



MCSO Captain Jim Porter (left), NTOA Founder John Kolman (center) and Keith Frakes (right)

Leading by Example

A Tribute to Keith Frakes

BY PHIL HANSEN

A truly wise person
uses few words;
a person with
understanding is
even-tempered.

– Proverbs 17:27



Keith Frakes in Afghanistan in 2009.

Those who follow this series of essays on leadership know that they usually undertake a close examination of some significant behavioral trait or operational practice that is characteristic of good leadership. Through the years, we have discussed behavioral traits like integrity, humility, and a passion for our mission. We also have examined a number of leadership tools or practices, such as active listening, mentorship and succession planning.

Today, rather than examining a single leadership characteristic or tool, I'd like to spend a little time talking about an individual leader who has exemplified many of these qualities throughout the course of his extraordinary career. NTOA's Director Emeritus Keith Frakes is such a man, and as students of leadership, there is a great deal we can learn from him.

I have had the privilege of serving alongside, observing, and learning from Keith as an NTOA instructor and direc-

tor for nearly 30 years. As a trainer, Keith is a patient and meticulous master of his trade. As a member of the board of directors, he has been an ethical leader and a voice of reason as the NTOA evolved and survived growing pains, financial challenges, and severe threats to its very existence. Keith's contributions to the association and our profession at large have been immense.

A LIFETIME OF SERVICE

It would take several pages to adequately do justice to Keith's training and experience, but a brief overview in broad strokes can provide us with some appreciation for his history of service before discussing aspects of his leadership style.

The son of a Marine Corps infantry officer and Vietnam War veteran, Keith was born into a life of service in Quantico, Virginia. At the age of 18, he enlisted in the US Army, initiating 41 years of military service that would

LEADERSHIP

include two deployments to Iraq and one to Afghanistan in the Global War on Terrorism. The majority of Keith's military service was with the 12th and 19th Special Operations Groups, where he was primarily engaged in counter-intelligence and counter-IED operations. He recently retired from the Army at the rank of Chief Warrant Officer Four (CW-4).

At the end of his initial active-duty enlistment, Keith transitioned to the military reserve and began his law enforcement career as a deputy sheriff with the Maricopa County (AZ) Sheriff's Office, where he served for 21 years, retiring at the rank of captain, commanding the department's explosive ordinance disposal (EOD) and firearms training divisions. During his MCSO career, Keith served as a full-time SWAT operator and team leader, EOD technician, public safety diver and tactical breaching instructor.

Upon retirement from the MCSO, Keith began work at the U.S. Department of Energy's Sandia National Laboratories, in the Explosive Arming and Firing Systems Department. There is an obvious nexus between Keith's military and law enforcement service, and his work at the National Laboratories in the areas of explosive breaching, explosive ordinance disposal and counter-IED operations. Most of his work at Sandia is classified, but it is fair to say that he has been heavily involved in research and training relating to the containment and disarming of WMD threats to our homeland. Keith is scheduled to retire from Sandia about the time this article appears in publication, with 18 years of service at that institution.

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HUMILITY AND STRENGTH

As impressive as the preceding paragraphs may seem, they barely scratch the surface with respect to Keith's contributions, service and sacrifice. Given his tenure and accomplishments, one might expect him to display a certain amount of swagger or self-importance, but nothing could be further from the truth. Keith is a model of humility and quiet strength.

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Keith Frakes with MCSO in 1987.

instructor and member of the NTOA board of directors, I've watched Keith interact with a vast array of personalities. From newly minted SWAT officers to seasoned law enforcement executives, Keith is unfailingly professional, treating others with kindness, respect and the highest level of dignity. Unfortunately, at one time or another most of us have served with people who treat peers, subordinates or anyone else who's not on "their team" with condescension and disdain. Because most workplace behavior is based on what personnel see their leaders do, others down the chain of command mimic them and the cycle continues. Keith's grace and professional demeanor have always been admired and emulated by others within our association. His character and leadership style are among the many reasons the NTOA is so highly regarded as a professional organization.

One of the greatest miscalculations among would-be leaders in our occupation is that to be effective as a leader, you need to act tough. They put up a façade of toughness, which they manifest by being curt, loud, insensitive, uncaring or sometimes downright rude to others. Real leaders are tough and resilient, but they don't hide behind a façade of self-importance and false bravado. Keith Frakes is a personification of the quiet warrior. He exudes a strength and

toughness that is demonstrated in his will, commitment to duty, and consistent adherence to the values we share. He has demonstrated his strength of character under the most difficult of circumstances, while simultaneously treating others in a helpful, respectful and civil manner.

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THE LISTENING AND LEADERSHIP PARADOX

The overall success of an organization (or team) relies on mutual trust and respect between all levels, and the best way to display our respect and build trust with others is to give them our full attention and listen to what they have to say. Listening lays the foundation for trust and for mutual respect.

A common misconception among leaders is the notion that the more authority they possess, the more obligation they have to do all the talking. As they ascend in rank, they see themselves more and more as senders of information, compelled to tell everyone else what to do. On its face, this may seem to make sense. In reality, nothing could be further from the truth. I call this the Listening and Leadership Paradox. The higher up the chain you go, the more you need to listen to those around you.

Listening attentively before speaking provides a leader with perspective and greater access to information while demonstrating respect for others. I've attended hundreds of hours of NTOA directors' meetings with Keith Frakes. As you might imagine, most of the attendees at these meetings are forceful, type-A personalities. At times, the agenda involved substantial differences of opinion and a potential for conflict that if left unchecked, could harm both the board and the association at large.

Regardless of the topic, the gravity of the situation or the depth of his feelings, Keith remains respectful and listens attentively before sharing his own thoughts on a subject. When he does speak, his responses are unfailingly calm, deliberate and well-reasoned. Keith has tremendous passion for our mission and for our responsibility as association directors. Obviously, he is capable of becoming as

frustrated as any of us, but anger, disrespect and sarcasm have never been a part of his repertoire. Generations of directors have learned to hold him in the highest regard, much to our benefit. As a result of his intellect, insight, and the respect he shows others, Keith's opinion has often carried the day.

A TIME TO SAY THANK YOU

Keith recently informed the NTOA Board of Directors that he is resigning his position after nearly 30 years of service to the organization as an instructor, an elected director and director emeritus. As members of this association, you may appreciate the fact that service as a board member or as an instructor at our national conferences is not compensated. It is done for the love of our mission and the betterment of our personnel and our profession.

The Frakes family tradition of service to our nation goes on, as Keith's son is currently serving as a Staff Sergeant / Chem-Bio Specialist in the 10th Special Forces Group. He and his wife are expecting this summer, so Keith will soon be assuming new duties as a grandpa — a mission he will undoubtedly undertake with the same pride and passion he's applied to anything he undertakes.

Thank you, Keith, for your friendship and all you've contributed to make us better people and a better organization. God bless you and the Frakes family.

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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