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Frontline Leadership: Strategies and Tactics for First Responders

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Author Note

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Abstract

For the workshop, I plan to provide a comprehensive three to four-hour session focusing on the principles of extreme ownership—a leadership approach that has proven successful, particularly in high-pressure environments. Drawing inspiration from the renowned philosophy advocated by former Navy SEALs Jocko Willink and Leif Babin, the workshop will dive into realistic strategies for effective leadership. To ensure relatability to the First Responder field, I will tailor the content to the unique challenges and environments faced by those in law enforcement at all levels. Real-world examples and personal experiences will be included, making the training not only educational but also highly applicable to their roles and responsibilities in the field, and within their own homes. Realizing the importance of active participation, the workshop will include interactive elements such as fire team exercises and role-playing scenarios. These activities will give recruits opportunities to apply the principles in simulated situations, helping to reinforce their understanding and ability to implement them.

Keywords: Leadership, Ownership, Management, Leader, Control, Discipline

Introduction to your Capstone Project

For my project, I have chosen to address the lack of formal leadership training in the First Responder field. I chose this project because I believe that good leadership is needed in these professional areas and having worked in the field for a long time, I have experienced the lack of opportunity for this type of training firsthand. I concluded that I could address this problem in one of two ways. I can either create an online module for leadership training that agencies can use to train their staff, or I can create an in-person training to deliver to a subsection of a department which will hopefully drive impact to change the leadership culture within that agency. I began with searching out an agency that I could partner with to conduct this training. Naturally, I looked to secure the support of the former agencies that I have been fortunate enough to work for in the past. Due to good working relationships and previous trust that I was able to garner in my previous career, I was able to secure a partnership with the city of Nampa police academy training group to present this material to. Since I currently consult in the field of leadership after leaving the First Responder field a couple years ago, I had a general idea of what topics I would be covering, but I wanted to be sure to cover not just general leadership strategies and tactics, but also what this specific agency needed in terms of future integration of these recruits. I met with promoted leadership of this agency and was able to steer the presentation towards the needs of their agency. In this case, some of these topics were heavily geared towards relationships, strategic thinking mindsets, decentralization/delegation, and emotional intelligence through what we call detachment. I secured a date in the academy calendar with the training Lieutenant and then provided a four hour in-person training workshop on leadership to 7 recruits and their training Lieutenant.

Elements coming together

I chose to go with the in-person training route because I feel that it will be the most impactful type of training and give the attendees the ability to interact directly with the material through me as a presenter instead of watching a video that they may not be directly related to. This will allow for engaging questions, discussion, implementation tools, and personal stories that relate directly to the field that they serve. The stakeholders in this project will be the recruits who are attending the training, the public they serve, the people they work with, and anyone else who has either direct or indirect contact with their sphere of influence. I hope that this will set the tone for their careers and their agencies to set them on a path toward more leadership-oriented mission visions and values. The differing perspectives that I will be bringing together will be the leadership principles of combat and high-stress environments with not only the area of policing and public relations, but also relationships, business principles, and day-to-day life challenges. These areas of challenges and conflict appear to be miles apart, but they all have the same solution, and that is good leadership.

The biggest thing that stands out to me about the connection between my project and awareness of self and others, is that true leadership revolves around being completely self-aware as well as knowing your people well enough to understand both their personal and professional needs. The project I have selected is providing in-person formal training for leadership strategies and tactics. One of the things I will be teaching is that the most important characteristic of a good leader is humility. When we think about a humble leader, what does that mean? A humble leader is someone who puts the focus on the mission, the team, and the individuals on the team before themselves. A leader who lacks humility focuses all their time and energy on themselves which causes them to lack self-assessment/awareness. A good

leader must be aware of others first and foremost to be able to become the asset that the individual or team requires to be successful. This has been something that I have been aware of, and my approach to the assignment/project has not changed. I have only grown more confident in the need for this type of implementation as this semester continues.

