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## 10-8: Life on the Line

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## 7 habits of successful police officers

Kevin Davis offers his thoughts on what it takes to be a 5%er

What personal traits do you have to possess for your peers and the public to think you're one helluva cop? In other words, what does it take these days to be a "5%er"?

A couple of weeks ago, [we reported](#) the views of nationally known trainer Kevin Davis on the qualities of a successful policing agency. Now we've asked Davis to construct a companion list, itemizing the attributes of successful officers, those stand-out hard-chargers who are best constituted to "take care of business" effectively and legally in even the most challenging assignments.

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"Success is not defined by time on the job," says Davis, a popular ILEETA instructor, independent training consultant, and 28-year veteran with a medium-size municipal agency in northeast Ohio. "You may bring some of these qualities with you when you start on the job and you can develop them all regardless of tenure."

These traits are not all-inclusive, nor are they static goals, he points out. "They require constant nurturing and reinforcement. But in my observation and experience, if you want to be the kind of officer that others respect and want to emulate, this is the core of what it takes to get there."

Feel free to add to or comment on Davis's Vital Seven:

### 1. Intrinsic Motivation

"It's tough to be a cop anywhere in the world today," Davis allows. "When was the last movie you saw where a police officer was a squared-away individual and not a human wreck? Disrespect for law enforcement seems to be part of a general societal degradation.

"These days, you may not get motivating pats on the back from extrinsic sources. You have to be driven by a steel-plated, intrinsic positive attitude that's your durable epicenter of professionalism, regardless of the reactions of others.

"There's a saying that you should 'shine your shoes for yourself, not for anyone else.' That's the attitude of the true professional, and it's manifest in the way your uniform and leather look, in the way you take care of yourself so you can do a better job, and in the way you go out every day looking for crime and offenders

instead of being a 'spectator cop' who sits back and watches others be the 'real police' getting things done.

"Policing is not a game. You have to be mentally and physically prepared each day for whatever may come down the road. Focus on what you can control (your attitude and behavior) rather than what you can't control (society's perceptions). The aura you create will radiate out from you."

## **2. Decisiveness Based on Legal Knowledge**

Uncertain, indecisive officers are a threat to themselves, fellow officers, and the community they serve. Successful officers, in contrast, "can make quick, confident decisions because they know what they can and can't do under the law and according to their department's policies and procedures," Davis says. "You can't make a good decision on anything — vehicle stops, Terry stops, use of force, search and seizure — unless you know what conforms to the rules of your profession."

Although the continuous flow of legal information may seem intimidating, "it's important to stay up on court decisions because they affect what you do every day," Davis says. "The best cops will have a better working knowledge of the law than most prosecutors and judges."

## **3. Devotion to Training and Practice**

"Training is what you learn from someone else. Practice is a gift you give yourself," Davis says. "For success, both need to be constant. The best musicians tend to be those who practice the most. The same is true for cops. The more you sweat in training and practice, the less you're likely to bleed on the street."

"We're a fast-food nation. We want things now, in 10 easy lessons, one DVD. But the truth is that there's no easy way to become good. Some behavioral scientists have estimated it takes 10,000 hours of practice and experience to truly master complex skills."

"When bullets are flying and people are trying to kill you, you need to rise to that occasion and go home safely when it's over. But you better have practiced extensively and regularly for that day. If you haven't, you risk doing something really stupid by over-reacting or under-reacting."

Davis says that 5%ers recognize law enforcement as a "true profession" that incorporates a wide variety of skill-sets. To perfect them may require seeking outside training at your own expense if your department won't foot the bill. Training and practice are an officer's "life blood," Davis says. "They're an investment in your own future. You gain confidence from competence and competence from hard work that never ends."

## **4. Weapons Mastery**

Any professional to be successful must be familiar and competent with the tools of his trade. For LEOs, that includes the duty firearm, the tactical baton, pepper spray, the Taser, and "all other weapons systems you carry, including your personal physical and verbal weapons," Davis says.

"For successful cops, there is no acceptable alternative option: You must master the weaponry for every level of force you may be called upon to use, beginning with command presence. In a life-threatening situation, you want your pistol to appear in your hand and on target without conscious thought. Developing skill to that level takes time and effort, but without mastery the results when your life is on the line could be catastrophic."

