Role designations: A KEY TO SUCCESS FOR PART-TIME TACTICAL TEAMS

By Travis Norton

Scout briefing the team during a barricaded suspect call out

Friction is "the force that resists all actions" and manifests itself in several different dimensions. For the tactical team, self-induced friction often results from inadequate planning, poorly defined objectives or a lack of clearly defined individual responsibilities. The focus of this article is on the individual responsibilities, or *role designations,* of tactical team members.

The importance of role designations in a professional sports setting was addressed by famed basketball coach Phil Jackson when he stated, "I knew the only way to win consistently was to give everybody, from the stars to the number 12 player on the bench, a vital role on the team." While the stakes can be high in any sporting event, a win or loss on the court pales in comparison to the life and death stakes common to all high-risk tactical operations.

Role designations work in the tactical environment because they alleviate the self-induced friction that is present when operators have no clearly defined operational responsibilities.

COLLATERAL-DUTY SWAT TEAMS

High operational tempo is rarely the norm for the collateral-duty SWAT team. Collateral-duty teams can go weeks, if not months, between missions.

> **Role designations work in the tactical environment because they alleviate the self-induced friction that is present when operators have no clearly defined operational responsibilities.**

In addition to a well-managed training program focused on the practice of critical skills, tactical team members must rely on established standard operating

procedures (SOPs) to guide them in the performance of their individual duties and required tasks as they ramp up for a mission. When operators deploy without a thorough understanding of their individual responsibilities, they are setting themselves (and the team) up for failure.

As a new team leader on a collateral-duty SWAT team, I was frustrated by the seemingly disorganized way that our team deployed during unplanned events. For example, detailing individual tasks and responsibilities during our mission briefings was taking too much time. Did we really need to remind the less-lethal operator that he needed to deploy with a certain number of rounds of less-lethal ammunition as part of his standard load-out? Concerns also extended to the specialized equipment (robots, chemical agents, etc.) that was not assigned to specific team members. Who was bringing these items to the fight? Who was making sure the batteries in the pole camera were charged and the system was working before we needed to use it at the target location? These issues were a critical vulnerability that needed to be addressed.

DEVELOPING THE ROLES

In his book "Championship Team Building: What Every Coach Needs to Know to Build a Motivated, Committed and Cohesive Team," Jeff Janssen describes the importance of clearly defining the roles for each of a team's players. Janssen states that "[r]ole definition means that each player knows what is expected of him to help the team be successful" and "[e]ach player should be given a primary responsibility that he is expected to handle and fulfill." I kept these words in mind as we started to develop our own team's individual role designations. Instead of reinventing the wheel, we went to the primary source of our team members' initial SWAT training, the Los Angeles Sheriff's Department Special Enforcement Bureau (SEB). We modified the SEB role designations to fit the nuances of our team (see Figure 1).

Our team is divided into three elements: entry, containment and long rifle. As we began to develop role designations for our entry personnel, we recognized that containment personnel would need them as well. What would happen, for example, if the operator who performs the role of the third man on the entry element were unavailable? On our team, the third man is responsible

Figure 1

ROLE DESIGNATIONS

Scout
– Formulates the tactical plan on all tactical operations
– Assists the team leader with running the team
– Deploys personnel on call outs
– Provides lethal cover for the arrest team
– First man on entry

Backup
– Partnered with the scout and assists with all his duties
– Assists scout with formulating the tactical plan
– Gives verbal announcements during exterior call outs
  in absence of CNT negotiator (normally CNT in ARV for announcements)
– Second man on entry

Third
– Responsible for intelligence gathering during all tactical operations
– Initially assigned to command post and will act as liaison between the
  scouting team and incident commander
– Responsible for target diagram and documentation of deployed personnel
– Hands-on operator (cuffing)
– Debriefs suspect(s) coming out of target location
– Relays information to CP and arrest/crisis entry team
– Third man on entry

Team leader
– SWAT sergeant
– Responsible for the tactical operation of the team
– Presents the tactical plan to the tactical commander for approval
– Fourth man on entry

Fifth
– Assists the third man during tactical operations
– Fifth man on entry

Sixth
– Provides entry team with 40mm less-lethal cover during tactical operations
– Carries entry bag
– Sixth man on entry

Seventh
– Tasked with obtaining manual breaching tools and in charge of robot and
  the under door camera
– Hands-on operator (cuffing) for third man
– Manual breacher
– Trailer

Eighth
– Assists the fifth man during tactical operations
– Backup hands-on operator to assist third and seventh man
– Manual breacher
– Trailer

Ninth
– Responsible for operation and readiness of ARV

Barricaded suspect call out in Oceanside, CA

for gathering intelligence, serves as the liaison between the scouting team and incident commander, takes physical control of suspects as they exit the target location and relays information to the command post during the execution phase of the mission. We addressed this issue by assigning backups from the containment element to each role on entry. The only exceptions are for the entry team positions of scout and backup. Entry team operators bump up by one position when the scout or backup are not available. Although everyone is trained to scout a location and get the call out started, the primary scout or backup assume these responsibilities once they arrive on scene.