Good leaders operate out of emotional intelligence at all times. One of the primary things that I will be teaching is that good leaders have to detach from their emotions to be able to make good decisions. However, there is a dichotomy here. I am not saying that a good leader is void of emotion. I am simply stating that sometimes we have to be able to detach from our own emotions (frustration, anger, fear, anxiety, sadness, etc) to take into account the emotions of everyone involved in the situation. Being able to build relationships and utilize emotional intelligence is critical in any good leader despite rank and file. A good example is a subordinate trying to lead up his or her chain of command. To be able to interpret the actions and intent of a superior, frequently it takes emotional intelligence to be able to see past the immediate and decipher “the why” behind the actions or inactions of the people we are dealing with. This takes incredible self-awareness and emotional intelligence to accomplish.

Everybody is a leader to some extent regardless of their title or promoted position. Leadership isn't a rank or a title. Leadership is simply the ability to influence people towards a common goal or articulable advancement. I have seen through my experience in the public service field, as well as my experience in consulting, that people tend to allow leadership voids to expand rather than stepping into them with confidence when they identify the need. This can be for a multitude of reasons. Sometimes it is because of the environment that their superiors have created, meaning that they avoid stepping up and speaking out for fear of being reprimanded or shut down. This type of training reinforces the fact that every person can lead from where they are. The philosophy of leadership that I will be teaching is that leadership

travels in all directions. This means that one can effectively lead up the chain of command to influence those above them utilizing things such as relationships, communication, and detachment from emotions. This is a great value for any person looking to capitalize on their environment instead of allowing their environment to dictate their responses to stimulus.

A man by the name of Mr. Corazza once said “When you think creatively there is no single correct answer”. That plays a large part in how I approached this project. I went through many options on how I could present this material to the stakeholders involved. I could have made a pamphlet or training video. I could have created some sort of leadership strategy survey that would reveal certain characteristics to the participant and then allowed them to do further research on their own should they feel called to do so. Of course, I also had the option that I went with which is presenting the material in a formal in-person format which I believe to be the most impactful method. That being said, I do believe that the other ways would be useful as well, and are not necessarily wrong. I suppose that is the key to the creative framework. Being open-minded as to what avenues would be possible is a must to land where you ultimately want to be. If I'm being honest, I think some of the other avenues I mentioned would have been less time-consuming on my end, but the impact is the primary indicator of success in this endeavor, so for that reason, I am glad I chose the method that I did.

My approach to this leadership training is unique because the philosophy of leadership that I believe and that I teach, is one that frequently receives pushback due to it being against most of our natural human tendencies. My approach to teaching this material will not necessarily be from a statistical or analytical stance, but from a personal perspective that will resonate with those who are willing to check their egos and operate from a place of humility, as all good leaders should. I will teach leadership from a place of ownership. This is something that goes directly against one's natural survival instincts. For example, I am a father of two young

boys aged 7 and 4. Now as a parent of good and moral standing (or so I'd like to think), I do not teach my kids to lie. I'm willing to bet that most parents do not teach their children to lie. Of course, there are anomalies, but generally speaking, I believe that statement to be true. That being said, I have watched both of my children point fingers at each other, the dog, a plant, and many other inanimate objects when confronted with having to take responsibility for an action or inaction that led to a failure, injury of a sibling, broken objects, etc. Since I know I did not teach them to cast blame and point fingers, and I know many other children who act the same way, it is safe to assume that a common natural human tendency is to blame others to survive potential circumstances. I will be working to override natural human tendencies in the people who attend the training for this project. Through examples, self-assessments, and a framework of ownership, I will expose a take on leadership that most people are reluctant to adopt. Ownership isn't for everyone. We will find out what they are made of in the end.

