

Incestuous Training Mistakes

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I first heard the term “incestuous training mistakes” back in 1991 when I was a tactical officer in Dallas Texas. There had been a tragic friendly-fire fatality involving a Dallas narcotics team. The commander of the Special Operations Bureau stated in a presentation to the chief of police (and the city council) that such incidents are often the result of incestuous training mistakes. He explained that incestuous training mistakes are small mistakes made during training that are *left uncorrected*. These uncorrected mistakes then come together at an inopportune moment (usually during a real mission) causing a catastrophic event such as a friendly-fire fatality or injury. Unfortunately, this explanation fell on deaf ears. The commander was lambasted by the chief of police and the city council for making derogatory comments about the police department’s training programs. Missed in this hateful attack on the professionalism and dedication of a very popular tactical commander was the fact that his assessment of the incident was on target!

In the article “Restructuring Your Training Program” (published by SWATdigest.com) I placed *overall* blame for incestuous training mistakes on three broad based but vastly interrelated training failures. These failure’s are; (a) Training is not well organized; (b) Training is not focused; and (c) Training is not comprehensive. Regardless of which of the above three failures a critical performance incident could be attributed to, each failure can have – to one degree or another – the same ill-fated *practices* that lead directly to incestuous mistakes and therefore a future catastrophic event. One thing that must be made abundantly clear is that these practices are not restricted to Special Operations alone. *They are found throughout law enforcement at all levels of expertise and experience!*

The Five Worst Ill-fated practices (Trainers and Team Leaders).

i. Rather than hold all team members to the same standard, tactical trainers and team leaders use a “dummy down” philosophy to recruit (or keep) team personnel. To dummy down standards means an intentional lowering of team and individual standards that allows unqualified officers to pass a test/requirement and join (or stay on) a tactical team. The dummy down concept is used when preferred individuals cannot *meet* designated standards. This preferential treatment adversely affects a team in two ways: (1) It destroys team and individual morale and causes tactical officers to lose faith and confidence in teammates that are not required to meet the same standards; and (2) It gives the impression that the team is based on the good-old-boy system and sophomoric cliques rather than talent and skill.

ii. Correct training is not reinforced; but mistakes are. At some point in our law enforcement careers we have been told that to learn a technique so well that it becomes a natural movement, we must do the technique several thousand times. Unfortunately, while most tactical training programs take this truism to heart, the techniques being practiced may not be performed *correctly* several thousand times. If not corrected immediately and constantly reinforced eventually the technique – performed incorrectly – will become ingrained in muscle memory. The hardest task for a tactical trainer is to teach an officer to *unlearn* an incorrect technique.

With that understanding, there are three vital training tools that trainers and team leaders fail to use to correct mistakes. These tools are:

- Individual performance notes: Performance notes are just what the name indicates. They are notes used by a team leader or trainer that outlines a specific tactical/technical performance problem an officer might be having during training or a real deployment. Without notes a trainer has no point of reference of what has (or has not) been tried to correct that problem. There are two reasons why trainers do not keep performance notes; one is because the trainer is lazy – which is inexcusable; the other is because the trainer fears that these notes might be subpoenaed at a later date and used against an officer or the team. This is a legitimate concern; however, please keep in mind that performance notes are handwritten personal notes - not official training records. Unless it is a safety issue that cannot possibly be resolved, information kept in the performance notes should not make it into an officers training records or personnel file.
- Performance corrections (also known as spot corrections): Performance corrections are corrective measures used in the field when a mistake is identified and *immediately* corrected. Performance corrections can relate to tactical and technical skills as well as an officer needing a mental or conduct adjustment (aka the NCIS Gibbs head-slap). There are many reasons why trainers fail to make corrections in the field; the worst of which is that they themselves have a lack of tactical or technical proficiency to identify mistakes and make the necessary corrections.
- Curative Training: Curative training is used to reinforce performance corrections. Curative training should be used to help *unlearn* performance mistakes. Trainers generally do not use curative training methods because they fear that it will embarrass a veteran tactical officer by making him/her do extra repetitions of a technique correctly while under supervision.

iii. Training programs are not thorough and challenging. Tactical trainers argue that it is very difficult to constantly come up with new and innovative ways to challenge their teams when training. I will concede that the trainers have, to some degree, a valid point. Developing a thorough training program that meets the needs of both individual officers and the team as a collective is a monumental task. However, I strongly disagree with the attitude that this monumental task is an impossible task. Without meaning to be overly critical, I have found that those team leaders and tactical trainers that complain the most about this subject either do not know how to put a training program together; or worse, they do not want to put that much effort into developing and running a training program.

