

LEADERSHIP

A Santa Maria Police Department officer carries a child to an ambulance after being first to arrive at a “baby not breathing” call during the COVID-19 crisis. There was no time to don PPE.



Lessons in Leadership: Reflections on leading through uncertain Times

BY PHIL HANSEN

We all know that leadership can be challenging, even during the best of times. As I sit down to write this article, I'm tasked with leading my department through a situation I haven't seen in over four decades of law enforcement service.

It's April 2020, and we are in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. The full extent of damage this virus will inflict on our nation's health and economy is unknown. While the majority of our country is advised to shelter in place, law enforcement personnel are expected to do just the opposite. We're tasked with going out among our fellow man, sick and healthy alike, and maintaining order in a time of chaos.

As leaders, we're trying to balance factors that sometimes pit the health of our personnel against the effective completion of our mission. If this weren't challenging enough, those of us in administrative positions are also trying to cope with severely diminished budgets due to the horrific effects that business closures from social distancing are having on our local economies.

I hope and pray that by the time you read this, things will be returning to normal, but I thought that in light of the crisis we all face, this might be a good time to review a few leadership fundamentals we should all remember to practice as we navigate our way through these uncertain times. Most of this advice should be familiar to you and some of these topics have been discussed at length in this series of articles. But just like tactical fundamentals, it never hurts to review some fundamentals in leadership, especially before heading into the fray.

FIRST, SHOW-UP AND COMMUNICATE

You can't lead from the sidelines, especially during a crisis. When things start to jump off and get time competitive, it's easy to get caught up in managing meetings, operations plans and administrative minutiae, and to forget that leadership is primarily about people. Of course you have to be a manager, but you also need to be seen and heard by your personnel, and they need to know that their leader is engaged in the same struggle they are in. In times like this, I try my best to make sure I'm attending briefings, walking the halls, communicating through regular updates, and soliciting feedback from all levels of the organization.

The natural tendency for leaders during a time of crisis is to see themselves as senders of information and to focus on issuing directives. But it's even more important to listen to the concerns of your personnel and whenever you can, to respond to them as soon as possible. You'll be under greater stress and demand for your attention during a crisis, so you can't think of everything. The ideas and suggestions from your people are a force multiplier. Be approachable

and open to new concepts, particularly when it involves the well-being of your personnel.

In the present case, this virus affects not only the safety of our personnel, but their loved ones as well. We are asking them to dig deep and set "normal" aside in their service to the community. At times like this, cooperation and communication are key factors, and trust is the coin of the realm. Let your people see you, hear you, and feel secure in the knowledge that you have their backs.

PROJECT OPTIMISM AND SET THE OPERATIONAL TONE

This is a new situation for all of us, and new situations tend to make people nervous. I have a very young department and for most of them, this is their first deployment in a period of crisis. They are naturally going to look to their leadership for guidance and some sense of assurance. As leaders, we have to always remember that we are being watched, and that the emotions, attitudes and actions of our personnel will be modeled largely on what they see from us.

My own goal is to project calm, realistic optimism and a sense of pride in the nobility of our mission.

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Calm is self-explanatory. Nobody wants to follow a leader who acts stressed-out, short tempered or emotionally unstable. By realistic optimism, I mean projecting confidence that we will prevail and get through this if we work together while also acknowledging that we may sustain illness and difficulty along the way.

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As leaders, we have to focus on what we can control and try not to be distracted and frustrated by what we cannot. Southern California is well known for its raging, destructive wildfires. While working during major wildfires in Los Angeles County, I would tell my subordinate supervisors, “Don’t worry, the fire always stops at PCH (Pacific Coast Highway), just do what you can to mitigate the damage until it gets there.” In other words, as law enforcement officers, we can’t stop this virus any more than we could stop those fires, but it will stop eventually. In the

meantime, we can be smart, safe and effective in doing what we know how to do: maintaining order, preserving the peace and helping to mitigate the suffering until it does stop.

Finally, I try to talk openly with my people about experiencing a sense of honor from the value and nobility of our mission. On a personal level, I don’t resent the fact that we are asked to go to work when others are expected to stay home. I take pride in it, and I try to express that pride to the people I am fortunate to serve with. During this pandemic, people are still victimized, spouses are still battered and children are still abused.

The public is fed a constant stream of fear and uncertainty by a media that thrives on those very things. The community looks to us for a sense of order, security and normalcy. As our personnel go out to work, they should take with them a sense of pride in their commitment and the importance of our mission. As a leader, openly express your pride in them and in our profession.

TAKE TIME FOR REFLECTION AND SEEK SUPPORT TO MAINTAIN PERSPECTIVE

The longer I do this work, the more I’ve come to realize that any success I’ve experienced has more to do with my network of support than it has to do with my own gifts or ability. One thing I believe I’ve done well throughout the years is to leverage that support, and rely on it to see me through times of crisis and uncertainty. My personal support network includes professional friends and mentors of tremendous insight, contemporary and historical leaders (from my books) who faced challenges that make my own seem trivial in comparison, my wife whose love

and common sense have kept me afloat for 45 years, and my God from whom I seek strength and direction. As diverse as these sources of support are, they all have something in common. If I want their help, it’s up to me to seek it out.

When things get tough, look out for yourself and don’t try to go it alone. Things like exercise and time with your family are crucial for maintaining your own strength and clarity of thought. Reach out to a friend, peer or mentor and have a discussion about the issues you’re facing. Just talking things through can provide new insights you hadn’t previously considered. And finally, set a few minutes of quiet time aside each day to reflect, to pray or to read a chapter in a book about a leader you admire.

When I read about the monumental issues that were faced by Abraham Lincoln or Winston Churchill, it puts my own burdens in perspective. Take care of yourself so you can take care of your personnel and remember, this too shall pass. After all, the fire always stops at PCH.

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.