

Using presence and words

Verbal judo teaches traffic officers how to persuade difficult people to co-operate

JULIA DENNY-DIMITRIOU



Photo: MARK WING

LAW enforcement officers in vehicle patrol spot a car driving erratically and pull it over. The driver throws open the door and topples out, swearing loudly. The officers brace themselves for a confrontation. Another pair of officers knocks on a door to deliver a court summons. A woman opens the door, screams angrily and tries to grab one of them. These incidents may sound like something from a TV show, but they are the kinds of experiences that Msunduzi Municipality traffic officers encounter all the time. Now, a new training programme is enhancing their skills to handle the challenges they face every day.

The man behind the programme is Merrivale resident Don Gold, director of the Minimum Force Institute of Africa. Over the next few months he will take all the municipality's 80 traffic officers through a 10-day course in verbal judo (tactical communications), weapons handling and law enforcement defence tactics. The latter involve using reasonable, necessary and proportionate force to subdue unco-operative and possibly aggressive people.

Gold was a security operative under the previous regime. He was involved in various fields, including counterinsurgency and undercover work. Some people may find his past politically incorrect and unsavoury. How then does he come to be training law enforcement officers and security personnel under the new dispensation? His practical response flowed unflatteringly: "I was a policeman at a time when the government had scant regard for civil liberties. We were called on to do things that did not sit well with the way I was raised. I knew there had to be a better way. This is my contribution to that 'better way' and it works."

"Heavy-handed policing never worked then and it will never work now or in the future. One important element missing from training in the old days was the human element. We have to remember that we are dealing with people who have their own emotions and problems. Law enforcement officers have to be able to handle all of these people with dignity. Everything we do, even using force, has to be done with the ethical implications in mind."

Gold stressed the ethical content of the course, saying that it enables officers to preserve law and order, while maintaining their own and the public's safety. It focuses on equipping them to use presence and words to calm difficult people and get them to co-operate voluntarily. This means using the power of their professional presence and persuasive communication to defuse potentially dangerous situations, redirect the behaviour of hostile people and get them to comply with the officers' requirements. This could be to get out of their car, take a Breathalyzer test, accept a summons, hand over evidence or submit to a search.

"Law enforcement officers usually encounter people at their worst. They may be under the influence of alcohol, severe emotional stress, shock, fear or some other extreme emotion. Every day, officers have to try to get reluctant people to co-operate with them voluntarily. And yet, they usually receive little or no specific training in how to use professional presence and appropriate words as alternatives to force."

"This course teaches them that they need to look professional, act professionally and remain in control of themselves in order to achieve the desired outcome in their encounters with members of the public. If they do not manage this with words, I train them to use reasonable, necessary and proportionate force to get people to comply. In extreme situations, they may need to use a firearm, so we also spend time on developing their firearms training, including night shooting — at all times emphasising a deep reverence for human life."

"The course makes much use of role play, so that officers can practise keeping calm under pressure and using persuasive language. "They already know what it's like to be sworn at and verbally abused, that's a common experience for them. But now, they need to be able to remain neutral and put into practice the verbal techniques the course teaches."

"This course creates enhanced professionalism and improved morale. In the longer term, it should lead to increased officer safety, decreased stress among officers, fewer complaints from citizens and increased convictions of lawbreakers," said Gold.

"The Witness spoke to the first batch of Msunduzi Municipality traffic officers to take part in the training course. "We first started, but now we strongly recommend it to others," said senior traffic officer Ally Khan.

"The course has given us new skills to deal with the public and boosted our morale. We see our job in a whole different light now," said Superintendent Priscilla Mahlaba.

"It has been exciting and we have gained a lot of experience. It has also created unity among us and we are stronger as a team," said senior traffic officer Fikile Mbhele. Others said they had enjoyed it so much that their only complaint was that the course was too short. They asked that management "ensure this is not just a 'one-off' and that we keep refreshing and updating our skills."

Kenneth Chetty, the Msunduzi Municipality's acting manager: public safety (traffic and security) was equally enthusiastic. "Since we are heading towards metro status, we want to upgrade our officers' skills in working with being metro law enforcement officers. Our ultimate aim is to make the city a safer place. This training has created a real buzz of excitement. Morale among all the staff has improved and staff other than traffic officers are asking to be included."

WHAT IS VERBAL JUDO?

THIS is a tactical communication training course based on the principle of judo itself: use the energy of others to master situations. It teaches a philosophy of how to look creatively at conflict and offers concrete strategies to resolve tense situations. It holds a set of communication principles and tactics that enable users to get co-operation and voluntary compliance from others under stressful conditions such as hostile suspects, upset or frightened victims.

Based on a combination of Aristotle's rhetoric, Eastern martial arts philosophy and modern police tactics, it is geared primarily for law enforcement but has been adapted for other fields including education, health care and general leadership. Verbal judo was developed by Dr George Thompson, based on his experience as an English professor, judo instructor and police officer. He is president and founder of the Verbal Judo Institute. The course is recognised by the SA Qualifications Authority (SAQA). — www.verbaljudo.com

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Msunduzi Municipality traffic officer Mbongiseni Hlela (right) practises restraint techniques on his colleague senior traffic officer Ally Khan (in yellow shirt), while the course trainer, Don Gold (left), looks on. On the floor (partly obscured) is traffic officer Sibusiso Tsekeletsa with traffic officer Mbuso Ncobeni in the background.

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DOES THE COURSE WORK?

OVER the past five years, Don Gold has trained 60 traffic and crime prevention officers for the Hibiscus Coast Municipality. Another 25 will be trained this year. *The Witness* asked Victor Chetty, director of Hibiscus Coast Municipality Protection Services, what benefit staff there have gained from their training.

"This course has increased the morale and confidence of our officers. Complaints from the public have dropped, staff members are on duty regularly and stress is lower.