iv. Training and real missions are not critiqued. There are two types of critique: written and verbal. The verbal critique is actually a “debrief” that should occur immediately after training or a critical incident has concluded. It should be done in an open forum with the entire team present. What should be discussed is: (a) What did we do wrong; (b) What could we have done better; and (c) What did we do well? The written critique – done by each team member – is more formal. It should address such subjects as safety, planning, equipment and team/individual performance issues. The written critique should be designed to allow an officer the freedom to

write whatever he/she believes is important without fear of retaliation. Critiques are one of the most valuable tools a trainer and team leader can have. Both forms of critique help to pin point problem areas long before the problem becomes a serious concern. So why aren't critiques used at all levels of SWAT? Because team leaders, trainers and team members routinely mistake good luck for good tactics. Mistaking good luck for good tactics occurs when a team (or individual) does something tactically unsound (or just flat-out stupid), gets away with it and, based on that success, develops the belief that the tactic or tactics they used were proper and fitting for the situation. Because everything went well, they erroneously believe there is nothing to be critiqued or changed. In SWAT, success should never be used as the *only* key-indicator that everything has been done tactically correct. There comes a time and place when a team has no other option but to pick the best bad choice, relying on hope and prayer to pull them through. That type of choice is made *in the heat of battle* when there are no good choices to be found. When (or if) success is the result of that choice, a well trained team knows full well that the good Lord smiled upon them and their critiques will reflect this fact.

v. Team leaders and trainers avoid seeking outside training and knowledge for their team. In tactical circles this is known as the 'our way or the highway syndrome' and is predominantly found in established veteran teams. Often beginning around the fifth or sixth year of a team's existence, this syndrome is motivated by a false sense of security derived from the successful completion of assorted tactical missions. In other words, the team has pulled off some really neat stuff and now they believe they are – tactically speaking – above reproach. When a team reaches this level of institutional arrogance they consider outside training (training sponsored by another police department or agency) as being beneath their level of expertise. With this mentality comes the attitude that the tactics that they use are the *only* tactics that *should* be used. Teams and individuals that have this mind-set stop working and communicating with other teams that operate with different tactics. At this point, three things happen; (1) the team has voluntarily become isolated; (2) because of the self-induced isolationism there is no influx of new ideas, new training methods/materials and new operational concepts; and (3) if the team (or a team member) is *forced* to attend outside training they are very poor students that intentionally learn nothing. When the above three points finally happen – and happen they will because all this is ego driven – the team will become tactically and technically stagnant. A team that has become stagnant in any manner of speaking will eventually encounter a situation that their standard less innovative tactics simply do not cover.

In the above paragraphs the blame for these five ill-fated practices is placed on the tactical trainer, the team leader and to a lesser extent the tactical commander. Below are the ill-fated practices done by a team and individual team members.

The Five Worst Ill-fated practices (Team and Team members)

i. Departmental policies and procedures (*that apply to SWAT*) are discarded by team members when training. Discarding these departmental policies leads to the belief that policies (or rules) are made to be broken and that SWAT, as a matter of routine, operates outside these restrictions. If officers are allowed to cross over departmental policy lines when training, they will eventually do so during a real mission.

ii. Rather than follow a specific training plan, a team member (or team members) is off doing his/her own thing. Often driven by adrenalin, the rogue officer intentionally operates outside the plan caring little or nothing about the consequences. As with the previous paragraph, eventually the rogue officer will attempt to operate in the same manner during a real mission.

iii. Team members improperly use individual or team equipment. Improper use of equipment indicates that the officer has not trained on the equipment and has developed some very bad habits. This often leads to inappropriate actions when using the equipment.

iv. The team has no unity. As a tactical trainer I come across this problem with a disturbing degree of regularity. I often find teams that are divided into adversarial cliques usually based on various levels of jealousy and/or the old-head mentality. Jealousy occurs when an officer believes he/she should be placed in a more desired team position (i.e. pointman in the lineup) rather than where they currently are; or when an officer is given a more desired team position over other officers that believe they are equally as qualified. The old-head mentality comes into play when veteran tactical officers view newer, younger tactical officers as a threat. No matter what the cause for poor unity might be, a team in this situation is headed quickly for disaster.

v. The team displays poor (or sloppy) basic tactical skills when training. Oddly enough, I have found that the more veteran a tactical team or officer might be, the more likely it is that they are going to be deficient in *certain* basic tactical skills. For instance, a veteran team might be good at clearing a house; but because they view training on approaches as being beneath their skill level, they fail to practice it. Therefore their objective approaches (van to the door) are very poor or sloppy. Conversely, a new team (right out of a SWAT school) is concerned with doing *all the fundamentals correctly and safely*. Unlike the veteran team, the new team has no “comfort zone” from which to operate. In other words, they have not had time to develop bad habits. Does this mean that the new team is better than a veteran team? No. Nothing replaces experience. But it does validate spending quality training time on basic skills and techniques.

There should be no doubt that there are more ill-fated practices done by team leaders, trainers and team members that could be discussed here; however, the ten listed above are, in my opinion, the most damaging. As previously mentioned in paragraph two of this article the manifestation of incestuous training is most often a friendly-fire fatality or injury during a real tactical operation. Ultimately, this end result is unavoidable unless the problems are corrected. So the imperative question that must be answered at this juncture is how to stop incestuous training mistakes from ever occurring.

