

YOUR FIRST 90 DAYS BEHIND THE BADGE

STEVEN DAVID LAMPLEY

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By the time you reach your first 90 days behind the badge, something important has begun to happen. The uniform that once felt unfamiliar has started to become part of who you are. The equipment on your duty belt is no longer something you have to consciously think about. You know the streets you patrol a little better, you recognize more names on the radio, and you have started developing a sense of confidence that only comes from experience.

However, your first 90 days are also when you begin to understand the true complexity of police work. The excitement of becoming an officer has settled into the reality of what the profession requires. You are beginning to realize that being a good police officer is about much more than knowing laws, making arrests, or responding quickly to calls. It is about judgment, communication, emotional control, and the ability to make sound decisions when people are counting on you during some of the worst moments of their lives.

The first 90 days are not about becoming a veteran officer. They are about building the habits that will determine what kind of officer you eventually become.

By this point, your Field Training Officer has likely challenged you, corrected you, and pushed you beyond your comfort zone. There may have been moments when you felt frustrated or questioned whether you were meeting expectations. Remember that correction is not criticism of who you are. It is an investment in who you can become.

A good FTO is not trying to make your first months difficult. They are trying to prepare you for the years ahead when there may not be someone standing beside you reminding you what to do. The lessons you learn during this period are designed to create independence, confidence, and good decision-making.

One of the biggest changes during your first 90 days is that you begin moving from memorizing procedures to understanding the reasons behind them. In the academy, many things were taught as rules you needed to remember. In the field, you begin to understand why those rules exist.

You learn why communication can prevent unnecessary conflict. You learn why slowing down can make a situation safer. You learn why paying attention to small details can make the difference between solving a problem and missing an opportunity.

Experience begins connecting the pieces.

During this time, you will also discover that police work is often less dramatic than people imagine. Television and movies focus on pursuits, arrests, and high-risk incidents, but much of police work involves helping people through difficult situations. You will spend countless hours dealing with family disputes, people in crisis, traffic problems, mental health concerns, and citizens who simply need someone to listen.

Never underestimate the importance of those encounters.

The way you treat people during ordinary calls will often define the reputation you develop in your community. A person may forget the outcome of a situation, but they will remember whether you treated them with dignity and respect.

Your first 90 days are also when you begin developing your own style as an officer. You will naturally observe other officers and begin adopting certain habits. Be careful about who you choose to imitate.

Every department has officers who represent the best of the profession. They are dependable, professional, and respected by both their fellow officers and the community they serve. They understand that authority is something to be used responsibly, not something to be displayed.

There are also officers who have developed poor habits over time. They may be negative, careless, or cynical. They may have forgotten the purpose behind the badge. Do not allow someone else's poor example to shape the officer you become.

Choose your influences carefully.

Your reputation will continue developing during this period. Other officers are watching how you respond when things do not go your way. They notice whether you accept responsibility or make excuses. They notice whether you help others or only look out for yourself.

Trust is earned slowly.

The officers beside you on the street need to know that when a difficult situation occurs, you will be there for them. That trust is built through consistency. It is built by doing the right thing when nobody is watching.

Your first 90 days will also test your ability to manage stress. You may begin noticing changes in yourself that you did not expect. Certain calls may stay with you longer than others. You may find yourself thinking about situations after your shift ends. You may become more aware of the dangers that exist in the world around you.

This is part of the transition into police work.

The key is learning how to process those experiences in a healthy way. Do not believe the outdated idea that needing support is a sign of weakness. The strongest officers are often those who recognize the importance of maintaining their mental and emotional health.

Talk with people you trust. Maintain relationships outside of law enforcement. Continue activities that remind you there is more to life than the job.

The badge is an important part of who you are, but it cannot become the only part of who you are.

Your family will continue adjusting during these first 90 days as well. They may notice that your schedule is different, your sleep patterns have changed, and your perspective on certain things is evolving. They may not always understand what you experience, especially if you do not communicate with them.

Remember that your family is your support system, not someone standing outside of your career. Include them in your journey. Explain the challenges without making them carry burdens they cannot help you carry.

The first 90 days are also when you should begin thinking about the officer you want to become years from now. Every veteran officer was once a new officer learning the basics. The difference between a career that is simply completed and one that is meaningful is the commitment to continue growing.

Never become comfortable with being average.

Continue training.

Continue learning.

Continue improving your communication skills.

Continue studying the profession.

The day you believe you have learned everything you need to know is the day you begin falling behind.

Your first 90 days behind the badge will pass quickly. The nervousness will fade. The uncertainty will lessen. The job will begin to feel more natural. But never lose the awareness you have right now—the understanding that wearing a badge is a privilege and a responsibility.

The public does not simply see an individual officer when you walk into a situation. They see the uniform. They see the badge. They see the profession you represent.

Make sure your actions honor all three.

Your first 90 days are not the measure of your entire career. They are the foundation upon which that career will be built. The habits you create, the attitude you develop, and the values you protect during this time will influence the officer you become.

Years from now, another new officer may stand where you are today, wondering if they are ready.

Remember what that felt like.

Then be the person who helps them discover that they are.