



ADVICE FROM A MILLENNIAL LEADER: **Five tips to lead the future generation of SWAT**

BY DAVID ALLEN

Difficulties leading the millennial generation have become a point of discussion among most departments' future leaders. Some leaders are adapting to the change, while others believe the newer generations should comply with the "status quo" of how things were done 20 years ago. The most common complaint from generation Xers, also known as the ones getting ready to retire, is not

being obligated to answer the "why?" Law enforcement agencies nationwide are dealing with high turnover rates as well as competing to recruit potential candidates from a shrinking pool of applicants. As a millennial in a leadership role at my department, these five tips have paved my path of success not only in my personal career but also in building high-performing teams at my agency.

1. BE APPROACHABLE

Being approachable is arguably the most important quality in effective leadership. We've all been around a lot of SWAT operators from across the nation, and some of them are far from approachable. Typically, SWAT operators are considered the "cream of the crop" within our departments. However, leadership should not set



they have gained to their peers, as the department will perform better as a whole. This will be accomplished if they are approachable.

2. THERE IS VALUE IN HONEST CONFLICT

Egos can run rampant on SWAT teams if leaders allow it. In most cases, we only have one chance to get it right; otherwise, people can get seriously hurt or even die. If we see something is not right, then we are obligated to say something, whether it causes a defensive reaction from someone or not. We should practice being polite and professional all the time. For example, if your teammate is “sweeping” someone during entry training, then something should be said (“see something, say something”). If a teammate forgets to do a weapons safety check before entering the shoot house, say something. If they get their feelings hurt, that’s OK. If an argument gets started about it but it keeps everyone safe and prevents them from doing it again, that too is OK. That is the value of honest conflict.

3. EVERYONE HAS A SAY

Millennials want to have a say, even if leaders don’t implement what they suggest. The entire team should have input in decision-making when it involves big changes such as equipment purchases, selection of new members, training topics, etc. Involving the entire team in decisions like these lets them know they can make an impact and promotes leadership. Team leaders have to ensure members know when input is appropriate and when it is not. For example, if a plan is being briefed with little time to discuss how they want to execute a high-risk hostage rescue, this typically is not the time for input. If time is available, then input should be allowed to develop the best possible plan of action. Allowing

everyone to have input can take time to balance, but if done correctly the reward of having a fully committed and trustworthy team operating on all cylinders is priceless.

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4. HAVE A CULTURE OF OWNERSHIP

It is difficult for most people to admit their mistakes, but failing to do so significantly hinders performance improvement. Leaders have to create an environment that encourages taking ownership of mistakes, and it must begin with them. There is something to be said when a man can look in the eyes of his brothers and sisters and admit wrongdoing. Today’s leaders must operate with the notion that they may not know everything. This will promote others to feel compelled and more comfortable in taking ownership of mistakes. One of the biggest hurdles of teams becoming the best in their field is a lack of ownership. Fear of making mistakes in training has become the norm, especially with younger members who try to avoid ridicule at all costs. Suffering from friendly ridicule is a part of our culture, but it does not have to be a negative part. Mistakes in training are going to happen, so instead of arguing, just admit a mistake was made and improve from there.

the tone that operators are more important than everyone else. It is the responsibility of department leadership to properly train our operators to be the most approachable individuals at the agency. The training and experience they receive while on the team makes them a valuable asset to everyone in the agency. Leaders should encourage each operator to pass on the knowledge and techniques

5. DETAILS MATTER

From the placement of where we attach the pouches to our vests to knowing your weapon's "point of aim, point of impact," details matter in our world. All leaders should place a high priority on paying attention to the details of what we do. I have seen seasoned SWAT members show up to call outs with empty magazines in their vests because they forgot to load their duty ammunition after training. Details matter.

We recently executed a hostage rescue of a 4-month-old child who was being held by the child's father in a vehicle on the interstate. The windows of the vehicle were rolled up, the doors locked, and the child was seated in the father's lap, which proved to be a huge obstacle to overcome. The father had knives and a crossbow in the vehicle and refused to release the child after hours of attempted negotiations. By this time, the team medics were concerned, as the child was showing signs of dehydration. Something had to be done.

As we were briefing our rescue options, a patrol sergeant who had been posted at the back of the vehicle prior to our arrival made a comment that the father would turn to face the driver's side window when spoken to or when his attention was drawn, and the baby would shift as well. This proved to be true as the negotiator continued to speak with the suspect. Our best option to rescue the child was to "break and rake" the passenger side window to gain entry, as both father and child would be facing

the opposite direction at the time of execution. We were prepared, as we knew the father would act as a human shield protecting the child from broken glass.

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The plan was executed and the child rescued while the father was taken into custody. Neither the father, the child, nor team members were injured in this operation. That one minor detail noticed by a perimeter unit (the father and child facing away from the point of entry) was the deciding factor to execute our rescue plan proves that details matter. Don't be nitpicky, just exaggerate the importance of the details of what we do and the team will have high performers who will save a lot of lives.

FINAL THOUGHTS

Very soon, the millennial generation will account for over half the

workforce in law enforcement. The old mentality of "you will do what I say because I said so," isn't going to cut it anymore. Leaders have to learn to be patient and take the time to explain why we are making a certain decision or making members perform a certain task if they want to build a solid team as well as avoid high turnover.

There will always be those times that direction will be handed down and executed flawlessly without question. I speak from experience when I say that in exercising these five steps, your team will know when and where to be as well as when to speak and not to speak. This becomes much easier when team members trust their leadership.

The strategies above can help earn that trust, have a team of high performers, and leave a legacy long after you have left. To stay on track, ask yourself, "What do I want to be remembered for?"

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



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Allen spent five years as an executive board member for the Florida SWAT Association. He has been an instructor for the FSA and the NTOA. He is also a senior agency instructor and adjunct professor at the Public Safety Academy at Northwest Florida State College. He recently graduated with his master's degree in public service administration from Columbia Southern University.

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