"Just Walk Away" – Why Leaving is Not a Safety Strategy

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> *"We don't rise to the level of our expectations; we fall to the level of our training."*
>
> *— Archilochus*

Code Enforcement Officers go to great lengths to avoid confrontation and violence knowing the results of such an encounter can be life altering both mentally and physically. Violence can also have fatal results. To date it is known that 22 code professionals have been killed in the line of duty by violence. Safety cannot be reduced to an unrealistic and impractical strategy of "*just walk away*" especially with the knowledge that code professionals have been injured and killed in the line of duty. Yet far too often code professionals whether a Code Enforcement Officer, Building Inspector, Fire Inspector, Health Inspector, Housing Inspector, Zoning Inspector, or other code related job title are told to "*just walk away*" when a dangerous situation is encountered.

> The belief that Code Enforcement Officers can "*just walk away*" from violent encounters is simply not true or realistic. Such instruction is best-case scenario wishful thinking that will not serve one well against the realities of a violent worst-case scenario attack.

It would be nice if it were so easy to avoid violence by simply leaving but that is often not realistic or possible. Those who push the "*just walk away*" mantra are usually well intentioned but significantly misinformed about the realities of violent encounters. The reality is that code professionals rarely have the luxury of walking away or retreating when confronted by a serious threat for numerous reasons that will be outlined in this article. I have analyzed thousands of real-world violent encounters. I have intently studied the actions of both the predators and their victims. There are many lessons to be learned about violence and one of those lessons is that walking away is often not an option especially from a Dedicated Threat whose intention is to kill.

To those who advocate a "*just walk away*" strategy I ask:

- What course of action do you recommend that a code professional utilize when the ability to safely retreat or leave is not possible?
- Is your department providing realistic and practical safety training to staff?
- Is your department providing safety equipment for such encounters?

Code Professionals Killed in the Line of Duty

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Name	End of Watch	Age	State/Country	Weapon	Location
James Madden	8/23/1932	43	IL	Shotgun	Field
Gail Braden	04/06/1944	46	KS	Handgun	Field
Charles Askew	04/13/1954	49	TX	Shotgun	Field
Jean JJ Tellier	6/01/1962	60	Canada	Shotgun	Field
Reed Walker	2/26/1960	55	NV	Handgun	Field
Vincent Scanlon	2/5/1985	32	FL	Handgun	Field
Cynthia Volpe	8/19/1992	38	CA	Handgun	Personal Residence
Karel Van Noppen	2/20/1995	42	Belgium	Handgun	Field
Don Juenemann	12/24/1997	56	MN	Rifle	Field
Jean Hillery	6/21/2000	56	CA	Handgun	Field
Tom Quadros	6/21/2000	52	CA	Handgun	Field
Bill Shaline	6/21/2000	57	CA	Handgun	Field
Mickey Wright	4/17/2001	46	TN	Handgun	Field
Earl Bowman	7/3/2002	44	IN	Knife	Field
Michael Walker	6/13/2005	44	TX	Handgun	Field
Rodney Morales	11/13/2008	40	CO	Handgun	Field
David Fleetwood	8/5/2013	62	PA	Rifle/Handgun	Municipal Building
Greg Zyszkiewicz	3/22/2017	64	WI	Shotgun	Field
Jill Robinson	8/9/2018	52	UT	Handgun	Field
Michael Tripus	11/27/2018	65	PA	Handgun	Municipal Building
Charles Case	8/20/2020	41	GA	Shotgun	Field
Dennis Catanyag	1/14/2021	46	CA	Knife	Field

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> *"All men can see these tactics whereby I conquer, but what none can see is the strategy out of which victory is evolved."*
>
> — *Sun Tzu*

The intent behind "*just walk away*" is really about **avoiding** conflict and violent encounters. The intent is great, but the application is flawed. If "*just walk away*" was a legitimate strategy there would not be 22 code professionals who were violently killed in the line of duty. Avoidance may be the goal but it is never guaranteed. Code professionals need an understanding of their options when avoidance is not possible.

