



Success often is measured by what we achieve, but the real test of leadership is knowing when it's time to let go. Joining the green team as a SWAT probation member felt like the pinnacle of my young law enforcement career — a dream fulfilled after years of preparation. For officers across the profession, whether in SWAT or other specialized teams, reaching these milestones often is a defining moment. Yet, while many focus on the entry point, few give thought to the equally important question: When is it time to step off?

For me, that question became more pressing as my responsibilities grew. I've spent the last 11 years of my 14-year career with the department as a SWAT member — a part-time position requiring monthly training spanning three to seven days, on top of my primary duties as an assistant troop commander in highway patrol. When I began my time as a SWAT member, I was at the rank of trooper. With tenure, I eventually moved up to trooper first class and then to corporal before being promoted to sergeant. I served for two years as a sergeant and was promoted to lieutenant. This journey has been a privilege, shaped by the unwavering support of my supervisors, peers and family. But it also required self-awareness, as stepping off was a decision I eventually had to face. Here's how I knew it was time to move on and what others in similar positions might learn from my experience.

Photo courtesy of Jonathan Nettles, Arkansas State Police

LEADING BY LETTING GO:

KNOWING WHEN *to* STEP AWAY

BY BRANDON MARGIS

Success often is measured by what we achieve, but the real test of leadership is knowing when it's time to let go.

Lessons in self-awareness

One of the most important lessons I learned during this process was the role of self-awareness in leadership. Emotional intelligence begins with understanding how our commitments and choices impact those around us. For years, I had convinced myself that I could balance my SWAT role indefinitely. But over time, I began to notice how my responsibilities and divided focus were taking a toll on my personal and professional life.

Operating in a state of incongruence — where my actions no longer aligned with my values of being fully present and prepared — took a toll on me. Feelings of guilt, stress and self-doubt crept in as I realized I wasn't giving my best to my family, my team or my role as a leader. Recognizing this incongruence required me to pause and reflect on my priorities and values, often during quiet moments to myself. These reflections were difficult but necessary, ultimately helping me embrace the self-awareness and emotional intelligence needed to make better decisions for those who depended on me.

Leadership is as much about understanding yourself as it is about understanding others. This journey taught me that self-awareness isn't just an internal exercise — it's a vital leadership skill that ensures your actions align with your values and your responsibilities.

The dual life

Balancing dual responsibilities — a primary duty and the intensive demands of SWAT — requires commitment and flexibility. I was fortunate to have supervisors who not only allowed but encouraged my participation on the team. Promotions to sergeant and later lieutenant came with the rare opportunity to keep my SWAT member position, a testament to their faith in me.

However, with these blessings came responsibilities. My supervisors' understanding was clear: SWAT would remain my secondary duty. There were times I missed training dates, callouts and classes because my primary role demanded it. At the time, I fully agreed with and continued to support this approach, as it ensured that my primary responsibilities remained the priority while allowing me to contribute meaningfully to the team. While there were a few instances where I had to miss SWAT events, there were more times that I was able to attend due to the generosity of my co-workers and supervisors covering in my absence.

Yet, self-assessment is not a one-time exercise; it's a continuous process. For years, I believed stepping off the team would only occur under unavoidable circumstances — injury, promotion or a major shift in responsibilities. However, leadership is about recognizing what you can give and whether you're giving at the level your team deserves.

As part of our continuous effort to grow as a team, our commander implemented 360 evaluations in April 2024 — something we had never done before. These evaluations meant that every team member would provide feedback on team leaders, and leaders would evaluate each other. While we already were candid with one another daily, this formalized approach added a new level of transparency. Waiting to meet with our commander to review the evaluations, I felt anxious. I had always been confident in my leadership, but seeing it laid out in writing, knowing that my peers and those I led had taken the time to evaluate me, carried a different weight.

The evaluations were overwhelmingly positive but also pointed out areas of potential growth. My work ethic, leadership, decision-making and ability to develop younger team members were consistently praised. I was described as professional, reliable and someone who could be counted on in any situation. Throughout 2024, I periodically reviewed the evaluations to reflect on whether I was still meeting the expectations placed on me. By the end of the year, I began noticing a shift. While others saw me operating at full capacity, I felt stretched too thin internally. The evaluations made me proud, but they also reinforced what I had begun to recognize: I could no longer sustain the level of commitment the team deserved.

Balancing responsibilities

Throughout my SWAT tenure, I prided myself on maintaining balance. Early on, I managed to squeeze in training prep during quiet moments on patrol. However, as my responsibilities grew with rank and tenure, finding time to prepare adequately became harder. After transferring laterally to a new position as a lieutenant and assistant commander, I realized after nearly two years that I was barely keeping up.

