





# Lessons in leadership: The power of engagement

BY PHIL HANSEN

A few months back, a good friend of mine accepted a position as deputy chief of a mid-sized police agency. When I called recently to ask how things were going at the new job, I was somewhat disappointed but not altogether surprised to hear his response. It seems that although his chief of police is a decent enough guy — intelligent, ethical and hardworking — he also is completely disengaged from the majority of the personnel in his department. My friend's quote was, "He never walks the halls ... I have to drag him in to say hello to the people who work for him." The chief is much more engaged in activities that take place outside the agency, such as his membership with his state chiefs' association or his involvement with other management and community organizations. There is a disconnect between the leader and the organization he is responsible for, resulting in a general feeling of disengagement on the part of the agency's personnel. Unfortunately, this is all too common in our line of work.

How do intelligent, committed leaders become so disengaged from their personnel? Most of us know intuitively that leadership is, first and foremost, a people business. There will

always be a few among us who are so self-absorbed they can't grasp the need to engage with their personnel, but most of us begin our leadership journey understanding the need to forge relationships with those we lead. Many of us relish those relationships and to a large degree, we are driven by them. But even the most people-oriented among us are not immune to the demands of time constraints, the pull on our egos from outside pursuits, and the discomfort caused by distance from our line personnel as we promote through the organization.

So what can we do to re-engage with our personnel?

**Set time aside:** Getting to know your people takes time and hard work, but it's essential to good leadership. As a department head, I may never be able to know all my people intimately,

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but I do endeavor to spend time and learn as much about them as possible. It's critical that my personnel realize how much I care about them, and how committed I am to our mission. They'll never gain that knowledge from emails and memoranda, no matter how eloquent the message. For that message to truly resonate, they have to see it in my eyes and hear it in my voice. Fifteen minutes of interaction with my personnel at a briefing is worth more than a stack of memoranda when it comes to gaining their confidence and support. Time spent with your people is essential. It's a priority that must be scheduled on a regular basis, no matter how pressing your calendar may be.

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## REGULAR, FACE-TO-FACE ENGAGEMENT WITH YOUR PERSONNEL IS AN ESSENTIAL COMPONENT OF AUTHENTIC LEADERSHIP.

**Ego and outside pursuits:** Many years ago, I learned a valuable lesson about ego and the pull of outside pursuits when I was working as a SWAT team leader in Los Angeles. I had taught courses in some of the early NTOA annual conferences, and as the association's training program expanded, I became very involved in teaching regional courses around the country. It was an exciting time for me. I was passionate about the subject matter and proud to represent both the NTOA and my unit of assignment as more and more training requests came my way. Before long, I was spending all my vacation time, several weeks a year, teaching classes on the road.

One morning I was dressing in my hotel room, preparing to teach a basic SWAT school in northern California,

when I turned the television on and watched a news report of a major shootout involving members of my own team in Los Angeles. The suspect had been killed but three members of my unit reportedly were wounded during the exchange. It's difficult to describe the hollow, sick feeling I had in my stomach as I watched that report. I was worried about my friends and asking myself what I was doing in a motel room, miles from home, when I should have been with my team. Fortunately, the wounds to our personnel turned out to be relatively minor, but the incident had a profound effect on me. After that incident, I cut my teaching back dramatically and spent the remainder of my team years focused on my team, where I felt my attention needed to be.

We all have egos in this business, and when we excel in our work it's a nice feeling to have our expertise recognized outside our organizations. Just remember that your primary obligation is always to the success of your mission and to the good people you've been entrusted to lead. Involvement with outside pursuits should be a distant priority, even when that involvement comes with accolades or financial reward.

**Distance from the line:** Almost anyone who's promoted to sergeant is familiar with that slight feeling of detachment that comes with the promotion. Things change when you promote, and you're no longer exactly one of the guys, or at least you shouldn't be. That feeling of detachment can become a little more pronounced with each subsequent promotion or transfer and before too long, some people in leadership positions feel so distant that they become uncomfortable or out of place in close contact with their own line personnel, so they spend all their time in front of a computer screen. If you allow that to happen, it's a terrible mistake and it is absolutely devastating to your

effectiveness as a leader. You must overcome that discomfort, get out from behind your desk and spend time interacting with your personnel. They want to hear from their leaders, and you need to hear from them.

Regular, face-to-face engagement with your personnel is an essential component of authentic leadership. The most effective professional organizations operate in an environment in which all personnel understand their mission or purpose, and in which there is a level of confidence and mutual trust between all levels of the hierarchy. That trust and understanding can only come about as a result of interaction and communication between a leader and his or her personnel. A leader shows respect for his personnel by listening to them, and trust is the reward that leader receives in return for treating his personnel with respect.

As law enforcement leaders, we have many responsibilities but one overarching goal: to accomplish our mission of serving and protecting our communities by training, mentoring, supporting, caring for and directing our personnel who ultimately do the work that must be done. That kind of leadership doesn't take place outside the organization or behind a desk.

### 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.