

LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP: The difference one good person can make

By Phil Hansen



Sgt. Steve Owen
E.O.W. – October 5, 2016

“A tree is best measured when it is down — and so it is with people.”¹

— Carl Sandburg

Shortly after noon on Wednesday, Oct. 5, 2016, Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department (LASD) Sgt. Steven Owen responded to a call of a residential burglary in progress. Owen was among the first to arrive on scene and was placing himself in a containment position to the rear of the location when he encountered the suspect.

The suspect, a parolee with an extensive criminal history, produced a handgun and shot Sgt. Owen in the head. The suspect then stood over the downed sergeant and fired into him several times before attempting to escape. The criminal was captured shortly thereafter by LASD Lancaster Station and Special Enforcement Bureau (SEB) personnel, who all showed a great deal of tactical acumen, courage and restraint in completing the arrest.

On Oct. 13, I was one of nearly 7,000 attendees who came to pay their respects at Sgt. Owen's memorial service. As a former member of the agency, I was privileged to sit close to the presenters within the confines of the overflowing

church. As the service progressed and the afternoon waned on, I found myself feeling encouragement and pride, rather than sadness and rage. I was inspired by this man — this leader we had come to honor.

The focus of this article is not the tactics related to the incident, nor my frustration with a seemingly broken justice system that allows predators to walk our streets after numerous felony convictions. The focus, rather, is on the leadership lessons we were reminded of as we celebrated the life of a man who clearly loved his God, his family and his chosen vocation as a law enforcement officer.

THE DIFFERENCE ONE GOOD PERSON CAN MAKE

I had encountered Sgt. Owen once or twice during the course of my LASD career, but I certainly cannot say that I ever knew him well. As I listened to co-workers, friends and family members share their experiences and memories, a clear

“

Regardless of rank, one person displaying true leadership and dedication to ideals beyond their own self-interest can make a tremendously positive impact on their unit of assignment, and on the lives of those who serve with them.

”

picture of the man emerged. It became readily apparent that among other things, he was a true leader who left a contribution and a positive mark on every place he went and on all those he touched.

Sgt. Owen never attained a position of high rank or official status within the department, but leadership has little to do with rank. “People will personally commit to certain individuals who on paper (or on the organizational chart) possess little authority, but instead possess pizzazz, drive, expertise and genuine caring for teammates.”² In many ways, Sgt. Owen became the heart and soul of his station. Subordinates, peers and command staff all respected and admired him for his work ethic, strength of character and passion for our profession. He led by example and was known as a tireless worker and problem-solver.

In his last assignment, he served as a team leader on a patrol station’s special problems unit. When a subordinate earned a place on his team through exceptional performance, it seems they also earned a nickname from the sergeant, and a nickname earned from Steve was worth more to his troops than a dozen official commendations. It was very apparent that his teammates worked as much for him as they did for the sheriff’s department. He was their inspirational leader.

Sgt. Owen’s contributions did not end with his co-workers. He believed in and acted on the premise that our mission in law enforcement goes well beyond putting criminals in jail. It entails treating others with dignity and doing everything possible to make the communities we serve better places to live. Following his death, people came forward from throughout the community. Local news stations broadcast stories of victims he rescued, disadvantaged children he assisted, and even former arrestees he mentored and put back on a path to a productive life. He left an indelible mark on his entire community.

The lesson: Regardless of rank, one person displaying true leadership and dedication to ideals beyond their own

self-interest can make a tremendously positive impact on their unit of assignment, and on the lives of those who serve with them.

MAINTAINING YOUR FOCUS ON THE IMPORTANT THINGS

Every law enforcement officer should attend a service for another who has been killed in the line of duty. Apart from the opportunity to show one’s respect for a fallen comrade, the experience offers tremendous lessons in perspective. This is a particularly valuable aspect for those in leadership positions.

From what I know about Sgt. Owen’s background and experience, it is doubtful that he had ever undergone a great deal of formal leadership training. Even so, it is apparent that he was a truly effective and accomplished leader. He was deeply devoted to and engaged with his family and his faith, and the effect of his devotion was reflected in the incredible strength his family displayed throughout this ordeal. At work, he unfailingly kept his focus on his people but he lived and led others with the broader perspective of what we in law enforcement hope to achieve.

“

Our personnel deserve the best leadership possible, and the best leaders possess a passion for the well-being of their personnel that drives them to excel.

”

Leaders benefit greatly from balance in their lives. Family and faith should not be distractions from one’s duties as a leader. Rather, they should serve as a source of strength and perspective, providing a stable foundation for character-based leadership. Such perspective is often missing in leaders whose occupation serves as their primary focus in life. Never lose sight of the fact that baseline leadership is first and foremost about character and about committing to ideals that are more important than self-interest. A vital aspect of our leadership role is to develop our subordinates as human beings, not simply as technical practitioners of the law enforcement discipline.

The lesson: Value, nurture and sustain the important things in life such as faith and family, and let those values influence your actions as a leader. Remember that the self-promotion, petty territorialism and ego-driven competitions

people often engage in are meaningless distractions from what should be our true focus of effort in the workplace: our people and our mission.

APPRECIATING THE OBLIGATION WE OWE TO OUR PERSONNEL³

Steve Owen's murder was a tragic loss, but unfortunately, crimes of this type are not a rare occurrence. Within a week of his murder, the Palm Springs (CA) police suffered the loss of two fine officers who were ambushed when they responded to a family disturbance. Their names will be added to the long and growing list of law enforcement personnel who have fallen victim during this remarkably violent time in our history. It seems as though our flag is now continuously flown at half-staff, and there is absolutely no excuse for uncommitted or lackluster leadership in our profession.

Nonetheless, many law enforcement leaders fail to grasp their responsibility or lose commitment along the way. Some become distracted by the pursuit of individual accomplishment and others become complacent and try to "ride it out" until retirement. In any event, they fail to recognize the obligation they owe to their personnel. Ours is a profession that poses a variety of risks. Apart from the physical risk of harm, there are even more prevalent dangers associated with job-related stress. Our personnel deserve the best leadership possible, and the best leaders possess a passion for the well-being of their personnel that drives them to excel.

The lesson: Remember that the obligation we owe to our personnel exceeds the normal expectations associated with leadership in the private sector or most other subdivisions of government. Ours is an obligation shared only among those who lead brothers and sisters in arms, wherein the price of failure may be tallied in blood.

Leadership is a tough game in a business where you're only as good as your last operation. Unfortunately, we cannot afford to stop and rest on our laurels, having reached some mythical level of "good leadership." We must contin-

ually strive to evolve and work toward self-improvement. The good news is that our people and our mission are clearly worth the effort.

From what I learned of Sgt. Steve Owen, he worked to be the best man, leader and peace officer he could be, and he knew the risks involved. If we could ask him today, I don't think he would have lived his life in any other way. ■

ENDNOTES

1. Sandberg, Carl. *Abraham Lincoln: The War Years*. Harcourt Brace and Co., NY, 1940.
2. "Quotations from Chairman Powell: A Leadership Primer." Oren Harari, GovLeaders.org, 1996.
3. For more on this subject, see "Baseline Leadership: Embracing the Obligation to Your Personnel," *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 2015.



We want to know what you think.
Email editor@ntoa.org with feedback or questions about this article.

“

From what I learned of Sgt. Steve Owen, he worked to be the best man, leader and peace officer he could be, and he knew the risks involved. If we could ask him today, I don't think he would have lived his life in any other way.

”