

Teamwork in Public Safety: Key Attributes and Strategies for Success

Although teamwork is a natural element of public safety, it's easy for leaders to become complacent and fail to pay sufficient attention to team dynamics

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ARTICLE HIGHLIGHTS:

- In public safety, such as SWAT operations, the success of missions is heavily reliant on effective teamwork. It is not just about individual skills but the collective effort of the team.
- SWAT leaders should focus on fostering these characteristics within their teams. Understanding the dynamic nature of teamwork and adapting to diverse challenges is crucial for success.
- SWAT leaders should prioritize ongoing training and development for their team members. Training not only enhances individual skills but also builds trust and mutual support within the team.

I learned the value of working as a team early in life. My first experience occurred on the football field, where I realized that breakdowns in communication and coordinated efforts quickly led to defeat. My military experience reinforced the virtues of teamwork, which complemented the transition to work in public safety, where strength in numbers remains a fundamentally important aspect.

During my entire 32-year law enforcement career, I was involved in some level of collective effort. Whether conducting tactical SWAT operations or as the chair of our agency's [strategic planning](#) committee, teamwork was the most valuable component of organization success.

Henry Ford was an innovative presence during this country's industrial revolution, and he recognized the value of teamwork when he said, "Coming together is a beginning, keeping together is progress, and working together is success." But what constitutes a team, and how can we better work together?

Jan Schmutz and her colleagues define teamwork as "a process that describes interactions among team members who combine collective resources to resolve task demands."^[1] This definition clearly epitomizes the nature of public safety and our commitment to service and protection within the communities we serve.

Police officers don't just depend on other officers to assist with their efforts. They rely on fire, EMS, corrections, dispatch and a multitude of other assets that possess similar goals and objectives to accomplish the mission. In the military, one occupational specialty is useless without the collective efforts of other support functions, branches and coalition forces.

4 CHARACTERISTICS OF SUCCESSFUL TEAMS

Schmutz et al further define a team as an "identifiable social work unit consisting of two or more people with several unique characteristics."^[1] Some of these characteristics include dynamic social interactions, shared goals, distributed expertise and clearly assigned roles and responsibilities. Let's take a look at each of these characteristics more closely.

1. Dynamic social interactions

Research points out the dynamic nature of teamwork. I think this is especially true in public safety, where no two calls for service are ever the same. Each day contains new challenges both within and outside our respective organizations. When it comes to working in a team environment, the social aspect can make or break a team. Haas and Mortenson are quick to point out how "today's teams are different from the teams of the past: They're far more diverse, dispersed, digital, and dynamic."^[2] Kirsten Weir's research also identified how these social interactions correlate to an intuitive level of teamwork that features "integrated thoughts, feelings, and behaviors of team members that enables them to work effectively together."^[3]

2. Shared Goals

Consider how [different generations interact within the workforce](#). Our public safety organizations are comprised of diverse team members who share similar goals but communicate and identify priorities differently. Our shared desire to help others unites us, helping overcome our differences.

Shared values in turn help team members "anticipate the needs of others; adjust to other's actions, and have a shared understanding of how a procedure should happen."^[4] Weir refers to as "team cognition—what teams think, how they think together, and how well synchronized their beliefs and perceptions are."^[3] Team cognition allows tactical team members to conduct a high-risk search warrant efficiently, while using precisely choreographed movements during entry. The same occurs on the battlefield—an intuitive understanding of how another soldier will react or respond to a threat.

As Weir point out, "team cognition [is how] teams ... quickly adapt to dynamic circumstances without having the opportunity to communicate a lot."^[3] Kozlowski and Ilgen's research echoed this sentiment. They note how "collective efficacy is more likely to develop when team members are more interdependent and interactive and have to coordinate task processes."^[5] The shared experiences among team members provide a basis for producing desired or intended results. In other words, when teams work well together, they gain confidence and accomplish more.

