

When they say “NO”

Building a Culture of Trust

All tactical problems require mission planning and execution for successful outcomes. How the planning is conducted, who is tasked with formulating the actions and who approves what is presented varies by agency and tactical unit. Risk management concerns are not always a priority for operational tactical team members. Depending on the gravity of the situation, approval may need to come from as high as the Chief-of-Police or Sheriff. The focus of this article is to provide guidance to law enforcement personnel who are tasked with presenting tactical plans to those who have the authority to grant or deny a course of action.

As a tenured member of the Los Angeles County Sheriff's Department Special Enforcement Bureau (SEB), I have participated in hundreds of high-risk operations and witnessed the planning process from a variety of perspectives ranging from a newly assigned deputy through to a scout in-charge of a team. The Special Enforcement Bureau empowers the lowest level and the actual individuals who will execute a plan to develop a solution to the presented problem. The team leadership lineup of a Scout, Back-Up Scout and Team Leader (Sergeant) are the main planning components for all circumstances requiring a tactical resolution. In essence, the team Scout and Back-Up Scout are often the primary mission planners.

This empowerment works at my unit primarily because the Scout and Back-Up are frequently the most seasoned and experienced members on the Special Weapons Team. Team Leaders, Team Commanders and Captains may not have prior tactical team experience or their experience was from several years ago. Given the variations of tactical experience at the command staff level one critical component is building and sustaining a culture of trust between all the vertical components of the unit. The mission planners, Team Leaders, Team Commanders, Unit Commander and overall Incident Commander must have the ability to have honest conversations regardless of rank. These interactions must flow both directions since the goal of all concerned is the successful execution of a plan that leads to a safe resolution.

From my experiences, the denial of a plan of action at the command staff level emanates from three main factors: a lack of clear understanding of what the mission planner was presenting, a larger departmental concern that ground level personnel may not have considered and/or differing perspectives based on experience and comprehension of the given problem. The establishment of a culture of trust allows these hurdles to be easily overcome and a tactically sound and safe plan implemented.

Command Staff Tactical Experience

I have worked for Team Leaders, Team Commanders, Captains and Incident Commanders that did not have prior SWAT experience. Their absence of experience can, at times, mean they do not understand the terminology we use or the nuances in our conversations. It is easy to over assume their understanding. It is the responsibility of leaders to familiarize themselves with our capability and TTP's, but it is also our responsibility as mission planners to teach, train and demonstrate our capabilities, philosophies, equipment and to ensure command has the knowledge required to make sound decisions. Mission planners also bear the responsibility to clearly explain their plan to decision makers. Remember the culture of trust, wherein mission planners encourage questions or concerns with a proposed plan of action. Additionally, an

experienced mission planner already has alternative plans in place in case the desired sequence is denied.

The most successful mission planners I have worked for or around possess certain attributes: high level of experience, extreme maturity and the ability to parallel think. They did not bristle at the word “NO”, they responded with “How about this” or “What is your concern” or “These are the options I see and here are risks involved by choosing B over A.” The above planners varied in personalities but they had the confidence of command staff because they had the ability to present alternatives, dive deeper into a specific decision and never disregarded the burden upper leadership carried when approving a plan.

Understanding The Bigger Picture

The Los Angeles County Sheriff’s Department conducts an executive level review of significant uses of force, within a one to two weeks immediately following the incident. These review panels are titled Critical Incident Review (CIR) and are not considered a formal investigative analysis, but rather an overview of what occurred. Costs of the operations, damages that occurred and force that potentially was used are some of the topics that are discussed. The panel identifies and implements strategies to limit the Department’s exposure to liability.

Mission planners must understand the larger departmental concerns when presenting options of desired courses of action. I come back to it again, the unit must possess a culture of trust to be effective. I may intuitively understand that the barricaded individual is not surrendering until we put a chemical agent inside the structure. However, I am not the one required to justify this to the executives who may only know that the last three barricaded operations resulted in large damage claims. As a mission planner I may want to go to a chemical agent relatively early in the process but command staff, which must justify my choices to executives, may want to try negotiations more or progress up from diversionary devices to a few liquid chemical agents before introducing pyrotechnic agents. At a minimum, agencies can justify their actions by demonstrating a progression of tactics they attempted before turning to more assertive means.

A few years ago, we had a potential hostage problem with a suspect who lost custody of her child and during a supervised visit kidnapped the child, went back to her apartment and significantly barricaded the door. The suspect had planned this event for weeks and had a sizable food supply. To compound the problem, she was live streaming the event out on social media, taking her story to the viewers who were feeding into her narrative. She had not threatened the child but refused to surrender or release the child. As mission planners, we had to be prepared for a possible hostage rescue event if her mental stability started to decline or any indication of murder-suicide became evident. With a heavily barricaded door, the obvious choice was placing an explosive charge to maximize our chance of entry.

From the larger public/departmental view, we had a mother simply expressing her love for her child that was “wrongly taken from her”, live streaming on social media with viewers commenting on how brave and courageous she was. Now imagine, the door explodes, in comes ten tactical team members with machine guns to wrestle the baby away. Does that feed into the over-militarization of police narrative? Absolutely! Should we still have the charge on the door and be prepared to intervene if it becomes necessary? Absolutely! Back to the culture of trust, the nuance is the mission planners acknowledging the bad optics and ensuring decision makers that intervention will occur only under a specific set of circumstances. Constant dialogue, updating of intelligence, remodification of plans and the ability to have a shared understanding of tactics and liability, creates a far better solution. This call-out was ultimately resolved by a SEB Scout who convinced the suspect he possessed a court order for her to be able to keep the child. When she stepped out, after unbarricading the door for about 15 min, to “sign” the order, she was taken into custody without issue.

Difference of Opinions

One often overlooked aspect of tactical decision making is when presented with the same information individuals with varying life experiences will see things differently. My unit is large enough that I am not at every call-out and as professionals we will debrief an incident to our other teams. Often during the debriefs I see a different course of action I would have chosen versus what that team scout selected. That does not make the involved scout wrong, simply I saw options differently or perhaps I could be mistaken in my analysis. Command staff are not any different in their decision-making cycle and as mission planners we should be aware of this and be prepared to clearly articulate our plan.

One facet that is often neglected by tactical units we have worked with is a debrief immediately after the operation with all parties involved. This practice provides mission planners and decision makers the ability to openly share their perspectives to teammates who were not part of the discussion. If significant issues or questions become evident, we can always schedule a unit-wide debrief where the entire operation is presented to all the teams. Units that lack a culture of trust will often avoid such forums out of fear of it devolving into a personal gripe session over a true attempt to improve performance.

Conclusion

Mission planners and decision makers both have a vested interest in the successful conclusion of an operation. In actuality, we both carry the weight of decisions that can have catastrophic consequences for our teammates, public and department. We should welcome opposing views and ideas to ensure tactically sound plans are implemented. If in the end, executives deny your presented resolution, be prepared to have alternative options. A competent mission planner takes advice, looks at varying options and has the maturity to work through the process with those who have the responsibility and authority to say "Yes" or "No."

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