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FROM HERO TO ZERO

The Standards Vacuum in Executive Protection - and What Professional
Leadership Requires

AN INDUSTRY WHITE PAPER

**PEOPLE. STANDARDS. LEADERSHIP.
A STRONGER PROFESSION.**

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Executive Summary

Executive protection has matured into a profession with increasingly clear standards, yet standards only improve outcomes when organizations implement them honestly and consistently. This paper examines the organizational conditions that allow capable professionals to move from celebrated to discarded without an objective benchmark changing in between.

The central argument is simple: when doctrine, training, documentation, review, and reciprocal accountability are weak, praise and punishment become arbitrary. The problem is intensified by a “broken middle” that filters ground truth between field personnel and senior leaders or principals. The result can be distorted risk decisions, suppressed warning signs, and a culture that treats questions as threats rather than information.

The profession now has a stronger foundation. Published executive-protection standards establish benchmarks for program development, ethics, training, operations, review, and continuous improvement. The remaining challenge is implementation: building organizations in which accountability runs in every direction, leadership develops people, and professionals can raise legitimate safety and security concerns without fear of retribution.

Key Takeaways

- A standards vacuum makes both praise and punishment subjective.
- Ground truth must reach senior leaders and principals without being filtered for image or convenience.
- Questions, near-misses, and mistakes are information - and should drive review and improvement.
- Management runs systems; leadership develops people. Strong protection programs require both.
- Published standards matter only when organizations train to them, document against them, review performance, and accept reciprocal accountability.

It happens more often than the profession likes to admit. An agent is the “unicorn” one quarter — the fixer, the one who gets the call when something goes wrong — and gone the next: badge deactivated, equipment in a box, nothing about their competence changed in between. The same hands that pinned on the praise take it back. Across executive protection, seasoned practitioners have watched versions of this cycle play out in public programs, private organizations, and client environments alike.

And every time, it is the same tell — an organization celebrating and then discarding a person against no standard that either verdict could point to. That whiplash is not just an individual misfortune. It is a symptom. And in executive protection, the symptom is still far more common than it should be.

This is not an attack on anyone. It is a diagnosis — and, for once, a hopeful one — written by people who love this profession and believe the men and women in it deserve better than the quiet dysfunction too many teams have learned to call “normal.”

The gap was never the missing character. It was the missing standard.

Here is the uncomfortable truth the industry spent years not advertising: a great deal of executive protection has run on borrowed credibility and improvised judgment. Teams get assembled from good people with real backgrounds — cops, soldiers, medics — and then dropped into a mission with no shared doctrine, no field-training pipeline, no written operational standard, and no culture of reviewing their own performance. Everyone is competent at something. No one agrees on what “right” looks like, because nothing ever defined it.

That vacuum is the root cause. Almost every failure the profession likes to pin on individuals — the near-miss, the fraud, the burnout, the good agent shown the door — is downstream of it. When there is no standard, there is nothing to train to, nothing to hold anyone to, and nothing to protect the person who tries to raise the floor. Praise and punishment both become arbitrary. Someone can be a hero and a liability in the same quarter, because the organization never had a fixed point to measure them against.

The symptoms we see too often

Driving by imitation. On too many teams, agents learn to drive protection details not from a curriculum but from watching whoever drove yesterday. No framework, no standardization, no one who owns the training. Aggressive habits get passed down like folklore — new agents mirror what they see, not what they were taught, because they were never taught. Then, when someone drives the way the culture modeled, the culture acts surprised. The problem was never the driver. It was that “how we drive” lived in nobody’s manual.

Praise instead of review. Something goes wrong on a movement — a real safety event, the kind that makes your stomach drop. Afterward, leadership gathers the team and says: we were the best in the business, first out the door, textbook. Everyone claps. No one asks the only question that matters: were the decisions we made the right ones, or did we get lucky? Self-congratulation is easier than examination, and far more comfortable. But an organization that praises itself instead of reviewing itself is one bad day away from learning the difference the hard way.

Questions treated as insubordination. In healthy professions, the person who asks “what’s our standard for this?” is doing their job. In a vacuum, that person becomes a threat — because the

question exposes that there is no standard, and that everyone has been improvising and calling it experience. So the culture develops a tell: it stops answering the question and starts punishing the asker. “Just say yes.” “Stop arguing.” What gets labeled difficult is very often just someone reasoning out loud in a room that has confused compliance with competence.

