

Principles for tactical operators and instructors

By Matthew W. McNamara



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Debating tactics is like discussing any other subject; people may have visceral reactions to techniques they don't use and swear their tactics are the best. In my experience, if a combative system is built around principles, which are defined as “fundamental truths or laws,” we end up with a much better product to use in execution. Once we understand and follow basic principles, then specific techniques can be built around them.

I have compiled what I consider to be the best tactical principles that can lead to better strategies and techniques that aid in saving lives in the tactical arena. These principles apply to individual operators, tactical teams and tactical instructors and they are based on my experiences in all three of these roles, as well as that of student. What I ask everyone reading this article to do is what I ask of my students each time I teach: check your ego at the door. As in all debates and discussions, don't concern yourself with

the *who* behind the statements, but try to objectively evaluate the content of the message. Then, after careful contemplation and thought, form your own opinions.

With the above prologue, I present what I believe are the top tactical principles to live by:

1. There is no “magic tactic.” This is a take on the phrase “there is no magic bullet.” I tell students that if there was a perfect tactic or technique, everyone would be doing the same thing and we would simply hand out manuals and spend the rest of the training week in a bar. Obviously this is not the case. Every tactic and technique has positive and negative attributes. Although none are perfect, there are ways to validate tactical options. By executing different tactics and techniques head-to-head or side-by-side, we can see which tactics have fewer shortcomings versus more.



2. Skill sets should be built around tactics that allow the operators to gain more advantage than they lose. Bottom line: objectively consider what you gain and what you lose with one tactic or technique versus another, and go with the one that gains the most tactical advantage.

Tactics is defined as the maneuvering for advantageous position. If we keep it simple, lose our egos and drop our commitment to a tactic simply because it is what we are comfortable and familiar with or because it is what the latest and greatest instructor says is the best, we will be doing ourselves and our students a great service. We should never take as gospel what any person or instructor says is “the best” or “the only” tactical option. The only way to truly validate different tactical options is either against a timer when debating shooting capabilities or against role-players armed with marking cartridges when debating tactical clearing techniques and movement. Doing so will quickly and dramatically illustrate the gains or losses of any tactic or technique. Simply debating tactics over



a beer, on email or in a Web-based forum will lead to nothing but theater.

3. Decreasing operator lag time in a combative situation is a primary tactical objective. We will be in the best possible position to win if we use tactics that allow us to manipulate the least amount of lag time possible while increasing our opponent’s lag time as much as possible. For an operator, this can mean training to the point where actions are nearly automatic, such as working the trigger reset on

weapons, finding our handgun and spare magazines on our kits, even how we hold our firearm while tactically moving through objectives. For a team, this can be a broader scope, as in using multiple breach points on entries while simultaneously using port and cover tactics on several different windows on the same structure. In short, this is about learning and understanding as much about Boyd’s OODA loop as possible. Without researching and understanding these strategies our ability to even start to manipulate lag time and understand its importance is greatly diminished.

4. Operators should always be tactically looking for and ready for the fight – simultaneously. During training I often observe students making entries into rooms, and if they even bother to look at their area of responsibility they are often doing only

that – *looking* at their area. This is only half of the tactical necessity. To succeed in the fight, we must also be physically positioned to take instant action in our area of responsibility. For example, the number one or two operator in a room is gener-

ally responsible for clearing the corner that is on the wall we are dominating (if we are using room domination tactical techniques). If we enter the room and simply rotate our head to the corner while our body and weapons platforms are actually facing the center of the room, we are behind the lag time curve. We are looking for the fight in our area of responsibility, but we are not physically *ready* for the fight in our area of responsibility. In this example we should be entering the breach point with our body aligned to the area that we are clearing. To

neglect a principle like this puts us behind the curve in a fight where milliseconds can mean the difference between success and failure, and living or dying.

5. If a space is worth clearing, it is worth clearing tactically. I have personally violated this principle and the memory of one specific instance during a hit on the west side of Chicago still makes me cringe to this day. Probably due to being tired, hot and obviously lazy, I “cleared” a space by first sticking my head into it while horribly out of position to shoot if I would have needed to. If we are going to spend our time clearing an area in a tactical operation we need to be sharp enough to clear it tactically and not in such a complacent manner that it leads to violating Principle 6.