Avoidance	Avoidance is best accomplished by maintaining **situational awareness** that provides timely and relevant information. Situational awareness that allows a code professional to identify pre-incident indicators in the environment *prior* to initiating contact is the only time the ability to "*just walk away*" is a realistic option. ➢ It is important to note that situational awareness does **NOT** guarantee that all threats will be identified or avoided.
De-escalation	When avoidance is not possible the code enforcement professional should, when possible, utilize de-escalation strategies to prevent the encounter from escalating to violence. At this point the ability to "*just walk away*" is severely diminished. ➢ Not all encounters can be successfully de-escalated. ➢ There may not be time to use de-escalation strategies such as with an ambush attack.

Use of Force	If avoidance and de-escalation are not possible the code enforcement officer may have no other choice than to use force that is reasonable and necessary to stop the threat. At this point the ability to "*just walk away*" does not exist.
	
	 ➢ Use of force must be legal, moral, ethical, and within department policy.
	    – Are staff provided realistic, practical, and on-going safety training?
	    – Are staff provided and trained in the use of safety equipment?
	    – Does the department have policies and procedures pertaining to use of force?

An **ambush attack** does not afford the options of avoidance or de-escalation. If the code enforcement officer survives the attack the only option may be to use force to stop the threat. An ambush attack is the worst-case scenario of violence a code professional can encounter.

91% of CEO's were killed with a firearm.

86% of CEO's were killed in the field.

Could these code professionals have just walked away!

Instructing a code enforcement officer to "*just walk away*" is not an effective strategy because it fails to account for the realities of violent encounters which often happen very fast, at very close distance, and are very dynamic. The ability to "*walk away*" becomes limited once conflict develops.

> **The time to walk away is when situational awareness is effectively used**
>
> **to identify danger _prior to contact_ with a citizen who may be a threat.**

Verbiage that provides a meaningful and realistic safety strategy is needed. It is much more effective to inform code enforcement professionals to:

> Use situational awareness to **avoid** a dangerous incident *before* it occurs. If avoidance is not possible then attempt to **de-escalate** the encounter. If de-escalation is not effective and the threat becomes violent, **use force** that is reasonable and necessary to protect yourself. If ambushed you need to survive the initial attack and take immediate and decisive action to stop the threat.

The ability to walk away from a violent encounter without being injured is the best-case scenario that is typically only available if you are able to avoid a situation prior to engaging the citizen or before it escalates to violence. Code enforcement officers must be trained in officer safety practices and issued officer safety equipment that will prepare them for the worst-case scenario. An important aspect about safety that is rarely discussed especially in relation to the "*just walk away*" mantra is:

The threat has a say in how a violent encounter unfolds.

This is an especially important element that tends to be ignored when instructing a code enforcement officer to just walk away. We cannot forget there is more than one person involved in the encounter and the threat does have a say in the outcome! Those who espouse "*just walk away*" act as if the code enforcement officer has complete control of the situation and the other party involved. This is not realistic.

Six reasons why "*just walk away*" is not possible:

1. **Ambush Attack**

   The nature of an ambush attack completely eliminates the possibility of walking away. During an ambush attack the threat:

   ⇨ uses the element of surprise
   ⇨ may be concealed
   ⇨ often has a concealed weapon ready for use
   ⇨ attacks suddenly
   ⇨ attacks without provocation

   The ambush attack happens fast and is often extremely violent. If you are fortunate to survive the ambush your two options are to make a *hasty exit* if possible or *fight for your life* to neutralize the threat. Realistically, a hasty exit is often not a viable option due to the aggressiveness and violent nature of the attack. The most effective course of action is to take cover and return fire. Code enforcement officers who are not armed, which is most code professionals, will have less response options available. An ambush attack is the worst-case scenario that always benefits the attacker and puts the code enforcement officer at a severe life-threatening disadvantage. Many code enforcement officers killed in the line of duty were killed in an ambush attack.

