

# Decision-making under stress

By Steven R. (Randy) Watt

Leaders are often required to make decisions while under stress. Stress evokes emotion, and emotion often leads to action without sufficient consideration. Even during rapidly evolving critical incidents, leaders must remain calm and not allow emotion to drive decision-making. Emotional responses will often be void of a sufficient application of training, experience, education or reason. However, leaders are also human, and emotions are a significant force within the human psyche. In order to avoid emotion-based decision-making, leaders must have a method for negating emotional impact during intense, pressure-filled events. Such events demand a calm, cool, detached process in order for the development and application of successful resolution plans.

Carl von Clausewitz, Prussian military analyst and author of “Vom

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**“Emotion is the enemy of logic and reason and, therefore, is the enemy of sound decision-making.”<sup>1</sup>**

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Kriege,” (“On War”) in 1837, a much studied and argued manual on the conduct of war used extensively throughout Western militaries, is credited with the term *fog of war*, meaning “... an area of uncertainty; three-quarters of the things on which all action in War is based are lying in a fog of uncertainty to a greater or lesser extent.” The term has often been further subrogated to *fog of battle*, and is commonly used to describe conditions in public safety critical incidents, particularly those spontaneous, high-risk events where clarity of fact is difficult to readily ascertain. Von Clausewitz’ solution for reducing the uncertainty — “The first thing (needed) here is a fine, piercing mind, to feel out the truth with the measure of its judgment” — is indicative of a response requiring clear, unobstructed thinking. Good judgment is often difficult to exercise when clouded by emotion.

A successful method of purging emotion during periods of stress consists of a three-part process: *breathe, mentally step back* and *plan*. First, utilize combat breathing to reduce and negate the physiological effects

of stress on the body and mind. The same breathing process allowing an operator to reduce the negative aspects of stress on physical performance will allow the leader to reduce such effects on mental performance.

Second, take a mental step back from the event. There is a tendency for action-oriented individuals to be drawn into the event, to become enmeshed in the fine details and emotionally connected to the situation. Avoid going “eyes on” to the specifics at the crisis site, which results in focusing on

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the small picture, or the tactical perspective. The leader must stay big picture and cannot afford to think solely on a tactical level. That is the realm of specified element leaders charged with specific responsibilities during an event, as per SOP. In order to be effective, the leader must mold a series of tactical actions into an organized and directed response plan, then execute, supervise and refine the whole plan. An emotional disconnection from the

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specifics of the crisis is required and can only be accomplished by mentally stepping back from the action.

Third, *plan!* The leader must, as quickly as possible, enact a *deliberate process* for stabilizing the crisis and transitioning into a problem-solving model. The problem-solving model creates a thought process devoid of emotion, helping reduce the stress by requiring a clear focus on resolution. Logic, reason, education,

training, experience, policy and law all play a role in a deliberate process directed at resolving a public safety crisis. By deliberately planning, the leader becomes proactive and begins shaping the operational environment toward favorable conditions for resolution. By failing to deliberately plan, the leader becomes reactive to the suspect's actions and is further drawn into the emotion of the event, thus allowing the suspect to maintain the initiative.

A common deliberate decision-making model used for armed conflict is the Military Decision-making Process (MDMP) of the United States Army. MDMP consists of a series of steps causing leaders to clearly, and in an unemotional way, review the

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situation and come up with an effective resolution to apply. To paraphrase, the steps consist of *receiving the mission, analyzing the mission, developing courses of action (solutions), analyzing and comparing the courses of action, conducting risk analysis and selecting a course of action (solution decision), ordering and executing the course of action.* The act of focusing on the steps forces the leader into a state of objectivity, thus assisting in removing emotion and its negative effects from the mind of the leader. A greater likelihood of successful resolution will result.

*Breathe, mentally step back, plan.* By applying these steps, a leader at the scene of a public safety crisis will negate the effects of emotion on successful decision-making and reduce the fog of war. The fight with the suspect is enough to deal with; leaders must try to avoid having to fight their emotions at the same time. //

#### ENDNOTE

1. Steven R. Watt, "Leadership in Harm's Way," TTPOA lecture, April 2012

The advertisement features a collage of tactical equipment and personnel. On the left, a tactical officer in a tan uniform and helmet stands next to a large, mounted binocular viewer. In the center, a white tactical vehicle is shown with various equipment on its roof. On the right, a man in a dark shirt is shown from the chest up, smiling and holding a large sheet of paper, likely a tactical drawing. The background is a grayscale image of a rugged, mountainous terrain. Logos for 'Watec' and 'TSE Tactical Support Equipment' are visible. The website address 'www.TacticalDrawings.com' is prominently displayed in green and white text across the bottom of the image.

Choose from monthly updated drawings or commission your own drawing.  
 520-403-7602 jk@tacticaldrawings.com  
 Artist Joonho Kim A volunteer chaplain for Pima County Sheriff's Dept, Tucson, AZ