



LEADERSHIP & Self-Control

Would you entrust your life to a leader who lacks discipline?

Late one night, two of my men, officers of the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD), were shot and severely wounded. A young man had been running naked through the neighborhood firing shots with a rifle. The officers followed him to his home and tried to convince him to put down his weapon. As they talked to him through his bedroom door, he exited through another door, snuck up behind them and shot both of them in the back. He ran back to the streets of the neighborhood.

A captain in charge of the command post in the neighborhood implemented a systematic search for the shooter. On my way to the scene, I stopped by the hospital to check on the condition of the two officers. Both were in serious condition.

I had ordered

SWAT deployed to the command post. Meantime, officers located the shooter. The captain established a perimeter around the high school football field where the suspect hid under the bleachers. The SWAT officer in charge (OIC), a lieutenant, asked me to clarify his mission. I explained the young shooter had a mental condition and hadn't been taking his medication. I asked him to attempt to take him alive, if possible, but made it clear I did not want additional officers killed or wounded. I watched the OIC run to meet his team, give them instructions and deploy to the football field.

A short time later, I heard the crack of a rifle, then immediately the firing of LAPD 12-gauge shotguns. My radio crackled: "Mission accomplished—no officers injured." I supposed the suspect had been killed.

This was a very emotionally charged situation. Two

brother officers were seriously injured or dying. It sounded to me like the suspect had fired first. SWAT members had every legal right to take his life. The OIC later reported that although the suspect had been wounded, he was taken into custody and would survive. They could have killed him. But they didn't.

Self-Discipline Leads By Example

Discipline, or self-control, formed the heart of this unusual mission. How did the lieutenant elicit this extraordinary level of self-control from his team? Because he was one of the most disciplined leaders I've known. His bench presses and behind-the-head pull-ups demonstrated his physical discipline, and his total-discipline lifestyle was legendary. That's why he was chosen to lead the high-stakes police unit, SWAT. He led by example. Because he was disciplined, he could demand and get discipline from his troops.

Self-control is a character trait required in all aspects of law enforcement. Dealing with the actions of a violent suspect, arresting offenders after a pursuit and listening to the raving of a motorist receiving a traffic citation all require self-discipline.

Yet, unfortunately, exercising discipline is not

When exemplary SWAT leaders model self-discipline, they inspire the same in their team.



PHOTO: DALE STROOKTON

our natural inclination. You can't be in this business very long without realizing humans left to their own impulses become delinquent and out of control. How, then, does one become highly disciplined?

The virtue of discipline develops through a process. Most of us in law enforcement had some discipline forced upon us early in life. We resisted it. We may have even resented it. But as we started to mature, we began seeing some of its benefits. The grueling training forced upon us by that tough coach resulted in victories we never dreamed we could achieve. Discipline is an unnatural character trait we tolerate and eventually embrace because we reap its rewards.

Who would want to give control of their life to leaders who cannot control their own?

Highly disciplined people have usually followed the principle of gradual but steady achievement. First, they make a deliberate decision to pursue this character trait. Then they begin with modest goals, celebrate those small victories and move on to greater objectives. Not following this strategy can lead to failure and discouragement. For example, beginning a physical fitness program too ambitiously can result in injury or such discomfort that one gives up. As you reach modest goals, the rewards will stimulate further progress. Discipline in all areas of your life is achievable, but it does require a commitment and a plan.

Discipline is especially relevant to powerful leadership. Leaders ask their followers to grant control of their lives to them on a limited basis. Most people relinquish control of their lives to others rather hesitantly, to say the least. This is especially true in our profession when the uncertainty of the outcome of a situation can involve serious injury or

death. This necessity of granting control to the leader is what makes self-control a requirement of law enforcement leadership. A basic question establishes the link between leadership and self-discipline: "Who would want to give control of their life to leaders who cannot control their own?" It's just that simple—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), which provides principle-based ethics seminars around the world for police agencies, parliament members, military leaders and a variety of other groups.