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De Facto Leaders

SWAT's leadership role in law enforcement agencies

BY DAVID ALLEN

A “de facto leader” is not formally recognized by rank, but is a person to be trusted and followed by those over whom they have influence. Often, members of SWAT teams are de facto leaders within their agency. No matter a SWAT member’s rank, they are often looked to for guidance on resolving our most stressful calls for service. Our abilities make us de facto leaders in our departments, and we should take every opportunity to impact those around us positively.

Members of SWAT teams should be the most approachable employees at our agencies because they have so much to offer others. The amount of training and experience in high-stress environments tactical professionals experience in their careers is unmatched by most in our profession. The ability to problem-solve complex situations and maintain poise in the heat of the moment is what sets us apart from those who don’t have the same experiences.

Outside our everyday duties, we should make ourselves accessible and make every attempt to improve those around us. The days of, “If you want to know what I know, then try out for the team” are over. The hostile environment law enforcement professionals face these days means we should have a sense of urgency in helping others prepare for the moment they will face danger. Seek out those who could use our help without waiting for them to ask. Don’t wait for

your shift mate to ask how to tactically clear a building or a supervisor to ask how to deal with an armed barricaded suspect. Be humble and seek them out, but avoid being judgmental. Invite your shift mates to clear a building together and provide constructive feedback without being overly critical.

Not everyone receives the training we have, so know which details matter and which don’t; otherwise we could lose them by being too nitpicky. Ask your supervisor if you can present a tabletop exercise that covers a tactical scenario that may be encountered by patrol at your next shift briefing. Teach them what you know and why the tactics you’ve learned will work to keep everyone safer. Ensure the supervisor knows you are only trying to help and not trying to undermine them and the position they hold. Keep in mind, there are different ways of executing tactical situations, so be open to feedback and alternative methods when offered.

It is our responsibility as members of SWAT to step up and answer the call to lead. Anytime I received a call requesting our SWAT team, I never responded critically, even if it was warranted. I never wanted anyone in our agency to feel as if our team members were better than everyone else; this went a long way toward building trust with other supervisors and our command staff. The next time you have an opportunity to make a positive impact on another and teach them what you’ve learned, it may save their life. If you ask any member of my team what my No. 1 expectation of them is, they would respond, “Be approachable.” Ditch the ego and be the de facto leader you can be.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



David Allen has been in law enforcement for over 17 years and currently serves as Major over the Administration Bureau at the Okaloosa County Sheriff’s Office. He has served in many different divisions throughout his tenure. For over 15 years, he was a member of the Okaloosa County SWAT team and served as SWAT commander the last three years.

Allen is an instructor with the NTOA and also served as an executive board member for the Florida SWAT Association. He graduated with his master’s degree in Public Service Administration from Columbia Southern University in 2020.

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