



NTOA FEATURE



## Competence, confidence and character: The 3-Cs of remarkable tactical team leaders

By Neil DuBord

Over the last 15 years, I have had the opportunity to work with several tactical teams in many different roles. During this time, I have experienced the work and performances of a variety of tactical team leaders, all of whom were very different. Each taught me something, either good or bad, about tactics, leadership or human behavior. Intuitively, I have always known a remarkable tactical team leader when I saw one, but I was never able to identify what made that individual so exceptional. This lack of understanding and clarity prevented me, as the former manager of the Edmonton Police Service (EPS) Tactical Team, from having complete confidence that we were selecting the right people at the right time to become team leaders.

Historically the EPS had always selected the most senior individual in the unit as the tactical team leader. This had become a rite of passage and the most experienced tactical officer on the team felt entitled to the position. It did not matter whether these individuals were the least competent or worst leaders on the team; if they had managed to stay in the unit long enough, they would progress to the position of team leader. There was no science or rationale behind the selection process other than recognizing their seniority. Moving forward,

the EPS wanted this to change, leading to the question, “What is it that makes one a remarkable tactical team leader?”

In an effort to answer this question, a common behavioral science tool called the repertory grid was used to distill the common elements found in great tactical team leaders. It began with an informal dialogue with current and previous leaders who were believed to be subject matter experts. They were also asked to think of three remarkable tactical team leaders and identify what made them so notable. These same individuals were then asked to think of three mediocre tactical team leaders and identify why they did not excel. These findings were analyzed using thematic analysis. The results led the EPS to some conclusions on the essential elements of remarkable tactical team leaders, and are the basis for this article.

### The 3-Cs

After completing the analysis of the material collected from the SMEs, it was obvious that there were common elements to what made a remarkable team leader. Although each subject matter expert used slightly different language, the conclusion was that there were three essential elements in all remarkable team leaders: *competence*,

*confidence* and *character*. These three essential elements have become known as the 3-Cs.

### First C — Competence

*Competence* is a critical part of all remarkable tactical team leaders. Socrates believed that the “one who clearly knows best what ought to be done will most easily gain the obedience of the others.” But being competent doesn’t mean that the team leaders need to know how to do everything themselves. Instead they need to know what to do and how to get it done.

Competence engenders confidence and trust in the tactical team leader. There is no substitution for the ability to perform, especially in a high stress crisis situation. Competence comes from a combination of formal education, continuous improvement, hard training and professional experience. The Edmonton Police Service categorized the competence of a tactical team leader into three areas: *tactics*, *technical/policy systems*, and *organization and management of resources*.

**Tactics:** Great tactical team leaders are usually great tacticians. In order to become certified tactical officers within the EPS, they must demonstrate their proficiency in 23 tactical related disciplines. Competent

team leaders have a high degree of proficiency in each one of these 23 disciplines and are well-versed in the application of these tactics.

**Technical/policy systems:** Tactical team leaders require a level of competence regarding the technical systems and equipment used in operations. This means they must be aware of the available technology and equipment and be prepared to use them in an effort to provide a tactical advantage to their mission. It is unacceptable for team leaders to increase the risk to the public, their team or the suspect because they are not familiar with a new piece of technology or a technical piece of equipment that could have been used to assist with an operation.

In addition, tactical team leaders must know and understand policy. The confidence and trust of the team leader by both the tactical team and management demands the team leader make sound tactical

decisions based on the policy and training standards of the unit.

**Organize and manage resources:** Prior to the study of this topic, very little formal consideration was given to whether the tactical team leader could organize and manage resources. There was always a discussion as to the leadership potential of the team leader but the ability to organize the resources of the team was never fully explored. Remember, the team leader's job within the EPS usually, if not always, went to the most senior person in the unit. However, it has now become apparent that remarkable team leaders must be able to manage and organize the team in a manner that garners respect, trust and loyalty while still promoting agile analytical, critical and ethical thinkers.

While many tactical team leaders are often selected for their competence alone, competence is something different from

confidence and character and should not be confused with them. Our research indicates that all 3-Cs are usually found in remarkable team leaders.

