



“The 24-Hour Rule”

Chief Harry P. Dolan (ret.)

October, 2016

Information delivered in the midst of a crisis is often inaccurate. It has been my experience that the first wave of information, gathered in a hurried or excited manner, always contains some inaccuracies. **Sometimes, as public safety leaders, we have no choice but to make quick decisions based on incomplete information when dealing with emergency situations. The majority of the decision-making situations we encounter, however, are not crisis situations requiring an immediate response.** In most of the decisions we make about operations, personnel, and policy matters, *there is time* to gather more information, think about our options, and even engage in debate.

Unfortunately, public safety leaders sometimes fail to utilize the time available to them and, instead, jump straight to making a decision without having all of the facts. They might make a statement to the media on partially incorrect facts that they later come to regret. In the heat of emotion, they may make a personnel decision that violates the due process rights of an employee that later costs the organization financially through a personnel lawsuit or at arbitration. How can we, as public safety leaders, avoid making decisions that we will later regret? One way is to utilize the “24-hour rule” whenever possible.

The 24-Hour Rule

What is the 24-hour rule? It is the conscious decision to wait 24 hours before making any important decisions that do not require an immediate response. I have to give my mother the credit for my appreciation of the 24-hour rule. She was the one that often said, during times of family conflict, “We’ll talk about it in the morning.” It never failed that after having several hours to calm down, and a good night’s rest, we had greater clarity and more accurate information when we discussed the problem the next day. After the adrenalin subsided and our minds were rested, we could think more clearly. We could calmly verify and interpret what had actually been said. It de-escalated the situation.

I have continued to use this tool in my professional career. Consider a situation of potential employee misconduct. The first wave of information, gathered hastily, may seem pretty damning, and your leadership team may be urging you to take swift action. Members of your command staff may be calling for the employee’s termination or demotion immediately and you may be tempted

to make an irreversible decision *right now*. But do you really need to do that? Is it a matter of immediate public safety? If not, then you have time to gather more information and give everyone time to “sleep on it” *before* making quick decisions that may have lasting consequences. In my 25 years of experience as a police chief, I have found that when waiting 24 hours to make a decision that could be safely postponed, my decision-making was significantly improved. This improvement in my ability to make an informed decision came as a result of the fact that the information that was initially available had changed enough to alter the nature of my initial perceptions of the problem. **Why not place an officer suspected of misconduct on paid administrative leave for a few days while a thorough investigation is conducted rather than making a split-second decision based on imperfect information?**

Think about a critical event such as a major homicide incident or an officer-involved shooting as another example. The pressure is on to give a statement right then and there at the scene. The media is present and they want a statement. **Certainly the media deserves a statement, and we are going to give them one, but not until we have some accurate information to give.** Can we wait to make a substantive statement for the press, made at headquarters removed from the confusion of the scene and with the benefit of vetted information? Please note that waiting 24 hours is not the same thing as waiting 24 days, as I think that is far too long to wait before giving initial information about a critical incident—particularly in the age of social media in which false narratives can develop extremely quickly. But even in a media environment in which combating false narratives is more important than ever, we must take the time to collect accurate information before making public statements.

The 24-hour rule also helps us prevent “TUI-ing,” which is talking, texting, or typing under the influence. When I say “under the influence” I am not just talking about alcohol. I also mean surprise, fear or anger. I have known people who—when angry—emailed, texted, or said something completely out of character that they never would have said 24 hours, or even 2 hours, later. If we could get the hands of public safety professionals off of their phones or keyboards while they are angry, it would make a big difference for our profession. There might be fewer careers ruined, fewer grievances and lawsuits filed, and fewer reputations destroyed.

Conclusion

I am convinced you will find that using the 24-hour rule will enhance your career, improve the quality of your communications inside and outside of your agency, and will help you in safeguarding the agency against the legal and public trust issues that result from making important decisions and statements without adequate information and time. It has helped me profoundly in my career and we emphasize the broad applicability of this rule in several of our *Dolan Consulting Group* courses, including our *Surviving Verbal Conflict®* and *Making Discipline Stick* courses. Using this simple tool, and fighting the temptation to speak publicly or make crucial decisions under the influence of heightened emotions, can help you in developing as a leader and communication professional.