Command Presence
What is it? Why is it important? How do we measure it?

by Dr. Terry N. Wollert

A former partner of mine shared one of his many colorful stories about his time as a state trooper with one of our firearms classes. He starts out by telling about a new rookie fresh from the academy being dispatched to a disturbance at a local bar. When the rookie entered the bar, he found an individual who had obviously consumed more alcohol that he could manage, shouting obscenities, and challenging anyone in the place to a fight. In a bold new state trooper demeanor, he identified himself and stated that the drunk would have to come with him. With


that, the drunk broke a bottle on the bar and threatened to cut and kill the trooper. The trooper responded by drawing his new revolver and shouted “drop the bottle or I will have to shoot.” This verbal exchange continued until an old sergeant with another recruit arrived. The sergeant entered the room, drew his weapon, and calmly stated “drop the bottle or I will shoot.” The drunk immediately complied and was placed under arrest. The ease that the sergeant got the drunk to comply was too much for the rookie trooper. While escorting the drunk to the cruiser the rookie asked why he did not comply with his commands but did when the sergeant commanded him to. The drunk replied, “It is simple, when the sergeant told me to drop the bottle or he would shoot, the other officer put his fingers into his ears. I didn’t think you would pull the trigger.”

This was his way of introducing the concept of “Command Presence.” When asking law enforcement trainers to identify essential elements of a successful officer or agent, frequently they respond, “Command Presence.” It is common to see command presence as a performance evaluation element during annual officer reviews. But, what is it? Why is it important? How do we measure it?

**WHAT IS COMMAND PRESENCE?**

For many the term command presence evokes images like General George Patton, Field Marshal Rommel, or President Regan. Their mere presence commanded respect and communicated authority. They are recognized for their application of tactics, situation analysis, and resolute commitment to accomplishing the mission. In many circles, command presence is associated with leadership. To be an effective leader one must have command presence. However, you don’t have to be a leader to have command presence. From a military or law enforcement
perspective "Command presence," describes the physical component of how leaders lead: their body movements, tone of voice, the way they stand, how they make eye contact.

**PRESENTATION IS EVERYTHING** "Chieftains must be credible. Their words and actions must be believable to both friend and foe. They must be trusted to have the intelligence and integrity to provide correct information. Leaders lacking in credibility will not gain proper influence and are to be hastily removed from positions of responsibility, for they cannot be trusted."-- Wess Roberts, “Leadership Secrets of Attila the Hun,”

What command presence is or isn’t gets a little more difficult when translating it into practical application. Often it easier to describe a lack of command presence, for example boisterous officers who: talk loud, shout orders, and come across as demanding or controlling. They may be characterized for the excessive use of profanity to make a point and are considered very aggressive individuals.

Every officer should ask four questions regarding command presence:

1. Do you look like you are in control?
2. Do you have confidence in your ability to resolve the issue?
3. Do you act like you are in control?
4. Do you speak like you are in control?

Command presence requires you to convey confidence and self-assuredness before, during, and after you go on duty. Confidence comes from knowing in your mind that you can handle the situation. It requires thinking and doing under pressure not cockiness. Competence and confidence are not magically acquired when you are issued a badge and a gun. Training and preparation are required to acquire the competencies and develop confidence in one’s ability to take charge of a scene and resolve the situation quickly and safely. Mastering command presence is a continuous learning process. The officer who comes across with “I’ve got the
badge; I am in charge here.” has false competence and confidence and will rapidly lose creditability and control of the situation.

The Federal Law Enforcement Training Center (FLETC) has initiated a research program to determine if a scoring system could be developed that would reflect a student’s capacity to engage in and survive a lethal encounter. The FLETC research team, consisting of law enforcement trainers and subject matter experts from the various training divisions, first identified performance elements associated with command presence. It was apparent that the elements were a combination of several training areas and, in fact, were multidisciplinary in application. The research team identified 10 competencies and 38 effective command presence criteria. These competencies are:

INVENTIVENESS
- Develops plans that anticipate obstacles
- Takes action to deal with potential problems
- Uses outside agencies as resources
- Taking the initiative by acting rather than reacting to events

ACTIVE INFORMATION SEEKING
- Asking questions to elicit discrepant information
- Actively seeks information when he/she learns of a discrepancy
- Forms a hypothesis and then asks questions or seeks information

THOROUGHNESS
- Ensure that the contact is complete and thorough
- Ensures that the post-incident procedures and/or evidence packages are complete and thorough
- Takes appropriate actions to overcome an obstacle

