

OFFICER SAFETY MUST NEVER BECOME CLICHÉ

Reclaiming what we mean when we say, “be safe”

By Donald R. Weaver

Across the country, it is common to hear officers say “be safe” or “stay safe” to one another. Sadly, sometimes these phrases are used as just another way of saying “farewell” or “goodbye” when parting ways. In many cases, the powerful impact these phrases should carry is completely lost. We should reclaim these phrases and reaffirm their intended message.

What do you understand when someone says, “be safe”? How do the officers at your agency interpret the phrase when your watch commander ends briefing with, “Stay safe out there”? When you utter the words “be safe” or “stay safe” to a coworker, what exactly are you trying to communicate?

Some use these phrases as an almost whimsical wish of good fortune or luck. Some think “be safe” only means, “I hope and wish that everything *turns out* OK today.” While we absolutely should hope, wish and pray for safety, we should not focus solely on the outcome. This interpretation dangerously reinforces the notion that officer safety is always (or even mostly) a result of things outside of our control. While we know that even the best and bravest officer can fall victim to unpreventable circumstances, we also know that most of the time there are many things we can do to minimize risk and enhance safety.

We must clarify how we are using the word safety. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary [defines “safe”](#) as “free from harm or risk; unhurt.” But it also lists another definition: “Not likely to take risks; cautious.” Of course officers must take some risks. But when we say “be safe” or “stay safe,” we are not merely hoping for a safe outcome—we are telling officers to be cautious.

We should communicate to our coworkers, subordinates and even our superiors that we can’t just “be” safe and we can’t just “stay” safe. Being safe and staying safe is not the result of passivity. “Be safe” and “stay safe” must be understood as encouraging or commanding them to take conscious, purposeful actions that are designed to help ensure safety, including:

- Be alert and aware of your surroundings
- Constantly train, prepare and improve
- Maintain mental and physical fitness
- Effectively utilize cover and concealment
- Do not place yourself unnecessarily at risk
- Do not intentionally antagonize people
- Avoid complacency
- Use force when appropriate
- When possible, summon additional resources
- Use safe tactics and techniques

What else can we do to help ensure that everyone in our department is spurred to action the next time someone says “be safe” or “stay safe”?

- Formalize our department’s commitment to officer safety by incorporating a safety mandate into the policy manual. For example, Lexipol’s Conduct Policy includes the following among illustrative causes for disciplinary action: “Failure to observe or violating department safety standards or safe working practices.”
- Continuously train on our department’s safety standards and safe working practices. Through Lexipol’s [Daily Training Bulletin](#) (DTB) program, for example, officers are exposed every day to their department’s policy, shown what it means and taught how to apply it to actual scenarios.
- Once the the expectation of safe behavior has been established, and after we have started continuously training on safety, we must adequately supervise our personnel.
- Finally, through the disciplinary process we must hold accountable those officers who unjustifiably disregard safe working practices.

As law enforcement professionals, we know that officer safety is not something that should be left purely to chance. Make sure that everyone around you knows that “be safe” and “stay safe” are not frivolous pleasantries but serious and urgent calls to action.

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