, Ross asks: "How do the experts in various subjects acquire their extraordinary skills? How much can be credited to innate talent and how much to intensive training?" And then he provides answers that carry important implications for every officer and LE instructor, Lewinski says.*

*"The one thing that all expertise theorists agree on is that it takes enormous effort to build" the expert mind, either in the realm of chess or in another discipline, Ross states. In the process, "motivation appears to be a more important factor than innate ability.... The preponderance of psychological evidence indicates" that professionals with outstanding skills, in short, "are made, not born."*

*Research indicates that the key "is not experience per se but 'effortful study,'" according to Ross. Such study involves learning and practice that entail "continually tackling challenges that lie just beyond one's competence." In other words, Lewinski explains, as you gain in ability, "the bar is constantly moved higher so that your skill level must keep stretching and improving to reach it."*

The brief goes to say later:

*"Instead of departmental policies and priorities that encourage mediocrity, we need a training philosophy that encourages, nurtures and guides the development of expertise. It's what the community expects and deserves."*

*If you have the burning drive of a 5%er, determined to maximize your Skills regardless of obstacles, understand that "in the early stages, effortful study is very difficult," Lewinski says. "Pushing your limits inevitably involves a lot of failure. When you fail, you need to back off a bit, learn to correct your weaknesses, and build your way back up.*

*"To get really, really good takes time. Be patient with yourself, because you need that time for your training and experience to evolve into mastery."*

This phenomenon manifests itself over and over all over the world in a wide diversity of human activities such as dance, music, academics, sports, etc. You swim with fast people, probabilities are your will be faster than the average bear.

You compete against fast racers; you are going to get faster. You sub-consciously find ways to become more efficient. You find ways to break your self-imposed limitations and expectations.

You want to learn to shoot fast and accurate....Where do you go? Who do you seek out? What are you going to adopt after interacting with these shooters?

You want to win in the UFC? I suggest you don't start with the local Karate club that hands out belts like candy. Why? Because the trainers and overall situation could not support what you are trying to achieve.

Well it recently hit me: Trainers being trained by their "students" to drive standards down.

Rather than trainers demanding, forcing, expecting, showing, demonstrating, what can be done, they accept the lowest common denominators students' standards of achievement and performance. The student has indeed trained the trainer.

In a similar vein, on a grand scale, many trainers are looking at their target audience and saying "They can only do this". So they adjust their training accordingly in alignment with their dumb-downed, re-calibrated world view. The entire program quickly becomes part of an automated, self-fulfilling prophecy.

Like clucking chickens congregating together for safety, flinching at every noise and perceived outside motion, groups of trainers spend their time reassuring themselves that it is perfectly acceptable to offer sub-standard training because after all the "average" person can only do so much. Right, right guys? Really, our students are not very capable are they? They also regularly rail against those pushing the limits. They don't explain the benefits of their approach, but seem to be perfectly content to drag down others to their level and their state of mind.

When you buy into this mentality you have sealed your fate and your ultimate destination.

There are only two kinds of people in the world. The Can-do's and the Can't-do's. Can-do's spend their time trying to find ways to make things happen. The Can't-do's find chapter and verse as to why it cannot be done. They actively throw out a barrage of obstacles for Can-do's to trip upon and generally try to impede their progress. I have also noted there seems to be a large percentage of insecure folks in the Can't-do camp. They are more comfortable there because they are surrounded by a much larger crowd. The Can't do's are generally louder and rail against the Can-do's who seem to be pressing on more quietly. Human history has chronicled this dynamic from the beginning.

Stop looking at your students and stop railing against other trainers and look inward in this case. Maybe it's you, not them. Stop blaming your students, your administration or other trainers for your less than optimal training program. Look at your own training philosophies and critically evaluate your own acceptable standards. It's not hard to notice that there is constant mental gravity to pull the standards down. You must remain upright! You must push back. When you do, expect a protracted fight.

Look at your own training methodologies. A critical component is the ability to inspire your audience on a performance level. If you cannot show them what the higher standard is, and you do not have a clear pathway to provide them to get there...Well they will probably hover around the lowest energy level and just hang out there.



**K.I.S.S. Principle as a Defense for Inadequate or Sub-Standard Training**

This is generally invoked when addressing a more complex system. Yet it can be quite an obstacle to actual battlefield superiority. Let's take the principle to the Nth degree and see where it leads.

You are faced with having to dispatch an enemy at twilight. It is a one-on-one engagement to take place on relatively open ground. Both opponents are to start out at a distance separating them at 300 yards and can initially barely see each other.

Each opponent has on their respective tables a few weapons to choose from.

One combatant is constrained entirely by the KISS Principle, the other is free to choose his weapons based on the overall environmental considerations and the training he has invested in.

On the table are 4 weapons, a rock, a knife, a 9mm Pistol (round in the chamber and 15 rounds in the magazine), and a 5.56mm M4 Carbine (red-dot reticule with a 100 yard-zero, one round in the chamber, 28 rounds in the magazine, visible aiming laser and quality weapon-mounted light).

What would you choose? One set of tools requires an entire set of skill and knowledge to effectively employ and is exponentially more complicated, well the other is Simple....

Would you rather go onto the modern battlefield in Sopwith 7F.1, Snipe or an F/A 22 Strike Fighter?

Does anybody actually believe at this point in history that the United States of America is the dominant Super-Power because we followed the KISS Principle to the exclusion of all else?



