



# the TRAINING of the GUARD

**Contract security officers don't always arrive task-ready. Some proactive managers are training on the fly to best utilize their outsourced guard force.**

## Dave Weiner had a problem.

A seasoned manager with more than 25 years of security experience in the corporate, government, and law enforcement sectors, Weiner was directing security at a U.S. Department of Veteran's Affairs healthcare facility in Long Beach, California. The facility needed security officers.

So, Weiner contracted out for help with a guard company. But once the officers arrived, Weiner was unpleasantly surprised to find that their skill sets did not measure up to what had been advertised. "Even given explicit directions in some cases, these folks were not adhering to contractual guidelines," Weiner says.

For example, a few officers did not adhere to basic tenets, like maintaining a professional appearance and following professional standards of conduct. "There was a whole host of these kinds of issues. In some cases, their shirts were not tucked in. They are out there socializing with staff when they should be patrolling," Weiner says. Sometimes, a guard would simply not show up for a shift or forget to call in when taking a break from patrol.

In addition, some officers didn't seem to possess customer service skills or know any de-escalation techniques, which can come in handy with potentially volatile patients in the health facility's emergency department. "We got some complaints about rude behavior," Weiner explains.

In the end, Weiner found there were too many problems with the service, and the contract was not renewed.

But contracting out with another firm did not solve the problem. Issues remained, and some turned more serious. "We had to remove a couple of guards for sexual harassment," Weiner says. There was also an incident of sexual battery, he adds.

So a third firm was brought in, but issues arose again. "It was the same service delivery in every case. It just wasn't up to par," Weiner says. Thus, the facility went through three different providers in just as many years.

In January 2019, with the facility still using the third provider, Weiner retired. (He is currently CEO of his own security firm, Secure Measures, LLC.)

Weiner sees economics as the biggest underlying cause of the problem. He knows that guard force companies generally have "razor thin" profit margins,

so they cannot afford to pay large salaries that might attract exceptional talent. "When you're barely paying these folks enough to care, they are not always going to do the job well," he says.

Training is often substandard, too, he adds. And smaller companies face a daunting economy-of-scale landscape: "The smaller firms can't compete with the larger companies. They are under resourced, so they don't pay their folks well."

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Looking back, Weiner now finds that the initial contacts with guard companies, such as meetings to discuss statements of work, can be misleading. “It’s the honeymoon phase. They are going to do everything you want and more,” he says. “The ethos of many of them is: they are going to do it different, they are going to do it better. But it doesn’t happen.”

Still, Weiner says that people like himself—that is, the ones contracting for the service—can be part of the solution to this problem. “The onus is on me to see that folks are meeting the expectations of what the contract says,” he says. And in general, “business owners need to start monitoring these things a little bit harder,” he argues. “That’s the only way they are going to get the services they paid for.”

### Training Is Crucial

Johnny Keeton, CPP, PSP, fully agrees with Weiner’s point about clients taking an active role in the security officer contracting relationship.

Keeton, another veteran security manager with more than 15 years of public and private security industry experience, is currently a senior security specialist at the Pentagon Federal Credit Union (PenFed) in Eugene, Oregon. When Keeton joined the security program at PenFed, the credit union was using contract security officers, mainly to serve as night guards.

Keeton had seen this movie before, but from the other side of the screen—his previous experience included a stint working for a security service provider. “Having come from the contract security world, I recognized the shortfalls of clients and service providers,” he says.

Knowing he could improve the service at PenFed, Keeton dove into the existing contract relationship. He examined the standard operating procedures (SOP) and learned exactly what tasks the contract officers needed to do. “I said, ‘OK, what is our current guard force contract? What does the guard do? Is it meeting the needs of our program?’” Keeton explains. The goal of this process, he adds, was to answer the questions “What are we

using this for, and what are we getting out of this?”

Keeton found that the existing SOP in the contract was...quite basic. “It was very rudimentary. Basically, show up, do patrols, and that’s about it,” he says. There were a few stipulations about wearing uniforms and maintaining a professional demeanor, but not much in the way of what guards should actually be doing.

“I believe clients need to take more responsibility in understanding what they want, and in how to utilize the guard force,” Keeton explains.

So Keeton decided he wanted to expand the SOP with various expected tasks—such as customer service duties involving visitor log-ins and phone list usage—and also details like uniform specifics and patrol frequencies. “I sat down and wrote a whole laundry list,” Keeton says.

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He ultimately rewrote the SOP, with help from the service provider. Some of the newly included tasks cost a bit extra, but many were included in the original rate. “We essentially took something very basic that wasn’t being used to its potential, and got it to its full potential,” Keeton says.

Once the new SOP was established, Keeton and other managers took the guards through some new on-site training. Company managers would guide them around the site and discuss what was expected on patrol.

The new security officers were appreciative. “They loved it. They would say, ‘This is the only site we can get site-

specific training,’” Keeton says. “And I thought, ‘That’s really weird.’”

Keeton also found the training rewarding. As a military veteran, he had learned the value of amassing technical knowledge and then passing it on, he says. “Why not train these guys and teach them what I know?”

### DIY Academy

Like Keeton, Nabih Numair, CPP, saw the advantages of taking matters into his own hands when it comes to contract guard training.

Based in the San Francisco Bay area, Numair has 15 years of physical security experience, including security management positions at Palo Alto Networks, Tesla, and Gavin de Becker and Associates. Throughout his career, Numair has worked with the larger guard companies to use contract security officer services, and he found that most of the companies “tend to neglect the training aspect of it.”

