

SETTING THE OPERATIONAL TONE

By Phil Hansen

Have you ever seen a team goofing off and projecting a laissez faire attitude toward training day? Or perhaps another team that was so uptight during the briefing for a warrant service, there was a high probability that at an officer-involved shooting would become a self-fulfilled prophesy? If so, there was a failure on the part of that team's leadership.

Good leaders continuously monitor and when necessary, influence the tone of their personnel and their team's approach to any operation. Effective leaders are keenly aware of their own nature and the vibes they project. They consciously monitor and work at projecting an environment of professionalism, calm and self-control. They should also be capable of eliciting greater restraint or aggression from their personnel, as needed.

A FEW WELL-CHOSEN WORDS

For much of my career, I served as a team leader and then as a team commander on a very active, highly regarded, full-time SWAT detail. With

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few exceptions, I worked with personnel who were carefully selected, highly trained, consummate professionals. As a result, work ethic and attention to detail were seldom subjects that I felt the need to address. But even personnel of that caliber can become complacent or distracted from fatigue, particularly after a series of repetitive deployments.

Over the years, there were times at a warrant service briefing when I sensed a lack of focus, a sense of complacency or even overconfidence in my personnel. On those rare occasions, I found that a few deliberate, well-chosen words at briefing were sufficient to set the tone and re-focus their attention. The

approach can be as simple as quietly reminding everyone of the need to be vigilant and concentrate on objectives, or it can be more elaborate. In some instances, I reminded them of a past deployment that went awry. A little knowledge of tactical unit history can work wonders for the leader who is able to relate a prior incident with similar characteristics that proved to be tragic, dangerous or problematic for the officers involved.

Leaders should be particularly watchful for evidence that their personnel are nervous or over-amped about a pending operation. On one occasion, our bureau was working in conjunction with another agency's team to serve multiple, simultaneous search and arrest warrants in connection with a series of brutal robbery-murders. The other agency's team was visibly pumped up and anxious about the pending operation. I remember thinking that the team commander should get a handle on members or perhaps even stand down and refer the operation to another team. As fate would have it, when that team deployed, multiple team

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members shot and killed an unarmed subject in the course of the warrant service. Nothing is certain, but I will always wonder: Had their leader provided some reassurance, while displaying and demanding more composure, could the shooting and subsequent fallout have been avoided?

INTO THE EYE OF THE STORM

The more stressful the incident, the more important it is that a leader project composure. I believe there should be a nearly inverse relationship between the two.

I use the phrase “project composure” because we as leaders are naturally subject to the same stresses and uncertainty as those who surround us, but we must outwardly overcome their influence. Others look to us for direction and reassurance; therefore, it is imperative that we recognize chaos and emotion as tangible factors to be mastered.

Few incidents are more stressful or demanding of a leader than a response to the scene of an officer-involved shooting. In June 2005, our team responded to an incident in which a well-known and highly regarded deputy sheriff was ambushed and brutally murdered by a gang member. A perimeter had been quickly established and the suspect was believed to be contained within an area encompassing several

city blocks. Having been at too many such scenes in the past, I knew that the command post area would be relatively chaotic, with emotions running high, an overabundance of resources and an avalanche of often conflicting intelligence.

While en route, I took time to mentally prioritize the information needed to ensure that the basics of containment, flexible response capability and viable command post operations were in place before initiating a coordinated search by our team personnel. I also made a conscious effort to compose myself and mentally prepare for the pending onslaught on my senses. Literally hundreds of deputy sheriffs and police officers crowded the command post area, as at least six law enforcement and media helicopters orbited overhead. Executive personnel, homicide investigators and multiple tactical team personnel from surrounding agencies waited in expectation.

As the controlling team commander in such a situation, all eyes will be on you, and the tone you set will have much to do with how smoothly the operation runs, and how your team is perceived by others. My advice is, if you find yourself in such a circumstance: Walk, don’t run. Address the basics first, while being expedient, but always as patient as possible with others. Be keenly aware of the image you project in person and on the radio. No one has ever been reassured by a commander who runs around yelling at people. This is our business, and we are professionals. There will be a time for anger and grieving later. Now is the time to project control, clarity of thought and competence. Always remember that calm can be as contagious as panic.¹

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In retrospect, I would like to think I performed well on that day, but that is best judged by others. I do know, however, that my personnel performed brilliantly, conducting a grueling house-to-house search and eventually capturing the suspect who was found hiding behind a bathtub curtain, several houses away from the murder scene. I also know that our arrival on scene was a source of comfort and reassurance for others. Together, we brought a sense of calm to the storm.

Call it setting the tone of operations, exerting command presence or whatever you will. It is a fundamental duty of leaders in our field, and it is best achieved through training, experience, continual mental preparation and conscious application under stress. ■

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ENDNOTE

1. Colonel Bryan P. McCoy, *The Passion of Command: The Moral Imperative of Leadership*, (Marine Corps Association Bookstore, 2006), p.7.