Innovative Solution

My potential project took many forms in my head and had to be scaled way back from what my initial thoughts were. This is where the big leaps in innovation set in for me. If I could not do something grandiose, I had to do something immensely impactful. At least, that's what I told myself. I suppose the level of received impact is up to the stakeholders, but I intend to deliver some. For this reason, I chose to go with the in-person formal training. I feel that this is more innovative than the other route I was pondering (creating a video or other training material) because it can deliver more impact. Not only do I believe that it can deliver more impact, but I also believe that it can deliver a more personalized message because I will be able to tailor it to meet the needs of specific questions and stances that stakeholders have in person when challenged or examined through their own experiences. It is challenging to open yourself up to

live questions and feedback instead of just providing a single, or two-dimensional material, but it removes the ambiguity and allows for a deeper understanding due to the ability to have direct and immediate information from an instructor. My hope was that those who may have seen a piece of paper or a video and written it off as unrelatable, would engage in discussion and be provided with a perspective that includes relatable information that they can then implement in all applicable areas of their personal and professional lives. For this reason, an in-person service learning approach provides more potential for impact to the stakeholders.

Results

The results of the training were measured with a survey created to rate the training material and the execution of delivery. The survey was easily accessed using a QR code that was embedded in the final slide of the presentation and only took approximately 3 minutes for the attendees to complete depending on the level of engagement from each participant. The participants used their smartphone cameras (or someone else's in the room if need be) to scan the code which takes them to the Survey Monkey platform hosting the survey. This provided immediate feedback results via email that told me how the participants rated the training, as well as any testimonials, suggestions for improvement, or other feedback they provided in the written section.

The stakeholders will benefit greatly from the leadership training provided for this project. Not only does this training provide a financial break for the department, but it also allows the recruits and attending officers the ability to reevaluate their natural tendencies and habits regarding their leadership abilities. The leadership philosophy that I present goes against the grain for most people because it looks at leadership from a place of ownership. Human tendency is to point fingers and want others to change to fit the narrative or problem that we hold as important to us. The leadership philosophy of extreme ownership is to search within

oneself for causation and solutions. This will allow the new officers as well as any senior officers the ability to start shaping and molding the culture of the agency for the foreseeable future. If they execute these principles humbly and from a place of individual ownership taught, their sphere of influence will be impactful.

Conclusion

I expected a mixed bag of results when it came to how the information was received. That expectation comes from experience doing this type of training in groups with some very senior individuals, mid-level seniority, and lower seniority individuals, and receiving moderate pushback most times. There are of course anomalies in different professional fields, but generally speaking, the more senior individuals are set in their ways and are the first to have pushback and apprehension to new ways of operating at any level, or with any task. The extreme ownership approach to leadership requires that one have the ability not only to subordinate one's ego, but also to accept and seek out innovation and change through one of the mindsets for victory that is taught, "innovate and adapt".

The group I was fortunate enough to train was extremely receptive to the principles and mindsets that were discussed in the training. One attendee even referred to it as "A good taste of brutal honesty". For this reason, I am grateful that I chose to go with the service learning option for this project. I can share this specific philosophy of leadership with ranks ranging from academy recruits, to slick sleeve (probationary) officers, as well as promoted positions of leadership like Sergeants and Lieutenants. It provides the opportunity to field questions that push back on some of the principles discussed with this method of training, which is something that sending a video or pamphlet simply can not do. Through open questioning and fire team exercises common ground can be found and I believe that those individuals who push back

walk away with a new view of what being a leader truly means. In my opinion, some pushback is a good sign. This points out the true differences in human tendencies and allows for decorum that expands the thought process of everyone involved. This project method allowed me to learn not only further communication skills as required to conduct face to face training, but also help to fine-tune my ability to seek understanding of others' perspectives. While finding significant resistance is always a possibility, it is safe to say that the response from this group was expected. Looking back on the design and implementation of this project, I would not have changed much outside of a timeline for execution. I would have liked to include an additional hour of fire team exercises within the training module had time allotted. I felt as though the conversations could have deepened had I not been forced to move forward with a stringent timeline. This is something that I can address in future training. As far as receptiveness to content and material, it went about as well as I hoped it would. I sincerely believe that these leadership principles and strategies will perforate the thoughts and tendencies that these recruits enter into their future careers with. They hold the key to shifting the culture in their department. However, it is only through the execution of these principles and constant self-assessments that they will be able to successfully influence those around them to follow suit.

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