

Simplified Instruction for Stage Management, Flow and Briefings

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The following article is part one of a two part article. We had to break it up due to its length. I encourage everyone to pay close attention to what Ron has to say even if you are not a MD or SO. Ron has been a long time SO and Frank Glover, of Carolina Cup fame, has called Ron one of the best SO's he has ever worked with. Ron has graciously taken the time to write down what has worked best for him and share that here. His dissection of stage management should be a model for all SO's. Ron also offered to allow his email to be posted here should you have questions. You may contact Ron at rgrhoden@aol.com.

1. Purpose:

The purpose of this instruction is to suggest methods for SOs to improve clarity of stage briefs and control of stage flow during IDPA matches. This instruction should be considered as a supporting document for the IDPA SO training class.

2. Responsibilities:

The responsibilities of the CSO/SO are to maintain safe conditions on the range and to provide an efficient and precise set of instructions that allows the shooter to safely and successfully complete a stage or course of fire.

When you volunteer to be an SO, you are helping the match director sell entertainment. The best way that you can contribute is to safely and efficiently keep the flow of the match going. Ever been to a great match with great stages and have to wait 2 hours to shoot each stage? How did it make you feel? What did you remember about the match?

3. Methods of Stage Flow Management:

The following is a discussion on the three methods of stage flow management; Verbal Instruction, Physical Demonstration, and Stage Presence. It is not intended to be a full and complete set of instructions. Stage design dictates the methods of verbal instruction or physical demonstration OR a combination of the two.

3.1 Verbal Instruction:

- A simple rule of verbal instruction is "tell them what you are going to tell them, tell them, and then tell them what you told them". It is very important that you know what you are going to say, in the fewest possible words, in a businesslike manner and maintain your primary purpose. Primary purpose? To safely and efficiently get a shooter through the course of fire, period. This may be a combination of reading the description or "just telling" them what the scenario is or a combination of both. I find that the combo method works best, but unless you can communicate quickly and precisely OR it is a blind stage, questions can become a problem. Know what you are going to say and say it in a direct business-like manner.
- Pre-match communications with the match director/range master is important. Their perspective on the intent of the stage should guide your instructions. Some Match directors/Range masters demand that the scenario sets the "mood", i.e. the bank hold up, car jack, etc. Many dedicated people volunteer their time and efforts into designing and placing these stages. While the scenario may not be important to you as the CSO/SO, it is to the designer. Important: if you start with it you finish with it, every shooter gets the same briefing.

- Use clear, precise words and try to get into a cadence of instruction. People learn best in different ways. It will be beneficial to use both verbal and visual instructions. Whether you read it off the page or from memory get it straight in your head and say it the same way each time. Yes it is boring, yes it is direct, but say it in a rhythm, say it clearly, say it directly and say the same thing to everyone. Do not leave a shooter with indecision. You are there to help the shooter be successful, not guess what you want so you can assess procedural when they get it wrong. The worst thing a CSO/SO can do is assess a penalty for a procedural brought about by your own failure to provide clear instructions.
- We also need to talk about CSO/SO presence. Some have called it command presence, stage presence, etc. Simply stated, it is a "listen to me, I am here to get you through this, and I control the flow" attitude. This can be accomplished by being confident, straight forward and accessible to the shooter. Notice I did not say loud, obnoxious, belligerent, Nazi-like or rude. Nothing wrong with being friendly, joking, clowning around, whatever you want to call it, BEFORE the brief. I found that a simple statement before the brief of "OK, let's get our head into the game, I am going to tell you how this is supposed to be shot, we need to be serious." Then you get into the game and accomplish your primary purpose. What is your primary purpose? See section 2. You set the tone, you set the pace, and you set them up for success.
- Maybe the most important rule for a CSO/SO during the briefing time is... never, ever, ever ask "Are there any questions?", after you give the brief. If you brief correctly, there should be no questions. Example: Course of fire is a Vickers count of 6 rounds to 3 targets, concealment garment required. 2 rounds slicing the pie from the right side of a wall, shoot them as you see them. Each target must receive 2 rounds before moving to the next shoot target. Are there any questions? Can I shoot them from the left side? Can I shoot the first target 6 times if I do not like my hits? After I shoot each target again after I have finished? Can I shoot each target 1 time then move to the next? Obviously, you have some new shooters. This is where the 'read the instructions then show them what you want done' comes into effect; do not try to answer everyone's question individually. Demonstrate quickly what you want, you start in the starting position, you go "beep", you get behind cover, you hold out your right hand and say, "shoot them as they come in view", from cover (tap the edge of the wall with your hand), shoot a minimum of 2 rounds on the first target, then move to the second, etc. If they are new, take that extra time to explain. Also keep in mind, everyone has an off day, and may just not be on their "A" game. It can be completed quickly. Answering every question at once may help a group of new shooters understand and meet your primary purpose.

