

Ex-Cons Who Teach Cops Trade Secrets

By Linda B. Joffe



from former
rehabilitation
based on their

A cop corners a crook. He escapes. Then, defying all reason, the crook comes back and explains to the cop how he did it. Every slick trick is revealed. The officer is baffled – and demoralized. “I’m not going to make it,” he says. “Maybe I shouldn’t be in police work.”

“Hey, man, don’t talk like that!” consoles the crook, throwing his arm over the officer’s shoulder. “Look, I’m not just saying this to try and make you feel good, but all you did was make a careless mistake with your handgrip. It was a small point. Aside from that, you handled me better than any cop ever did.”

Sound far-fetched? Similar scenes are taking place in San Francisco regularly. A group of once hard-core crooks is banding together with the police in a tough coalition to fight crime – the first of its kind in the country. At first, many people wondered if it would work. Now they have their answer: It is a stunning success.

These cooperative ex-crooks are members of Delancey Street (DS), a San Francisco rehabilitation program. Founded eight years ago by John Maher, an ex-drug addict and former convict from New York, DS has been defying all precepts of criminal reform. It shuns government grants as well as professional help from social workers, psychiatrists or counselors.

Instead, it is a self-help, communal foundation run solely by its approximately 360 members – former convicts, drug addicts, thieves, murders, pushers, prostitutes and pimps. Financial support comes from a few modest contributions and from DS’s eight “training school” businesses, which gross hundreds of thousands of dollars a year while teaching its members productive skills. The DS philosophy is simple: Give these former criminals strong role-models – others like

themselves who have managed to constructively transform their own lives – and goals which inspire change, and they will want to rehabilitate themselves. The main operating principle is peer pressure to “go straight.”

The results of the approach have earned respect for DS throughout the San Francisco community and beyond. As a result, when the city police department decided to devise an innovative police training program, DS was asked if it would like to help. When DS said yes, Police Chief Charles Gain said it was “an impressive testament to the success of DS’s unique program that these people with antisocial and antipolice attitudes can turn them around so completely and contribute their energy, time and ‘street skills’ to help the police.”

The idea was to put police recruits through 17 weeks of intense training, culminating with four weeks of role-plays, or crime scenarios, produced by and “starring” DS members. The DS residents would be “teachers of the sorts. When it came to understanding the criminal mind and learning how to out-con a con, it was concluded, they would be the best instructors of all.

The plots and dialogues are unerringly realistic. Participants enact, from their own experiences, situations they feel cause the most problems and misunderstandings for police. DS members also assist in working out the plots, complete with witnesses lying, suspects swearing and crowds interfering. After each scene, the “teachers” answer questions and make observations, revealing the tricks of their former trade. Says Larry Barsetti, a field training officer on the force for more than six years: “The scenarios are done so realistically, it’s as though we go ‘zap’ and there is a crime right before our eyes.”

Originally, the plan was to keep the crime dramas within the training academy. But with enthusiasm riding high, it was decided, after some classroom practice, to role-play in the streets, bars, homes, stores – places where the real crimes happen.

These “crimes” are taken the full route, from police call through trial. And everyone, it seems, has joined in the effort: the San Francisco Hall of Justice provides courtrooms, local judges volunteer to preside, local law students act as jury and legal advisers. In addition, the mayor, business owners, homeowners and leaders of the city’s subcultures have all cooperated with these simulated “stings.”

The scenarios run the gamut of police problems from family squabbles to homicide. And each is different from the others. But built into each one – as the following example illustrates – are two important concerns: The recruits must maintain control of the situation, and they must be able to discern fact from fiction.

It is 11:30 p.m. A call comes over the police radio: “A 459 (burglary) in progress at the phone booth near the market on Beach and Scott.” Sounds simple enough. Very routine. The police – two rookies – rush to the scene. Luckily, they are in time to catch a suspect in the phone booth. As soon as he sees the police, he becomes hostile. He shouts angrily, pointing to a near by car. In it is a man, obviously drunk, passed out and slumped over the steering wheel.

Given the place and time of night, it’s nothing unusual. The police try to calm the suspect in order to check his identification. His alibi seems weak. He says he lives in the neighborhood and was trying to use the phone when he discovered it was broken. There is no other phone booth in sight.

“No, I won’t give you my ID,” he says belligerently. “I’m not the one who broke this phone. Why don’t you guys do your job and arrest some of the bums hanging out in this neighborhood?” he points to the car again. “If you were here enough, this wouldn’t be happening, and I wouldn’t be kicking broken phones!”

He keeps trying to divert the policemen’s attention to the drunk in the car. They don’t go for it. His feisty behavior is too suspicious.

Not in command

But the police do not appear to be in command of the situation. They cannot get the man to show his ID. Finally, almost as an act of resignation, one officer goes over to the car. Halfheartedly, he looks inside. On the man's lap is what appears to be a sack of coins rolled up. "Hey, come over here!" he calls to his partner. To their astonishment, it looks as though this man is, in fact, the real suspect.

As they open the door, however, the drunk in his stupor falls onto the ground. He starts flailing his arms in a feeble attempt to resist arrest. The confusion increases. The drunk, a Chicano, begins a bilingual tirade, accusing the police of man-handling him. And the first man, having been proven correct, is even more upset than before. "See, I told you so! Arrest this bum. He's the kind of guy who's wrecking our neighborhood."

Meanwhile, four Chicanos walk up – more DS actors. They see one of their "brothers" struggling with the police and decide to help him. Emotions are high now. The policemen try to arrest the drunk but are continually sidetracked by the heckling bystanders. Then, to add to the chaos, a man and woman – more DS people – come along. They are tourists seeking directions: "Which way is it to the freeway?" Surprisingly, amid all this, one officer tries to help. The couple doesn't fully understand. The officer explains again.

The suspect is finally handcuffed and put in the car. But the police must still contend with the confusion. Minutes later, while the officers' backs are turned, one of the Chicanos lets the suspect out of the car. He escapes. The rookies are visibly upset. They have lost control – and their suspect.

Field training officer Mike Hebel, who observed the scene, says it was probably one of the best. "The recruits did everything wrong. They just weren't assertive enough," he says with a laugh. "For me it was a hilarious night; for them it was very embarrassing."

Such scenes, he believes, with rookie mistakes and discussions afterward, are tremendously instructive. "This recruit class," he asserts, "is the best-trained class the San Francisco Police Department has ever had." This kind of instruction, another field training officer adds, "is about 400 percent better than when I was in training."

But no one could be more pleased – and proud – of these rookies than the DS "teachers." "We really get the feeling," observes a role-player, "that we are doing some good and that the cops are learning. The cops get very embarrassed if certain basic things happen, like if they lose their weapons, or arrest the wrong people. But you get the feeling that after they're over being embarrassed, they won't do it again."

'just the way it happens'

But do these lessons really carry over into the job? "Oh, yea," states a recent academy graduate. "Now that I'm in the street, I've learned that a lot of what the DS people taught me is exactly the way it happens." Another grad best sums up the general feeling: "The DS people really got into it and gave a lot of important pointers. They really cared about helping us – and they sure did."

Why do they care? At DS they realize that ultimately they have the most at stake. As one lone-time resident who's spent most of his life behind bars puts it: "I want those streets cleaner than the cops do, because it's my kids that end up victimized – on dope and doing the crimes and going to jail. We're the ones who have the most to lose."

With "crooks" like this on their side the San Francisco police – and the community – have much to gain.



Chief Charles Gain, San Francisco police, was impressed that ex-cons could reverse anti-cop attitudes.