3. Distributed expertise

Public safety organizations are full of extremely capable personnel who possess varying degrees of occu-

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pational expertise. The hierarchical nature and policy-driven aspect of these organizations is one factor; however, Baker points out how “team members must possess specific knowledge, skills and attitudes (KSAs) to work effectively together.”[4] This includes our ability to monitor each other’s performance, while understanding the tasks and responsibilities of our coworkers. Weir refers to this as “the ABCs of teamwork” the attitudes, behaviors, and cognitive states that collectively influence whether a team achieves its goals.”[3]

Consider how a career in public safety naturally evolves as personnel gain more experience and serve different roles within the organization. I reflect on my early years as a young officer and how my personal experiences, training and exposure to different teams shaped my development into a first-line leader and ultimately a commander. As I moved up the chain, I quickly learned to leverage the strengths of our team to accomplish the mission. If I identified someone who lacked experience or exposure, I incorporated a variety of career development activities to help them gain confidence, while enhancing their individual KSAs.

4. Clearly assigned roles and responsibilities

It’s no surprise that human performance in the workplace depends on clearly defined expectations. Supervisors carry a huge burden when it comes to ensuring the people under their charge know what’s expected of them. Haas and Mortenson’s research identified four critical elements of team success:[2]

- **Compelling direction:** Any team must have clearly defined goals and objectives, which allows all members to contribute toward a successful outcome. Your organization must provide sufficient information about expectations and [planning initiatives](#) to all team members.
- **Strong Structure:** In public safety, we often take structure for granted since our organizations are hierarchical; however, this structural component is useless without the right mixture of team members who possess a balance of knowledge, skills and abilities coupled with clearly defined roles.
- **Supportive context:** It’s important for organizations to maintain some type of reward system that reinforces positive performance. This also includes accessibility to the appropriate resources for completing the job, in addition to provision of adequate training.
- **Shared mindset:** Haas and Mortenson noted how “us versus them” thinking and incomplete information are two corrosive problems that routinely plague organizations and prevent teams from working effectively.[2] By fostering both a common identity and understanding among team members, organizational leadership can avoid these problems and have everyone working toward the same goal. [Being on the same page](#) is important, especially in public safety, where it’s easy to focus on problems or issues that impact a single shift or section within diverse organizations.

It’s impossible for team members to clearly understand their organizational roles and responsibilities without adequate feedback. Baker and colleagues noted how “immediate feedback is also a characteristic of effective team performance.”[4] It’s incumbent not only on agency leadership, but on other team members to monitor both individual and colleague performance and to provide relevant feedback in a timely manner. Khawam’s research echoed this notion and identified how “teamwork also provides social support, encourage[s] cooperation, and make[s] jobs more interesting and challenging.”[6]

Finally, let’s not forget about the importance of understanding roles and responsibilities from a continuity standpoint. Continuity of operations is essential in public safety. Whether driven by staffing shortages, a pandemic or a natural disaster, public safety team members must be able to [perform and fill in the gaps](#) regardless of the austere conditions faced. The better team members understand their roles and the roles of their colleagues, the better equipped the organization is to handle any type of challenge.

MAKING A TEAM SUCCESSFUL

My experiences in both public safety and the military made me quickly realize that success isn’t based on the actions of a single person. Making a positive impact or accomplishing organizational goals is based on the combined efforts of an entire team. Tarricone and Luca analyzed team performance and identified six key attributes of successful teams in their 2002 case study.[7] Their findings shouldn’t come as a surprise, since these are also essential traits commonly found in most public safety organizations.