In explaining his view, Numair cites recent statistics which show that security officers now outnumber law enforcement officers in the United States. According to U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, there were more than 1.1 million private security guards in 2018, compared with about 660,000 police officers and sheriffs. This means that security officers will be the first responders to many incidents, and they must possess skill sets that go beyond the traditional observe-and-report, Numair argues.

For example, contemporary security officers need skills in the areas of surveillance detection, de-escalation tactics, first responder training, and the ability to interact with people suffering from mental illnesses. The latter is particularly important in San Francisco, a city with a sizable homeless population; an interaction with someone loitering on facility grounds who may suffer from mental illness should be conducted with respect, rather than sheer brute force, Numair explains.

As would-be first responders, guards should also have the appropriate

medical training, Numair adds. He has hired guards for corporate events, where security personnel with medical training can be a real asset in case of an accident or sick guest. But Numair says he was surprised to learn that many security officers do not have training in CPR or first aid. One guard company told him that officers who possessed such training would cost more. "To me that was just mind boggling that it wasn't standard," he says.

Although the state of California does require training to get a security guard license, or "guard card," the pre-licensing course can be completed in one day. "My take on the guard card standard is that it's way too minimal. Anyone with a pulse can get a guard card," Numair says.

And like Weiner, Numair found that services were overbilled during initial meetings, when the request

for proposal (RFP) and expectations would be discussed. "All companies will promise you the moon and the stars, but when it comes to execution, the majority of them will fail to execute," he says.

When Numair was working at Tesla he decided to be proactive. He and his team started a makeshift training academy, in which they taught skills like report writing, active shooter response, and de-escalation techniques. The experiment was a success, and the security officers appreciated the opportunity. "The guards loved that. They walked away feeling more invested," he says.

Although such training was a time investment on the part of his team, and it added to the overall workload, Numair says it was worth it in the end. Like Keeton, he found the training rewarding. "I enjoy delivering the

knowledge I accumulated over the last 15 years," he says.

### The In-House Option

The type of training that Numair and Keeton decided to undertake suggests another option for security managers: train in-house staffers to be security officers, rather than outsourcing.

Indeed, for many companies, in-house versus outsourcing is a key equation when it comes to security guards, says Dorian Amstel, CPP, PSP, a physical security senior director for DynCorp International. To flesh out the pros and cons of this question, Amstel wrote an "Ask the Expert" paper on the subject for the ASIS Physical Security Council last year.

According to Amstel, the benefits of an in-house security force include greater supervisor control; greater quality control for guard services; greater control

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SECURITY

over hiring, training, and performance; and greater organizational commitment and buy-in from security officers.

Greater organizational commitment can eliminate what Amstel calls the us-versus-them paradox, in which outsourced guards “feel a sense of loyalty to their security company, but not towards the contracting party.”

Although in-house staffing provides some benefits, “drawbacks cannot be avoided and are often very dissuasive for companies contemplating this option,” Amstel said. These drawbacks include the HR costs of in-house employees, such as health insurance, 401(k) plans, and paid vacation days; hiring costs, such as screening and background checks; and difficulties staffing for nights, weekends, and holidays.

Other drawbacks can potentially kick in for global companies that are looking to use in-house staffing for international offices. “Some countries will have specific requirements and restrictions, which may prevent you from providing your own in-house security,” Amstel said. In Mexico, for example, a company can have in-house security consisting of plainclothes guards, but any guards wearing uniforms must be provided by a security company.

In the future, another option may be entering the in-house versus outsourcing debate: the use of robot guards instead of humans.

“They work 24 hours a day and can have many of the added capabilities which elude their human counterparts,” Amstel said. “For instance, internal scanner, video and audio recording capability, thermal imaging, and an array of sensors worthy of a superhero.”

Although some such robot guards are now on duty in the United States, their possible widespread use is still an open question. “The determining factor to their ubiquitous use, however, will be their ability to interact with people the way security guards can,” Amstel said.

### Communicate, Train, Fix

Of course, there are guard companies that take training and fulfilling skill expectations seriously. Virginia-based Top Guard Security has been in business for more than 20 years, and business success has allowed it to grow to become a firm with more than 1,000 employees.

Top Guard Vice President Chris Stuart, one of the founders of the company, offers some guidance for security service company managers who want to succeed with clients. First, he says that

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identifying and evaluating potential during the recruiting and hiring process is crucial. “The best effort to identify great people is expended on the front end of the process,” he explains.

So, his firm uses targeted advertisements, a hiring funnel designed to weed out those applicants who are not serious, a robust onboarding practice, and an orientation program that “pulls no punches” on company expectations. “Best to find out early who isn’t ready to commit to striving for excellence,” he says.

From Stuart’s perspective, a dearth of supervisory training is the industry’s Achilles’ heel, so the company invests in a substantial site supervisor training program for employees.

“It only makes sense to educate and empower the people with the greatest effect on the workforce,” he explains. “Harvard Business School study after study always reaches the same conclusion—a person’s immediate supervisor is the single largest determinant of whether a person stays or leaves a job.”

Finally, once officers are working on-site for a contractor, the services firm should take a proactive approach in dealing with issues. “Ask routinely. Summarize the problem. Fix it. Communicate the fix. Confirm the fix doesn’t go awry,” Stuart says. “Humility and honesty cannot be overemphasized, because a lack of either infuriates clients.” ■

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