## Second C — Confidence

The second essential component of remarkable tactical team leaders is *confidence*. Confidence comes from within and is important for all tactical team leaders. It is contagious and spreads to all the other team members, especially in crisis situations. It helps to eliminate self-doubt and reduce anxiety. The right amount of confidence breeds trust and respect from others. It encompasses three elements: a superior level of self-awareness, sound judgment and decision-making and unyielding composure.

**Self-awareness** enables team leaders to recognize their strengths and weaknesses. Being self-aware allows team leaders to



formulate accurate self-perceptions, gather feedback on how others perceive them and modify their self-image accordingly. Being truly self-aware ultimately requires team leaders to develop a clear, honest picture of their capabilities, but more importantly, their limitations. It includes being completely open to positive and negative feedback.

In contrast, tactical team leaders who lack self-awareness view themselves as self-important and are disconnected from their teams. When things go wrong, they never bear any of the responsibility and it is always someone else's fault. Their lack of self-awareness precludes them from seeing any of their own shortcomings, because after all, they are usually very competent and as such have the talent and skill required for being successful.

Self-aware tactical team leaders analyze themselves and ask hard questions about experiences, events and their actions. They take responsibility for their actions and use the experience to learn more about themselves.

**Decision-making** requires great confidence. Remarkable tactical team leaders take calculated risks and are innovative and confident in their decisions to do so. If a team leader is afraid to make or commit to decisions, other members of the team will quickly lose trust and begin to take their own actions to fill the void caused by the indecision. Crisis situations which are intertwined with complexity and high degrees of stress require logical and rational decision-making, and it is confidence that allows the team leader to move to action.

**Unyielding composure:** Confidence is not arrogance and is not ego-centered. The most remarkable team leaders never have to tell anyone their status or how good they are because they prove it at each and every call they attend. In the most demanding and tense situations, they present themselves with a sense of calm that is quickly conveyed throughout the team and they are never judgmental. In times of trouble, either operational or otherwise, a composed, sensible and grounded team leader will garner

the following and support of the team, enhancing the opportunity for success.

### Third C — Character

*Character* is the last essential component of a remarkable tactical team leader. Character is developed from one's background, beliefs, education and experience. Good character involves excellent judgment and excellent judgment is forged from experience. General Bradley stated, "Judgment comes from experience and experience comes from bad judgments." The molding of a tactical team leader's character is a career-long endeavor that is tested each and every day.

Tactical team leaders show strong character by developing self-control. They are in command of their emotions and communicate in a constructive and sincere manner. Tactical team leaders show character when they make decisions that demonstrate they are putting their organization and their team interests before their own self-interests. Team leaders with formidable character will not develop a sense of entitlement or belief that the team cannot survive without them. They have control over their emotions and refuse to get involved in drama that perpetuates rumors and gossip.

It is character that allows a tactical team leader to create a positive and dynamic culture. This culture can be depicted as inclusive, fair and ethical. Ultimately the climate set by the tactical team leader can have a dramatic impact on the quality of the team's work. It does not take long for other members of a tactical team to become skeptical of a team leader whose actions are cognitively dissonant to his words.

Finally, it is the character of the tactical team leader that honors an environment of mutual trust and respect for all employees. It gives the team leader the moral courage to be honest, direct and candid with others. It provides a mechanism for the team leader to acknowledge organizational values and ethical guidelines. Being a tactical team leader can never be separate from the individual;

one cannot impart what one does not possess. General Norman Schwarzkopf stated, "The main ingredient of good leadership is good character. This is because leadership involves conduct and conduct is determined by values."

### So what does this all mean?

It has become clear that if we wish to nurture remarkable tactical team leaders, we must provide them with guidelines and expectations of what the role involves. We cannot expect to always get the right tactical team leader at the right time by simply selecting the most senior member of the unit. As a result, the tactical teams should develop a selection process for tactical team leaders based on the criteria found in the 3-Cs.

