

SELECTING PERSONNEL FOR

MULTI-AGENCY TASK FORCES



Task forces are critical when addressing multi-jurisdictional needs, investigating major cases impacting several agencies or when combating regional crime problems. The success or failure of a task force depends largely on the personnel assign to it. When police executives decide

to participate on a task force, there are many variables that should be considered when selecting participants.

Before selecting participants to serve on a task force, police management should have a clear understanding of the type of task force it is. Essentially, task forces fall into one of three categories. First, special

event task forces are formed in preparation of a specific future event and are limited in duration. Task forces designed to provide security at major events, such as the Olympic Games or even in anticipation of post-event melees, similar to those police encounter after college sporting events, can be considered special event task forces.

Due to the magnitude of some special events, these task forces are often more reliant on the sheer number of task force members rather than the officers' individual qualifications; however, some special event task forces require specific officer qualifications. An example of this type of special event task forces would include a DUI checkpoint task force where officers must have certain training and skills to detect impaired drivers. Without qualified personnel, the effectiveness and efficiency of the task force would be minimal.

The next type of task force is the case-specific task force, created in response to a criminal act, such as a major bombing or series of related homicides, where multiple agencies' resources are pooled together to investigate and prosecute the case. A classic example of a case specific task force would be the Unibomber Task Force or a task force assembled to locate a missing child.

The primary difference between a special event and case-specific task force is the duration of the task force's existence.

Special event task forces usually have known duration while case-specific task forces usually have an unknown duration because it is often difficult to predict how long it will take to solve a particular case. Whether the duration of the task force is known or not, both will eventually dissolve as a result of the special event concluding or a case being closed.

The specialized task force focuses on issues within a defined parameter for an infinite period of time, or at least until funding or interest no longer exists for the task. Specialized task forces address a particular crime problem rather than a singular special event or criminal case. These specialized task forces include counter-terrorism, narcotics suppression, reducing computer and high technology crimes, combating prostitution, preventing and prosecuting crimes against children / elderly and apprehending fugitives.

Motivation and Work Ethic

When selecting participants, the agency should consider whether

the candidates for the position 1) are willing, motivated and enthusiastic about the position, 2) have been "volunteered" and truly have no real desire to participate or 3) disinterested and really do not care one way or another if they are selected.

The best-case scenario is the candidate motivated to perform any assignment and task required by the task force, i.e., follow directions from a supervisor and be willing to make the sacrifices necessary to accomplish the mission. Being assigned to a task force often requires personal sacrifice because of the workload, the type of work and constant last-minute schedule changes that occur during operational planning.

The degree of willingness to participate on a task force, while important, should not be the only consideration. The most highly motivated officer may lack the general skills or experience needed, yet, an officer with no desire to participate on the task force may be the most qualified candidate from the agency. Even if an officer does not truly want to participate on a task force, he can still be the type of quality participant that will give 100% to the assignment. Past work history should be a good indicator of the future performance.

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Veteran Versus Rookie

On some task forces, a less experienced officer will be able to quickly learn the requirements for the job with minimal training and supervision. For example, a task force designed to reduce speeding violations in school zones can easily integrate a less experienced officer into the task force.

Most task forces working complex criminal investigations thrive on the years of experience brought to the task force by the participants. For an officer to successfully integrate on investigative task forces, they should already have some experience conducting investigations, even if the violation being investigated is not the same. Many task forces expect new participants to come on board the task force and begin working cases with minimal direction. Even if an experienced investigator has never written a search warrant affidavit for intellectual property crime, it is crucial that he at least has experience authoring some type of affidavit.

High Performer Versus Deadweight

Multi-agency task forces provide agencies a stage to highlight the professionalism of their employees. By assigning a stellar employee to a task force, not only does the likelihood of the task force's success increase, but also the overall reputation of the host agency within the law enforcement community can be reinforced or improved. Remember, the first people evaluating the performance will inevitably be from the surrounding law enforcement agencies.

Unfortunately, in some rare instances, executives use task forces as a way to resolve personnel problems. These situations usually

involve assigning a low performer or problem employee to a task force to fulfill the poor management practice of "out of sight, out of mind." Instead of properly addressing the problem, it seems easier to reassign a problem officer to an off-site task force where the host agency will seemingly not have to address underlying issues. While this tactic may temporarily ease one problem, it will create a whole new set of problems. These new problems will no longer be internal agency problems, but instead will now impact multiple agencies.

First, the problem will not have been addressed and therefore, it should not be expected to change. Second, fellow employees aware of the real reason for the reassignment will view the task force's role as a "dumping ground" for problematic employees. Based on the speed of internal news spreading throughout the ranks of police agencies, soon the entire agency shares this same "dumping ground" view. Third, the existing task force members will immediately recognize the problems affiliated with their new member. They will certainly distance themselves from a potential problem employee, rendering him useless and ineffective on the task force.