- **Commitment to learn success and shared goals:** We take this for granted since working in public safety means team members are committed to the success found in a team environment, coupled with a desire to attain shared goals for the sake of completing the mission.
- **Interdependence:** As the researches pointed out. “teamwork [is] a cooperative process that allows ordinary people to achieve extraordinary results.”[7] Considering that public safety features extraordinary people who are selfless in their desire to assist others, the results of a combined effort equate to nothing short of amazing performance outcomes.
- **Interpersonal skills:** Public safety professionals understand the importance of interpersonal communication and the benefits these skills have on everything from [de-escalating a threat](#) to provision of a calming effect during some type or traumatic situation. Safe to say, those working in public safety are typically the calm after the storm.
- **Open communication and positive feedback:** This involves not only [actively listening](#) to the concerns and needs of the team and agency leadership, but also valuing different opinions and contributions.
- **Appropriate composition:** We’ve already discussed the importance of team members knowing what’s expected of them, but it’s equally important to staff the appropriate people in the appropriate places within the organization as determined by each person’s requisite KSAs. We’re not looking for clones here—it’s important to diversify team composition so difference perspectives and attributes can be leveraged for complex situations.
- **Commitment to processes, leadership and accountability:** In public safety, this is certainly nothing new because taking on the job is a testament to our personal commitment to something greater than ourselves. Leadership and accountability through effective [policy management](#) is an equally important part of the equation and can make or break any team.

Although teamwork is a natural element of public safety, it’s easy for leaders to become complacent and fail to pay sufficient attention to team dynamics and appropriate feedback necessary to drive optimum performance. As leaders, it’s not our responsibility to ensure our personnel frequently work outside of their comfort levels and constantly challenge themselves.

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DON'T FORGET ABOUT TRAINING

Finally, it's important to point out that team success can't be achieved without adequate training. For those of us in public safety, training started in the military, during college, trade school, or in the academy. This is another reason why continuing education is so important for all team members. Baker and his colleagues note team training as "the most widely applied strategy to improve team performance."^[4] Their research identified training as an effective means of reducing the negative effects associated with a hierarchy because training develops assertiveness and mutual trust within the team. Both attributes allow team members to admit mistakes, while accepting and appreciating the feedback that results.

Kozlowski and Ilgen conclude that "teams that learn more collectively will demonstrate enhanced effectiveness."^[5] Make sure to invest the appropriate amount of time in resources into good quality training. Enhancing employee knowledge is a given. Teamwork enhanced through training also fulfills our employees' social needs, as Khawam et al note: "The feeling of being included, being a part of something, can not only create a trust between team members to provide for a strong support system, but can also create a more open and comfortable working environment for all."^[6]

As inspirational speaker and author Simon Sinek point out, "A team is not a group of people that work together. A team is a group of people that trust each other."

TAILORING TEAMWORK: SWAT LEADERS' APPROACH TO SPECIFIC MISSIONS

1. **Hostage rescue:** In hostage rescue situations, every second counts, and communication breakdowns can be fatal. Emphasize how early experiences in sports and the military translate to the importance of seamless teamwork.

Stress that in hostage rescue missions, the ability to adapt dynamically to evolving situations, coordinate tactics and maintain clear communication with the team is paramount.

2. **Active shooter responses:** Active shooter incidents require SWAT teams to respond swiftly and decisively. Highlight the need for dynamic social interactions, shared goals, distributed expertise and clearly assigned roles.

Explain that in active shooter scenarios, teamwork is essential for minimizing casualties and neutralizing threats efficiently. The team must quickly adapt to the changing environment and work cohesively to protect innocent lives.

3. **High-risk warrant service:** For high-risk warrant service operations, stress the importance of commitment to shared goals and interdependence within the team.

Highlight how SWAT teams, when executing high-risk warrants, must rely on each other's specialized skills and trust in their colleagues to ensure mission success and safety.

4. **Crisis negotiations:** Crisis negotiation situations require unique communication skills. Encourage the development of interpersonal skills and commitment to learning within the team.

Stress that in negotiations with barricaded suspects or emotionally distressed individuals, SWAT teams must effectively communicate and build trust to peacefully resolve crises. In summary, adapting the principles of teamwork, the four key characteristics of successful teams, and ongoing training apply directly to the unique challenges of various SWAT missions.

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