The 3-Cs — *competence, confidence and character* — supply current and future tactical team leaders with a blueprint for success. Equally as important, the 3-Cs provide managers of tactical teams with a tool to select the right people for the role at the right time. This provides a mechanism for managers to set expectations and impart accountability to remarkable tactical team leaders. ◀◀

### About the author



#### Superintendent Neil Dubord

has been a member of the Edmonton Police Service for 24 years and is currently the commander in charge of West Division. He has been a tactical team member, tactical team leader, tactical team commander and is currently a Level II Certified Critical Incident Commander for the Edmonton Police Service. Superintendent Dubord is a graduate from Class #236 of the FBI National Academy, holds a master's degree specializing in leadership and training from Royal Roads University and is a Ph.D. from Northcentral University in Arizona. He instructs and assesses nationally on incident command at the Canadian Police College.



# SWAT commanders and unintended weapon discharges: The process of reviewing, analyzing and making recommendations after occurrence

By Kevan J. Dugan

The title of this article undoubtedly evoked a visceral reaction directly related to your personal experience, whether it has happened within your team or not. When I speak about this issue to commanders who have not experienced it, it is interesting to note that almost everyone says something like “Luckily, we haven’t had one yet.” The statement is telling, in that by using the words “lucky” and “yet,” the implication is that they feel it could occur at some future point and acknowledge, at least on some level, the possibility of the event. I

think they are right on both counts. As evidence, I offer that our profession has been training for years to keep our finger outside of the trigger guard, to treat every weapon as if it was loaded, and to only pull the trigger when justified, yet every year rounds are discharged unintentionally under a host of circumstances. Those commanders who have had to deal with the issue recognize the challenges it can pose.

The intent of this article is two-fold; first, to encourage commanders to put a policy in place that outlines the process for

a critical review of these events, and second, to promote the idea that the commander’s recommendations, taking all things into account, are created in the best interest of the department, the team and the member.

## Drawing a distinction between terms

Some in our field may not draw a distinction between an *accidental discharge*, *unintentional discharge* and *negligent discharge*, often using the terms interchangeably or using the term which puts the most favorable light on the occurrence. At the most basic level, the following are examples of an *accidental discharge*:

- A weapon that experiences a mechanical malfunction that causes the weapon to discharge a round independent of the actions of the operator.
- A weapon that discharges a round by influence of an external action. For example, the weapon is dropped onto a hard surface, a suspect activates the trigger during a struggle or the trigger is functioned by an inanimate object, such as gear placed inappropriately on the load-bearing vest.

An *unintentional* or *negligent* discharge then, occurs when a weapon is fired by the actions of the operator, though the underlying premise is that the operator of the weapon did not intend, or make a conscious decision, to fire it. From the operator’s standpoint, because there was no conscious thought involved, there is a possibility that he may not remember the



physical act of pulling the trigger. Since the operator has been trained for years to keep his finger out of the trigger guard, you can almost be assured that the initial reaction and statement will be something similar to “I never touched the trigger!” or “I don’t know how it could have gone off.” The shock and disbelief of the initial event will be followed by the member’s anxiety and apprehension over wondering what the team will think and if he will be removed from the team.

### Expect team member reaction

Immediately after the event, and before completion of the investigation, you may be approached by other team members who will offer their concerns and recommendations as to the future of the involved member. Although there is certainly no harm in listening to their concerns (even while taking immediate punitive action if warranted), it is important to point out that it is too early for opinions since the investigation has yet to be completed. Unless this person was an eyewitness to the event and saw everything clearly, his opinion will most likely be based on suppositions and emotions. A clear message needs to be conveyed that it is unreasonable to consider friendships, or lack thereof, when making these kinds of decisions. As Sir Francis Bacon stated, “We prefer to believe what we prefer to be true.”

Meeting with the entire team on the heels of this type of event is very beneficial in maintaining the team’s focus. Informing them of the anticipated process, the approximate time frame that it will take, who is conducting the investigation, and what will be required of them goes a long way toward keeping emotions and rumors in check. That is also the time to remind them that they should stay focused on their tasks, since training and operations will not cease just because of this event and the subsequent investigation. Lastly, your team leaders need to be engaged in the control of rumors and monitoring of emotions.