SELF-PRESENTATION
- Acts with confidence, consistently across situations
- Maintains personal appearance
- Demonstrates self confidence
- Inspires confidence in his/her team members
CONCERN WITH IMPACT
- Calculates in advance, the effects of own actions on others
- Considers impact information in deciding whether to reveal it to others
- Thinks about effects of own or others actions on the agency's law-enforcement mission

COMMUNICATION
- Ensures team members have all available information and/or that roles are clear - Information Exchange
- Appeals to reason in communication to team members
- Demonstrates alpha command style (alpha/beta)
- Uses appropriate voice tone and volume - Communication Delivery
- Uses Verbal/Non-Verbal communication consistently
- Considers command strategy (recognize command effect)
- Demonstrates effective incident documentation

SELF CONTROL
- Thinks clearly and logically in stressful situations
- Maintains self control when provoked
- Identifies own limitations and seeks assistance

ASSERTIVENESS
- Insists that others comply with laws/directives
- Enforce rules or give orders to influence or control actions of suspects
- Gains the respect of other people

CONCEPTUAL THINKING
- States what he/she has learned from own past experience
- Uses rules of thumb to help identify discrepancies or make decisions
- Uses specific information or knowledge learned from training or from others
- Sees relationship connections in separate pieces of evidence
- Draws conclusions based on observations of others' nonverbal behavior

LEGAL AWARENESS
- Demonstrates awareness of laws and/or limits of legal authority
- Gears method for developing case to ensure legal success
- Approaches an arrest/search in a way that builds an airtight legal case

WHY IS COMMAND PRESENCE IMPORTANT?
You can have the shiniest badge and fanciest uniform and the attitude of John Wayne, but your voice and non-verbal behavior will reveal, instantly, any fear, uncertainty, anger, boredom, or confusion you have. Command presence is about perception. It’s how you are perceived by
those you interact with both good and bad. How your words and actions are interpreted can make the difference in the outcome.

Pinizzotto in *Violent Encounters: A Study of Felonious Assaults on Our Nation's Law Enforcement Officers* pointed out that individuals with criminal intent size us up and scope us out. Pinizzotto’s interviews with offenders revealed that they evaluated officer actions like response times, approaches, handcuffing, searching, and transporting procedures. Interaction with specific officers and agencies allowed the offenders to observe and evaluate a variety of officers performing their duties under specific circumstances. One offender stated, “I knew who was working which shift, when vice was working, who the lazy officers were, and who the hot dogs were.” When asked what influenced their decision to assault an officer, the suspects stated that they chose not to assault officers that presented strong command presence because they did not feel they would be easy targets and could fail in their attempts.

The FLETC research program, mentioned earlier, examined the extent to which training can better prepare law enforcement officers to perform under highly stressful conditions. Initial results from the research program have been reported in technical reports entitled the *Survival Scores Research Project and Stress and Decision Making*. One objective of the research was to create an evaluation tool that would determine how well students perform their law enforcement skills within the framework of a reality-based training scenario. While analyzing the evaluation data one of the evaluative criteria demonstrated some unique properties. The evaluation element was “Command Presence” and its unique quality is its ability to predict scenario-based practical evaluation success and failure. Using a statistical procedure called CHAID\(^1\), indicated that

\(^1\) CHAID stands for *Chi*-squared Automatic Interaction Detector to identify predictor variables with the smallest adjusted \(p\)-value, i.e., the most significant predictor variable
students receiving an unacceptable command presence rating had a 98.9% chance of failing the scenario-based practical evaluation. On the other hand, students receiving an acceptable or better rating have a 99% chance of passing the practical evaluation.

Having a single evaluation element that has 99% predictability is too significant to ignore. FLETC’s *Survival Scores Research* and Pinizzotto’s findings in *Violent Encounters* suggest that training and evaluating command presence is too critical to overlook.

**HOW DO WE MEASURE COMMAND PRESENCE?**

Given the multidisciplinary nature of *command presence* requires a comprehensive evaluation strategy. Using information from law enforcement publications, Office of Personnel Management (OPM) competency statements, lessons learned from assaults on officers, reality-based training, and research on decision making under stress, FLETC subject matter experts grouped these performance elements into eight areas or Scenario Training Assessment and Review (STAR) factors. The STAR focuses on the essential elements required to evaluate a student’s ability to make decisions under threat conditions and implement those decisions to control the situation. The STAR factors (Figure 1) represent “survival factors” associated with reality-based training scenarios and performance expected of the students. The eight STAR factors include:
Using the STAR model provides for continuity of instruction, the student should become familiar with the eight performance factors and begin to think of their responses within this framework. Thus, entering a building to clear it, the student should mentally rehearse and execute "situation awareness.” Additionally, when responding to domestic disputes officers should utilize situation awareness such as engaging the victim and others from a safe vantage point. The task of removing a suspect from a vehicle with multiple occupants requires situation awareness and other factors as well. The conceptual nature of the eight survival factors enables students to readily adapt and apply them in real world situations. However, specific performance elements included within each STAR factor can vary depending on the scope, complexity, and objective of the scenario. For example, it may not be appropriate for the student to use outside agencies as
resources during the scenario however, use appropriate voice tone and volume would be one of the criteria used for determining command presence. Some command presence competencies “Communication-Uses Verbal/Non-Verbal communication consistently” can be observed during the scenario while others “Conceptual Thinking-Uses rules of thumb to help identify discrepancies or make decisions” must be deduced from comments made by the student during the after action review. Command presence competencies are intertwined within the eight survival factors. The command presence competencies form the foundation for controlling and winning every law enforcement encounter.

