

Finding the best SWAT candidates — It's all about the

INTERVIEW

By Ed Allen

Recruiting, selecting and retaining qualified personnel for tactical teams has become much more challenging in recent years. Team commanders are often faced with low applicant turnout, poor quality candidates and long-term operator retention issues, all making today's selection processes even more critical.

In years past, the oral interview was considered a “nice to have” phase in the selection process, with the majority of the selection phases focusing on knowledge, skills and abilities (KSAs). But rarely do team commanders have to discipline operators — or worse, remove them from the team — because of a deficient physical skill or ability. More often than not, discipline issues occur as a result of the operator's decision-making (or lack of), inability to communicate effectively or appropriately, or an unwillingness to work cohesively in a team. All of these are fair game in a line of questioning during an interview phase of the selection process. Whether you are the commander designing the interview questions or the candidate preparing for them, let's explore what questions are being asked, who is asking, and why.

A recent online survey of NTOA team commanders revealed a number of interesting points. When asked if they include a formal interview phase as part of their selection process, 93 percent responded *yes*. So, if you are part of the small group that is skipping this part, you are no doubt missing out on a critical opportunity to screen applicants

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effectively. Reevaluate your selection process schedule and make time for this phase. Compared to other phases of testing that you may be conducting, an interview is relatively inexpensive and easy to conduct. Having said that, recognize that interviews are time-consuming and probably best saved for later in the process so you are only interviewing

the remaining, and often best, candidates. The interview should not be a surprise to the candidates either. They should be notified that it will occur and be given ample time to prepare.

If we agree that an interview is an essential part of the process, the next logical question is who should be conducting the interview. When asked this very question in the online survey, 6 percent of team commanders advised that they conduct the interview personally and 19 percent said it was conducted by their team leaders. But what was most revealing was that roughly 75 percent of commanders responded that the interviews are conducted by a panel of people. When we probed even further and asked if those commanders enlisted panel members from another team or agency, 21 percent responded no, but 78 percent stated they did. Anecdotally, this tells us a couple of things: 1) More value is placed on the collective opinion of a group of evaluators versus a single person; and 2) inserting qualified outside interviewers adds a level of impartiality to the process.

Enlisting interviewers from another team or agency brings both benefits and challenges. Having someone from another team sit in on the interviews

lends a degree of impartiality to your process, particularly if the interviewer has little or no relationship with the applicants. However, the challenge with bringing interviewers in from the outside is that they may not be looking for the same attributes in a candidate as you are. Therefore, it is imperative that interview questions are standardized and a detailed explanation is provided as to what the expected response or answer should be. They can still maintain their impartiality, as long as they are using your benchmarks as a basis for their evaluations. For applicants, this is an extremely important factor to consider when preparing for the interview. Applicants cannot assume that everyone on the panel will know who they are or their experience level. Applicants should be prepared to introduce themselves thoroughly and

when necessary, expand on answers that would have normally been briefer with a familiar panel.

The oral interview is intended to elicit answers or responses from candidates to determine if they are a good fit for the position and if they have the potential to work within the current structure and culture of the team. The format may include straightforward or even scenario-based questions.

THE OPERATORS' ESSENTIAL QUALITIES

So what are the candidate attributes that most commanders are looking for? Our online survey revealed that commanders placed almost equal value on four attributes.

Decision-making skills. It is often said that modern-day SWAT operations

are a “thinking person’s game,” meaning that we no longer resolve critical incidents through force alone. There is an expectation that SWAT operators should be capable of not only identifying problems, but evaluating options, measuring risk and most importantly, making decisions both as an individual and collaboratively with fellow teammates. Good decision-making thus becomes the foundation for most tactical skill sets that are learned after selection to the team. Interviewers should develop questions that force the candidate to make tough decisions, possibly under a time constraint. *What* candidates decide to do is almost less important than *why* they made the decision to do it. The logic, justification or reasoning they provide for coming to their decision is often quite revealing. The only bad answer in this line of questioning

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is indecision. Interviewers tend to be more understanding of a candidate who answers poorly based upon a lack of experience or knowledge than one who just refuses to come to a decision and provide an answer at all.

Team player. The ability to function well within a team is also critical. SWAT, like many small-unit operations, forces highly motivated and skilled individuals to work together often under extremely stressful conditions. There is little room for individual performance. The successes and failures of the team are owned by all. Up to this point, applicants may have a well-earned reputation as being highly motivated or even high performers. But questions should be crafted to help reveal the true nature of that motivation.

- Does the candidate recognize those who have assisted him along the way?
- Does the candidate speak as enthusiastically about group projects and accomplishments as he does of his own individual achievements?
- Does the candidate appreciate the value of followership?

This line of questioning is often best paired with follow-up on specific drills that the applicant has been subjected to during the selection process. This is the perfect time to ask the candidate why he or she acted in a certain way during an earlier teamwork drill.

Understanding of tactical operations. Few commanders today expect candidates to come to the team with all of the knowledge necessary for the position. More importantly, commanders want to know that applicants have a keen understanding of tactical operations based on their current assignment and experience level. If the applicant is a patrol officer with less than five

years of experience, he or she should at a minimum understand things like the agency's response to resistance, weapons and pursuit policies. Therefore, the complexity and depth of questions in this category may have to be adjusted for each candidate, even though the intent is ultimately the same. For the applicant preparing for this line of questioning, remember to stay in your lane. Do not pretend to have knowledge or experience in areas in which you don't.

Communication skills. Of the four attributes that commanders were asked about in the online survey, communication skills slightly edged out the others in terms of importance. Not surprising, considering that many discipline and behavior issues can be directly correlated to an operator's communication skills. Commanders want to know that operators can remain calm and focused under pressure, all the while maintaining their ability to collect their thoughts, convey them effectively and listen when necessary. Candidates have to be able to demonstrate that they can represent the team professionally and communicate with all types of people in both individual and group settings.

Interview questions may focus on attention to detail, memory, deductive reasoning, summation of complex issues and even professionalism. For candidates preparing for this line of questioning, beware of getting too comfortable. SWAT teams can be very casual and often fraternal in nature. This can cause a false sense of informality and candor. Now is not the time for that. The interviewer is not trying to determine if you can communicate with your peers on the range during a training day, but rather if you can serve as an effective voice of the team externally. Can you testify in court,

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represent the team in a multi-jurisdictional regional meeting or conduct a pre-incident operational briefing?

In summary, the oral interview phase is as equally important to those conducting the interview as those being subjected to it. For the evaluators, investing a significant amount of time and resources into KSAs and minimizing, or ignoring completely, the interview phase can be a tragic mistake. You may end up with a perfect candidate capable of exceeding many of the physical and skill set requirements, only to later cause significant disruption on the team due to substandard personal attributes.

For candidates preparing for the selection process, it will not matter how much time you invest in your shooting skills and physical performance if you fail to prepare for your interview. You will never be able to outshoot or outrun your lack of personal attributes. ■



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