### Preparation for review

As a commander, it is helpful to the investigators and to your process for you to establish a punch list of questions that need answered to support your recommendations to upper management. While not all-inclusive, the below bullet points offer an example of some essential elements of information:

- Was the event an accidental, unintentional or negligent discharge?
- Does a weapon need to be taken off-line?
- Was policy violated?
- Is there a policy void?
- Is a policy change necessary?
- Did our current training methods cause this?
- Was mission planning a major contributing factor?
- Is there a cause-and-effect relationship of the major factors?
- Will the member be retained or dismissed?
- If retained, what additional training is required?
- Is team-wide training necessary?
- If you retain, can you mitigate USC 42 Section 1983 liability?
- If you dismiss the member, are you within contractual guidelines?

Our desired outcome is that the answers to our questions will enable us to focus on what caused the accidental, unintentional or negligent discharge. Once you have these answers, you can establish a plan to correct the problem, mitigate the risk of a recurrent event, determine the existence of a policy void, establish appropriate discipline and so forth.

### Process for review, analysis and premise validation

When an accidental, unintentional or negligent discharge occurs, the commander needs to ensure a thorough and comprehen-

sive investigation of the event. Who does the investigation is not as important as the manner in which it is accomplished. Otherwise, the subsequent decisions will be based on inaccurate and incomplete data. The commander should visit the scene, attempt to replicate the event (if necessary and safely achievable) and thoroughly analyze the results of the investigation and the probability that the event occurred as indicated. When considering probability, determine which category — accidental, unintentional or negligent — is statistically more likely to explain the event. What is the premise? While mechanical malfunctions and foreign objects have caused accidental discharges, statistically the overwhelming majority of these occurrences fall into the category of unintentional or negligent discharges. Therefore, if it is factually supported, it is no longer a premise, it’s a fact.

As with all investigations, begin by gathering facts. The facts are used to analyze the probability of the operator’s account of the event, and the more facts we gather, the more confidence you will have in your final analysis. The analysis model needs to include *divergent* and *convergent* methods. Divergent thinking opens our minds to alternatives and convergent thinking lets us focus on each alternative, dismissing those that are not possible or unlikely. Start with a divergent analysis of all the facts outlined in the investigation to help identify all possible causes of the discharge. Then examine the subcategories of each cause to determine if these alternatives are unlikely or not probable. The ability to make an argument as to why it could or couldn’t have happened in the way it was described opens the investigator up to complete analysis. Not considering alternatives is the principal cause of faulty analysis.<sup>1</sup>

For example, let’s examine a situation in which, during a struggle with a suspect, an unintentional discharge occurs that the operator swears was not caused by his actions. Does the operator claim a weapon malfunction? Divergent thinking opens our

minds to include this as a possibility. Convergent thinking leads us to test the weapon to validate the theory. If all weapon systems are operating properly, then a factual conclusion can be reached that the weapon did not malfunction. This leaves us with two remaining possibilities; either the weapon was functioned by some other external influence or the operator unintentionally caused the trigger to be functioned. We then review other details of the investigation. Does the operator claim the weapon was influenced by external action? Was it dropped? If so, try to safely replicate the event, as stated by the operator, to establish another premise. Does the operator state a foreign object, such as a piece of gear, must have contacted the trigger? Again, try to safely replicate the event with the same load-bearing vest and the same gear in the exact same positions. Does the operator state that the suspect must have contacted the trigger during a struggle?

