

# Navigating having a blended sworn and non-sworn security operation

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*A few concrete steps can help to minimize the conflicts that arise as a result of differences between the two groups.*

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Effective collaborations are crucial for both small and large organizations, regardless of whether teams are working on a minor school project or a multi-billion dollar professional sports venture. In healthcare security entities, successful teamwork is just as essential. However, one aspect of healthcare security partnerships calls for particular discussion: the relationship between sworn and civilian personnel when the two groups work together to provide security for a facility. Disharmony can lead to conflicts that impair a department's performance.

## ROOTS OF CONFLICTS

In general, the personnel within an organization are critical to achieving goals and overall success. If employees lack the necessary skills or possess unfavorable personalities, they can impede progress in numerous ways. Having adequately trained and developed employees directly af-

fects overall performance of the organization [1]. Beyond having basic skill sets, the ways employees interact with one another is also vital. As researchers in Canada have demonstrated, various conflicts—such as those pertaining to relationships, processes, and tasks—can affect employee well-being and lead to loneliness [2]. Unhappiness, in turn, can negatively affect employees' performance, as they may not be operating at their full potential.

Process and task conflicts are likely a part of most employees' daily experiences to some extent. However, persistent conflicts can be particularly harmful to ongoing partnerships. Consider a long-term work relationship overwhelmed by constant process and task conflicts—it is unlikely to thrive. Many employees face the reality of being excluded from a group or idea due to misunderstandings, miscommunications, and, at times, inadequate policies.

In the case of blended sworn and non-sworn teams in healthcare, conflict can arise in part from training differences between the two groups, even when off-duty sworn officers are used to complement full-time non-sworn

employees. Although both groups share the overall goal of promoting safety, their methods for achieving this goal can differ significantly. Sworn law enforcement officers undergo quite a different training regimen than their civilian counterparts do. Their training includes rigorous law review, defensive tactics, courtroom testimony, case investigation, report writing, traffic law enforcement, and interrogation tactics.

Non-sworn personnel may recognize some similarities to their own training, but the key differences lie in the training context and job expectations. For example, non-sworn personnel are typically trained in conducting interviews to gather information through mostly open-ended questions, while sworn officers are trained to conduct interrogations that are more pointed and designed to obtain confessions within the context of criminal activity. Moreover, once an incident involves criminal activity, law enforcement is required. Sworn personnel have the authority to perform certain duties that non-sworn personnel do not, and these differences can sometimes lead to conflict.

Tensions can also arise when

civilians are brought into a police department because their specialized expertise is required—a common situation. For instance, civilians may be needed for victim advocacy, IT support, specialized positions, and administrative support.

Exacerbating differences in culture and training, sworn personnel tend to socialize and spend time with other sworn staff, while non-sworn personnel tend to do the same with other non-sworn staff. Non-sworn personnel may find it intimidating to approach and engage with someone who is wearing body armor and carrying a gun, just as sworn personnel may feel uncomfortable engaging in conversation with a civilian officer who has never had to serve a high-risk warrant or arrest someone who is physically combative.

## ACTIONS FOR LEADERS

Sworn and non-sworn employees may have access to different tools and relationships that could be useful to each other, but if the differences lead to conflicts, the conflicts can result in the hiding of knowledge [3] and a failure to share strategies and help each other with problem-solving. An

us-versus-them or me-versus-you mentality in the workplace is rarely productive, and security department leaders must be mindful of the relationship between knowledge hiding and employee conflict.

Leaders also need to assess the current state of relationships between sworn and non-sworn employees and take steps to reduce conflict. In addition to practicing self-reflection, they can explore the actions below to reduce conflict.

**Clarify roles and responsibilities.** Clearly defining the roles and responsibilities of sworn and non-sworn employees can reduce ambiguity and minimize conflict. Ensure that everyone understands what is expected of them and how their work complements that of others.

**Foster communication and collaboration.** Encourage open communication and collaboration between sworn and non-sworn components of the department. Create opportunities for them to work together, share information, and learn from each other.

**Provide training and education.** Offer training and education to both sworn and non-sworn components to promote under-

standing and respect for the other's roles and responsibilities. This can help build a sense of teamwork and unity within the department, reducing the potential for conflict.

To facilitate a cohesive and effective team dynamic, it is important to get everyone at the same table, ensure that all personnel understand the capabilities of their colleagues, and encourage collaboration and knowledge sharing between sworn and non-sworn personnel. Getting sworn and non-sworn personnel to work together can be achieved through collaboration on specific projects, committee work, or town hall-type meetings.

When sworn and non-sworn personnel work together, they can bring different perspectives and skill sets to the table, which can lead to more effective problem-solving and decision-making. Leaders should assess the strengths and weaknesses of their team members and allocate tasks accordingly. By breaking down barriers and fostering a sense of teamwork, departments can leverage the unique talents and knowledge of all their personnel to achieve their shared goal of promoting safety.

## **A CLOSER LOOK AT DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES**

### **A Civilian Point of View**

In this section, Claudia Garcia, a civilian executive assistant in our department who interacts with sworn personnel every day, discusses her perspectives on the partnership in response to questions asked by the two first authors of this article.

**Question: How would you describe the relationship between sworn and non-sworn personnel?**

**Answer:** The relationship between both personnel varies based on role. For example, I speak to sworn personnel in leadership roles much more frequently than I do a line-level police officer. My relationship with the sworn personnel I interact with could be viewed as "good," because I converse with them quite frequently and, through this, I have gotten to know them on a more personal level, which is great.