As an instructor, your job includes determining whether student have acquired the skills, knowledge, and attitudes to function as a law enforcement officer or agent. There are two purposes for assessing student performance during reality-based training. The first is to diagnose if and where a student is having problems. This is typically accomplished during the lab exercises. The second is to determine if the training objectives have been accomplished. This occurs during the practical examinations. The evaluator directly influences the success or failure of the training.

Unlike written tests, assessing student performance during scenarios is more subjective and requires the instructor to observe student behavior and then make a judgment as to the acceptability of that behavior. This is especially true for assessing command presence. To reduce the potential variability during these assessments instructors must be trained to ensure the reliability and validity of their evaluations. The pass/fail decision made on each student should be based on what the student did not by differences among the instructors in what value they place on what they observed. The critical point here is that if the instructors are inconsistent in their evaluations then the test cannot be valid.
For professional and legal reasons instructors need to make accurate and consistent evaluations of student performance. Therefore, training instructors to evaluate students should include factors for effectively assessing student performance during reality-based training scenarios and proven techniques on evaluator training. In addition, this simple model can be used in training evaluators.

1. Bring together a group of instructors with expertise in the knowledge and skills being assessed.

2. Use these instructors to classify videos of live performance or simulation demonstrating all of the attributes of the desired performance, videos that present a clear non-performance is demonstrated, and additional videos illustrating a range of performance between the two extremes.

3. During training, the new evaluators should be presented with one performance at a time. Typically the desired performance video would be shown first. The new evaluators would use the check sheet to record their observations.

4. Show the next video, usually the clear non-performance, and again record their observations.

5. The ratings for each item on the check sheet is then tabulated as a percentage of agreement and presented to the group. Areas with low percentages of agreement should be reviewed and discussed until a consensus is reached. The video can be used during these discussions so that evaluators can discuss specific behaviors.

6. The process identified in step 5 is repeated until a high degree of consistency is achieved.

Following this procedure establishes the reliability of both the evaluator and the check sheet at the same time. It is recommended that multiple evaluators should observe and evaluate a single
student on a periodic basis. If the consistency of the evaluators has dropped below an acceptable level then the evaluators should attend refresher training. New evaluators can be trained using the same videos with their results compared with the original group of evaluators.

**CONCLUSION**

Law enforcement is a complex career field and command presence is critical to the success and survival of law enforcement professionals. A good instructor realizes that there may be many solutions to any given law enforcement problem. A successful scenario performance is one in which a student who performs as a reasonable officer, faced with similar circumstances, has a positive outcome. Command presence during training should not require perfection for a successful outcome. While perfection is an admirable goal, it is unlikely officers can achieve perfection in dynamic, rapidly evolving situations in the field. Instructors must remember there is no single way to handle a given situation. Each officer’s perspective is different; therefore, they may handle the situation differently than the instructor would. The critical question is not whether the instructor “would” have done the same thing, but rather “could” a reasonable officer have performed that way and “would” they have won the encounter. Instructors need to be open to different approaches when evaluating command presence during law enforcement scenarios, and be as objective as possible when providing feedback to students.

**References**


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About the author

Dr. Terry N. Wollert is a senior researcher with the Federal Law Enforcement Training Center’s (FLETC) Training Innovation Division (TID) Research Branch. Terry is the Principal Investigator for FLETC's Stress Research, author of several stress related research articles, and co-author of Stress Exposure Training: An Event-Based Approach in the book Performance Under Stress. Since joining FLETC, Terry has supported the instructional programs offered by the Firearms Division, Driver and Marine Division, Financial Fraud Institute, and the FLETC Management Institute. Terry served as a member of the Tactical Oversight Board (TOB) and as the Vice-Chairman of the FLETC Lessons Learned Committee. He is also a certified Force Science Institute use-of-force investigator.