



Drifting standards and creeping missions

By Sid Heal



There are many aspects that mark good tactical teams, but the distinguishing feature that identifies the truly great ones is a consistency of excellence. While teams of lesser competence occasionally enjoy the limelight, great teams stand out in their uncompromising insistence of quality. They maintain minimum standards while striving for best practices. More than being prominently above standards, they are more often recognized for setting them. While a rigid and dogmatic adherence to every rule under all circumstances is a recipe for disaster, lacking clear and compelling rationale to the contrary, these teams are unyielding in their compliance to valid standards of performance. They are especially vigilant in avoiding two pitfalls — drifting standards and creeping missions.

Drifting standards is a condition that results in a lack of enforcement of minimum qualifications. Regardless of whether it is marksmanship, physical fitness or some other perishable skill, once an exception is made, even a small or temporary one, a new “minimum” has been established and so the standard begins to “drift” and diminishes in

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value. Avoiding drifting standards requires constant vigilance since the reasons that exceptions are seen as necessary may be strong and reasonable in the present situation, but a new set of circumstances can appear equally persuasive. Once there is a precedent it makes the next exception even harder to refuse, and so, it begins. While there are a multitude of examples, some of the more common include making excep-

tions, extending deadlines and granting exemptions.

Tactical teams are routinely called upon to handle some of the most dangerous and complex missions in law enforcement, and just as commonly required to meet standards that exceed those of other units in a department, especially physical fitness. Testing is periodically conducted to ensure all personnel are up to par, but sometimes, for entirely legitimate reasons such as injury or illness, someone is incapable of passing the test. Without a remedial alternative, making an exception, or worse, exempting the person from this particular iteration, serves to reset the standard. The most common challenge is through a grievance or a lawsuit, either because someone was excluded from the original standard but can now meet the “new one” or because of some failure that can be attributed to the exception.

Similar in concept to drifting standards is mission creep. *Mission creep* is the insidious changing or expansion of a mission from its original definition. Mission creep occurs by one of two methods. The first way happens when a unit is not properly equipped or trained and higher headquarters shift the mission. The second way is when a unit itself attempts to do more than was originally intended or assigned.¹ Somewhat ironically, mission creep is more likely to happen with success since a successful mission invites expansion. After all, if it worked once, why won't it work again? Or if it worked here, why won't it work there? While these questions seem benign on the surface, without more careful scrutiny they invite failure, since the same tactics, tools, training and the like will simply be reapplied in new situations until they eventually prove unsuccessful. Each success invites a more ambitious attempt and/or broader scope.

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Arguably, the most common example of mission creep with law enforcement tactical teams is when a team feels underutilized. Because of the expense in equipping and training a competent team, a "return on investment" is seen as a necessary justification for maintaining them over the years. When a lack of activity leaves them languishing, other assignments that have not historically required such attention become appealing. Thus, a team formed for handling armed and barricaded suspects or high risk warrants begins handling assignments not rising to the same degree of risk. Initially at least, the shifts are minor and nearly unnoticeable but, left unexamined and unchecked, the next shift moves the focus still further from the mission as originally planned. Lacking further examination, the emphasis gradually moves toward even

more routine assignments. Eventually, the mission of the team expands to be so broad in scope that it encroaches on those without demonstrable need for such a specialized team.

Both drifting standards and mission creep are dangerous. But while a failure resulting from drifting standards can be a disaster, failures from mission creep are often catastrophes.

Conversely, a team that has succeeded in one area, especially one in which it gains credibility and recognition, encourages an expansion to more dangerous assignments. What has succeeded in the past ensures that it will be far more difficult to make a case for more training or better equipment. Success, then, becomes its own impetus. Being equipped and trained for one mission may still leave a team deficient for another.

Both *drifting standards* and *mission creep* are dangerous. But while a failure resulting from drifting standards can be a disaster, failures from mission creep are often catastrophes. The unforeseen difficulties are only discovered after some conspicuous, and often tragic, event. Mature teams understand and manage their own limitations and will readily admit when reinforcements are necessary, equipment is deficient or training is inappropriate or substandard. Drifting standards are generally the responsibility of the tactical team, but mission creep is always the responsibility of the authorizing authority. Only when there is a clear and compelling need for an exception or extension of a deadline should requirements or deadlines be waived, and only when accompanied by a comprehensive mission analysis should missions be changed or expanded. ◀◀

Endnote

1. For more information, see U.S. Army Field Manual 3-07, "Stability Operations and Support Operations," Headquarters, Department of the Army, Washington D.C., (February 20, 2003), p. 1-17.

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