

SIZING UP

By Sid Heal

One of the most valuable traits of an incident commander is an ability to “size up” a situation. *Size up* refers to the process of critically evaluating an unfolding situation to estimate the nature and magnitude of the incident, establish priorities, identify hazards and determine an appropriate course of action.¹

Typically, a size up occurs in the earliest stages of a response and is critical for success. Retired LAPD Deputy Chief Mike Hillmann² refers to this period as the “golden hour.” Interventions are far more successful if promptly implemented, and the first hour is often the most critical. It is, after all, easier to stop a trickle than a torrent and a flame than an inferno.

The importance of recognizing the underlying factors and influences in play cannot be overstated. Imagine, for example, the advantages of recognizing the significance of the element of surprise as a condition of success for the Branch Davidian raid or the futility of a surround-and-call-out at Columbine. Clearly, some understanding of the nature of what is occurring is of great advantage.

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CONFUSION, COMPLEXITY, CHAOS

To a greater or lesser extent, one or more of three factors are present in every tactical operation and disaster response. These are *confusion*, *complexity* and *chaos*. Because these factors frequently coexist, they are

often mistaken for one another, with the terms often used interchangeably. Notwithstanding, they are not synonymous.³

A *confusing* situation is one that is characterized by a state of disorder and bewilderment. Confusing situations evoke the question, “What should I do?” A *complex* situation is one that is characterized by elaborate and interactive factors and influences such as interactions, relationships, phases, branches and sequels. Complex situations are often confusing but confusing situations are not always complex. A complex situation is one which forces a decision-maker to consider the ramifications contemporaneously with the decision and evokes the question, “Then what?”

A *chaotic* situation is characterized by extreme confusion and disorder and lacks discernible patterns or predictability. Chaos occurs when a situation seems incomprehensible. Like complexity, confusion is inherent in chaotic situations but confusion can exist without a situation being chaotic. Chaotic situations evoke the question, “What’s happening?”

While all three factors present formidable challenges, chaos is the most dangerous because remedial actions are impossible without some idea of what is transpiring. It is worthy of note, then, that chaos is not a norm. Because chaos is an anomaly, effective countermeasures will tend to be unique and context dependent. Likewise, there is no stasis state. Chaotic situations can be brought under control, and conversely, situations can deteriorate into chaos. Accordingly, size up is a continuing process rather than a singular event. Chaos is also not universal. There may be activities or regions in complete chaos while order prevails elsewhere. Neither is chaos random. There are patterns, limitations, sequences, durations, tendencies and other factors that always provide some insight and comprehension, even if minimal.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR SIZING UP

Understandably, methods for conducting a size up vary greatly, but some general considerations predominate. For example, a confusing situation is necessarily focused on establishing priorities, while a complex one must also address sequels.⁴ Likewise, because a chaotic situation defies understanding, initial efforts must first deal with determining the nature of the incident. Accordingly, a size up is more intuitive than procedural and so relies more heavily on experience and insight than rules and techniques. Any objective assessment requires at least a rudimentary understanding of the nature of crises.⁵ Lacking a scientific basis, a decision-maker is forced to rely on what worked in the past or find a matching skill set, which may or not be adequate.

While crises can take the form of fires, floods, storms, earthquakes, hazmat spills, active shooters, riots and a myriad of other forms, they all share five prevailing characteristics:

- All crises entail *risk*. There are no decisions or actions that will be without some kind of jeopardy.
- Crises are fraught with *uncertainty*. Planners and decision-makers will be forced to base decisions on information that is incomplete, confusing, ambiguous, unreliable or even conflicting with other information. Likewise, the element of chance is always a contributing factor.
- Crises are *time-sensitive*. Because these are unfolding situations, they are by definition continually changing. Decisions delayed are often rendered ineffective because the situation has changed before they are implemented. Moreover, those that involve adversaries are not only time-sensitive, they are time-competitive. Each adversary seeks to exploit opportunities and advantages when they occur and the faster adversary gains an advantage — sometimes decisively so.
- Crises always carry a *potential for severe consequences*. Failure can be deadly, even catastrophic.
- Every crisis has *human factors* that must be considered and accommodated. Victims are in danger and may need rescue. Bystanders can be meddling. Adversaries can be dangerous. Rescue personnel can be injured. Furthermore, regardless of their status or roles, all people will at some time become tired, thirsty and hungry, not to mention impatient, irritable, complaining or argumentative.

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Despite sincere efforts at defining procedures and methods, size ups defy standardization. Rules, procedures, checklists and algorithms are useful only when developed from experience with previous incidents and accompanied with consistent expectations. They fail miserably when a new situation is nontraditional.

However, this is not to say that no methods are useful. Even the most fundamental understanding of the underlying concepts provides advantages. It is clear, for example, that regardless of how a crisis manifests itself, some effort must be made to control risk, reduce uncertainty, manage time, attenuate adverse consequences and accommodate human frailties. An incident commander who is well-versed in the supporting science is far more likely to grasp the essence of a situation than one who is not. Subtle differences in problem definition will have profound differences in problem resolution. ■

ENDNOTES

1. The term "size up" is alternately spelled "size-up" and "sizeup." The concept itself is very loosely defined and this definition is a derivative from several sources.
2. While Mike Hillmann needs no introduction, for purposes of posterity, he is a long-standing member of the NTOA and a highly respected mentor who has provided guidance and insight into these types of problems for decades.
3. While it is of value from a scientific standpoint to understand the nuances that distinguish these characteristics, for practical purposes they are almost always treated the same.
4. For more information on sequels, see "Planning: Branches, Sequels and Couplings," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 1999, pp. 69-70.
5. For more information on the nature of crises, see "Characteristics of Crises and Conflict," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 2002, pp. 57-58.