Good tactics that allow you to gain and maintain an edge of advantage can be thought of as part of your weapons system. "A successful officer knows how to prevent a fight as well as what to do in a fight," Davis observes. "With tactical skill, you deny an adversary the opportunity to assault you, so you don't have to go toe-to-toe with him or blindly race into a situation and make yourself an easy target."

Tactical competence needs to be an evolving art. "Take time to learn trends — what the criminal population is innovating, what's new that you're facing out there — so you can adapt your alertness and behavior accordingly," Davis advises. "Again, take the initiative in educating yourself to understand your enemy. Waiting

for your agency to inform you can be dangerous.”

## 5. SMEAC Planning

“If you fail to plan, you plan to fail. It’s that simple,” Davis declares. He’s talking about goal-setting and pathway-mapping across a broad spectrum: your next call, your career, your life outside of policing.

He believes that successful officers employ a planning approach represented by the acronym SMEAC — Situation, Mission, Execution, Administration and logistics, Command and signals.

**Situation:** First, you identify clearly the individuals and circumstances you’re dealing with. What are you involved in or heading into? “You access as much current intelligence and background as you can to help you see as complete a picture as possible,” Davis says.

- **Mission:** What is your goal; what exactly are you trying to accomplish? “Without a goal you have no focus.”
- **Execution:** You lay out simply and methodically a strategy for how you’re doing to accomplish your mission. What help do you need from other people? Who does what exactly? “You have to be flexible enough to alter your plans as the situation evolves, but thinking about your tactics in advance is a safeguard against winging it,” Davis explains. “In law enforcement when we just wing things tends to be when we screw up bad.”

These first three elements, Davis says, are the most important part of planning.

- **Administration and Logistics:** This refers to nitty-gritty practicalities. “On a SWAT call-out, for example, this step includes deciding what radio channel you’re going to use, checking to be sure everyone has a vest and handcuffs, assigning who’s riding in what vehicle, determining how you’re going to get to the scene — important details that assure your plan moves forward smoothly,” Davis says.
- **Command and Signals:** How are you going to communicate and relate to the parties involved?

## 6. Integrity

“The dark side of law enforcement is always looming,” Davis warns. “The history of this profession is filled with good, aggressive officers who lost their way. The challenge is to go about your life on and off the job in an ethical way.

“A successful officer can swim in the swamp of life on the street and not come out stinking. He or she can hunt monsters without becoming one. Ethics is often taught in law enforcement classes. The successful officer makes it an action as well as an idea.”

## 7. Continuous Improvement

Successful officers consider themselves a work in progress, regardless of their years of service or the successes they’ve accumulated. When it comes to 5%er performance, “you are never completely and permanently there,” Davis says. “There are always opportunities for improvement, and the successful officer actively searches for ways to be better.”

There may be breakthrough moments when radical changes occur. But more likely — and usually more reliable — is an ongoing series of small changes that arise through self-reflection and identification of ways to enhance your personal and professional lives.

“Taking incremental, continuous steps is usually more desirable than attempting giant leaps,” Davis says. “Improvement that’s not drastically different is easier to implement. As times change and circumstances

change, it's important to keep evolving in positive ways if you want to stay successful."

Kevin Davis consults with agencies throughout the country on firearms, use of force, and other training issues. He can be reached at: [trainerKevinDavis@gmail.com](mailto:trainerKevinDavis@gmail.com) or through his website: [www.advancedtacticalconcepts.com](http://www.advancedtacticalconcepts.com).

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### About the author

Charles Remsberg co-founded the original Street Survival Seminar and the Street Survival Newsline, authored three of the best-selling law enforcement training textbooks, and helped produce numerous award-winning training videos. His nearly three decades of work earned him the prestigious O.W. Wilson Award for outstanding contributions to law enforcement and the American Police Hall of Fame Honor Award for distinguished achievement in public service.

Pre-order Charles Remsberg's latest book, [Blood Lessons](#), which takes you inside more than 20 unforgettable confrontations where officers' lives are on the line.

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