   ### Michael Tripus - AMBUSHED
   Tripus was shot and killed in the Paradise Township Municipal Building by a 72-year-old perpetrator who told police that Tripus "…*had nothing to do with the problems and acted professionally…*"

   ### Michael Walker - AMBUSHED
   Walker was shot 9 times with a .45-caliber pistol while following up on a complaint. As Walker took photos he was confronted by the property owner and his son. The son retrieved a pistol from the house shooting and killing Walker.

   ### Rodney Morales - AMBUSHED
   Morales was shot once in the chest and killed after entering an apartment building to investigate a "*routine zoning complaint.*"

   ### Jill Robinson - AMBUSHED
   Robinson was shot and killed in the driveway by a 65-year-old perpetrator who then proceeded to pour gasoline on her body and light her on fire.

   ### Charles Case - AMBUSHED
   Case went to a residence to post a "condemned" sign on the property. After the sign was posted Case was walking back to his truck when the killer stalked him from behind shooting him multiple times with a shotgun.

   ### Dennis Catanyag - AMBUSHED
   Catanyag was stabbed to death while sitting in his parked vehicle. He just completed an inspection at a restaurant when a restaurant employee grabbed a knife, walked to Catanyag's vehicle, opened the passenger door, and began stabbing Catanyag.

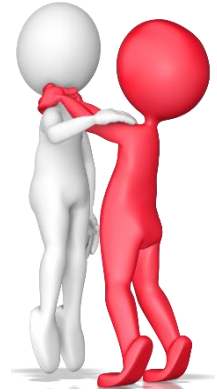   **"*Just walking away*" was not an option for these code professionals!**

2. **The threat prohibits you from leaving**

   The code enforcement officer may be prevented from leaving because the threat:

   a. has the officer at gunpoint, knifepoint, etc.

   b. physically controls the officer with a grab or chokehold

   c. restrains the officer with rope, handcuffs, etc.

   d. physically blocks the officers escape route

   A threat who wants to harm a code enforcement officer has a lot of influence in how the violent encounter will transpire. It is not as if the officer can dictate their departure from a violent encounter. The threat may have the code enforcement officer at gunpoint preventing an escape. The threat may be using a weapon such as a knife in an aggressive, threatening, or violent manner that prevents leaving. Additionally, there may be no cover or concealment for the code enforcement officer to utilize as a form of protection from the threat or the weapon being used.

3. **Attempting to leave is not tactically sound**

   The code enforcement officer may be in a position that does not allow for a safe departure from the threat. For example, the officer might be inside a business or residence in which the owner is blocking or has locked the front door which is your primary exit. In order for you to leave you must get past the threat which places you in a more dangerous situation.

   If attempting to leave places you in jeopardy then consider other options. Avoid taking measures that makes you less safe.

4. **An injury prevents you from leaving**

   There is the possibility that the threat attacks you causing an injury which prevents you from leaving. Or you may have a pre-existing condition such as an injured back or knee that impairs your ability to leave in a safe and rapid manner.

5. **The threat chases you**

In your attempt to "*just walk away*" the threat chases you. The angry citizen who is chasing you may possess a weapon with the intention of causing death or serious bodily injury.

6. **The Code Enforcement Officer "Freezes"**

The officer becomes overwhelmed by extreme fear resulting in the inability to take proactive safety measures. This is referred to as "Condition Black." When a code enforcement officer experiences such a stress reaction he or she has a very limited time (approximately ½ - 1 second) to regain composure, assess the situation, and respond accordingly. Failure to get out of Condition Black and focus on the threat will often result in the officers death or severe injury.

Code Professionals Should Never Be Told to "Just Walk Away"

At this point it should be abundantly clear that the "*just walk away*" mantra is not realistic or practical strategy. It is best-case scenario thinking that does not serve code enforcement officers well during the worst-case scenario of a violent attack. Instead code enforcement officers are better served when provided quality officer safety training and equipment backed by well written policies and procedures relating to the use of force. Such training provides officers the best opportunity to avoid, mitigate, and when necessary respond to violence. Telling officers to "*just walk away*" is negligent, unrealistic, and lacks understanding on the realities of violent confrontations.

