

BASELINE LEADERSHIP — EMBRACING THE OBLIGATION TO YOUR PERSONNEL

By Phil Hansen

As I write this, it is National Police Week and I have just returned from our department's annual memorial ceremony. Between line-of-duty funerals and annual memorial events, I have probably participated in a hundred such gatherings over the course of my career. I am pleased to say that the event I just attended was a genuine and heartfelt tribute to our fallen brothers and sisters.

Today I stood at parade rest while introductions were made and resolutions were read from the stage, and I looked at the photos of 13 California peace officers who were killed in the line of duty in 2014. Their faces were a powerful reminder of why our personnel deserve good leadership, and of the appalling potential for tragic consequences if we fail them. They are indisputable evidence that as leaders, our focus must continually be centered on those we lead.

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ORIENTATION AND CHARACTER

Law enforcement personnel are fundamentally problem-solvers whom we trust to make the right decisions under difficult and sometimes drastic circumstances. This is particularly true in the field of tactical operations. Because of this, I have often stated my belief that the most important qualities of a SWAT operator are character and intelligence. How much more important must it be that as leaders, we possess the same qualities, and that we consistently orient our attention toward those we lead?

If you have achieved a leadership position within your agency, you have most likely demonstrated the requisite intelligence for the job. The remaining question is: Does your character measure up to the task? As leaders, our answer to this question will be determined by our decisions and actions on a daily basis, for as long as we hold that position of trust.

FOCUS ON THE WELL-BEING OF THOSE YOU LEAD

At some point, when holding a discussion on leadership, I usually display a graphic and disturbing photo of an officer who was killed in the line

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of duty. There's no intent to be sensationalistic, morbid or disrespectful. The photo serves as a visceral reminder of the price of failure in our profession. One of the aspects that sets law enforcement apart from other endeavors is the potential cost in human lives and suffering if we are unsuccessful. Too many law enforcement leaders become complacent or distracted by the pursuit of individual accomplishment and fail to recognize the risks involved. In doing so, they also fail to appreciate their obligation to their personnel.

My former agency was once among the best in the world at analyzing and sharing the lessons learned after the death or serious injury of a deputy

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sheriff. Critical review and honest acknowledgment of mistakes was simply a part of our professional approach to such incidents. Unfortunately, in later years we got away from that practice due to political sensitivity, fear of liability or just an unwillingness to risk hurting someone's feelings. Like a bad parent, it became more comfortable to praise all the participants rather than identify errors or impose discipline. Unfortunately, we do not learn much from handing out medals, particularly when they are posthumous and the recipient is incapable of telling us what went wrong.

Somewhere along the line, many of our leaders lost sight of the fact that a fundamental duty of leadership is to mentor and teach others. That duty includes teaching tactics and lessons learned from our losses. The loss of any officer is tragic, but the tragedy is compounded if we fail to learn from it.

LET YOUR SENSE OF OBLIGATION GUIDE YOUR ACTIONS

When good teams conduct tactical planning, they attempt to anticipate potential obstacles and actions of the suspect. They then develop differing courses of action to deal with those variables. Teams that fail to do so simply plan for success in one dimension and are then overwhelmed when things do not go as planned. As a principle of leadership, try to employ the same technique by continually asking yourself how you would respond to the ensuing questions if things do not go as planned and you suffer a casualty:

Did you make yourself fully aware of the circumstances before approving the deployment and ensuing plans? Did you sacrifice any appreciable measure of safety for cost savings or expedience? Did you consider all the tactical options at your disposal?

Fully accepting your obligation as a leader can provide great clarity as a decision-maker. It is the feeling of obligation that will force you to do things like read every page of a warrant affidavit at the end of a long day. After all, you must verify that there are valid reasons to send your personnel into harm's way, and ensure that they are properly cloaked in legal authority.

That same sense of obligation can give you the courage to institute unpopular changes to benefit your team.

It is amazing how we in law enforcement have a history of resisting change that is good for us. In the 1970s we resisted early prodding to wear seat belts. Some of the older guys back then even resisted wearing body armor. As a young SWAT sergeant in the 1980s, I had to force some of my guys to wear our new helmets instead of ball caps, and later, as a SWAT lieutenant in the early 2000s, it was tough to get some of them to wear shoulder armor. I forced those changes because I recognized my obligation to focus on the well-being of my personnel, whether or not they liked it. I also asked myself how I would answer questions from their loved ones if they were harmed.

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Perhaps you are conflicted about instituting some change within your team that will face resistance. Perhaps you are still at a crossroads as to whether or not you will scrap dynamic movement tactics for all situations, and instead embrace proven, safer alternatives that may be less popular with some members of your team. If you focus on the well-being of your personnel and embrace your obligation as a leader, the decision should become remarkably clear. Leaders do not wait for tragedy to strike as an impetus for instituting change.

Finally, good leaders are honest with others and with themselves. Search your soul on a regular basis. If your priority is on promotion, your popularity, your superiors or anything but the well-being of your personnel and the success of your team in its mission of saving lives, it is time to rededicate yourself or perhaps seek another path for advancement. The potential price of failure is too high. ■