6. Every tactical breach should be made assuming that there is an armed offender on the other side waiting and willing to shoot at you. Following this principle will keep operators and teams from getting lazy, or worse, dead. Ask yourself if tactics should be built around the compliant subject or the one ready to kill you if given the chance? If we assume that each time we breach a door, each time we enter a room, and each time we enter a structure there is an armed offender anxiously waiting to shoot at us and our team, it will force us to manipulate

each of those breaches in as tactically sound a manner as possible. with the reasoning that “we can get in to spaces much faster if we breach our own doors” and “we have to get through doors as fast as possible in order to get out of dangerous hallways.” I will agree that opening your own door(s) may be a little bit faster. However, what this technique is indubitably fastest at is greatly improving the ability of a bad guy to shoot us in the breach point before we are ready or able to put surgical hits on him.

Should we sacrifice security for speed? Doing something that is faster at putting

each of those breaches in as tactically sound a manner as possible.

Consider operators who are taught and trained to open their own doors. The technique of opening your own doors is usually done

operators in a disadvantageous tactical position is not a smart or good thing; it is just faster. Taking the extra time to manipulate a breach point in a way that ensures we are tactically prepared to put surgical hits on targets the instant the door is open is not only wise but also a strategy for winning.

I was once trained (berated actually) by a former Delta Command sergeant major on this technique. He demanded that the first man responsible for entering a breach point always have both hands on his firearm the before a door was opened or a breach was made. This was because the sergeant major and his squadron had proved on the timer, against role-players and in combat that they could not put surgical hits on targets as fast as necessary to win if they were breaching their own doors.

Finally, think about the following: First, would you open your own door if you were told in advance that there was someone on the other side waiting and willing to shoot at you as soon as the door was opened? If not, then why would you ever do it? Second, on most primary breaches, teams employ a ram or pry at the exterior door-

way (front or back door of a house). I have never seen an operator work a ram or pry and be the first person in the door. Why not? If we don't allow the first entry operator to be the person ramming and breaching the primary door, then why would we do it on interior entry points?

7. Tactics should be built around being able to make surgical hits as efficiently, effectively and quickly as possible. A hostage rescue scenario, which is at the top of the list of difficult operations, demands that we can place surgical hits on target in time to save lives. Operators need to be masters of their weapon platforms and manipulating them at the highest level possible. Being a master means understanding that the best shooting platform or stance is the one you are in when you need to make a surgical hit, and this will probably not be the stance you drill on a flat range, on steady ground upon which you are stationary. You must be able to make shots around teammates and innocent people, while in the most precarious of positions, and while moving to a point of tactical superiority.

Following this principle also means executing tactics and techniques that create the opportunity for more operators to have a shot in hostage rescue or other tactical scenarios. If we build our tactics and techniques around being able to manipulate scenarios that open up the opportunity to place surgical hits on the hardest of targets in the most precarious of situations and positions, we will win when it counts most.

8. The more operator guns safely in the fight, the better. This principle should seem obvious, but I have witnessed it being heatedly debated several times, at least until the tactics and techniques are put up against Principle 2 above.

When we can manipulate our tactics and techniques to allow teams to put as many guns safely in the fight at the same time as possible, we increase our chances of quicker and safer resolutions for the good guys. This

could be while moving to breach points in small spaces or large, in large rooms or small ones, or in and around different-sized structures. We gain the maximum amount of effective tactical control in areas by having as many points of domination as possible. In tactical operations we dominate space by having as many operator guns in the fight as possible. A one-on-one gun fight with an adversary doesn't make much sense — in theory or execution.

We need operators who can objectively discuss different tactics, work their way through them, put different techniques head-to-head using timers and forceful roleplayers, and then determine which tactical option is good, which is better, and which is dangerous.

9. The combatant who sees first in a tactical situation wins. To see first is to be first. If we can't see our adversaries, we obviously won't know that they exist in the timeframe when it counts the most. Our tactics must put operators in positions where they see their adversary first and in time to effectively dominate them, either physically or by firepower. Achieving this principle allows an operator to successfully move through many of the other principles.