Overall, I would describe the relationship as divided. My colleagues and I have noticed that commissioned officers, especially police officers, will only reach

out to us if there's a need to (issue-related question) and, other than this, there's no camaraderie. As we speak, this might have to do with the department not having the ability to socialize like they did during pre-pandemic times. Still, it would be beneficial to begin creating or strengthening the bond between the non-sworn and the sworn personnel.

**Question: What are the benefits of sworn and non-sworn personnel working together?**

**Answer:** In my experience as a civilian, a benefit I see of working alongside sworn officers is that I have learned the difficulties of their job. It's very simple to watch an incident on television and quickly make a judgement regarding their decisions. After speaking to commissioned officers, sergeants, lieutenants, and detectives, I've also learned how stressful the job can become and how one can easily become overwhelmed with emotion. One example that comes to mind is having to handle a situation where a young person is trying to commit suicide. I can't even begin to imagine what toll is taken on a person who has dealt with these situations for many years. In my

time in the department, I have come to see policing from a different perspective and have the utmost respect for all they do to ensure we're staying safe.

**Question: What are some of the challenges that sworn and non-sworn partnerships present?**

**Answer:** One is feeling divided. Some sworn and non-sworn personnel feel like we're from two different worlds; without feeling as if we're one team, this will always be a challenge when trying to build a partnership. Another challenge, which I feel is such an important one, is non-sworn personnel feeling that their opinions, suggestions, and views don't matter. Reassuring them that all feedback (whether civilian or sworn) is always encouraged, welcome, and will be considered might help with overcoming this challenge.

## **THE SWORN PERSPECTIVE**

Sworn police officers perform a very unique duty within departments. They are the only component that can do such things as arrest someone, serve warrants, and enforce laws. These unique du-

ties give sworn personnel a different perspective than non-sworn personnel have. This perspective helps fuel different focuses and insights. For example, safety is one thing that is at the forefront of many sworn officers' minds, not only safety for themselves, but safety for those around them. They can feel responsible for the safety and well-being of civilian employees, particularly when civilian personnel are brought into a police department because of their specialized expertise. Close contact and the desire of sworn officers' to protect others can create a sense of camaraderie and mutual respect between sworn and non-sworn personnel. However, this sense of responsibility can present itself as coldness or being uncaring, when it is hyper-vigilance and self-awareness of a sworn officer's environment. For example, many officers do not want to sit someplace where their back is to a door (because you never know who is coming in a door). This attitude may lead to misunderstandings amongst others who do not share the sworn officer's way of thinking.

There can also be a sense of frustration or resentment if the sworn officers think the civilian

personnel are not fulfilling their duties adequately. As we indicated earlier, resentment and lack of understanding can lead to conflict and a breakdown in communication, which department leaders need to recognize while actively working to build positive relationships between sworn and non-sworn personnel.

Differences in communication is one of the biggest hurdles to overcome in any safety department. Sworn and non-sworn personnel communicate in very different styles, manners, and mechanisms. Sworn officers are probably accustomed to a militaristic, roll call type environment in which crime bulletins are passed around and wanted persons are discussed. Compare this to a virtual meeting or tabletop environment in which non-sworn personnel do most of the briefings. The simple act of blending these types of environments could lead to misunderstandings and uncomfortable feelings, but there are times when sworn and non-sworn must come together to meet. Is it best to put civilians in the roll call environment or sworn in the virtual environment? Leaders will have to decide this among the myriad of other choices they are making.



Finally, there is the issue of perceived importance within any work environment. In schools, it makes sense that teachers are elevated because they are the driving force behind the core mission. In a private business, the sales team may be elevated because they generate revenue. In a protective services department, the same phenomenon can be experienced. Especially when a protective services department is called a “police” department, police officers may feel that they, alone, are the true constituents of the department; they are the police, after all. With this mindset, it is easy to fall into the trap of viewing civilians as ancillary to the cause and secondary. But the relationship between sworn and civilian employees cannot be allowed to give rise to an us-versus-them mentality; rather, a we-are-stronger-together attitude must be prevalent. Leadership must be cognizant of any rifts that start to form due to egos or titles. Every component is important, and everyone has a part to play.

## OVERVIEW

The success of any organization is greatly influenced by the

individuals that comprise it. From the highest-level executives to support staff, every member plays a crucial role. In the healthcare security sector, it is common for sworn and non-sworn personnel to work together. Law enforcement and security are closely related and can complement each other in scope and breadth, with the goal of ensuring overall safety. There may be obstacles to mixing sworn and non-sworn staff, but there are also many benefits that can be derived from this collaboration. When sworn and non-sworn personnel work together, they can bring different perspectives and skill sets to the table, which can lead to more effective problem solving and decision-making. When both groups work in harmony, the efficiencies and knowledge of both can be maximized. Although certain tasks can only be performed by sworn personnel and other tasks are better suited for non-sworn personnel, the key is to have a plan and foster a strong relationship between the two entities.

Healthcare security organizations must conduct a thorough evaluation of their mixture of sworn and non-sworn personnel

and take deliberate steps to maximize the efforts of both groups while maintaining positive relationships between them. Good working relationships are essential for success, and a lack of trust and understanding between these groups can be detrimental to the overall mission. The most effective security departments align their objectives with the strengths of their personnel, assigning tasks to the individuals who are most qualified to handle them. For example, a sworn officer may not have the same technical expertise as a civilian employee when it comes to coding a software program, just as a civilian employee may not have the experience to plan a strategy to reduce burglaries. Collaborative partnerships that leverage the unique strengths of both groups are

where success lies. Teamwork, communication, and the exchange of ideas are critical components of a successful healthcare security organization.

### References

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