



## WARRIOR RESILIENCE: TEACHING MINDFUL INTEGRATION IN LAW ENFORCEMENT CULTURE AND TRAINING

Many law enforcement agencies and other organizations such as the U.S. Department of Defense and Marine Corps are more closely exploring mindfulness-based training methods to enhance officer resilience across military, first responder and other high-stress professions. There are many practical advantages to incorporating training methodologies that help police deal with the traumatic stressors of their work and to support resiliency, healthy community relations and mind fitness that enhances their ability to respond, versus react, during crisis situations.

In this issue, we have a frank discussion with Lt. Richard Goerling of the Hillsboro, Oregon Police Department about his groundbreaking work using mindfulness-based stress reduction techniques that teach officer resilience and tactical communications in his department and surrounding communities. Richard is featured in the cover story of the October 2013 Issue of *Mindful* magazine and has also appeared in several law enforcement publications as he helps police officers “pause and protect.”

**Q: What are some of the traumatic stressors related to police work and why is formal incorporation of resiliency training so important?**

*Richard:* There are many challenges that police face on a daily basis. My hypothesis is that there’s a tremendous amount of suffering within police culture, which I believe is *institutionalized suffering*. It goes beyond the conventional stressors that police face walking the beat and managing the terrible side of humanity. What I’m talking about are the additional organizational stressors that impact the personal well-being and on-the-job effectiveness of first responders. There are volumes of research that show the severity of how these stressors, compounded with normal police work, severely impact the

quality of health and the life expectancy of cops. They’re more often stressed by what goes on between their four walls than what’s happening on the streets. Officers are dying young. Statistically, more police officers are killed by their own hand than by assailants in the United States. Divorce and alcoholism rates are much higher in law enforcement than in most other careers. Sixty percent of cops are obese, which leads to sleep apnea, diabetes and heart disease. It’s a pretty consistent observation in our communities that they appear overweight, they don’t look well and they’re not nice. The cumulative stress that comes at officers from every direction exposes them to a toxicity that degrades the resiliency of our police force over time. Cops on the ground are bright and capable people and they deserve leadership and a culture capable

of giving more to prepare and support them for success and well-being on the job. That’s where resiliency training comes in. It’s a starting point to help save lives and make better calls in crisis situations. This can create a dynamic shift that slowly over time will help transform police culture within the four walls of our departments.

**Q: You’re often critical of groupthink. How do you define the concept and what are the risks that groupthink poses to law enforcement organizations?**

*Richard:* From an academic standpoint, groupthink can be defined any number of ways, but I define it as the cultural and institutional forces that are significantly influencing the way individuals behave within

the context of the organization. Whether it's in law enforcement, academia or business, every institution has organizational policies and procedures that fit together and synchronize how their people view the world. The end result is a pattern of linear thinking, which is detrimental to the organization when cognitive diversity is misunderstood or shunned. Every organization benefits from individuals who can think differently. One's ability to challenge the norm—not for the sake of being contrarian—but for the sake of improving processes can improve the outcomes for whatever goals the organization is trying to achieve. Based on my military and

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law enforcement experience, it's clear these government institutions don't focus on the entrepreneurial or critical-thinking piece within their cultures. We have a natural tendency in law enforcement to entrench in a mindset of *us versus them*. Our culture reinforces the tactical application of *I'm right and you're wrong* at the leadership level. It also happens in many industries where critical decisions are driven by a singular thought, by egos or by a refusal to accept alternative viewpoints. It won't surprise anyone when I say I'm a vocal critic of how groupthink hinders law enforcement. I walk the path of creating allies and enemies, but law enforcement is my culture. I'm a part of it and I have a duty to be a change agent and challenge the norm.

**Q: In your blog, [LeadingResilience.org](http://LeadingResilience.org), you cite *The Lucifer Effect* when discussing examples of how groupthink can lead to bad behavior. What is *The Lucifer Effect*?**

*Richard:* In his book, “*The Lucifer Effect: Understanding How Good People Turn Evil*,” Philip Zimbardo who also conducted the famous Stanford Prison Experiment speaks to the cultural and social forces that impact organizations and result in bad behavior. He

draws parallels between his research during the prison experiment and what happened at Abu Ghraib prison in Iraq. Some of the questions Zimbardo poses about institutions that focus solely on individual bad behavior without addressing the system's culpability are relevant to law enforcement. Maybe the problem isn't that we, the organization, have a bad apple—maybe the barrel is bad and the apple goes bad because of the barrel.