Keep toggling between divergent and convergent thinking. Always look for evidence that is inconsistent with the hypothesis, for it is more telling than evidence that is consistent. Be wary of conclusions not based in fact. During the analysis process, be on guard against personal biases. We tend to give high value to new information that is consistent with our biases, thus reinforcing them, while giving low value to and even rejecting new information that is inconsistent with our biases.<sup>2</sup>

### Identifying ancillary issues

During the process, always remain analytical. Most situations, even the complex ones, are influenced by only a few major factors.<sup>3</sup> For instance, in the last example, does the fact that there was a struggle with a suspect automatically prove the suspect engaged the trigger? Is it really cause and effect, or are the two facts unrelated in bringing about the outcome? Perhaps there was a struggle but the suspect didn't manipulate the trigger. This is important since we still need to determine what caused the unintentional

discharge. Was it the operator's finger or was it a piece of gear? As commanders, we need to ensure that all ancillary issues are identified as well. In the above example, even after it was determined what caused the trigger to function, an additional issue could be, "If the weapon had a safety, why was it not engaged?" Maybe there was a reason due to the dynamics of the event or perhaps, given other circumstances, it should have been on. Does the team have a policy regarding safety usage or is there a policy void? All these issues must be identified in order to determine how to mitigate or eliminate another future event.

### Other factors

Can mission planning be one of the few major factors in the event? In this hypothetical example, a team makes use of ladders to port windows and deploy a NFDD in support of entry into the structure, and the porting team member has an unintentional or negligent discharge. Upon review, we learn that the team leader, who planned the mission, utilized two members on the port team. The first member was assigned to set the ladder and the second to climb the ladder, break the window, deploy the NFDD and cover inside. If we analyze and chalk out the physiology behind what is required of the second member, we see some of the possible requirements, dependent upon established training of that team:

- Climbing a ladder while gripping a break and rake tool;
- Closing both hands tightly around the tool, using gross motor movements to break and clear glass from the window while maintaining balance on the ladder and staying visually alert for threats;
- Dropping the tool to a predetermined safe area, obtaining the NFDD, using fine motor skills to pull the retaining pin, visually acquiring the deployment area and tossing the NFDD to that point while balancing on ladder;
- After deploying the NFDD, maintain visual focus on identifying threats, bringing

the weapon up to the proper position, activating the weapon light and maintaining balance on the ladder while verbally advising occupants of identity and lawful purpose.

- Finally, add all the environmental factors and the elevated heart and respiration rates into the equation.

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We can all agree that mission planning did not cause the trigger to function, but could it have contributed? If so, then we have identified another issue to attend to before our list of recommendations is complete. Maybe we decide that more members with fewer assignments will eliminate this as a future factor. But upon further review, we see that our team isn't large enough to accomplish this. Perhaps the answer is a change in methodology of service of future warrants involving a similar structure, or the need to establish a training and operational relationship with a nearby team to give us the numbers we need. Maybe we noted that the operational plan wasn't reviewed appropriately, or that a mission rehearsal could have identified the possible planning flaw. Regardless, our analysis identified other ancillary factors that need to be addressed.

## Recommendations

Once you have identified how the event likely occurred and all the ancillary issues, recommendations should follow a hierarchy prioritized in this order: what is best for the department, what is best for the team, and then what is *fair* to the member. We can't first think in terms of what the member desires, because his likely desire is to stay with the unit, even though his actions may call for removal. These three priorities are not mutually exclusive, either. Removal of a team member may *be* in his own best interest in order to limit his liability and prevent the future possibility of a potential tragedy.

Why is "what is best for the department" a top priority for us? Our departments have placed us in this command position because they trust that we will appropriately maintain a group of highly trained individuals to carry out high risk law enforcement functions in a legal and ethical manner while minimizing their exposure to liability. An injury as a result of a negligent discharge, in and of itself, may be the basis for a lawsuit. But our concern should not end there. If we take no corrective action and a similar type



of negligent discharge occurs, our liability could land squarely within the "deliberate indifference" and "failure to train" category of those lawsuits filed under USC 42, Section 1983. If the officer is retained on the team, and has a subsequent negligent

discharge, our liability could extend into the "failure to supervise" or "negligent retention" category. Worst-case scenarios could include death or injury of a team member or citizen, disbanding of the team, multi-million dollar damages, public distrust of the department and individual liability as a supervisor.



