

Instructor Ethics 101

When we step up to teach a defensive handgun class, we are quite literally asking people to bet their lives on the quality of the information we have and on our ability to teach it to them. This is no exaggeration, but just the simple truth. Students come to us looking for the knowledge and skill that can save their lives some dark night.

When we teach them well, our work can help them stay alive. If we fail to teach them well, if we teach them the wrong things, if we give them half an answer or a bad answer, they may pay for our failure with their heart's blood.

Understanding this – really understanding it – should scare us down to our toenails. It should force each one of us to become better as shooters, as teachers, as learners, as students of self-defense. It should jar us out of complacency and drive us to do our best with every class we teach.

We want to be good at what we do because we understand that as defensive firearms instructors, *people's lives are in our hands*.

Sometimes I fear that not all instructors understand this. “I’m just teaching beginners,” I have heard some say, as if they have some private guarantee that none of their beginners will ever really need the things they teach. Or as if it doesn’t matter whether a beginner is started right. But even a beginner needs a solid foundation they can safely build upon, not some half-hearted construct cobbled together of cardboard and glue and hope. Given that the majority of students will likely never take a single class beyond the beginner level, the instructor who teaches beginning students carries the heaviest burden of all. At other levels, it may sometimes be reasonable to assume that the students will get what they need in some other class or from some other teacher, if our own class fails to reach them; but that’s not a reasonable assumption with beginners. It might be that *this* class is the only one they will ever get and the only contact they will ever have with an instructor. That’s a serious responsibility for the instructor who chooses to work with beginners.

There’s something related, scary, that’s especially common within the women’s side of the firearms world (though not at all unique to it). I have often run into a mindset that says we can give our students what they need without ever challenging them, without ever pushing their skills and without any risk of hurting their feelings. Everything must always be fun, fun, fun – sweetness and light and hallelujah! But ... when we’re talking about self-defense, we’re actually talking about some very serious matters. We can and do have fun on the range, but when we study firearms for self defense, it’s fun with a deadly serious purpose. That purpose will drive us straight through the heart some very personal territory, which is the kind of journey you cannot take without risk.

To be clear, I'm a strong believer in encouraging words and positive attitudes. At the same time, those encouraging words should be true, and they should be appropriate. There are times when the most encouraging, appropriate thing we can say to our student is, "You can do better than that." It is good and right to celebrate success, but even better to celebrate *earned* success.

Personally, I have always had a struggle with wanting my students to like me, to think I'm a nice person and fun to be around. Of course, those are good things! But my students don't come to me to be my pals. They come to me believing that I can help them learn how to protect their own lives in the face of deadly danger. If my desire to be super nice and super sweet actually gets them killed someday, then I haven't been nice to them at all.

In order to fulfill my most important responsibility to my students, I have to risk pushing them beyond their comfort levels. And I have to do it in a way that will cause them to work harder rather than shut down or give up. If I'm not willing to take that social risk for the sake of my students' lives, I have no right to call myself a good instructor.

Responsibility

Excellent defensive firearms teachers feel a strong sense of responsibility toward their students, and they show that they feel that responsibility in several ways.

"I had only been shooting a short time and wasn't very skilled when people pushed and pushed me to become an instructor. 'We need more women in the field' they would say... No one was being casual or flippant, but still, what we need is more *skilled and qualified* people in the field – not just more people, male or female." – Shelby McKenzie

- **They get extra training**, far above what they "need," because they want to be absolutely sure they can give students trustworthy instruction. I put "need" in scare quotes for a reason: as a very young child, my family and I lived for a short time in a third-world country. One of the hallmarks of the horrible education system in that impoverished country was its low standards for teachers. Even as a child, I was shocked to learn that in that country, a first grade teacher simply had to have graduated from second grade and *nothing more*. There are firearms instructors today who regard that same third-world, third-rate standard more than adequate for teaching people how to defend their very lives; they feel that it's enough for them to be barely ahead of their students. I celebrate those who believe and act otherwise!
- **They work hard to be sure what they teach is accurate**. These instructors study different techniques and measure those techniques not just against common sense, but against actual performance. They study how crime happens and they study ways people effectively defend themselves from violence. They work to understand important ideas such as how human brains work, how bodies behave under stress, and how to coach someone in a physical skill. They strive

to maintain a sense of balance and non-bias in their teaching. They find good reasons to support the techniques they already teach and believe, and they also deliberately look for good reasons to change techniques. They never teach a technique simply because someone else told them it was a good idea. They do their homework.

- **They personalize what they teach** to match the students they have. These instructors strive to avoid one-size-fits-all solutions to problems. They work to understand each student's specific struggle before suggesting a solution and they make sure each student receives training that takes their own real-life needs into account. This is more work than simply throwing "the technique" out there for a big group of students to adopt or adapt as they see fit, but it's also more likely to become an integrated part of your students' survival plan.

There are many other ways good instructors demonstrate their fundamental respect for the tremendous trust their students have placed in them. We will talk about these issues throughout the book; look for them! You may even want to jot notes for yourself as you go along. What matters most to you, and how are you expressing it for your students?

Power

Looking back through my notes from a class I took seven or eight years ago, I found a note I'd jotted down about something another student said. It must have resonated with me at the time because it made it into my notes. But I honestly don't remember it. I have no conscious memory of that segment of the class. No idea who said it, even – there's just a little squiggle next to the words, to indicate that it was a fellow student and not the instructor. That student had power, though. He or she changed my life. And I know this, because I've been using that person's idea for the past few years as I've taught others. It's just a small thing, but it's become an integrated part of my thinking.