To the contrary, executives will encounter a conundrum when faced with assigning their highest performing officer to a task force. If the task force addresses a specific crime problem or issue, is the agency willing to sacrifice the exceptional work the employee was doing in his previous assignment? The role of the task force in fulfilling the priorities of the agency must be examined. In a city plagued with homicides, it would behoove the agency to have the top performing detectives addressing that problem.

Promoter Versus Non-Promoter

In all law enforcement agencies, there are those officers who desire to climb into the management ranks and those who prefer the sanctity of patrolling and working cases

without having supervisory responsibilities. For officers seeking to rise within the ranks, the diversity of past assignments is often a key factor in the promotion process. In anticipation of future promotions, some officers attempt to diversify their résumé by "punching their ticket" in as many different assignments as they can, sometimes with more focus on the number of assignments than the quality of their experiences.

This itinerant mentality is not a guarantee that the officer will not be an asset to the task force, but it should definitely be considered as a mitigating factor by executive management. Some task forces require a long-term commitment because it takes years of apprenticeship before an employee can even begin to become productive.

The question that executive management

must ask in regards to promotions is, "Should officers be eligible for promotion while assigned to the task force?" If so, is the agency willing to leave a ranking member on the task force or will he be pulled back to the agency to assume a new supervisory role? Should officers assigned to the task force be given a temporary, or term, promotion during their assignment to the task force?

Availability for Duty

Many task forces require participants to work unique and unscheduled hours while others may have fixed schedules. Police management should have a clear understanding of the time commitment required for task force personnel. This should include

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the regularly scheduled work hours, the average number of night, weekend and holiday shifts, any task force requirement for maximum after-hour responses times or residency restrictions. Police management to make this information part of the announcement for the task force position so only those candidates willing to commit to the hours will apply.

Specialized and Collateral Duties

Every law enforcement agency has specialized duties in which some officers engage that are in addition to their general patrol, investigative or administrative responsibilities. The specialized duties include everything from SWAT, bomb technician, K9, computer forensics, hazardous material technician, hostage negotiator, accident reconstruction, evidence collection teams and weapons of mass destruction coordinator to grief counselor and grant writer. While participation in these duties is commendable and necessary, some of these duties may conflict with the task force's mission.

For example, an officer participating on agency's SWAT team may find a conflict while participating on a terrorism task force. In the event of a terrorist incident, the SWAT team will likely be called for tactical assignments. Most critical to the terrorism task force at the point of a terrorist incident is the need to have trained investigators covering investigative leads. The officer with too many collateral duties will find himself pulled in too many directions to be of full value to all of his commitments.

While too many specialized collateral duties may hinder certain task force operations, it may be a valuable asset to others. The key for executives to consider is whether the specialized or collateral duties will enhance or detract from the task force on a daily basis and, more important, during times of crisis.

Team Player

Tasks forces are teams. No team will ever be successful unless the players work well with each other. Officers working on task forces must be willing to openly share ideas, be willing to accept group decisions and work with officers from other agencies. Although a subjective measure to quantify, executive managers assess any task force candidate's ability to work well with others, equitably contribute to the task force workload and humbly share recognition for completed work assignments.

Specialized Skill Set

Different task forces require different skills ranging from the ability to sustain oneself in extreme weather conditions for extended periods to being able to decipher computer source codes. Police management should examine the skills required for each task force before a selection of candidate is made.

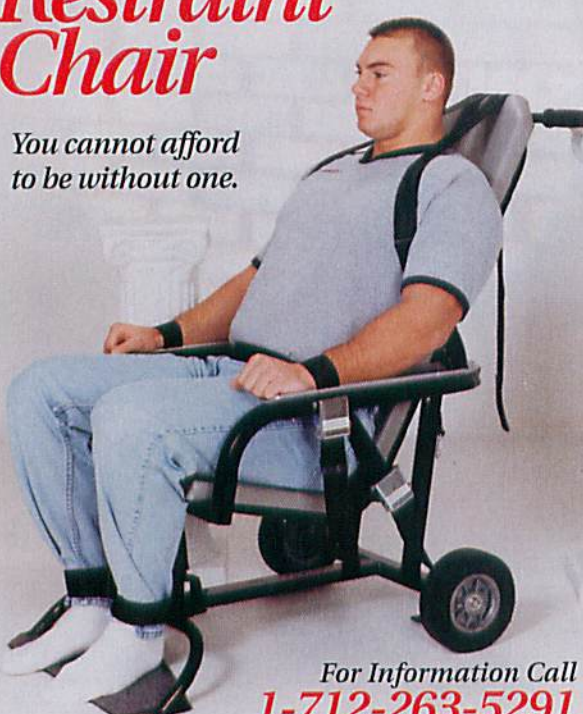
Some task forces require skills that should be possessed, or attainable, by any participant. These skills include the ability to operate basic computer programs, conduct general witness interviews and make misdemeanor arrests. Other task forces will benefit from specialized skills possessed by certain participants, such as specific industry knowledge, foreign language skills or advanced degrees, such as law or medical degree.

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