Additionally, we have developed individually issued call out cards that serve as a quick reference deployment procedures checklist for each operator's assigned role in a variety of tactical situations such as hostage crises and barricades. The call out cards serve as a role guide for each operator's actions from the moment of activation to deployment at the target location. Operators who have additional duties such as intelligence

gathering or special equipment deployment have a separate card that outlines their additional duties during unplanned events. It is important to understand that these call out cards are guides that remind the operator of his mission-critical responsibilities in the situations the team is most likely to encounter. In certain circumstances, the operator may need to deviate from the formally defined role responsibilities, if the tactical situation warrants.

IMPLEMENTATION AND OPERATIONAL USE

After defining the team roles came the task of training the team. A team meeting helped to clearly define individual tactical roles and decide how these newly defined role definitions would be integrated into the team's operational practices. We also introduced call out cards and explained their purpose and how our team would integrate them into our tactical operations.

The team's initial introduction to role designations took some time. It was a complete shift in the way our team had been conducting business. None of our team members was resistant to the role designations concept, but there was some initial confusion, most of which centered on how the role backup concept would be applied. We clarified the concept through the example of a member of the entry element being unavailable for a mission. The primary operator's absence would trigger that operator's backup to assume the absent team member's assigned role responsibilities. We also reinforced the importance of recognizing when the need to assume an absent team member's primary role becomes necessary. This is especially important during unplanned events where rapidly evolving circumstances leave little room for time-consuming debate about who is responsible for taking care of mission-critical tasks.

The importance of backups for each role became evident soon after we implemented the role designations concept for our team. During a barricaded suspect call out, the third man was already deployed in a patrol capacity at the target location and was unable to leave due to the suspect's actions. When the backup third man arrived,

...our ability to ramp up quickly during unplanned events has increased greatly. There is no longer confusion at the tactical staging area. Team members know their jobs and respond in an organized manner, thus helping increase our economy of force.

he saw that the primary was not there and filled the role immediately. Since then, our ability to ramp up quickly during unplanned events has increased greatly. There is no longer confusion at the tactical staging area. Team members know their jobs and respond in an organized manner, thus helping increase our economy of force.

TRAINING

To ensure no one forgets his or her role, it is important to review individual role designations every training day, and to vary how the role designation review is conducted. For example, a review can consist of nothing more than each team member briefing his or her assigned responsibilities to fellow team members, a tabletop scenario or practical implementation during a reality-based training scenario.

Regardless of the review method, the time required to conduct the actual review doesn't have to be long or drawn out to keep members' roles fresh in their minds. Reality-based training scenarios that involve all of your team elements (command, CNT, SWAT) are the best time to test your role designations. Have the scenario written to test and drill each of the roles. For example, you can take the scout and backup out of the initial phase of the scenario and see how the team operates without them. Do they bump up by one and perform as trained? If not, you can stop the scenario, conduct a quick debrief, remind everyone how the roles work and then reset the scenario.

CONCLUSION

When I initially proposed that we implement role designations for our team I was not in a position to effect the change. I encountered resistance from some who said it would not work on a collateral-duty team such as ours. Time and experience have clearly demonstrated that implementing role designations as an operational practice does work, even on a part-time team such as ours.

As we all know, change is never easy for police officers and change can be even harder for tactical teams to embrace. But the payoff in increased operational efficiency that role designations provide is worth the hard work.

If your team decides to implement role designations, design them to fit your team and the type of missions you are most likely to encounter. Role designations have helped our team reduce the amount of friction that is ever present in tactical operations.

> **As we all know, change is never easy for police officers and change can be even harder for tactical teams to embrace. But the payoff in increased operational efficiency that role designations provide is worth the hard work.**

Our implementation of role designations has also led to an increased sense of pride among team members. Formalizing our team's operational role designations has streamlined our deployment procedures, improved our readiness to respond to unplanned events and enhanced the team's overall cohesiveness during high-risk missions. These are all desirable qualities for any tactical response team. ∎

REFERENCES

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Heal, Charles. *Field Command.* Brooklyn, NY: Lantern Books, 2012.

Jackson, Phil, and Delehanty, Hugh. *Sacred Hoops.* New York, NY: Hyperion, 2006.

Janssen, J.. "Championship Team Building: What Every Coach Needs to Know to Build a Motivated, Committed & Cohesive Team." Cary, NC: Janssen Peak Performance, 2002.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sgt. Travis Norton is a 16-year veteran of the Oceanside Police Department in Southern California. He has been a member of the SWAT team for 10 years, serving the last four as team leader. He can be reached at tnorton@ci.oceanside.ca.us.