You see in my opinion the KISS principle is a strong consideration but should never be the dominant consideration in my opinion in the world of professional arms.

Skill at arms means exactly that...Skill. Skill is the result of consistent, qualitative and meaningful training. No getting around that part of the equation.

Just because one does not know how to leverage the extra capabilities of a more capable tool does not necessarily make that tool less useful to the more skilled wielder of that tool.

Don't get me wrong, at every turn we should look to simplify whenever and wherever possible. But let's not let the KISS principle become an excuse to avoid the more complex tasks and training challenges we have to address.

Here is an example of a guy who took what I considered to be a fairly complex process and simplified it for me.

Quite a few years ago, I learned to barefoot water-ski in less than 45 minutes from a guy who took a Bronze Medal in the X-Games. I could marginally slalom ski, but was getting pounded into submission trying to figure out how to barefoot. I had a several people try to show me how to barefoot previously, with dismal results....Ouch.

A friend of mine set up the time and place to meet this X-Games star. I was uncomfortable, intimidated if you will to meet this guy. This was clearly out of my league. The guy recognized this and told me something I will not soon forget. He said, "Don't worry, you will be bare-footing, in a few minutes...I am that good!"

I remember thinking, man this guy is cocky! Turns out HE was that good. During my lesson, he specifically stated that most people really do not understand the dynamics of what is going on with the skier and with the water.

He then gave me an incredibly simple pathway to achieve the bio-mechanics of what it took to practically barefoot. Like clockwork, one skill and exercise lead and connected to the next. I went from the boom off the side of the boat to a deep water/rope start in less than 30 minutes. In 45 minutes I did some tumble turns and some pretty hard turns and wake crossings, in several cases on one foot.

I was smiling from ear to ear...**HE was that Good!** HE really was. It was not what I did, but what he knew and what he knew about how to train people in this particular process.

He no doubt had taken years of experience, hours and hours of practice, pain and frustration and created an almost straight-line pathway to a higher skill level. He distilled it down to what needed to be done, no more, no less.

This is the essence of a good trainer. Skilled at what he or she does, skilled at taking highly complex tasks and making them as simple as possible without compromising the integrity of the end-result and required capability.

### **Creating or Training "Intuitive" Responses**

A better question in my mind is this: What is an intuitive response anyway?

My understanding at this point, is that intuitive responses are something you default to quickly without sequential/consciously thinking, as a result of experience. Intuition based on experience is generally very reliable and in fact a necessity in critical, high-stress situations.

It is something you arrive at when you have sorted through all the non-appropriate, non-optimal solutions as time/training has permitted. In other words, what is "intuitive" to one man is not to another.

It is intuitive to push against the recoil of a handgun when you first start shooting. Over time it becomes intuitive to relax when you shoot that same handgun. Your accuracy and speed increase as you learn how to drive the gun so to speak.

It is intuitive to duck, flinch, retreat when attacked by somebody's fist or when shot at when you first become aware of the incoming. Over time it becomes intuitive to initiate a completely different set of responses to the same stimulus.

Leaving the realm of tactical ideas, think Formula 1 race car driver. What is totally "intuitive" to a high level driver in this category is a total mystery to me. However, I am sure if you could roll back the mind and experiences of this driver you would find at some point in the time line, he had the same "intuition" about driving fast that I now hold to be true...Most of it would probably end up being incorrect.

The key thing is he immersed himself in the environment he chose to explore. Through, trial and error, repetition, training, practical experience, his "intuitive" responses changed throughout the span of his career.

I for one would rather listen to a Formula 1 driver if I wanted to learn to drive faster. I would want to see, hear, and feel what and why he does things. Rather than to plod around aimlessly with my own grand experiment, I would want to take advantage of his long-term and proven experience in that area. Once I entered into his mind-space and could consistently repeat what he was doing, then I would re-dissect the components again in an effort to improve what I was presented to that point.

The million dollar question is: How much time do we have to do what?

This is greatly influenced by your ability as a trainer\organization and target audience itself.

A good trainer will of course take his target audience into account, he must. But I have also noted that some trainers have brought into the equation lack of vision and experience, low-expectations and a poor training methodology; which is a great recipe for sub-standard performance.

If the trainer cannot physically show and demonstrate the effectiveness of X, Y, or Z, then the student will probably not buy off on it or attain to the skill level he or she really needs while under that trainers tutelage.

Therefore what the trainer believes is confirmed...."The student can only do so much".

What does this all mean? It means you need to retake the lost ground. It means stop accepting the false premise that good enough is good enough! Don't concede to those that are simply lazy.

It means stop letting the bottom dwellers train you to accept lower performance standards. It means re-evaluating the core components of what you are doing and why you are doing it. It means continually seeking with a view to improve not prove your original assumptions are correct and immovable.

Understand that being a professional at arms encompasses a vast skill-set that requires difficult, arduous, and challenging training processes and that any program that fundamentally denies this reality is part of the problem.

So I leave you with this. Continue to climb the mountain. It is not easy, but the toil is well worth the effort. Those that you come in touch with along the way will thank you for taking the path less traveled.

A Roman observer speaking of Legionaries put it this way:

*"Think thou that these magnificent, victorious Legionaries became what they are through some arbitrary stroke of fortune? Nay! They do not sit around congratulating themselves in the wake of every victory. Nay! They spend every moment refining and improving their craft. Without apology, they pursue excellence. Each one knows and understands that he alone stands between the Empire and oblivion. Watch them! Indeed, they appear to have been born with weapons in their hands!"*

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