



OPEN WAVELENGTH

Unconventional Leadership: Rethinking Influence in 911 and Public Safety

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911 is no longer business as usual or just the intricate intersection where urgent demand meets the high-stakes tension of real-time decisions. Today, the all-too-futuristic technology of tomorrow is already here. While the fundamentals remain the same, the tools at our disposal have dramatically shifted the tide. As the workforce evolves, those leading and influencing it must rethink and reframe their approach to leadership.

Leadership is one of the most discussed and multifaceted topics in professional development. It is not simply a position; it is both action and character. Leadership is a noun, a verb, and an adjective all at once. Bookshelves are filled, podcasts abound, and conferences overflow with sessions on the subject. Yet in the fast-paced world of 911 and public safety, many organizations and individuals still struggle to fully embrace it.

The reality is that traditional approaches to leadership are being tested as never before. Titles and authority alone cannot carry us through the rigorous challenges of today and they lack the effectiveness needed for the future. In today's constantly evolving 911 landscape, what's needed more than ever is "unconventional leadership."

"Unconventional leadership" redefines influence, inspires change, and challenges the status quo — not by adhering to old paradigms or playing it safe, but by daring to break boundaries, challenge norms, and redefine what it means to lead. At its core, "unconventional leadership" embodies a simple truth: leadership is not confined to titles or ranks. Whether in times of crisis or during the everyday grind, it is defined by impact and how we inspire those around us, guide our teams through the toughest challenges, and innovate to solve problems once thought insurmountable.

Malcolm Gladwell's *The Law of the Few* presents a compelling framework for reimagining leadership within the public safety sector, introducing the roles of connectors, mavens, and salespeople, each driving meaningful change in distinct ways. Applied to public safety, these roles offer valuable insight into how leadership can evolve: from uniting diverse teams and building networks of influence, to sharing crucial knowledge and inspiring collective action.

In such a high-stakes environment where the goal is saving lives amid overwhelming odds, leadership must go beyond conventional boundaries.

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It's not merely about meeting objectives or making quick decisions; it's about embracing the courage to challenge the status quo, the empathy to understand both team and community needs, and the vision to look beyond the immediate horizon.

This is the essence of "unconventional leadership:" adaptive, innovative and relentlessly committed to the mission. It's leadership that takes risks when others hesitate, finds creative solutions when traditional paths fail, and steps up in times of crisis, creating a culture where every team member can rise to their full potential.

Unconventional leaders don't just respond to change, they drive it. They understand that leadership is a mindset, not a position. In the unpredictable world of public safety, this mindset will shape the industry's future. In the 911 environment, these roles translate seamlessly: connectors foster collaboration across agencies, vendors, and communities; mavens share their knowledge and keep teams ahead of technological and cultural shifts; and salespeople shape organizational culture and secure buy-in for new practices, even in the face of resistance.

Together, they form the backbone of leadership that strengthens morale, fuels innovation and challenges the limits of "how it's always been done." Yet embracing these roles requires confronting a quieter challenge: the shadow of imposter syndrome. Too many public safety dispatchers, supervisors, and directors wrestle with the fear of being "found out," despite years of success, which leads to stifled creativity and fuels burnout.

Breaking this cycle demands a shift toward leading from any chair, where leadership is defined by influence, not titles. Empowering leadership at every level fosters resilience. As John Maxwell reminds us, "Leadership is influence, nothing more, nothing less."

In an industry where lives are on the line, the true measure of a leader is not the badge or the office,

but the courage to lead with purpose, authenticity, and heart. When purpose becomes the compass, leaders can guide teams through uncertainty with clarity and hope. As Simon Sinek's *Start with Why* reminds us, in 911, the "why" is always urgent and clear, protecting lives and serving our communities.

That purpose steadies hands, sharpens minds and sustains teams in crisis. But purpose must be balanced with strategic restraint, knowing when to charge forward with bold action and when to pause with calculated foresight. True leadership blends courage with composure, transforming challenges like staffing shortages, cultural shifts and technological disruption into opportunities for growth.

As Albert Einstein famously said, "We cannot solve problems with the same mindset that created them." For public safety leaders, this truth is more pressing than ever. The next generation of leadership will be defined not by hierarchy, but by humanity and by those willing to risk vulnerability, inspire through connection and act with both urgency and compassion.

There is no clear playbook for leadership. The path is often uncertain and unpredictable. What matters is embracing this uncertainty, staying true to who you are, and leading with authenticity. Leadership isn't about fitting into a mold, it's about carving your own path, guided by your values and the people you serve.

For some, leadership is thrust upon them in times of crisis, not because they've been groomed for it, but because they understand the weight of responsibility and the impact of their decisions. For some, their leadership journey may not mirror the paths of those they look up to or those of the incumbents.

"Unconventional leadership" is not for the faint of heart. It's for those bold enough to rewrite the rulebook, those who see every challenge not as a roadblock but as an invitation to rise. It's about

embracing the unexpected, knowing that the path forward is rarely straight but always filled with opportunities to grow, learn, and lead with unwavering purpose.

Leadership, at its core, is about being real in the face of uncertainty. It's owning your journey, even when it doesn't fit the traditional mold, and finding your voice in the moments that matter most. It's about stepping up, being open to feedback and recognizing that the true power of leadership lies not in the title you hold, but in the difference you make.

So, ask yourself: What kind of leader do you want to be? Will you continue to follow the status quo,

or will you dare to challenge it by pushing boundaries, defying norms and leading in ways that leave a lasting impact?

The future of public safety and leadership itself depends on those willing to do things unconventionally.

Now is the time to lead with courage, purpose and conviction — to make a real difference. The world is waiting for leaders who are ready to transform it.

Are you ready to answer the call?

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