**Q: How have your ideas and initiatives been received within the police leadership ranks?**

*Richard:* When I present my views to other leaders, either they respond by saying that I make sense or they say I'm a lunatic. I'll accept both. However, as leaders, we cannot ignore the issues. I believe change starts by taking a different approach and by looking at leadership itself and evolving from the tactical application of *I'm right and you're wrong*. We've historically been held to one paradigm that makes the officer solely accountable for his or her own wellness. I believe organizational culture must transform and provide tools and support to help those on the frontlines regulate their emotions well, and by extension, corresponding behavior and decision-making. We recruit and train bright and healthy people into the force. Then we put them on the job and hope they survive as they deal with the societal encounters that go hand-in-hand with the job. They see child abuse cases, shootings, car crashes. And we hope they're able to manage those stressors, but over time, they can manifest in late-stage police misbehavior such as excessive use of force. It's what we call *lawful to awful force*. And when it happens, we hold that individual accountable. But, there should also be organizational culpability. If police are holistically not well, then it's predictable that their overall cognitive performance is going to diminish. They're not going to regulate their emotions or make decisions as quickly and effectively as they did when they were at their peak performance. If the individual's mind, body and spirit are unhealthy, then the organization and the community will suffer.

**Q: What is mindfulness and why do you believe it's so vital to law enforcement?**

*Richard:* Mindfulness is by my definition the cultivation of the practice of being present.

It's really that simple. It's powerful to be self-aware and it comes from the Warrior Ethos of knowing yourself. Being present and understanding what's happening around you is critical. My own journey started when I began to investigate how the stressors of



*Lt. Goerling also serves as U.S. Coast Guard Cmdr., and teaches criminal justice at Portland Community College.*

police work erode the well-being of cops and the ripple effect it has on community relations both large and small. It can be argued that corporate or institutional “un-wellness” persists in law enforcement and we need to also invest beyond technical training and include emotional intelligence and holistic wellness training that enhances police officer resilience and repairs broken community relationships.

**Q: What are some methods that you're introducing to teach and practice mindfulness?**

*Richard:* There are a variety of methods we use to shift the focus of training from the physical and technical aspects of law enforcement to training our officers how to nurture and sustain their resilience. Yoga, verbal judo (tactical communication),

meditation and mindfulness-based stress reduction (MBSR) programs can really help officers heal from a hard day, a broken heart or even physical injury. Your mind is a very powerful component of your well-being. In 2009, I went through eight-week MBSR training and convinced other colleagues to go through it with me. We discovered that the training had real-world applications in the everyday life of a police officer. My efforts to expand training were outside my role as a police lieutenant and we had some staff who were resistant. My police chief today is both a mentor and an advocate for cultural innovation. He's opened the door and 24 people have gone through the first training. We have plans to train others this year and we're inviting other agencies to participate.

**Q: What's the individual experience like for an officer going through this training?**

*Richard:* When you take a police officer into a yoga room and have them sit with a cushion and contemplate—they're immediately transported outside the culture of law enforcement and invaded with all of these new thoughts. As a police officer, you're reliving emergency calls and experiences that are traumatic and you're facing those thoughts head-on. Mindfulness teaches us not to be judgmental. It can be a powerful experience when someone who is dealing with trauma—thinking about a recent



*Time away for this family man and outdoor enthusiast often includes beach trips with his dog Bruno.*

normalizing for an officer is the first step in a long journey of healing. And when we heal ourselves, then we can help others along the way. Mindfulness has a tremendous impact on how we interact with our community. We hear about it in the media and there's a tremendous amount of bias in law enforcement. If you don't have well police officers, the result will be a negative accumulation of encounters. Mindfulness can help root some of this out and heal the relationship, which is ultimately based on the sum of all police-citizen encounters. We can change perceptions by how our institution treats the people we serve, but we must start with our individual experience.

**Q: Do you believe mindfulness has broader applications to organizations outside law enforcement?**

*Richard:* Yes, we can take a page and learn from our Marines and soldiers fighting wars in places like Afghanistan. They're being constantly exposed to life-threatening situations, yet they're able to work in foreign communities and help rebuild them. Even though they're trained warriors fighting the Taliban, they're also building relationships by walking in villages and handing out humanitarian supplies and engaging with the people. We in law enforcement can get

lost in our own suffering and that creates a bravado that the community is suspicious of—yet I've encountered people who resist mindfulness because they misunderstood it as passivism or hippy thinking. In reality, there's strong neurological evidence supporting its effectiveness in our military.

Dr. Elizabeth Stanley is a leading researcher and instructor on mind fitness training. She's helped Marines maintain their resilience, even in war. When she first started, she got a lot of resistance from folks in her community—*why are you training killers to be mindful?* Her response was that if I can help warriors to be mindful then maybe there would be less killing or less instances of bad behavior triggered by stress. It was a shocking concept to think that we could train warriors to be empathetic, when really, most well-trained soldiers are some of the nicest, empathetic people you'll ever meet. There is no pretense. They're so confident about who they are as a whole person, that mindfulness isn't about choosing between being a pacifist or a warrior—it's about learning how to be present and self-aware. Joint Forces Quarterly recently published a number of related articles about the total fitness concept or strengthening the mind-body-spirit connection of U.S. soldiers. I'm inspired by what the military is doing in this field.

