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“Just Walk Away” – Why Leaving is not always an Option

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Most Code Enforcement Officers (CEO) are inclined to avoid violence knowing the results of a violent encounter can be life altering both mentally and physically. Violence can also have fatal results. Far too often code enforcement officers are told to “*just walk away*” when a dangerous situation is encountered. It would be nice if it were so easy to avoid violence by simply leaving but that is not always possible. Those who push the “*just walk away*” motto are well intentioned but misinformed about the realities of violent encounters. The reality is that code enforcement officers do not always have the luxury of walking away 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.

The belief that Code Enforcement Officers can “*just walk away*” from all violent encounters is simply not true or realistic.

The intent behind “*just walk away*” is really about **avoiding** violent encounters. The intent is great but the application is flawed. Words matter and it is important to use words and phrases that have specific intent and application. The true intention of “just walk away” is:

- ⇒ **Avoidance** – This is typically accomplished by maintaining situational awareness. It is important to note that situational awareness is NOT a guarantee that all threats will be noticed and avoided. Using situational awareness effectively to avoid violence is the only time that a CEO truly has the ability to “*just walk away*.”
- ⇒ **De-escalation** – If avoidance is not possible then the CEO should attempt to de-escalate the situation which provides the officer an opportunity to safely leave. At this point the ability to “*just walk away*” is already diminished.
- ⇒ **Use of Force** – If avoidance and de-escalation is not possible then the CEO must use force that is reasonable and necessary to neutralize the threat. At this point the ability to “*just walk away*” does not exist.

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Telling an officer to “*just walk away*” has no context and therefore very little meaning because it is so generic. Additionally, just walking away is possible only during the avoidance phase and the ability to leave dramatically diminishes once a situation develops. At this point situational awareness probably was not effective and the ability to avoid escalation may or may not be possible. The key is that something has already gone bad. It doesn’t mean that the encounter will escalate to violence but the ability to “*just walk away*” is now reactive and not proactive. **The time to walk away is when situational awareness is used effectively to identify potential danger prior to contact with a citizen who may be a threat.**

It is much more effective to tell officers they need to maintain situational awareness to **avoid** a potentially threatening incident **before** it occurs. If avoidance doesn’t work then attempt to **de-escalate** but if the threat becomes violent then the **use of force** is necessary to protect yourself from harm. This is a roadmap with some context.

The ability to walk away from a violent encounter without being injured is the best-case scenario that is only available if you are able to avoid a situation before it escalates to violence. Code enforcement officers must be trained in officer safety practices and issued safety equipment that will prepare them for the worst-case scenario. **Remember, the threat has a say in how a violent encounter unfolds.** Let’s review four reasons why “*walking away*” is not always possible.

1. **Ambush Attack** – The mere nature of an ambush attack completely eliminates the possibility of walking away. During an ambush attack the threat:
 - ⇒ uses the element of surprise
 - ⇒ is often concealed and/or has a weapon concealed
 - ⇒ attacks suddenly
 - ⇒ attacks without provocation

The attack happens fast. If you are lucky 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 officers, 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.

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2. **The threat prohibits you from leaving** – The threat who wants to harm you has a lot of influence in how a violent counter will transpire. It is not as if the code enforcement 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 another weapon such as a knife in a 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.
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 code enforcement officer might be inside a business or a 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 need to get past the threat which might end up placing you in a more dangerous situation. If attempting to leave places you in jeopardy you should choose another option. Avoid taking measures that places you in jeopardy and makes you less safe.
4. **An injury prevents you from leaving** – There is the possibility that the threat attacks you and causes an injury which prevents you from leaving. Or you may have a pre-existing injury such as a bad back or pulled hamstring that impairs your ability to leave.

The “*just walk away*” mantra is not good advice. In fact, it is worthless because it is generic and without context. Stop using an empty phrase that literally offers zero safety benefit. Instead, now is the time for departments to provide staff with officer safety training and equipment they so desperately need when confronted by violence. Training is the key. Staff do not go to work with the intention of getting injured or killed. They know to avoid violence when possible. Ask yourself how many of the code enforcement officers who have been killed in the line of duty could have *just walked away*!

About the author

Scott Kirshner, M.Ed., SAS-AP® has been a Parole Administrator, Supervisory Probation Officer, and a Corrections Officer. He has extensive experience as an officer survival trainer and has been a lead defensive tactics instructor, firearms instructor, and use of force instructor. He is the author of [Officer Survival for Code Enforcement Officers](#) which is available on Amazon.com. Mr. Kirshner is the owner and Lead Instructor of Dedicated Threat Solutions, LLC. The author can be reached at: info@dedicatedthreatsolutions.com or to learn more visit: www.dedicatedthreatsolutions.com

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