> *If only the code enforcement officers who have been killed in the line of duty could have just walked away!*

The need for current, relevant, and practical safety training for code professionals is essential. For too long there has been a lack of training opportunities geared specifically towards code professionals. Fortunately this is no longer the case and high-quality training is now available through the **Code Enforcement Officer Safety Foundation** with the **Code Official Safety Specialist (COSS)** training program.

Code Official Safety Specialist (COSS)

The *Code Enforcement Officer Safety Foundation* in partnership with *Dedicated Threat Solutions* is proud to offer an international officer safety program for code enforcement professionals to include Code Enforcement Officers, Building Inspectors, Fire Inspectors, Health Inspectors, Housing Inspectors, and other code related positions.

The **Code Official Safety Specialist** program is a comprehensive 5-course series on officer survival principles, concepts, and practices. Each course is approximately 3 hours and includes a comprehensive participant workbook with activities to further develop the course content. This training program provides code professionals foundational officer safety skills so you can be safer in the performance of your job duties. The **Code Official Safety Specialist** sets the standard on officer safety training in the code enforcement profession. Additionally, this training applies to all code professionals regardless of jurisdiction, job title, or the type of department you are employed.

> **The Code Official Safety Specialist program is applicable to all code professionals regardless of jurisdiction.**

The **Code Official Safety Specialist** training program consists of the following 5 courses:

1. Tactical Mindset

2. Fear Management

3. Verbal De-escalation

4. 3 Phases of a Contact

5. Surviving a Violent Encounter

Attendees who complete the training receive ICC continuing education credit towards professional development. Those who successfully complete all 5 courses receive a certificate of completion recognizing the officer as a **Code Official Safety Specialist**.

To register for the On-Demand **Code Official Safety Specialist (COSS)** training go to:
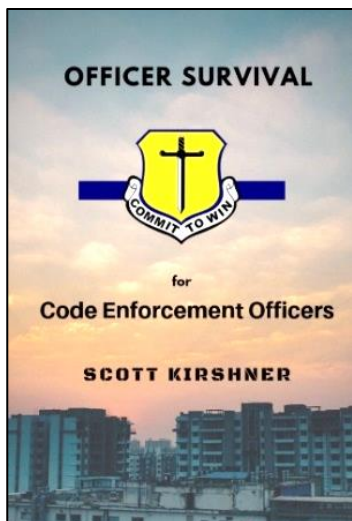
https://ceosfcoss.thinkific.com/courses/cosstraining

Benefits of Code Official Safety Specialist (COSS) Training:

- ☑ 5 Comprehensive Courses
- ☑ 15 Hours of Training
- ☑ Comprehensive Participant Workbook for Each Course
- ☑ Facilitated by a Highly Experienced Officer Survival Instructor
- ☑ Authorization to use the "**COSS**" acronym
- ☑ Official Certificate upon COSS completion
- ☑ ICC CEU's for each course
- ☑ State Association CEU's depending on state
- ☑ Professional Growth and Development
- ☑ Commitment to Officer Safety
- ☑ Increased Confidence
- ☑ Understanding why "*just walk away*" is flawed

The **Code Official Safety Specialist** (COSS) training program

is facilitated by Scott Kirshner who is the author of the

book **Officer Survival for Code Enforcement Officers**

which is used by departments, associations, and code

professionals nationally and internationally.

About the author

Scott Kirshner, M.Ed., COSCI, SAS-AP® has been a Parole Administrator, Supervisory Probation Officer, and a Corrections Officer. He has extensive experience as an officer survival trainer as a lead defensive tactics instructor, firearms instructor, and use of force instructor. He is the author of **Officer Survival for Code Enforcement Officers**. *Mr. Kirshner is the owner and Lead Instructor of Dedicated Threat Solutions, LLC. He can be reached at:* info@dedicatedthreatsolutions.com