That ability to change others and alter their view of the world is a real-life superpower. That's the power a good defensive shooting instructor has, because we often interact with students as they are on the cusp of making some fairly fundamental shifts their thinking and worldviews. This is most emphatically *not* limited to beginning students only. Even at the advanced levels, defensive handgun classes often stir up surprising insights from students that affect the quality of their lives. I'm reminded of a friend of mine, who in a high-level scenario-based class had a sudden insight about himself that caused him to quit his job and find a new one. Because issues surrounding self-defense often hit students where they live, the work of a defensive firearms instructor often does likewise. As our words and actions touch the lives of our students, we have the power to change the world.

Massad Ayoob speaks of teaching as having an 'oil stain' effect. When you plink just a few drops of oil into a pond, that oil will spread around and change the nature of everything else the water touches. That's the power a good instructor has in the lives of her students.

One of the most important components of instructor development is helping new teachers understand their own tremendous power – and helping them fully embrace the responsibility that goes with it. Most of us really aren't 100% comfortable with having the ability to change the world for good *or* bad. It scares us. So we retreat into denial and reject the responsibility we should be embracing. It's more comfortable to think "no one listens to me anyway" than it is to measure our thoughts, weigh our words, and think about the potential effects we have on others before we throw something out into the room where our students are listening, or out into the world at large. Even so, becoming a good instructor means accepting your own power and embracing your responsibility to use it wisely.

"Where there is great power
there is great responsibility." –
Winston Churchill (1906 speech
to the House of Commons)

What parts of your own power scare you, and why? What are some ways you can more responsibly explore and use the power you already have? Carefully considering your answers to these questions will build a big part of your foundation toward becoming an excellent, ethical defensive firearms trainer.

Love

As a friend and I were discussing ways to develop new firearms instructors, I got to thinking about some of the best defensive handgun trainers I've met – people who are also some of the best in the world at what they do. Here's what I wrote to my friend about that:

*"As much as I've learned on the range in formal classes over the years, I've learned far more sitting in my mentors' living room on weekend nights, chattering over dinner [and] listening to the guest instructors explain the nuts and bolts behind their own programs in a casual setting where they weren't on stage and were simply talking among friends. Finding out what makes the good ones tick, and beginning to understand what motivates them, and finally coming to see the beating heart of love that drives the truly greats in everything they do, **the angry and desperate love** that hides behind the gruff exteriors of crabby old men who've seen too much death and carnage and never want to see it again."*

It's love that drives a good instructor — love for the student, and not for himself. The best of the best aren't the stars of their own movies. They're humble, down-to-earth, practical people who look for ways to make others shine. They're driven by the kind of selflessness that strives to protect others and give them the tools to protect themselves. Because of that love for others, they get a lot of their energy from deep wells of frustration and yes, sometimes even rage, at anything that would harm their students or prevent their students from being able to protect themselves.

"Be yourself when teaching.
Don't get up there and try to

As a learner on this journey, from watching these men and women I've come to realize that we as instructors have to be driven by the same kind of selfless love that fuels them. This doesn't mean we must become just like them in every way. It simply means that we allow the same type of love that drives their work to drive our own.

It's love that forces us to do the work that needs to be done.

It's love that keeps us up late at night making sure our teaching plans are solid and built on good principles, our ranges well prepped for the students, our safety protocols carefully considered and ready to go, our speeches well-practiced and easy to understand, our shooting techniques the best we can possibly offer, our gunhandling skills solid enough for students to imitate... and on, and on, and on.

Anyone can grab an audience without having the heart, but it's love for the students that separates the good from the truly great.

Birthright

Being a defensive handgun instructor isn't always easy. For me, there have been many challenges with travel: twice in as many weeks one fall, I spent an unexpected night in the Minneapolis airport when flights were delayed. There are challenges with weather: it's often unexpectedly cold, or unexpectedly hot, or unexpectedly wet and rainy. There are challenges with ranges and facilities, conflicting schedules, and the endless balancing act between time and energy that every small business owner feels. Those things can be tough, but they don't *matter* – not compared to the deep joy of watching a student gain confidence and competence, improving both her skill and her comfort level with the firearm.

An interviewer once asked me, "Have you ever had a student call to say she'd defended herself with a firearm after taking your class?" I suppose most instructors privately hope to get a call like that, but the idea that drives me forward isn't that. It's the email from a woman who tells me that she learned to be more aware and more alert in my class, so she's better able to avoid potential victimhood. It's the man who tells me he used something I taught to stay out of danger, or to get away from trouble before it started. It's the crime that never happened because the intended victim ... *wasn't*. It's the call from a woman who says she's gained the confidence to jump in and do other things she's been afraid to do, that the courage she gained in my class has helped her face her fears and grow. It's watching men and women become competent gun handlers and good shots, and seeing that increased confidence spill over into other areas of their lives. Those are the things that motivate me.

Every person on this planet has a birthright of being strong, confident, and prepared to protect themselves and the people they care about. As defensive firearms trainers, we have the tremendous privilege of helping good people claim that birthright for themselves.

be Massad Ayoob or John Farnam or Chuck Taylor or Jeff Cooper. They've already done that. Just be yourself. You're better at being yourself than you are at being those other guys." – Marty Hayes

