

LEADERSHIP AND WELLNESS

BY JAMES BAND

When it comes to physical and mental fitness, law enforcement seems to be lagging. While there has been some great movement in mental health and wellness for officers, we never seem to talk about the correlation between fitness and police professionals' ability to be good at what they do.

The culture of policing needs to change. The fire service has always gotten this right. They work out on duty and many departments have robust wellness programs managed by paid staff. There is an obvious correlation in most people's minds between fitness and firefighters' ability to do their job effectively. Unfortunately, the police culture did not form with the same understanding about that correlation.

The most important tools police professionals have are their minds and bodies. This is even more true for tactical teams. You might be a part of the best outfitted SWAT team in the nation. Can you sprint 150 meters, jump a fence, think calmly, and manipulate your weapon efficiently after kneeling in an uncomfortable position in the cold for two hours? Good gear is important, but so is strength, cardiovascular health, flexibility and nutrition. Your shoulders, knees and every other part of you should be as dialed as your long rifle. You are only going to be as effective as your human machine will

allow. You cannot buy a strong lower back; you need to earn it with deadlifts and back squats.

WELLNESS

We spend millions of dollars across this country every year on equipment designed to keep our officers and deputies safe — state-of-the-art firearms, tactical vests, ballistic helmets, to name a few. But did you know that as a police officer, you are 25 times more likely to die of cardiovascular disease than by the actions of a suspect? The average age of a police officer who has a heart attack is 49; the average age of a civilian having a heart attack is 65.¹ Eighty percent of law enforcement officers are overweight and 40 percent are considered obese.² These are depressing statistics and demonstrate the need for leaders in our profession to make wellness a priority. We need to first be an example and then to prioritize wellness where we have influence.

LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Some of the responsibility for change lies with police leadership. Many conferences and lectures focus on how leadership must set the example in law enforcement. Valid points always are raised about the importance of being ethical, not just requiring ethics. Demonstrating

accountability, not just demanding it from those who work for you. These are valid points because leaders set a tone, and as a leader you must demonstrate the things you claim are important to your team. You cannot create a culture of mental and physical wellness if people looking to you for leadership do not see you living and modeling it.

Clearly, modeling does not mean finishing an Ironman triathlon or becoming a hyper-athlete. Leading can be something as simple as showing that you took a first step by going to the gym and starting a moderate exercise regimen. Leading can be making a nutritionist available to your staff for an annual visit. It is not very expensive and it provides some starting points for people to make themselves better. An agency should be fertile ground for any team member who starts dropping seeds of interest in the soil of wellness.

A NEW IDEA

We recently finalized a wellness incentive for our employees, which requires two different aspects of overall fitness. The first is a visit with a mental health professional who specializes in treating first responders. The most elite teams in the military have figured this out and it is time for

us to do it too. Most people have a physical checkup with their doctor to ensure everything is firing on all cylinders; why would we not do the same thing for our brains? Your mind needs the same cleaning, oiling and care you give your firearm. Getting this type of care is not weakness; it is sharpening the most important part of you in pursuit of excellence in your profession. It is maintenance in pursuit of mastery.

The second aspect of our incentive is tied to cardiorespiratory fitness. We are using the Texas Department of Public Safety rowing standard as a model. The test measures an individual's VO2 Max in a 2,000-meter row on a Concept 2 machine. The machines are widely available for about \$900.

If an officer can hit the 75th percentile based on their age, weight and gender pursuant to the standard, they qualify for this aspect of the incentive. If they hit the 85th percentile, they qualify for an increased incentive. It is a great standard because rowing is a very functional movement, rowers are cheap, Texas has done the heavy

lifting, and it is nearly impossible to get hurt on a rower. The duration and intensity line up pretty linearly to a fight on the street.

SUMMARY

Movements begin with individuals. We had a very noticeable surge of officers showing up in our gym as the discussion about our new wellness incentive began. Two officers have each lost over 50 pounds as a result and one of them is no longer taking insulin.

If you are a leader in an organization, think about the difference you could make by just starting a conversation. Informal leaders can really initiate movement inside agencies; if that is you, lead the way. If you are a manager, don't underestimate the power of the first steps. If you are not the one leading the charge, support the people who are.

By optimizing our physical and mental tools, we are better at our profession. This optimization ensures that we always go home at the end of the day and that we are better when we get there.

ENDNOTES

1. Violanti et al. "Life expectancy in police officers: a comparison with the U.S. general population." *Int J Emerg Ment Health*. 2013;15(4):217-28.
2. Shell et al. The Police Executive Leadership Program Class Exercise and Nutrition Questionnaire, administered by Daniel E. Shell, Division of Public Safety Leadership, Johns Hopkins University (Baltimore, MD, October 2003).

More information at publicsafetyheart.org.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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