Stopping Incestuous Training Mistakes

i. There must be established written team and individual standards. Based on common sense, standards should cover everything from physical fitness training to weapons qualifications. These standards are not negotiable by those that cannot meet the standards. Nor should team standards be flexible without extreme mitigating circumstances. Remember, if the standards are lowered (or discarded) for one person, then they must be lowered (or discarded) for everyone. If this happens then there is no reason to have any standards at all.

ii. Departmental policies and procedures *as they apply to SWAT* must be adhered to. Please note the italicized words ‘as they apply to SWAT’. Because of the unique nature of our tactical missions, we sometimes find ourselves operating outside normal departmental policies and procedures; however, this in no way means that SWAT should not have its own operating procedures that govern the special circumstances we work in. These policies and procedures for SWAT should be strict enough to give guidance – yet flexible enough to allow for innovative thinking, planning and actions.

iii. Training must be designed to be realistic and challenging at all levels of tactical expertise. Each training session must have reasonable attainable goals assigned to it. During training the team leader should *immediately* make performance corrections when problems are spotted. Team members that cannot reach the assigned goals after performance corrections are made should receive curative training. Curative training should continue until the tactic or technique is done correctly. To identify past problems and the measures used to correct them, individual performance notes should be maintained during training cycles.

iv. Legitimate techniques, skills and tactics must constantly be reinforced. Because all tactical skills are perishable, teams must, as a matter of routine, revisit even the most basic skills.

v. Training should be well instructed by a variety of people. There are a lot of people teaching SWAT these days; some are very good and some are not so good. Always keep in mind that there is no such thing as an all knowing SWAT-god instructor or the perfect SWAT school. Also, just because a school/training is sponsored and/or taught by a well known veteran SWAT team does not necessarily mean that members of that team can teach this material – nor does it mean that they have a good or even decent curriculum.

vi. Training should be well received. Meaning that when training at home or at an outside school, the officer must always strive to be a good student. Chances are that not everything the officer is taught during that training will be used during his/her tactical career; however, even if the officer only uses 1% of what he/she learned then that training was a success.

vii. Critiques must be used at all levels of training and operations to identify problems areas. This takes a lot of courage because it means being open to criticism.

viii. Cliques and personality conflicts within the team must be dealt with and not allowed to fester. There is no room in SWAT for such immature behavior.

ix. Training must be safe. Needless training injuries will destroy a team’s morale – not to mention it leaves the team short of personnel.

x. The team must have good leadership. I’ve saved this point for last because, in my opinion, good leadership coupled with the previous nine points will negate *almost* all forms of incestuous training mistakes. It is only a recent phenomena in law enforcement that departments have *finally* began to recognize the need for *leadership training* for those seeking (or receiving) promotions and/or placement as SWAT team leaders or tactical commanders. The old method of assigning leadership positions is based exclusively on the virtue of rank, test scores, popularity and the ability to do administrative-work (i.e. paper shuffling), *not the ability* to

actually lead men and women in the field. While the old method is indeed dying, it is not dead yet. Many present day Chiefs of Police – who were brought up under the old system – do not see the value and long term benefit of having educated and well trained tactical leaders. They view SWAT as a costly necessary evil manned with door-kicking Neanderthals that have little or no worth outside the confines of a tactical mission. These same Chiefs fail to understand that while good leadership can negate incestuous mistakes, bad leadership – including their own – promotes them!

Conclusion: During my tenure with Dallas SWAT we had four officers hit by suspect gunfire. Two caught rounds in their heavy body armor and suffered blunt trauma injuries, another was shot through the shoulder; and the last was shot on the inside of the upper thigh. Thankfully, all of these officers survived their injuries. In SWAT, the threat of being wounded or killed by an angered suspect is simply the nature of the beast we are sworn to fight against. *We cannot escape this fact!* Sadly, during that same time frame, two Dallas officers assigned to the narcotics division were killed and one was wounded by friendly fire. Since my retirement, four Dallas SWAT officers have been wounded by friendly-fire. As much as I truly love the Dallas police department, in this respect, the department is a great example of a very bad example. These friendly-fire fatalities and injuries are absolutely inexcusable. It is bad enough that we risk our lives when dealing with criminals. Having to worry about being wounded or killed by another officer adds a new level of uncertainty to an already volatile situation. The tragic irony is found in the fact that had the Dallas police department reviewed, torn apart and then restructured its tactical training programs (including SWAT) after the first friendly-fire event, the incidents that have followed over the last decade might never have happened. In closing I'll leave you with one single parting thought concerning this issue – All fatalities and injuries resulting from incestuous training mistakes are avoidable if we (the tactical community) have the courage to address the problem.

When an officer is killed by friendly fire, two people die on that day; the officer that took the bullet and the officer that pulled the trigger.

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