"This course really builds an officer to do his or her work with confidence and come back safely. My officers have enjoyed it and learnt a lot.

"I would recommend this course to any of my colleagues. I did it in 1997 and I believe it was the highlight of my career in the provincial traffic department. I promised myself that if I was ever in a position to make decisions and organise training, I would want all officers working under my command to undergo this course. It did a lot for me back then and as I now.

"As long as I am the head of this department, I will ensure that every single member of my staff who interacts with the public in the execution of his or her duties will do this outstanding, refreshing course as it will make them better officers to serve our communities."

WHO IS DON GOLD?

DON Gold has 38 years' experience in the security industry, including 25 years' police service. He was seconded to the British South Africa Police in the then Rhodesia and served in Namibia. He was also a bomb disposal specialist, took part in many counterinsurgency operations and performed extensive undercover work. A martial arts instructor and handgun and unarmed combat specialist, he was a founder member of, and instructor to, the SA Police Special Task Force (national Swat unit) and trained bodyguards and intelligence personnel.

He is also a United States-qualified law enforcement ethics trainer and instructor in verbal judo or tactical communications. Organisations for which he has trained include all the major casino groups in southern Africa, the KwaZulu-Natal Road Traffic Inspectorate, Ezemvelo KZN Wildlife, the World Wildlife Fund, South African Airways and Michaelhouse school. He is married to Sylvia, also a karate instructor, and they have two children.

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WATCHING A DIFFERENT MATCH

NOT nearly enough truth was reported on the print media about the appalling display between Kaizer Chiefs and Mamelodi Sundowns in the M8 final on September 23. I couldn't help but think, during the match, that the television commentators were watching a completely different game from that displayed on my set.

We were sadly disappointed for what should have been nothing short of an exciting, attacking soccer match and a determined effort by players appeared to be no more than a friendly match between school teams, with more faults than the R8 million up for grabs.

If this game was anything to go by, the South African Football Association would be doing themselves and the country a favour by replacing our Bafana Bafana team with Banyana Banyana in 2010.

HADLEY AUGUSTUS
Prestbury, Pietermaritzburg

Penalising animals

RECENTLY a local resident witnessed a most distressing incident while walking along Murray Road. A little duikeer was trampled by its head in the fence put up by the Roy Hesketh Racing Foundation. It was totally traumatised and it took ages to free the animal which was bleeding profusely. The buck ran off — to die in the bush in agony, perhaps?

The fencing material was used without any consideration for the wellbeing of the indigenous animals when it comes to bush fires or the totally unnecessary loud noise of racing car exhausts.

Last Friday, cars were tearing around the circuit again and the noise was overwhelming. Imagine being a wild animal without free passage to get away from the noise.

When are these people going to realise that this is not the place to impose their will on an area which has been a conservation site for so many years, allowing a peaceful existence for animals and the surrounding community? They must take their racing car cowboy antics where they will not upset man or beast.

D. WRIGHT
Lincoln Meade
Pietermaritzburg

Religious persecution

CHRISTIANS in this city view the ongoing, systematic brutality being meted out to Christians in the state of Orissa, India, with grave concern.

According to the All-India Christian Council, starting on Christmas eve 2007, 95 churches and 730 houses were burnt down or destroyed over several days by Hindu extremists. Current reports say that hundreds of houses and churches have been destroyed in a new wave of attacks.

Entire Christian villages are being emptied. Thousands of Christians and their pastors are in hiding in the forests of Orissa, where they are hungry and being pelted by monsoon rains. Nuns have been raped and pastors killed.

The state government of Orissa is dragging its heels because the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), an alliance partner, is protecting the Sangh Parivar which is carrying out the attacks on Christians.

Various groups in India say that the culprits behind the violence against Christians are fascist groups such as the BJP and the Rashtriya Swyam-sevak Sangh, a Hindu spiritual group. They preach the ideology of an all-Hindu India and don't respect the fact that India has obligations to the Universal Declaration on Human Rights which states that everyone has a right to change religion.

India's own constitution states that "All people are equally entitled to the right to freely profess, practise and propagate religion. (Article 25(1))."

Such endorsements of civil rights give India the respectability accorded to the great democracies of the world, but the reality is that India, out of line with international law and its own constitution, has states with anti-conversion laws.

Christians, especially those of greater expectations in South Africa, have far greater expectations of India in terms of human rights.

L. CHETTY
Newholmes
Pietermaritzburg

Supporting the environment

THE Democratic Alliance (DA) welcomes the news that Sasol has become the first local industrial company to be listed on the Dow Jones Sustainability Index (DJSI). This index comprises the leading 10% of 2500 global companies in terms of environmental best practice.

The criteria used for assessment include corporate governance, knowledge management, environmental performance and human rights policies. The DJSI encourages industrial corporate entities to move towards sustainability and is an index watched by market players around the globe. Sasol's achievement is in line with the DA's vision of an open-opportunity society for all in which corporate commitment to environmental responsibility is the norm. We cannot build a better society for today without thinking about how to sustain it in the future. With the looming threat of climate change and its dire consequences for the globe, more South African companies should follow Sasol's lead.

The success of Sasol's listing also shows that it is taking seriously its attempt to reduce carbon emissions. Sasol is currently one of the largest single emitters of carbon in the world and by this commitment to improved environmental responsibility it is opening itself up to greater scrutiny in this crucial area.

GARETH MORGAN MP
Berea, Durban

Putting country first

Julius Mlambe, Zwelanzima Vavi and Blade Nzimande.

The country is in dire need of a massive shake up in the Department of Safety and Security to address the key issue of crime and violence. The welcome departure of Charles Nqakula presents the president with an opportunity to address crime.

The president will also have to address the issue of health care seri-