What grows in the dark. Fraud, waste, and abuse are rarely acts of villainy. They are what grows in the absence of oversight. When there is no clear policy, no documentation habit, no independent review, small compromises become routine and routine becomes culture. Time and pay get massaged. Resources get used loosely. Conflicts of interest go undisclosed because no one is watching and no one built a process for watching. None of it requires bad people. It only requires an environment where accountability is optional — which is exactly what a standards vacuum is.

The broken middle

Here is the part the profession discusses least, and it may matter most. The failure is rarely at the top or the bottom.

Line agents, more often than not, want to do it right. They came to protect, and they take it seriously. And senior leaders — along with the clients or principals they protect — usually set reasonable expectations and reasonable limits. The breakdown tends to live in the middle: a management layer that can neither lead the people below it nor tell the truth to the people above it. That is a cocktail for disaster.

And that middle sits astride the single most important channel in all of protection — the flow of ground truth from the field up to the person whose safety depends on it. What agents actually see (the gaps, the near-misses, the fixes that would make the principal safer) is supposed to travel up that channel intact. In a broken middle, it doesn't. It gets diluted, reshaped, distilled, or distorted by managers more concerned with their image than with the mission — until what reaches the senior leader's desk bears little resemblance to what happened on the ground.

Sit with the consequence, because it is not abstract. It means the person being protected is making decisions about their own safety — about risk, resources, and personnel — on laundered information. They are, in a real sense, being protected from the truth about their protection. The agents pay for it with their credibility and sometimes their jobs. The principal pays for it with a blind spot they do not know they have.

This is why the symptoms persist even where standards exist. A standards vacuum is bad; a broken middle is worse, because it defeats even good standards — it corrupts the data the whole system runs on before the system ever gets to use it. Praise travels up; problems get buried. Questions get punished, because a question threatens the image the middle is protecting. Mistakes get pushed downward onto whoever is convenient, because owning them upward would require the honesty the middle cannot afford. The broken middle is the transmission mechanism that turns every other failure in this essay from a possibility into a pattern.

And there is an extreme worth naming, because it is where a broken middle becomes something darker. Faced with a suggestion to improve, a healthy organization builds a path to get there — even a patient, multi-year one. A broken one simply cuts the suggestion off. But the true fracture appears when leadership goes further still: when, rather than engage the person trying to make things better, it manufactures a narrative to discredit them — tainting the image, reshaping the facts, altering the reality for its own benefit — and does so unscrutinized and unscathed, never offering the support that would have let that person improve at the pace of the organization instead of at the butt end of a

whack-a-mole and a boot to the curb. That is no longer weak leadership. That is a betrayal of the mission wearing the mask of protecting it.

The good news: the industry wrote the standard

For years, the honest defense of all this was that executive protection was a young, fragmented discipline without an agreed-upon benchmark. That defense has expired.

In September 2025, ASIS International released its Executive Protection Standard — a formal framework setting minimum criteria for the development, implementation, operation, and maintenance of an EP program. It speaks directly to the gaps above: leadership and policy development, risk and threat assessment, personnel management, ethics, training, and communications, protective operations and transportation, emergency coordination, and — critically — monitoring, auditing, and continuous improvement. In plain terms: train your people, document your work, review your incidents, and hold the program accountable.

And the Board of Executive Protection Professionals (BEPP), an ANSI-accredited standards developer, has produced the first ANSI-approved American National Standard for Providing Executive Protection — a consensus document built over years by hundreds of practitioners, paired with a professional certification path. A whole community of serious people has done the hard, unglamorous work of defining what “right” looks like.

This is the profession on the mend. The knowledge exists now. The benchmark exists now. The excuse does not.

Which means the vacuum is now a choice

The industry at large is professionalizing. Standards bodies have codified best practice. Certifications exist. Conferences convene thousands of practitioners who genuinely want to raise the bar. Judged by its best institutions and its published standards, executive protection is on an unmistakably upward trajectory — and that deserves to be said plainly.