What is best for the team needs to be of great concern to you as well. Now is the time to consider meeting with team leaders to get a feel for how the team is reacting to this event. If the decision is to retain the member on the unit, but every other member of the team has indicated that they have lost confidence and trust in that team member, then we have just identified another issue that impacts the decision-making process. In his "Essay on Man," Alexander Pope wrote, "What reason weaves, by passion is undone."<sup>4</sup> If the concern is founded on misinformation, then we need to guide the team through the analytical process to ensure that their decisions are based upon fact. If their concern is well-founded, then we need to analyze what they are saying to determine if we missed an important point during the process. Either way, we need to

prepare the team for the upcoming decisions in regard to the involved member's status and any possible policy or training changes that will affect the team as a whole.

Although what is best for the member is addressed last, this should not diminish the importance of the topic. Keep in mind, even if no innocent person was injured, the member will likely experience self-doubt, hyper-sensitivity, humiliation and anger among a host of other possible emotional responses. Therefore, aside from your other duties, you should facilitate all assistance that is available to him. With due regard for internal policies and regulations, he needs to be kept informed of the progress of the investigation. At the very least, you should continue your professional relationship with him to ensure that he does not feel abandoned. Remember that unless the act was so reckless that the officer will be fired, he is still a member of the department (or an adjacent department if you are a multi-jurisdictional team). Sullyng his reputation is to be avoided if at all possible.

If you do decide to remove the member from the team, you would be well advised to review any contractual issues by which you must abide, and to discuss the dismissal with your department's legal counsel to identify any issues that you haven't considered.

### One final consideration

To ensure that you are not letting emotions drive your decision on this or any other issue you may face as a commander, I offer two techniques that I sometimes use as a check and balance on my decision-making. First, I imagine a commander from another team has come to me with this issue and asks what my recommendation would be for his team member. This enables me to emotionally remove myself even more from the event. Secondly, I maintain very close relationships with other team commanders that I consider peers or mentors.

After I have made my decision, and without making it known to them, I call several of them, give them the facts of the

event that I am dealing with and ask their opinion. I weigh their answer against mine. If all their answers are in line with mine, then I am confident that emotions have not influenced my decision. If all are opposite of mine, that would be a red flag. Evenly split opinions may be due to a gray area that is driven by specific team policies and procedures, but again, a good indicator that my emotions are not driving the decision.

Based upon the circumstances of the event, there are a number of legitimate approaches a commander can consider in addressing an accidental/unintentional/negligent discharge situation. The only clear failure is to take no action at all. ◀◀

### Endnotes

1. Jones, Morgan D. "The Thinker's Toolkit," Crown Business, 1998.
2. Ibid.

3. Ibid.
4. "Essay on Man," Epistle II, Alexander Pope.

### About the author

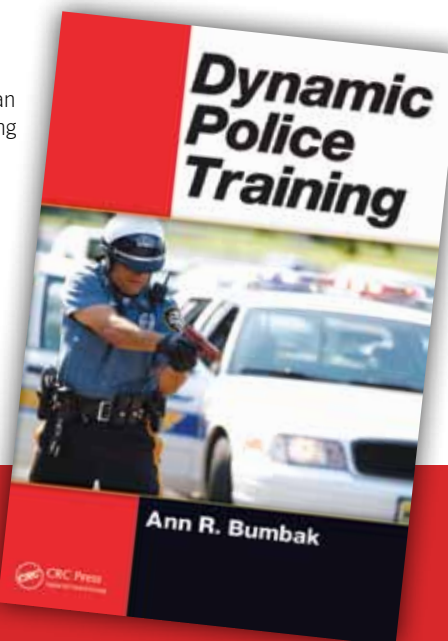
**Captain Kevan Dugan** is a 28-year veteran of the Pennsylvania State Police and is the Director of the Tactical Operations Division, overseeing the canine, explosives and Special Emergency Response Team sections. He was a former member, team leader and coordinator for SERT and is the Section Chair of the NTOA Commander's Section. He is also a newly-elected Eastern Director of the NTOA's Board of Directors. He can be reached at kdugan@state.pa.us.

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