10. Operators must be aggressive enough, soon enough. While teaching across the country I am often amazed at how defensive and non-aggressive operators are, and not just in their tactics and training but their personal demeanor while running tactical operations. This defensiveness leads to operators being behind the lag time curve, which increases their chances of

being hurt or killed.

Too often we see videos of officers being feloniously assaulted, oftentimes when there were indications that the aggression was likely or imminent. While observing students and live hits and after studying research regarding attacks on officers, I concluded that individual officers and operators are not taking offensive action soon enough, if at all.

Final confirmation of an attack usually comes in the form of injury to you. If you feel threatened, engage the subject, using up to and including lethal force. Winning in tactical operations most likely means acting first — hesitation can equal death. If force is justified, then hurt them worse, first. This principle should be applied to tactical operations and strategies also.

As a tactical commander, are you allowing your team to be aggressive enough, soon enough to save lives and/or reduce the risk of permanent personal injury to themselves or innocents? Too often decisions are made that put the bad guy or even property at the forefront of the decision-making process, ahead of the lives of operators or innocents. This is borderline criminal, in my opinion. What each operator and each commander should do immediately in a tactical event is establish the "tactical line in the sand," which is the determination of what you as an operator or you as a commander would do if the subject(s) did A, B, or C, along with what the suspect(s) will not be allowed to do. Determining this line in the sand clearly helps establish the individual operator's and the team's "mental trigger" and allows us to mentally rehearse a situation before it happens. As operators or commanders, if we can articulate the reason(s) for action, and the situation dictates certain tactical responses, then we need to be aggressive enough, soon enough, to make the difference in saving lives.

11. A combat mindset is paramount. I tell students that if all the tactical subject-matter experts in the world were able to

simply touch them and pass on all of their advanced skills, that skill level would be useless when it came time to actually fight unless that person had mentally prepared for combat. This should be done in advance of operations and through individual and team training, strategy sessions and visualization. As Steinbeck said, “in the end the final weapon is the brain (mind). All else is supplemental.”

The willingness to prepare the mind to allow you to win decisively and without hesitation is just as important as gaining the skill needed to survive tactical encounters. You will not be able to do this without first knowing what you can do legally, nor without first preparing to act when there is no time for contemplation. Receiving and actually possessing the skills to win will be secondary to having the mindset needed to win. Without a winning mindset, born of a firm foundation of competence and a personal commitment to victory, skills by themselves are of little real use. Legitimate warriors are always looking for, and finding, a way to win.

Conclusion

One of my primary objectives in teaching tactical classes is to make students think. This simple goal lets me rarely fail, because if I am teaching tactics and techniques that create debate within the students’ minds, then they are thinking and a thinking operator is a good thing. We need operators who can objectively discuss different tactics, work their way through them, put different techniques head-to-head using timers and forceful roleplayers, and then determine which tactical option is good, which is better, and which is dangerous.

I realize that my list may change in the future, but probably only by being added to. Since it is a list of principles and not techniques, it should change very little. However, as operators, instructors and students, we must be willing to be humble and flexible enough to validate different strategies, theories, and techniques against the principles. Only then can we discover which is better and subsequently change the way we do business when we find techniques which gain us more tactical

advantage than they lose. If we do this, we will provide a great service to ourselves as operators and students as well as in our role as instructors. ◀◀

About the author

Matthew W. McNamara has been a full-time police officer in and around Chicago since 1992, serving in positions from patrolman to deputy chief and tactical team leader. He is a former Illinois Tactical Officers Association Board member and is currently certified by the U.S. Department of State as well as multiple state law enforcement accrediting agencies as an instructor teaching a wide range of tactical courses across the United States.

After leaving full-time police work in 2005, McNamara worked for high-threat security firm Triple Canopy, Inc. He most recently he served as the COO for Combat Shooting and Tactics, LLC and currently serves as COO for the non-profit foundation Fulcrum Tactical Training and Support, LLC. Comments can be sent to matt@fulcrumtactical.com.

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