But standards only protect people when they are implemented. A 52-page framework and a 550-page American National Standard do nothing sitting on a shelf. And this is where specific organizations and agencies — not the industry, specific ones — reveal themselves. When a benchmark for training, documentation, ethics, and after-action review is publicly available, and a team still has no field-training program, no written driving doctrine, no incident review, and no tolerance for the person who asks why — that is no longer immaturity. It is a decision.

A toxic culture doesn’t lack standards because none exist; it lacks them because implementing them would require accountability the leadership doesn’t want — documentation that could be examined, reviews that could assign responsibility, questions that could expose comfort. The standard is a mirror, and some organizations would rather not look.

What a healthy middle looks like

None of this is inevitable. The alternative is not complicated to describe — it is only hard to choose. A healthy organization, and the healthy middle inside it, does three things.

It leverages relationships to build everyone up — not itself. Relationships are not the problem in this profession. They are how good teams get built: trusted networks, real mentorship, vendor partnerships that bring genuine capability. The line is not “relationships bad.” The line is the direction of benefit. A relationship pointed outward — used to develop the team, strengthen the mission, and

raise the people around you — is professionalism. A relationship pointed inward — steering contracts to friends, undisclosed conflicts of interest, hiring for loyalty over merit, using a position to advantage a private interest — is corruption wearing the costume of collegiality. The published standards now say this plainly: ethics and conflict-of-interest management are not optional courtesies but baseline requirements. Leverage talent and relationships legally, ethically, and in a way that builds everyone up. The moment the primary beneficiary becomes oneself, it has stopped being leadership and started being self-dealing.

It makes accountability run both ways. The professional baseline is not accountability flowing only downhill. It is reciprocal accountability — the agent holds themselves accountable, and the organization, the culture, and the industry hold themselves to the same bar. A shop that demands accountability of its agents but never accepts it upward is not accountable; it is merely authoritarian. And inside that reciprocity lives one of the most humane and most effective principles a protection culture can adopt: mistakes are not disqualifying events. They are the raw material of improvement. Failures and errors happen — to everyone, at every level. Good management and leadership own them, account for them, report them accurately, and use them to build the team to self-correct and do better next time. A mature culture uses an error to shape talent; an insecure one uses it to discard talent — and, worse, discards it selectively, punishing the mistake in the inconvenient person while excusing the identical mistake in the favored one. Development, not disposal. That is the standard.

It understands that leadership is not management. Management and leadership are different competencies, and they do not automatically come together. Management runs systems — scheduling, logistics, compliance, resources. Leadership develops people — mentoring, building, shaping, growing. Both are necessary; being excellent at one does not make someone good at the other, and that is okay. The dysfunction begins when an organization installs a strong manager in a leadership seat and never notices the gap. A manager mistaking leadership for management treats people as problems to be suppressed as they surface — a complaint here, a difficult agent there, a morale issue over there — and simply keeps knocking them down. But leadership is not whack-a-mole. Reactive suppression is what you do when you have no development strategy. Real leadership does the opposite: it builds people, so that the underlying gaps — training, clarity, standards, trust — get closed and the problems stop surfacing in the first place. Whack-a-mole manages the appearance of order. Building people creates the real thing.

The squeaky wheel

“The squeaky wheel gets the grease” is a two-edged proverb. In a poor culture, the squeak is an annoyance and the wheel is simply removed. In a good one, the system is maintained — the wheel is serviced, the squeak is addressed, and the wheel comes back stronger. The squeak was never the enemy. It was information.

What good is the alarm that never sounds? The response that is never exercised? The performance that is never evaluated, or the question that is never answered? An organization that silences its own warning systems is not calmer or stronger for it. It is only quieter on the way to the failure it refused to hear coming.

What leadership actually is

This should not be all diagnosis. The reason to name what is broken is to make room for what is possible — and there is enormous possibility in the leaders the profession already has, the ones still

growing, and even the ones currently struggling. So the point deserves to be made plainly to every current, future, and struggling leader who might read this.

A graduate degree in security and safety leadership does not make a leader. Neither does the title, the seat, nor a résumé of senior positions. Those things can accompany leadership; they do not create it. What creates it is a genuine, sincere commitment to people — building them up rather than pushing them down to hold oneself up; developing people who can, in turn, strengthen the entire team.