3.2 Physical Demonstration

- This method uses simplified verbal instructions while you, the CSO/SO, demonstrate the stage clearly, pointing to the targets with your hand or laser pointer, getting into the correct positions, moving to the next position, etc.
- This is the simplest method of course briefing there is, but the trickiest. The CSO/SO has to know the stage, has to be precise, has to be correct and has to give the exact same brief each time. There can be no deviations, no joking around, this is all on the CSO/SO. If you and the match director/range master agree to use this method, you have to be competent enough to give the briefing verbatim to each squad, each time.
- Simply tell them and show them what the course of fire is, step by step. Demonstrate quickly what you want. You start in the starting position, you go "beep", you get behind cover, you hold out your right hand and say, "shoot them as they come in view", from cover (tap the edge of the wall with your hand), shoot a minimum of 2 rounds on the first target, then move to the second, etc. If they are new, take that extra time to explain. This can be completed quickly.

- A confident presence is the most tangible asset you have when you use this method. The CSO/SO has to know the stage and what is required to complete the stage.

3.3 Stage Presence

- In the author's opinion, this is the most significant factor in the success of a stage, match and shooter enjoyment.
- Some people are born with presences, some learn it, some accept leadership, and some do not. In any of these cases it's about management of people, confidence, basic knowledge, average physical level, and agility of mind. How a CSO/SO chooses to manage a stage is up to the match director/range master and the CSO/SO. How the stage is presented, is the key. If you know what you are doing, and you know the stage, and you can successfully communicate to the shooters, then you can be successful. You do not have to be loud, negative, or rude, but you have to be prepared to be direct and fair.
- Grab the attention of the audience. First impressions mean everything. Get their attention, be that by voice (loud or soft, but not screaming at them), holding up your hand, whatever works for you. Once you have their attention, start with a grabber statement, for example "OK, let's get our head into the game, I am going to tell you how this is supposed to be shot, we need to be serious." You have set the tone, they will listen.
- Speak clearly, directly and simply but in a business-like manner. Present your stage brief that you have worked out before-hand concisely.
- Standard shooter commands are given while you look at nothing but the gun. The IDPA rule book and SO training program sufficiently cover load and un-load commands. Only IDPA commands should be used.
- Awareness of what is going on around you is very important. Keep spectators back, out of shooter's line of site. Picture takers can and will crowd the line, placing them in a fairly unsafe position for the sake of a picture. Be aware that safety is primary.
- There should be no doubt who is in control, who knows what is going on.

4. Stage Flow

- Controlling the stage flow is the responsibility of the CSO/SO. How you do that is varied. At large matches the CSO really decides if he has a sufficient experienced group with him or her, who holds the timer, clip board, etc. How do we get really good people to run stages? Experience is the only way. At the local level, if you are the one with experience, help the inexperienced SOs. This is really the function of the match director that wants good SO's, not just button pushers.
- Once the stage brief is worked out, run it through someone to get feedback and practice; a dry run.
- Get your group that is helping to understand what you need done to make things flow smoothly and efficiently.
- Generally speaking, if it takes more than 1 minute to read a brief, that's too long. If it takes 2 minutes to demonstrate a stage that is also too long. How many 120 second stages have you seen in IDPA? Be direct, concise and simple.

5. Score Keeper

- The most important person you can work with is the score keeper. The score keeper has the responsibility of first and foremost collecting the time, points down, procedural, etc. and documenting them accurately. Their function is the administration of the stage; CSO/SO sets the briefing, sets the shooter up to succeed, and focuses on safety. Your score keeper makes sure that re-shoots, time arguments, and procedural arguments are kept to a minimum. They are your team mate and really good ones are hard to find, make them as happy as you can. (Backing up your score keeper on close calls is something that should be done too.)
- Good score keepers work as hard and are on their feet as much as anyone at a match. They follow you around, write down the scores, or if you are lucky they score the targets in a fair manner on their own, only asking you to step in as a CSO/SO if there is an issue.
- As a rule, we all know or should know, that once the shooter loads, shoots, unloads and shows all clear, the person with the timer is in control. Once the shooter is complete, holstered and the clear is called, the score keeper is really in control. As the targets are called, you can only go as fast as the scorekeeper can keep up. Good scorekeepers control that with their communications and presence. Ever see 3 people paste 3 different targets and call out each target at the same time? Really good score keeper will stop the 3, point each target, look at each target, write down the score of each target and then tell them to paste said targets. And those scorekeepers do it seamlessly and quickly; controlling the flow.
- If the scorekeeper is calling the target scores and there is a problem, then the CSO gets involved.
- Score keepers should focus on getting the time, capturing the points down per target, approving the pasting of the targets, get the shooter off the stage, complete the administration (signing, shooter copy, etc), and get the next shooter ready to go and the "on deck" shooter ready.
- Knowledgeable scorekeepers also work as a second set of eyes. They can, from a little distance away, catch which targets are shot and in which order, i.e. slicing the pie problems, cover issues, etc. You as the CSO/SO cannot catch everything; you are supposed to focus on the gun, not the targets. Decide before the stage has accepted the first shooter if the scorekeeper is comfortable with this. It is not always necessary for the scorekeeper to make cover calls, etc; it is the stage design that will dictate the process.

