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# THE SELECTION OF TACTICAL OFFICERS

By Michael A. Campion, PhD, LP, HSPP

**T**he selection of tactical officers is a process that should include consideration of the candidate's motivation, previous work performance and assessments, physical abilities, as well as stress hardiness and emotional readiness. Much of the information can be obtained from data within the department and interviews by the tactical leadership team. In addition to the above tools, I would suggest adding one more critical tool: a psychological assessment designed for tactical candidates. This would provide another perspective to the screening process.

The probability of selecting the appropriate candidate increases by using a variety of screening tools along with psychological assessments.

## OBJECTIONS

Psychological tests are not scientific! Unfortunately no assessment is 100% accurate or predictive when measuring humans. However, social researchers can provide fairly objective information regarding certain traits essential to the tactical assignment.

First, we need to decide what traits are necessary to be an effective SWAT officer. My research started by observing and training with tactical teams and eventually becoming a deputy sheriff. The training and work with tactical teams opened doors to interview tactical team leaders and team members as to what are the traits of successful tactical team officers. Next, I reviewed the existing literature on tactical teams, which eventually lead to the development of our tactical assessment. We are currently doing follow-up research to determine the effectiveness of our tactical assessment, but according to reports from tactical teams, the assessment appears to be effective. "If I fail a SWAT psychological assessment, it will ruin my career or I will, at least, have a negative mark on my career!" This is a reasonable concern; however, it is only true if the Tactical Officer Assessment is viewed or presented as a psychological

test whose purpose is to see if someone is "crazy." The Tactical Officer Assessment's purpose is to assess readiness" at this time in an officer's career for the unique and additional demands of functioning as a SWAT officer.

I recommend that, in all published information concerning the position, the outcome of the selection process is clearly communicated. This includes the last step, the psychological assessment, which only pertains to the readiness for the position at this time in the officer's career. This is why it is recommended that the actual assessment be referred to as "Tactical Officer Readiness Assessment."

The assessment report should have specific verbiage that clearly states the recommendation pertains only to the readiness for SWAT positions and is not a comment on the candidate's effectiveness as a street officer. The summary recommendation should state that "the officer is ready at the time of testing based upon traits needed for an assignment as a tactical officer." The unqualified summary should state, "not ready at this point" in the candidate's career. The police psychologist should then discuss the reason for lack of readiness with the candidate, and recommendations should be made for the candidate's personal growth and preparation to become a member of the tactical team.

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## THE ASSESSMENT

The psychological assessment again is one of the tools in the selection process of a SWAT officer. Let me share the traits which my research indicated were essential. There will be a minimum detail in the description of the traits, but that is necessary to maintain the integrity of the assessment. The following is a sample of the 26 traits for a successful career as a tactical team member.

➤ Positive Health Habits — includes height to weight ratio, balanced life, and spiritual toughness.

➔ Personality Traits — impulse control, anger management, high self-esteem.

➔ Mental Alertness — speed of decision-making, visual alertness, attention focus, organized thinking, judgment.

➔ Team Player — motivation, trust, rapidly adapts, working with others in a supportive manner.

To measure these traits, an assessment package is recommended that includes the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory-2, another standardized personality measure, a cognitive test, a structured interview by a police psychologist, and the Champion Tactical Candidate Assessment. The last instrument is used to assess the candidate from three perspectives: the candidate's self-appraisal, confidential appraisals from a supervisor, and from peers. This "360°" approach combined with the other instruments, provides rather complete information as to a candidate's readiness for the tactical team. Positions other than the entry team, such as bomb technician, negotiator, and sniper will require additional specialized testing which has a different emphasis.

#### WHY USE ASSESSMENTS?

The main reason for the assessment is to gain another perspective on the candidate in the total screening process. The candidates will be placed in deadly force situations and will have strains on their personal schedules with additional training time and "call outs." The SWAT member is asked, therefore, to function above and beyond the stress level of the street officer and must be able to manage higher stress levels.

The selection should be as complete as possible in order to protect the selected individual from litigation that might occur from "line of duty" decisions. The assessment must clearly report the positive traits of the officer and his/her suitability for the assignment.

#### BENCHMARK FOR PERSONAL GROWTH

The assessment for the tactical unit is not only used for information on readiness, but also for the tactical team member's personal growth. I have never personally evaluated a candidate who was perfect. Therefore, everyone has room for improvement. The feedback to the team member should be part of the assessment process. The confidential feedback would be to encourage and challenge the officer to maximize his potential.

As a benchmark, the assessment can be used to help a team member measure whether or not the stress is too great and could adversely affect performance. The assessment provides the officer a baseline with which to compare current/future stress levels. Regular team suitability assessment is recommended to ensure continued effectiveness as a team member. If concern is

noted, additional training and routine psychological coaching will be conducted and, if needed, separation from the team until readiness is regained.

The Champion, Barrow and Associates team is proud to work with members of tactical teams, both as a consultant and as a participant. We are always trying to refine the psychological assessment process and tools. If you or your department is interested in more information on the assessment process, or is willing to take part in a short survey, please contact our office. A summary of the results will be sent immediately to participating tactical teams. ■

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*The author wishes to acknowledge the hard work and dedicated bravery of tactical teams throughout America.*

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

*Dr. Michael A. Champion has over 25 years of experience in public safety. He is also a retired Associate Professor from the University of Illinois College of Medicine at Urbana-Champaign.*

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