

ON LEADERSHIP

A FAREWELL MESSAGE

By Steven R. (Randy) Watt

After eight years and 32 columns, I believe it's time for more current SWAT team leaders to opine in this space, and consequently this is my last column. During this time, I have been back to the war twice more, as well as to the resident U.S. Army War College. I have served as Deputy Group Commander, Battalion Commander and Group Commander of my Army National Guard unit, and retired from my position as Assistant Chief of Police. Those changes, while further enhancing organizational and strategic leadership education, training and experience, have moved me far from the direct leadership realm where SWAT team leaders reside; too far, in my opinion, to still provide good guidance to you.

In my premier column, I said we would focus on the "art" of leadership, rather than the science. The science is easily obtained through a variety of means, and many attend the courses or read the books. The



art, however, is much harder to find and is acquired through mentoring and experience combined with specific traits and values. Few truly become good-to-great leaders, no matter how much of the science they obtain and no matter how many skins they hang on their walls. Those who do rise to greatness take the science learned and apply the art, making them especially effective as leaders. The difference is readily

apparent and highly visible in the effect such leaders have on their organizations. Just holding the office, no matter how high, is not enough; great leaders produce positive change. Let me say that again: *great leaders produce positive change*. Even in the face of adversity and challenge, including inadequate resources and high politics, great leaders find ways to influence the conditions and produce the intended results. The proof of such change — high performance — is also its own reward.

In this, my final column, I've attempted to summarize all I've previously offered in just a few paragraphs to convey the most important tenets of effective direct leadership. I offer the following *artful* points as my parting words.

1. *It is not about you, it's about what you produce.* Too many leaders worry about themselves and what they stand to gain or lose and how their subsequent actions and decisions will affect their careers. These people are ineffective, and often controversial, as leaders. They are either frozen by fear of decisions gone wrong or too easily swayed by the politics impacting their organizational existence. Good leaders make the right decisions and take the right actions because they are the right things to do, regardless of the potential impact to their future. Good leaders stand on principle — time-proven, rock-solid, well-tested principle.



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2. *Performance standards are the bedrock of effective teams and great leaders ensure the standards are met by all.* Good-to-great teams have performance standards for which they are accountable. Starting with physical fitness standards as the required foundation for operator success in a high-stress environment, and moving through selection/retention standards, shooting proficiency standards, equipment maintenance standards and teamwork standards, good teams are held accountable for their performance. No one is exempt. The standards are written, the performance is documented. As the team's capability evolves, so do the standards. The good-to-great SWAT team leader jealously and zealously guards the standards. The standards are the cause of high performance and capability, and the leader knows that *when*, not *if*, the worst situation occurs and the air is snapping and popping with the passing of bullets, adherence to standards creates the greatest likelihood of a positive outcome.

Observers need only look at the SWAT team leader to find evidence of the standards. The SWAT team leader not only leads by example, he *is* the example. He may not be the fastest runner, but he is at a high level of physical fitness. He may not be the best shooter, but he's capable of meeting the



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standard the first time at every testing event. SWAT team members know they are accountable, because the leader himself is accountable. A SWAT team leader who fails to hold himself accountable to the same standards as his team members is as contemptible as a third-world dictator.

3. *Mediocrity produces complacency, an insidious and deadly disease.* In keeping with the above paragraph on standards, nothing indicates a potentially deadly lack of leadership like a SWAT organizational environment flush with mediocrity and complacency. Mediocrity is the forerunner of complacency as it creates an "I don't care" attitude among the members of the organization. Laziness follows, along with subsequent, but accepted, poor performance. Leaders are often opposed in their efforts to produce excellence because, as Albert Einstein once said, "Great Spirits often receive violent opposition from mediocrities." Mediocrity will then be followed by complacency, a sense of comfort residing in the laziness of the status quo of minimal performance.

Complacency cannot exist unless mediocrity reigns in the organization. Once complacency becomes embedded, disaster will eventually follow. Many of you read my recent column on an event in my city which left one officer dead and five others wounded. The cause? Complacency. The reason? Failed leadership resulting in the acceptance of mediocrity to a fatal level. Do not accept mediocrity. SWAT teams, by their very design and purpose, should be incapable of mediocrity and devoid of complacency. If these exist, step up as the leader and fix it or step out of the way and let the next good leader get to work.

4. *SWAT is not something we do, it is something we are.* It is not the pin or the patch on the uniform, it's what's in the heart that delineates a SWAT officer, and that is doubly so with the great SWAT and special operations team leaders I have known. They exemplify everything I have ever written in this column, and more. They live the tenets contained in the "One Warrior's Creed," recognizing the importance and societal impact of the way of life and position they have



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chosen. Police officers are the sheepdogs. Police leaders, including and especially SWAT team leaders, are the shepherds directing and guiding the sheepdogs as to how and when to engage the wolves. Such responsibility requires we live the life, not just say the words.

Living such a life, by not accepting mediocrity and by destroying complacency, by holding yourself and your team to high standards of performance, by caring about what you produce, and, as a result, by being competently and

confidently prepared for the worst the dregs of humanity can throw at us, brings the greatest reward a true Warrior Leader can receive: peace of mind. Prepare hard and well, and you will lead well. And you will receive peace. In closing, allow me to quote the greatest shepherd of all: "Peace I leave with you, my peace I give unto you: not as the world giveth, give I unto you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid." ▮

Editor's note: When Randy Watt began his column in 2006, his goal was to "offer guidance to current and future tactical team leaders so that they may more effectively lead, guide and direct their teams." He has certainly accomplished that goal with this column. His keen ability to write succinct and vital lessons on the art of leadership has greatly benefitted the tactical community. We thank him for his significant contribution to the quality and prestige of our publication.

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