6. "The Crew"

- If you are lucky enough to be able to choose your crew to work with, make sure you use your crew to their potential. At large matches, some, if not all, of the time there is a crew of dedicated, hard working people who set the props, paste the targets, take scores and generally do all the things that are least enjoyable. Make sure as the CSO/SO you take care of the crew.
- Make sure that they have water, food, a place to sit down (all before yourself), and are comfortable with what needs to be done. Remember to say thank you! You cannot get through this by yourself. You are supposed to be the leader; not the slave driver with no feelings. Good leaders lead and do not push from behind; hence the word leadership.

7. Equipment

Make sure that you have sufficient amount of pasters, decent timer that you are familiar with, spare battery for timer, backup timer, several writing pens, clip board(s), spare targets, staple gun(s) and staples (right size) to run a stage. Boxes of pasters always seem to disappear, pens walk away, and finding a stapler with staples always seems to be a problem. Have what you need and verify you have it as the CSO/SO.

8. Health

- As an organization we pay a lot of attention to shooter and spectator safety; as we should. We pay almost no attention to the safety and health of our CSO/SO, scorekeepers and crew.
- Hydration for most people is a few drinks of water. De-hydration can kill you or at the very least make you mentally "sluggish" and not as alert as you would be normally. Drink often and plenty days before a match and during a match. . Pop, carbonated drinks and alcoholic drinks DON'T count! If anything they make dehydration worse! For those of us in the southern or western part of the country, summers are hot. Winter and indoor ranges can dry you out just as fast. Drink and make sure everyone you are working with is drinking, or at least try to get them to drink.
- In warm weather, make sure your folks have access to sunscreen, cover/places to sit during down time, and wear a billed cap.
- Make sure your SOs are keeping their blood sugar level consistent by eating every two hours or every 2 squads. Low blood sugar levels that result from not eating can make you feel weak, faint or tired, and your mental abilities may be affected as well, making you slower to react.
- Good ear protection is a must. It needs to be comfortable and suitable for all day wear. Make sure the hearing protection is correct, remember the squib load. Sometimes we can wear so much protection that we cannot hear anything. Whatever it takes to protect your hearing and be able to hear enough to function is important.
- Eye protection is also a must. With the large amount of inexpensive, industrial eye protection available today, there is really no reason to purchase \$100 plus, high speed sunglasses. Local hardware stores (Lowe's, Home Depot, and Ace) all have decent quality eye wear. I do recommend "wrap style" eye wear for maximum eye protection. Make sure they fit correctly as to not continually slide down the nose, exposing the eyes to frags, etc.
- It is the CSO/SO responsibility to make sure that the shooter has both eye/ear protection and is wearing them, along with everyone else. Safety is the responsibility of all, but yours by title.

Rules for the efficient CSO/SO

1. Know the stage and safety features of the stage, i.e. muzzle safe points, etc.
2. Know the brief you are going to give.
3. Read the brief (if you have one), 30 second max. Demonstrate the brief, 60 seconds max.
4. Watch the gun while the shooter is in contact with it. Focus on the gun. Do not be a spectator, be a safety officer. Be ready for the squib, dud or whatever could go wrong and hurt someone.
5. Never ask are there any question to the group of shooters. There always will be.
6. Be polite but direct, concise, simple and business like in your presentation. Make sure every squad gets the same thing.
7. Remember your Primary Purpose for running a stage. The primary purpose is "To safely and efficiently get a shooter through the course of fire."
8. Never set up a shooter to fail because of your brief or lack of communications. They will have plenty of time to do that for themselves once the buzzer goes off. If a shooter does something different than you briefed and it still is within the IDPA rules, and course design intent, what's the problem? Be flexible. Course design will decide if it is correct or not.
9. Always be fair to the shooter, "just because" is not a reason.
10. Never let the shooter think you are not in charge. Your presence and professionalism are there for others to judge. If you make a mistake, it is OK. You are going to make them and at the most inconvenient times. Correct them, apologize and move forward. Nobody is perfect.

You can meet these suggestions and be polite at the same time. You set the management of the stage and the flow with the briefing.

**The Golden Rule of a Stage Management:
It is all about the stage brief,
always has been, always will be.**