Range Commands

When we have a line of students on the range, we need to communicate with them. We must communicate clearly to avoid dangerous misunderstandings. We must communicate loudly, because our students are wearing ear protection. Many students will not hear us well with their ears covered, so the commands we give must be very distinct, made up of sounds that are not easily confused for other commands. To save our voice and reduce misunderstandings, the commands must be very short and easily repeated.

If you are a soft-spoken person with a gentle voice, you may find it unnatural to bellow terse orders at these perfectly innocent people who trust you to teach them how to shoot. But for safety's sake, this *must* be done. The job requires it. You cannot safely run a group of people on the range by giving conversational directions in a soft voice. To help each person understand what the group is doing with loaded firearms while wearing ear protection, your commands must be clear, short, distinct, and LOUD.

Clarity

In every case, we must make sure our students understand what the commands mean before we actually use them. Explain any unfamiliar or unusual commands very early in the day, either as part of your safety briefing or during the initial range instruction, before anyone puts on their hearing protection.

Making our commands clear means we use the imperative form; that is, we must voice an actual *command* so that students clearly understand what we want them to do. “Draw to low ready!” is a command. “Please get your gun out and, um, uh, get ready to fire, okay?” is a muddled request that may not be understood.

Students appreciate knowing what is expected of them, and they especially appreciate it when we take the time to be sure everyone around them does, too. Nobody feels safe standing next to a confused person holding a live firearm!

Brevity

Keep commands short.

Short commands save your voice.

Students can follow short commands.

We can repeat short commands.

Keep commands short.

Rhythm and pitch

Here's one essential trick to improve students' ability to understand your commands: use a particular rhythm and pitch, a familiar cadence, for every command and series of commands. Like the singsongy patter of an auctioneer, the rhythm and pitch of the instructor's voice allows the crowd to better understand what's happening even when they miss hearing a specific word.

Use your voice like a musical instrument to keep students tuned in to the flow of your commands. Your tune can carry (almost!) all of your meaning, and the tune gets through the ear muffs a lot more easily than words alone ever will.

Put special emphasis – either extra length or more volume – on the part of the command students are most likely to want you to repeat. Usually, this will be the number of shots you want them to fire, but it may be something else entirely, such as the *un-* in "unload."

As much as possible, use a different rhythm and pitch when you must talk to just one individual student on the line. This helps reduce confusion, misunderstandings, and uncomfortable mistakes.

> "Change your voice inflection when the task changes. It catches the students' attention." – Marty Hayes

If for some reason, you cannot change your volume or pacing when you must address an individual student rather than the group (perhaps you don't have enough instructional staff to allow someone else to watch the rest of the line while you move closer to your person, so you must bellow at one student from a longer distance that would be appropriate for a private conversation), you can simply use words to let the other students know that you're not addressing them. "Jenny, and Jenny *only*: reload! Jenny only."

In situations like this, failing to either change volume or to tell the other students we aren't talking to them often results in befuddled people all across the range trying to figure out why you're telling them to reload when they already did.

Attention!

Use a verbal attention signal (a more eloquent type of throat-clearing) whenever there has been a break in the pattern. Use it when students return to the line after taping targets, or immediately after you've been privately addressing a single student, or whenever you resume a paused command sequence. This phrase contains no command of its own, but simply alerts students that you're about to issue a fresh command or change the details of a previous one.

The verbal attention signal I use most often is: "On the line!" There's no information inside this noise, so students don't have to ask each other to repeat what I just said while they were thinking about other things.

This is the formal, professional equivalent of something we do in casual conversation all the time: "Hey, Chris." <wait for Chris to look over and indicate that he's listening> "Could you please hand me the thermafloogit that's next to your right elbow?"

Pause and look

Just before you give the signal to begin shooting, pause and look at your shooters. During this *brief* break in the action, watch for confused shoulders or people looking at the folks next to them for more information. Look for unexpected hand or arm movements that may indicate gun malfunctions or trouble with a reload. Watch for visual signals from your assistants that might mean someone needs personal attention before they will be able to fire.

When you spot any of these indicators, wait an extra moment before blowing the whistle, so the student can either resolve the problem themselves or ask for help. If the problem turns out to be more involved than the student can fix without help during a simple pause, you might ask your assistant to work with the needy student while you and the others proceed with the drill.

Taking that brief moment to pause and look before giving the signal to fire will usually allow students to resolve their issues on their own, without feeling disrespected or frazzled into dangerous behavior.

> ***A brief word about time pressure:*** We often want students to shoot quickly and deal with reloads or malfunctions quickly. This may mean putting them under deliberate stress, hurrying them along on purpose so they learn the skill of being efficient in their gunhandling. Even in those situations, you'll still want to check how far out of sync you have allowed people to get before you give the signal to fire. As much as possible, try to keep this type of stress *within the drill* rather than artificially outside it.

