



Internal Discipline



Follow basic principles to make balanced decisions

One afternoon on the job as a new lieutenant watch commander, I prepared for the night watch roll-call assembly of our accident investigation division. A senior sergeant walked into the office to pick up the assignment board. I smelled alcohol. His eyes were slightly bloodshot. I watched him carefully. He did not stagger or slur his speech, but I knew he'd been drinking. And I knew that if I could detect his drinking, so would others.

I had a difficult decision to make. My dilemma involved the integration of two responsibilities that seemed to conflict. On the one hand, I felt a duty to take some type of corrective and/or disciplinary action. I had a clear responsibility to look out for the interests of our agency, profession and society in general. On the other hand, I felt an obligation to care for the interests of this fellow officer. After all, I reasoned, our stated purpose of internal discipline was to improve the performance of our personnel. To train them, not destroy them. How could I take appropriate corrective action while at the same time preserve, at least to some degree, the self respect and future effectiveness of the sergeant?

First, I isolated the sergeant in the vacant captain's office. I administered a breath test privately. The sergeant blew a .12—clearly under the influence. I placed another sergeant in charge and walked the sergeant out a side door to his private vehicle. I drove him home, ordered him to remain there, obtained a statement from him and told him I would return the vehicle keys to him when he was completely sober. Another sergeant picked me up and returned me to my office. I prepared a formal investigation report, attaching the results of the breath test, and placed it in a confidential envelope on the captain's desk.

The sergeant was disciplined with a suspension without pay and enrolled in an outpatient-counseling program. When he returned to duty, he was assigned to a position where he would be under close supervision. He made a successful recovery and returned to full duty.

Conflicting Responsibilities

All law officers encounter difficult decisions involving seemingly conflicting responsibilities. You may be thrust into a position of facing another officer (usually off duty) in violation of the law. Some situations will be either so serious or so minor they'll be easy to resolve. In between those extremes, however, the tough dilemmas arise.

Our profession understandably leads to a band-of-brothers mentality. We face physical as well as emotional dangers on a regular basis. We depend upon one another for survival. It's easy to adopt unbalanced decision making when facing competing emotions. An overpowering urge to "protect" our colleague can take over, and we ignore consideration of the full ramifications of this code of silence. We may suppress our competing sense of duty to protect the integrity of our profession and fulfill our duty to society. Do we really protect an officer when we allow them to violate the law with impunity? In such situations, we're complicit in the development of a lifestyle that can lead to eventual deeper trouble and even major disaster.

Basic Principles

One night, two officers under my command stopped a speeding off-duty officer from an adjoining police department after a brief pursuit. No alcohol was involved. A supervisor on scene due to the broadcasted short pursuit notified me. I asked that the entire matter be

documented formally and submitted to me. We could later decide the propriety of disciplinary and/or criminal action.

The following day, I contacted the chief of the speeding officer's department, explained the situation and told him I would send him a copy of our documentation. He thanked me profusely. This was not the first time the officer had been involved in unacceptable behavior. His own fellow officers resisted working with him. This would be the final straw that would help them remove an undesirable employee.

Of course we have discretion in dealing with minor violations involving officers just as we do the general public. But for the more complicated situations there are no easy answers. A few basic principles do apply, however:

1. Stop the immediate danger.
Example: Don't allow a DUI to continue to drive;
2. Accept your entire responsibilities—not just the "protection" of a fellow officer;
3. Document the facts (e.g., a breath test when alcohol is involved);
4. Keep the investigation unobtrusive and discreet; and
5. Allow the proper person with all of the facts (e.g., knowledge of the officer's prior behavior) to make the appropriate decision.

Bottom Line

Being a law officer who makes balanced decisions involving competing responsibilities is never easy, but leads to integrity—on point. **LOM**

BOB VERNON retired from the Los Angeles Police Department after 37 years on the force. He earned an MBA at Pepperdine University and is a graduate of the University of Southern California's Managerial Policy Institute and the FBI's National Executive Institute. After retirement, Vernon founded The Pointman Leadership Institute (visit pointmanleadership.org).