

communicate, communication
mu/ni•ca'tor n.
com•mu•ni•ca•tion
communicating; transmittal
messages, or information
communications (used with a singular)

LEADING THROUGH COMMUNICATION

By Phil Hansen

It is frustrating to hear accounts of law enforcement supervisors or command staff who attempt to direct the actions of their personnel through domination or intimidation, rather than leading through communication and mutual understanding.

Attempts to lead through intimidation are often manifested through verbal insults, threats of workplace retaliation or even physical confrontation. While inappropriate in any law enforcement setting, these methods are particularly baffling when employed in a SWAT environment, among personnel who should be self-confident and naturally resistant to such methods.

Tyrannical behavior is not effective over the long run. In fact, it usually

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results in subordinate personnel just paying lip service to the ranking officer, and then following the lead of peers who serve as the true, informal, de facto leaders. In most instances, command personnel who demean or intimidate others are only leaders in the sense that they have command authority by virtue of rank. In truth, these types exercise

little real influence over time, and often serve as examples of the axiom that command does not necessarily equate to control.

In my experience, this sort of behavior usually indicates an underlying insecurity, often based on the fact that the leader in question is only marginally qualified for the position he occupies.

In many cases these individuals lack experience or fail to possess a fundamental grasp of the laws, policy and TTPs which govern team operations, so they attempt to make up for their shortcomings with bluster.

It is not uncommon to hear stories about staff meetings in which no one speaks up for fear of being degraded in front of their peers. Recently, I was told about a team commander who challenged one of his SWAT officers and cursed him publicly during the course of an incident debriefing, all because the officer had the audacity to question the rationale for a command decision made during the operation.

Team personnel at all levels must be encouraged to evaluate plans, provide feedback and voice their concerns. In an open and honest debriefing, this holds true even when it means respectfully questioning the actions of a superior officer. The failure to encourage such an environment has unquestionably contributed to the deaths of SWAT officers in the recent past.

When a leader encourages open communication at all levels and makes a habit of explaining the rationale behind directives, subordinate personnel will not only appreciate the inclusive environment, they will also learn to understand and ultimately trust the leader's reasoning and thought process. As a result, orders issued during the time constraints of a crisis are more apt to be accepted and implemented without hesitation.

LEADERS COMMUNICATE TO TEACH AND TO EFFECT POSITIVE CHANGE

Good leaders are fundamentally proficient in their discipline. Good leaders are also teachers who ultimately are measured by their ability to effect positive change within their organization.

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Change can be difficult even when it is constructive. There is a natural tendency to resist change because people cling to routine and become comfortable with the status quo.

When implementing changes in policy or procedure, effective leaders must be able and willing to clearly communicate the thought process and rationale behind the desired change. If the change is sensible and communicated clearly and sincerely from a leader, subordinates will accept it, even when it is not necessarily welcome. Change seldom receives unanimous approval. However, if the most cynical member of your audience can say, “I’m not sure I agree, but I can see where he’s

coming from,” then you have gone a long way toward reaching your goal.

SWAT personnel are problem solvers. The very nature of SWAT demands a response to crisis situations or “problems” that are beyond the resolution capability of traditional patrol or detective resources. As a result, intelligence and adaptability should rank highly among the many important characteristics we seek when selecting SWAT personnel. In my opinion, character, intelligence, maturity and adaptability are the most important qualifying attributes for any SWAT officer. Physical attributes, marksmanship and movement skills are crucial, but they can be introduced, developed and honed through training.

It stands to reason that once selected, these intelligent, resourceful people naturally seek answers and insights as to how and why decisions are made. As a rule, personnel of this caliber neither respect nor respond well to, “Because I said so.” As a leader, if you are unable or unwilling to teach and to communicate answers to reasonable questions concerning your directives, a reassessment of your own capability may be in order. ■

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