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shooting for example—to face it and let it go. It's liberating when an officer realizes they can allow the thoughts to just be. It normalizes the monkey mind occurring in everyone's head, which is a natural part of what we do as humans. The process of

They're not perfect and never will be, but there's some tremendous work being done to improve resilience and to combat the effects of PTSD. If mindfulness can somehow help soldiers recover from extraordinarily traumatic environments, imagine how we can apply those techniques to manage day-to-day stressors in law enforcement or in any other profession.

**Q: Who are some other leading researchers or authors you'd recommend readers learn more about in this field?**

*Richard:* Dr. Jon Kabat-Zinn is the founder of the Center for Mindfulness in Medicine, Health Care, and Society at the University of Massachusetts Medical School. He's accumulated over 35 years of amazing evidenced-based research and authored numerous books and papers related to MBSR. His works speak to using mindfulness that teaches us to be aware, even in stressful situations, and to be able to choose between reacting or responding. Viktor Frankl was a neurologist and psychiatrist who survived the Holocaust at Auschwitz and wrote, "Man's Search for Meaning," first published in 1946. Even when under such dark circumstances, Frankl remarkably points out that, "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and our freedom." I'm trying to teach those in law enforcement how to slow down in stressful situations, not in terms of time and space, but to become more present and make better decisions.

For more contemporary works, I recommend reading Taylor Clark's "Nerve: Poise Under Pressure, Serenity Under Stress, and the Brave New Science of Fear and Cool," and Robert Sapolsky's, "Why Zebras Don't Get Ulcers." I also make these books part of the curriculum in the courses that I teach. I always encourage people to read outside their normal environment and to broaden their understanding of resilience. ■



**Richard Goerling**  
*Featured Guest*

Lt. Richard Goerling has served in civilian law enforcement for over 15 years. He's held both federal and municipal positions and worked as a patrol officer, detective, patrol sergeant, detective sergeant and detective lieutenant. He currently serves as a patrol lieutenant for the City of Hillsboro in the Portland metropolitan area of Oregon. Parallel to his policing career, Lt. Goerling served as a member of the U.S. Coast Guard for over 24 years, both active and reserve, and currently holds the rank of commander assigned to Coast Guard Sector Columbia River, Oregon. His early active-duty tours include serving as a deck officer and law enforcement officer aboard a high endurance cutter, and as an instructor at the Coast Guard's Maritime Law Enforcement Academy. He served on active-duty for two years after 9/11 as an intelligence officer. Lt. Goerling was a strategic planner during the nation's response to the Deepwater Horizon oil spill making valuable contributions to the National Incident Command at Coast Guard Headquarters in Washington, D.C. He holds an adjunct faculty position at Portland Community College instructing in the criminal justice program. He teaches courses in homeland security, introductory policing and tactical communications. Lt. Goerling recently developed an innovative course that explores police officer resilience and its relationship to police-community relations. He holds a bachelor's degree in economics and a master's degree in business administration. Lt. Goerling is a guest speaker on the topic of resilience at professional conferences nationwide.



**Michelle Maldonado**  
*Series Creator*

Michelle Maldonado is a former corporate attorney with more than 17 years of leadership experience in strategic planning, operations and partnership development across the e-learning, technology and online media industries. She currently serves as Associate Vice President of Corporate and Strategic Relationships for American Public University (APU) and is the creator and editor of The Authentic Leadership Series. Michelle is passionate about talent development, coaching and the mentoring of professionals to support organizational success and sustainability. Utilizing an authentic and consultative approach, Michelle collaborates with industry organizations to form education alliances that support overall talent and institutional growth strategies. She also represents APU in conferences and other venues on the topic of leadership authenticity and its convergence with emotional intelligence, mindfulness and other "conscious leadership" practices that inspire culture transformation. Michelle's work has been featured in Chief Learning Officer, Human Capital Insights, Leadership Excellence, and Training magazines.

To learn more about how American Public University's programs and services may help you with your talent development and retention strategies, please visit: [www.StudyAtAPU.com/Solutions](http://www.StudyAtAPU.com/Solutions) or contact Michelle at [mmaldonado@apus.edu](mailto:mmaldonado@apus.edu).



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James Thompson is Senior Writer and Content Strategist at American Public University with more than 16 years' experience as a communications leader, marketing copywriter and creative author. He draws insights from his executive experience leading human resources and corporate communications, and recruitment and talent management programs for Fortune 500 organizations.

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