Whistle

In Cornered Cat classes, we use a whistle as the command to fire. We do this because we do not want to acclimate students to firing on a verbal signal.

XXX MORE XXX

Volume

One of the most significant challenges I have faced as an instructor has been making my voice work well enough for every student on the range to easily hear it. The problem – to the extent that it is a problem – is that I'm a woman, with a woman's naturally-higher voice register. Adult male voices tend to cut right

through ear muffs or plugs without much problem, but female voices have a harder time getting through. So I have had to learn a few tricks to help students hear my voice. Fortunately, both men and women can use these same tricks to increase their volume and avoid unneeded stress on the vocal cords.

First (and I know this might seem a little obvious, but bear with me): before you open your mouth, you must know *exactly* what you are going to say. Why? Because your volume naturally increases when you are fully committed to saying a thing, and because range commands ideally begin with a sharp, explosive sound designed to get people's attention. You make that sound best and loudest when you are fully committed to making it.

Second, bring the sound out from somewhere down in your gut, from its center somewhere near your belly button, rather than from high in your chest or throat. Law enforcement officers sometimes call this forceful way of speaking a "command voice." When done right, it feels very different from ordinary speech, and puts much less strain on your vocal cords.

Give your commands in a deeper tone or pitch than your natural one whenever possible, bringing your voice down from its normal, higher register into a lower one if you can do so. This, too, lessens the strain on your vocal cords and improves your volume.

Finally, commit to giving only *one* brief command at a time. By separating your words into very distinct units with a pause between them, you take best advantage of the volume you do have.

Can you hear me now?

In addition to making your own voice louder, there are a few other tricks you can use to help students hear your commands.

Because students are wearing hearing protection, you may need to repeat the commands so everyone can hear them. Try repeating each command three times: The first time you say the command, face directly toward the targets in the center of the range, and use the long version. After a brief pause, give the short form of the command while looking toward the students on your left, then pause and repeat it while looking toward the students on your right. This will allow everyone a better opportunity to hear what you said.

When setting up the shooting line at the beginning of the day, place your students as far apart as needed for comfort – but *no farther apart than that*. When students are not spread all the way across the range, your voice does not need to carry so far. This also improves safety by making it faster for coaches and instructional staff to reach potential problems.

When you have a student who is hard of hearing, put that student in the center of the line so she can hear the commands more clearly. Students on the edge of the line are more likely to have difficulty hearing than those toward the center, so save the ends for people with good ears and electronic hearing protection.

If the class is very large and you have assistant coaches, you might ask your assistants to echo your commands a brief moment after you give them. This is another reason to use *one* command at a time; it gives people time to process what you say and makes it very natural for assistants to extend your voice by repeating the commands for the nearest students during each pause.

Make sure your assistants understand that they need to echo only the brief form of the command (the one-word version), and that they should *not* try to add more information or explain anything. That's because if they start talking, they could easily drown out the next command and make the clarity problem worse instead of better. So ask them to repeat the one-word command during your natural pauses, and signal you with a handwave if a student needs more information.

Call the line clear

Always specifically call the line clear at the end of each drill, before you allow students to turn around or step away from their shooting position. Don't get in the habit of allowing students to wander off in the middle or even at the end of the drill without that line-clearing command. Casual wandering like this leads to unfocused people forgetfully stepping forward while others are still handling firearms, or sweeping the people next to them as they turn around before they've holstered. Movement off the line without a clear command also increases chaos and confusion, and chaos is always our enemy in multi-person classes.

Maintain control of your line and specifically call it clear before allowing students to break.

Example:

- "Safely holster!" <pause for compliance>
- "Is anyone ***NOT*** holstered?" <pause, listen, and look>
- "The line IS holstered. The line is clear." <switch to lecture voice> "Go ahead and pick up your gear, tape targets, and refill your magazines. Five minute break. Don't forget to grab a mouthful of water."

Encourage students to stop you from unintentionally calling the line clear while they still have a gun out of the holster. Do this by asking, "Is anyone ***NOT*** holstered?"

It's almost always more natural to ask that question the other way around ("Is everyone holstered?") but if you do that, the chorus of *yes* answers will drown out the single, all-important *no* from the student who still has his firearm out. Since you must hear that lonely *no*, structure your question in the negative: "Is anyone ***NOT*** holstered?"

When you pause and look before calling the line clear, quickly check each student's status: Can you see a gun in the student's holster, or can you see the student's empty hands? Make eye contact with each of your range staff to be sure they're not focused on someone still handling a gun that you've missed. And listen for the very important *no* that will let you know that it's not yet safe to call the line clear.