

FINISHING STRONG

A LEADER'S RESPONSIBILITY TO RUN A COMPLETE RACE

BY PHIL HANSEN





It is the end of another calendar year as I pen this essay, and many leaders are preparing to retire or enter some new phase in their career. Some will move into new positions within their organizations, filling vacancies that open as the inexorable tides of time and change roll on.

Pending changes in leadership can create a time of renewal and promise for an organization. They also can mark a period of tension, rumor mongering and uncertainty during which little of significance gets accomplished. Much will depend on how outgoing leaders fill their remaining time. Will they plan for their departure and provide stable leadership to the end of their term, or will they “retire on duty” and coast to the finish as though these last weeks and months are somehow owed to them like a vacation?

The premise of this article is really quite simple: If you occupy a leadership position, you have an obligation to your personnel and to the organization you serve to run a complete race and be a leader to the finish.

A MATTER OF DUTY

This lesson probably won’t be embraced by those self-indulgent personalities who have typically failed to provide substantive leadership throughout their tenure. Rather, this is meant to serve as a reminder for responsible leaders who have a history of embracing the obligation they owe to their personnel and who are now approaching the end of their terms. There is a natural tendency for all of us to take our foot off the gas as we near the end of an assignment or our career. But it is a temptation we can’t afford to give in to.

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Law enforcement has never been an easy career, but today we operate in an environment that is more challenging than ever before. It is fraught with critics, pitfalls and danger on all sides. Our personnel feel as though they are under siege, leaving many of them to question the wisdom of their career choice. Imagine the emotional let-down they would experience if they begin to feel that their leaders no longer care about their work, their mission, and by extension, about them. That's the message outgoing leaders send when they disengage themselves and shirk responsibility, taking excessive time off and avoiding briefings and other opportunities to interact with their personnel. Our young officers may have anywhere from 10 to 30 years of service ahead of them. How will they feel if their leaders act like they can't wait to get out of the door and leave them behind?

Our mission, our message and our obligation to lead doesn't diminish just because we are about to transfer or retire. Our personnel need consistent leadership, seeing and hearing us espouse the importance of their work. They need to continually feel our support for their success and safety.

PLANNING A SUCCESSFUL TRANSITION

Effective leaders design and generate outcomes. Planning has always been critical to our success as leaders and to whatever extent possible, the transition out of your current assignment should be a planned event that promotes progress with ongoing endeavors while ensuring a continuum of leadership throughout the transition. When there is no plan and outgoing leaders become too distracted by outside influences, take excessive time off and "mail it in" at work, they create a leadership vacuum that is often filled with uncertainty and unhealthy competition between rivals. Rumors abound, snarky behavior emerges and soon

nothing substantial gets accomplished. Before long, the team, unit or organization becomes more obsessed with handicapping the potential winners and losers than with getting the job done.

Much of this negative energy can be avoided if the outgoing leader remains engaged and in control until the transition is complete. At a minimum, the leader who remains at the helm till the end sets a positive example, diminishes conflict between subordinate leaders and keeps people focused on the tasks at hand. At best, the leader can engage in true succession planning, working toward an objective selection process and ensuring that potential candidates for promotion have the requisite training and experience to fulfill the requirements of the position. In any event, the leader's presence to the end will reduce the anxiety, uncertainty and negativity that are often associated with a leadership vacuum.

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An approaching retirement or transfer is a good time to consider implementing short-term goals that can enhance the transition. Equipment inventories or audits of performance areas such as training compliance are good examples of such work. These are extremely valuable, short-term projects that can be accomplished in a leader's final weeks, while providing benefits to both the outgoing and incoming leadership. They serve the dual purpose of providing a report card of sorts for the departing leader while providing the incoming leader with greater situational awareness about his new command, along with a sense of assurance that things are in order.

Finally, responsible leaders have an obligation to do everything we can to facilitate our replacement's success.

Our goal should be to leave our commands in better shape than we found them, and the best leaders want to see their personnel and their agency excel long after their departure. You have probably worked hard to accomplish those goals throughout your tenure. Don't squander that progress and lose the momentum you've built by letting things slip in your waning days.

Lead by example to the end and show others how to finish the race with self-respect, a passion for our work, and commitment to your personnel.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Phil Hansen retired as 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.

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