True leadership puts people first — in everything. Their failures belong to leadership, too. Their mistakes reflect the systems, training, expectations, and supervision around them. That is not a burden to resent; it is the job. And it is a hard job. Leadership is not fun, easy, or glamorous. It is the stopgap — the protector of the people beneath the leader, every bit as much as the client or principal is protected in the field. In protection, security, medicine, and intelligence, no one grows under poor leadership. No one grows while being beaten down. People grow when they are lifted up, brought together, held accountable, given someone worth following, and backed by leaders willing to fight for them for all the right reasons.

Leadership is not a title, and it is not a ribbon or a certificate. It is a mindset. It is doing what is right rather than what is easy, what is legal rather than what is convenient, what is honest behind closed doors when no one is watching — not cutting corners, not cheating, not disparaging, but growing people and doing right by all of them. Protecting the organization means protecting its people, not just protecting yourself.

Communities deserve that kind of leadership and protection. Clients deserve it. Protectees, dignitaries, and executives deserve it. And so do the agents who stand the posts.

And one more truth, quieter than the rest: the walls have ears, and executive protection is a very small world. No one ever really knows who is listening, who knows whom, or where a private conversation will travel. Character, therefore, cannot be a performance for the people watching; it is what remains when someone believes no one is. Be real. Be honest. Be truthful — on the range, in the vehicle, at the desk, and in the conversations assumed to be private. In the end, professionals are not defined by someone else's account of them, or by whatever was said when they were not in the room. They are defined by their own actions, character, and performance. That is the only reputation that lasts.

The people who hold the line

Here is what the profession should refuse to forget: it is full of people who do the right thing anyway. People who speak up in a room that would rather they didn't. People who try to build the standard — or implement the one that now exists — when leadership never bothered. People who keep pushing ground truth up an honest channel because they understand that the principal's safety depends on it. They are not undermining the team when they insist the hard truth reach the top. They are doing the most important part of the job.

Those people pay a price for it. In a culture that has chosen the vacuum, the one who insists on a standard is inconvenient — and inconvenient people, in the short game, sometimes lose their seat. That is the ugly arithmetic of a broken shop: it can be safer, career-wise, to stay quiet and let the gap persist than to try to close it.

But there is a long game, and it keeps a different ledger.

The long game

You can lose the short game and still win the long one. You can lose the job and keep the thing the job could never give you or take from you: your integrity, your professionalism, the knowledge that when it counted, you did what was right instead of what was easy.

The men and women who hold that line are not the problem with this industry. They are its conscience — and its future. Because standards don't implement themselves. Cultures don't reform on their own. Middles don't become honest by accident. Somebody has to be willing to be the inconvenient one — to keep asking the question, to keep carrying the truth upward undistorted, to keep pointing at the benchmark that already exists and saying we should meet it — even when the reward for doing so is a box of belongings and a door that no longer opens.

From hero to zero, the story goes. But that math only works if you accept their scoreboard. On the real one — the one that measures whether a person told the truth, protected others, and kept their word to themselves — the ones shown the door for insisting on a standard were never the zeros.

They were the standard the room hadn't chosen yet.

The fix is not better people; this profession already has extraordinary people. And it is no longer even the absence of a standard — ASIS and BEPP have written those. The fix is implementation and honesty: adopting, training to, documenting, and enforcing the standards that now exist; leveraging relationships to build everyone up rather than oneself; making accountability run in every direction; leading people instead of managing appearances; and keeping the channel between the field and the principal truthful; and protecting the right of every agent to voice a safety, security, or protection concern without fear of retribution — so that excellence is an expectation rather than an accident, and so the ones who hold the line get to keep doing it.

Professional Standards & References

This white paper discusses the emergence of formal executive-protection standards as an important step in the profession's development. Readers should consult the issuing organizations and the current editions of their standards for authoritative requirements and terminology.

ASIS International. Executive Protection Standard (2025).

Board of Executive Protection Professionals (BEPP). American National Standard for Providing Executive Protection.

The discussion in this paper is industry commentary. Operational examples are generalized, composite, or deidentified; no persons, agencies, clients, or principals are named.

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