



GETTING ENGAGED: A new perspective on team morale

By Ed Allen

Today's team leaders and commanders are saddled with an incredible amount of responsibilities running a team. One that is often overlooked, yet extremely important, is their role as the chief morale officer. Although nowhere in policy or standards will you find a requirement that the commander ensure the team remains happy, if morale is not addressed on a regular basis, the results will have a negative effect on operational capabilities.

Morale can be defined as “the feelings of enthusiasm and loyalty that

a person or group has about a task or job.” Feelings are not part of the normal lexicon of a commander or team leader. We do not often concern ourselves with how employees, in this case operators, feel about the job they are doing — that is, until it's too late.

Unchecked or low morale can often lead to the same performance issues on a SWAT team as they do in any other assignment in the law enforcement organization. If employees are not satisfied, engaged and enthusiastic about the work they do, it should be no surprise

that performance issues like complacency, absenteeism and turnover become prevalent. Morale and engagement should be considered synonymous. Low engagement by leaders and team members will certainly lead to low morale.

It is important to remember that operators volunteered to participate on the team and they should bring with them their own personal motivation and positive attitude. They must also understand that team operations, equipment and relationships may not always be perfect, and they bear a certain

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responsibility in contributing to positive team morale. But despite the best efforts by operators, maintaining a high level of morale in today's world can be a daunting task.

Scrutiny and criticism of law enforcement by the media and the public is at an all-time high. Such criticism can often lead operators to question themselves and whether or not they want to continue to expose themselves to such risks. SWAT leaders also should recognize that many of the most common factors that negatively impact morale are not within the direct control of operators. They have an expectation that their team leaders and commander will be fully engaged and aware of current morale issues and are working to address them or can at least explain why they are occurring or can't change right now.

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As our profession is going through one of the most significant generational shifts it has ever seen, we are yet again reminded that what worked for the last couple of decades may not work today. As leaders, we carry with us the problems and issues we experience along the way. We hold on to them with the hope that one day we will be in a higher posi-

tion of authority and decision-making that will eventually allow us to fix those problems. By the time that opportunity comes, however, those issues may no longer be relevant. We cannot assume that what we considered morale issues in the past are still issues today. Nor can we assume that what may have kept our morale high along the way will do the same for today's operators. Today's operators have expectations and motivations that are completely different than their predecessors. Simply being on the team may not be enough.

A 2014 Gallup research poll suggests that less than one-third of U.S. employees are truly engaged in their work. And for those employees who reported being disengaged, nearly 70 percent attributed their disengagement as being a result of their managers. Those employees with the highest levels of engagement also were more likely to describe their manager as being open and approachable. Those same highly engaged employees identified that their manager helped them set work priorities and goals and tended to focus on the employees' strengths rather than weaknesses. This all suggests that positive and engaged leaders attract and retain positive and engaged employees.

Let's be clear though: It is not the job of commanders and team leaders to entertain team members. Nor do they have an obligation to fulfill every request or demand simply because some suggest they will be unhappy without it. Being on SWAT requires personal sacrifice, hard work and dedication. It's not always fun or even enjoyable, for that matter.

It is also important to understand that we are not suggesting this is applicable during critical events. There is a time for discussion, debate and collective decision-making by team members and leaders, but it is not during a critical incident. Most understand that decision-making, for the most part, switches from a democratic to an autocratic process during those times. But

when those critical incidents do occur, why wouldn't a SWAT leader want a high level of morale and engagement to already be present?

So now the hard work comes. How do you engage team members and address morale issues? This may vary depending on your tenure as a SWAT leader. If you've been in a leadership role on the team for a period of time, it may require some thick skin. You have to be willing to accept the fact that a festering morale problem has been occurring on your watch, or worse, as a result of your own doing. If you are new to the SWAT leadership position, focus on the issues and be careful not to simply blame your predecessor. Regardless of which category you may fall into, here are a few things that you can do build team morale:

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Don't wait. SWAT leaders can't wait for operators to bring these issues to them or until morale deteriorates so far that it becomes detrimental to team performance. Schedule regular individual meetings with all members of your team. Group meetings do not lend themselves well to honest and candid discussions. Give people an opportunity to vent, bring new ideas or express concerns about how things are going. Even if they have nothing to offer, you have at least given them an opportunity and diminished their ability to complain that no one is listening to them.

Go outside of your team: While your team members may be closest to the problem, that doesn't mean that they

are the only ones that see it. Talk to others who interact with the operators, like negotiators, patrol commanders and surrounding agency SWAT team members. They will often share their perspective with you if done in confidence.

Deal with it. Once larger issues are identified, don't shy away from them. Make it clear to the team that you are aware of the issue, and explain how it is going to change or why it cannot. The only thing worse than a poor morale problem is one that is made public and then ignored.

Focus on them. Often SWAT leaders become fixated on the overall team performance and lose sight of the individual operator as a person. Listen to what operators need for their own personal benefit and what they expect from you. Take time to develop a personal plan

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for their own growth on the team and follow up on it regularly. Your level of engagement in their concerns will be reciprocated in their level of loyalty.

Lighten up a little. Law enforcement officers, particularly SWAT operators, respect strong and well-disciplined

leaders. They want to follow people who exude confidence, demonstrate tactical knowledge and are no-nonsense — but not all of the time. Remember, they volunteered to be part of the team. They are not drafted or enlisted under any contract to remain. They are there because they want to be. Make sure that you create an environment that makes them want to be there. Let them see that you enjoy being part of the team by having a little fun occasionally. Although training time is precious, don't underestimate the value of scheduling in some activities that have no other purpose other than to serve as team-building exercises.

Our profession is currently being challenged to recruit and retain employees for one of the toughest jobs in the country. Even more difficult is recruiting and retaining people who also want to be on a SWAT team. We have to recognize the value of maintaining high levels of morale in SWAT. The question isn't whether future employees need it; the question is whether or not you will be the one who provides it for them. ■

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Ed Allen is a retired major from the Seminole County (FL) Sheriff's Office. He served for more than 29 years in the profession, with over 20 on SWAT. He holds a bachelor of science degree in applied behavioral science, is a certified emergency manager and a graduate of the 242nd Session of the FBI National Academy. Allen currently serves as Training Program Manager for the National Tactical Officers Association.



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