

# Lessons in leadership: **BUILDING BRIDGES**

BY PHIL HANSEN



It's late February as I write this message. On Feb. 7, I received a phone call from a friend and colleague who has made the same call on this date for the last nine years. He calls each year just to touch base with me and say thanks. This year marked the 10th anniversary of the day that Los Angeles Police Department SWAT Officer Randal "Randy" Simmons was killed in the line of duty, and the phone call came from LAPD SWAT Lt. Ruben Lopez.

Ten years ago, Ruben was a new SWAT lieutenant at LAPD D-Platoon, and I was the SWAT lieutenant for the Los Angeles County Sheriff Department's Special Enforcement Bureau (SEB). I was awakened in the night with the news of Randy's

death, and told that the incident was still unresolved. I immediately dressed and responded to LAPD's incident command post to offer any assistance the sheriff's department could provide. A short time later, a contingent of my personnel arrived on scene with some of our armor. From a tactical perspective, we were able to assist our friends in a small way, but our greatest impact that terrible day came in the form of showing respect and support for brothers-in-arms during a very difficult time.

The purpose of this article is not to discuss a specific incident or to chronicle the longstanding relationship between LAPD SWAT and LASD SEB, although the two

teams have been there for one another many times over the years. Its purpose is to illustrate the need for collaboration between teams and to underscore the responsibility leaders have to build and maintain relationships outside their own organization. I can say unequivocally that the failure to form relationships has played a significant role in the catastrophic breakdown of tactical operations, resulting in the deaths of innocent victims and law enforcement personnel.

## **THE HIGH COST OF ISOLATION**

When teams become isolated and neglect relationships with surrounding counterparts, they set themselves up for failure in the

tactical environment. That failure may come about as a result of inadequate resources during a crisis, or it may manifest itself in the form of incompetence due to outdated, inappropriate tactics, techniques and procedures (TTPs). Simply stated, collaboration with sister agencies is a force multiplier, both in terms of resources and intellect.

## PERSONNEL AND EQUIPMENT

The most obvious benefit of collaboration is the resulting availability of reserves in personnel and equipment. Properly trained and equipped tactical personnel are always in limited supply. While most teams may be sufficiently staffed and equipped to handle straightforward barricade or warrant operations, most do not have the resources to adequately handle hostage events, complex incidents of extended duration, or multiple simultaneous operations.

There once was an hours-long hostage incident in which negotiations proved unsuccessful and the suspects became increasingly agitated. A tactical intervention was approved and several hostages were killed or wounded by suspects during the assault. In reviewing the incident, it was readily apparent that the availability of supplementary tactical personnel could have put a stop to much, if not all, of the carnage. I later asked the handling team leader if his team had considered seeking the assistance of another tactical team that was located nearby. He told me that such a request was never considered because “We never really do anything with those guys...”

## EVOLVING AS A TEAM

Another benefit of collaboration comes in the form of learning from each other’s training and experience. Tactics and equipment are in a constant state of evolution. Working with other teams permits us to gain new perspectives and evaluate different approaches to problem solving. At its best, it elevates effort and improvement through a sense of competition and comradery. At a bare minimum, it serves to test and validate your own methods against others.

I was once asked to provide a week of training to a team shortly after they had suffered line of duty deaths during a tactical incident. It was one of the most difficult and emotionally trying training missions I ever experienced. The team’s former commander had discouraged any sort of collaboration with outside tactical personnel, or any sort of training apart from their own. He apparently believed that his own military background provided him with everything needed to train his law enforcement tactical personnel. As our week’s training progressed, it became apparent to the team’s members that there were a number of available tactical alternatives which would have likely prevented the loss of their partners’ lives. It was heartbreaking to see them come to that realization.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF SETTING EGO ASIDE

It is a leader’s responsibility to build and maintain relationships. This may involve putting ego aside and accepting the fact that you (or your team) can’t do it all by

yourselves. It also implies your acknowledgement that other, more effective ways of doing business may exist outside your organization. Make no mistake about it, training with other teams can be difficult. After all, no one in their right mind enjoys being evaluated by peers from another agency. But it gets easier over time, and it’s how we get better. It’s also how we develop trust, which is the foundation of meaningful relationships.

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# OUR GREATEST IMPACT THAT TERRIBLE DAY CAME IN THE FORM OF SHOWING RESPECT AND SUPPORT FOR BROTHERS-IN-ARMS DURING A VERY DIFFICULT TIME.

When you find yourself in command of a major operation such as a hostage incident or officer-down shooting with an outstanding suspect, you will likely have offers of assistance from several agencies. Unfortunately, it is very difficult to assign tactical missions to outsiders unless you have some degree of trust in their capability and level of competence. That sense of assurance can only come about as a result of regular dialogue and training.

If you are a team commander or team leader, the time to introduce yourself to your counterpart and offer assistance is not at a command post in the middle of a crisis.

## A RELATIONSHIP WORTH NOTING

Lt. Lopez's yearly call to me is more than a noble gesture from a classy guy. It also displays his understanding of how important relationships and collaboration are within our occupation. LAPD and LASD field two of the largest and best equipped full-time tactical teams in the nation. Yet, both acknowledge the scarcity of resources in a world of conflict that is increasingly complex in its approach to violence.

Both teams have a competitive spirit, proud histories and a strong sense of their own identity. Yet both put ego aside and embrace their long-standing relationship, building on a foundation that was formed more than 50 years ago by visionary leaders like NTOA Founder John Kolman (LASD/ SEB) and Ron McCarthy (LAPD/SWAT), who collaborated from the very beginning of the SWAT concept while forming a lifelong friendship.

If you're a leader in your organization and haven't had contact with another team in your region for some time, consider making a phone call of your own. Great alliances that save lives can spring from something as simple as a phone call and a follow-up meeting over a cup of coffee.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Hansen is chief of police for the Santa Maria (CA) Police Department. Prior to his service in Santa Maria, he retired as a captain from the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department with 36 years of service. Most of his work was in the field of tactical operations and critical incident command, including 13 years as a full-time SWAT sergeant/team leader and six years as the SWAT lieutenant/team commander for SEB. He was an elected member of the NTOA Board of Directors for 20 years and was chairman of the board from 2008 to 2013; he now serves as a director emeritus.



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