

CRISIS

DECISION

MAKING

By Sid Heal

**W**hen tactical operations are disassembled, the most conspicuous elements are decisions. Even novices are quick to notice that the direction and tempo of every action begins with a decision. Decisions are the pivot points in these types of situations, and at some time every person involved is required to make them. For obvious reasons, even a basic understanding of what is involved is advantageous.

In the simplest terms, a decision means to answer a question and provide a conclusion. In the chaotic conditions surrounding tactical operations and disaster responses, decisions are encumbered with uncertainty, harsh time constraints and risk. Moreover, a mistake can lead to a calamity. This type of decision making is far riskier and tenser than those in other circumstances but is the norm for crises; hence the term “crisis decision making.” *Crisis decision making* is best understood as the mental process of reaching a conclusion relevant to resolving the situation during a time of instability and danger.

As might be expected, the methods and procedures that render good decisions in other conditions can be problematic for crisis decision making for one fundamental



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reason: Speed is more important than precision. Tactical operations and disasters are dynamic, and a decision delayed is often worthless because the situation will have changed. The best solution for handling these types of situations is one that is timely even though it may not be optimal.<sup>1</sup> The most common method for making crisis decisions is called *satisficing*, a process for making decisions that opts for a prompt search for adequacy over a prolonged one for the optimal.

To understand how satisficing works and why it's important, consider the following example: Some campers watch as a spark from their campfire ignites some dry leaves. They quickly jump up and one begins to stomp out the fire while another tries covering it with loose dirt. The other removes any flammable material. Only later do they note that the water they were boiling on the campfire would have been an even better solution. The critical importance of solving the problem quickly was more important than searching for an ideal solution which a delay may have rendered ineffective anyway. In situations like these, perfect is the enemy of good enough.

Naturally, if the situation repeated itself, their first thought would be to douse the flames with the water they were boiling. They might even keep water available for just such a reoccurrence. This illustrates the value of experience. *Experience* is practical wisdom comprised of knowledge and skills attained through personal participation or observation. People who make decisions based on experience don't start at the beginning of a problem, but rather where they left off the last time. They mentally dismiss actions that have proven inadequate or unproductive on previous occasions and seek better alternatives.

The value of experience in crisis decision making cannot be underestimated. Persons who have experienced a similar situation make better decisions faster than those who have not. In fact, the greater the repertoire of experiences, the more likely it is that decision makers will be able to contrive or adapt a solution that previously worked. Moreover, they tend to be more imaginative in problem-solving because they have a greater depth of understanding than those experiencing a situation for the first time.

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This method of decision making is called recognition-primed decision making (RPDM).<sup>2</sup> Experts are not the only ones who use this method. To a greater or lesser extent, everyone faced with a decision in an atmosphere of uncertainty and accompanied with harsh time constraints will use some derivation of it. It is a natural way of thinking when the circumstances will simply not permit detailed analysis with prolonged conclusions.

While not everything about RPDM is wholly understood, some generalizations can explain how it works. When a decision maker is faced with a situation in which a rapid decision is required, the person mentally generates alternatives and then imagines which one will

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provide a satisfactory solution. The first alternative that appears to offer a solution is then selected and/or adapted to fit the particular circumstances. Experienced people have the advantage of being able to draw upon previous problems that are similar, while novices must continue to cycle through possibilities to find one they think will suffice. As can be seen, a similar experience provides a substantial advantage in both speed and effectiveness.

The value of training and education in gaining insight and understanding from personal participation and observation is readily apparent. The decision maker is not even required to have experienced a similar problem in reality because all that's necessary is that they have thought through the problem at least once. Experts work not so much by seeking the relevant but rather by eliminating the irrelevant, and then spend more time thinking about a smaller sample of possibilities. They already know what won't work or won't work very well. Thus, they don't think harder, they just think in more productive ways.

Arguably, the best training and education is not the knowledge



on how decisions are made but rather the principles on which they are based. For disaster responses and tactical operations this refers to tactical science. In the most general understanding, *tactical science* is that systemized body of knowledge focused on how crises emerge, evolve and are resolved. It emphasizes the fundamental doctrinal principles and time-honored concepts that have been gleaned over thousands of years. Some outstanding advice on this issue comes from Gen. Al Gray, who commented, “The most formidable warriors are students of their profession.”<sup>3</sup> Only those who possess the knowledge and experience and understand the factors and influences in play will be fully capable of coping with the scope of the possibilities and depth of the consequences, because when it comes to crises, a perfect solution requires an infinite wait. //

## ENDNOTES


1. It is a bitter irony that the optimal solution is often cited by naive “experts” testifying against law enforcement officers after the fact and who have little understanding or appreciation for the dynamic and stressful conditions under which such a decision was made.
2. It is also commonly referred to as recognition-primed decisions or “RPD.” The term and examples are gleaned from the works of Dr. Gary Klein, especially *Streetlights and Shadows: Searching for the Keys to Adaptive Decision Making*.
3. Gen. A.M. Gray, 29<sup>th</sup> Commandant of the U.S. Marine Corps.

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