Like other specialized units, SWAT demands total focus. It's not just about physical presence but mental readiness. In close quarters battle (CQB) training, we are taught that our plates — the body armor we wear — are there to protect our teammates. I realized that my lack of consistent preparedness, though never a question of willingness to take a bullet for a teammate, was a signal that I couldn't fully commit. The moment your heart is in it but your head is not, it's time to step aside for the safety of the team and allow someone else to fill the gap.

Recognizing the signs, it's time to step off

One of the most difficult realizations came when I noticed the subtle ways my commitment to SWAT was impacting those around me. I began listening, truly listening, to my colleagues and family. When the boots on the ground (troopers on the highway) who I worked for would call and ask, “Hey, LT, are you in the office today?” I initially thought it was a polite concern. Over time, I recognized it reflected an expectation that I wouldn’t be there — that my other commitments were taking me away too often.

At home, my wife’s support never wavered, but subtle reactions began to show. When my daughters saw me packing for another training, their sighs and dropped shoulders reflected their feelings in the moment. “You’ve got training again?” they’d ask with simple curiosity. My wife’s casual “Oh, I didn’t realize that was this week” was more an observation than anything else.

Listening to these cues, I understood the importance of empathy — not just for others but also for myself. By ignoring these signs, I risked operating in a state of incongruence that would ultimately hurt my family, my team and my well-being.

Lessons learned

During my 11 years on SWAT, I’ve witnessed firsthand the toll it can take on others. I’ve seen team members struggle to balance their marriages, families and primary jobs — sometimes to the point of being removed from the team. Watching those experiences left a profound impact on me, serving as a reminder of the importance of maintaining balance and prioritizing what truly matters. I vowed never to let my own plate overflow to such an extent.

Recognizing when to step off SWAT was a decision rooted in self-awareness and accountability to my team, my family and myself. It wasn’t an easy choice, but it was the right one. Stepping off didn’t mean walking away from leadership or abandoning the values I gained while on the team. Instead, it meant embracing the deeper responsibility of ensuring that my troop, family, and team had the attention and dedication they deserved.

SWAT taught me invaluable lessons about leadership, resilience and teamwork. It gave me opportunities to grow and the privilege of forging friendships that will last a lifetime. A principle deeply instilled in me during my time on the team was the belief that we leave things better than when we found them. I strove to honor that principle, knowing that stepping aside at the right time would allow the team to grow and succeed without my divided focus.

If you’ve started asking yourself, “How do I know when it’s time to step off?” it doesn’t necessarily mean the time has come just because the thought crossed your mind.

However, when you truly listen to those around you — your family, your peers, your own conscience — and you feel a little hurt inside, that may be your answer. Leadership isn’t just about what you achieve but about knowing when to prioritize what matters most.

Final reflection

Stepping away from SWAT allowed me to honor one of the most important principles of servant leadership: ensuring the growth and success of others. Leadership is not just about personal achievement — it’s about knowing when to pivot so others can thrive. By stepping aside, I created space for younger members to develop their skills and bring fresh perspectives to the team.

This decision, while difficult, was rooted in self-assessment, emotional intelligence and resilience. Servant leadership calls us to listen to the needs of those around us — spoken and unspoken — and align our actions with values, prioritizing the greater good. That meant recognizing that my continued presence on the team might limit opportunities for others or compromise the quality of my contributions.

Stepping away wasn’t about walking away from responsibility; it was about ensuring that my actions reflected my commitment to those I served — my family, my team and the mission. Servant leadership teaches us that the ultimate measure of success lies not in what we achieve individually but in the legacy we leave behind — a legacy of empowerment, trust and growth for others.

About the author

Brandon Margis is a 14-year veteran of the Arkansas State Police, where he served 11 years on the SWAT Team, finishing his assignment as assistant entry team leader. A law enforcement instructor since 2014, he currently serves as a lieutenant and assistant commander in Highway Patrol at Troop K in Hot Springs. Margis is an NTOA-certified instructor in less-lethal tactics, flash sound diversionary devices (FSDD) and chemical agents. He holds a B.S. in Criminal Justice from the University of Arkansas at Little Rock and is a graduate of the FBI National Academy. He can be reached at brandonmargis@gmail.com.

Servant leadership teaches us that the ultimate measure of success lies not in what we achieve individually but in the legacy we leave behind — a legacy of empowerment, trust and growth for others.