

OpFor gaming

By Sid Heal



During the First Peloponnesian War nearly 2,500 years ago, Pericles was giving a speech to the Athenians when he stated “I am more afraid of our own mistakes than our enemies’ designs.”¹ In truth, most tactical operations and disaster responses fail not because of overwhelming resistance or a more cunning scheme, but because of mistakes made by the agencies assigned to handle the situation. Ironically, and sadly, these mistakes are often apparent to nearly everyone afterwards.

Needless to say, the true value in identifying mistakes is to avoid them. While debriefings and after action reviews² serve to identify mistakes to avoid their repetition, measures taken to identify and correct them before they are encountered are far

more important. One of the best methods to accomplish this is through the use of “OpFor gaming.”

OpFor is a military acronym which stands for “opposing forces.” OpFor gaming involves two or more opposing forces competing in an exercise in which all relevant factors, such as knowledge, strategy, skills, endurance, timing and even chance are critical for success. Aside from the obvious objective of “winning,” the true value of OpFor gaming is in identifying and correcting unsuspected vulnerabilities.

OpFor games are often identified as *red teaming*, *threat exercises*, *force-on-force* or *aggressor operations*. While these terms refer specifically to tactical operations, the concept is long-known and well-established

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in the business community. It is not uncommon, for example, to assign a “devil’s advocate” to examine plans during meetings, conferences and the like. A devil’s advocate is a person who is called upon to adopt and defend opposing views, as well as identifying weaknesses and attacking those being presented. In fact, this is the most simplistic method of OpFor gaming and is often used by law enforcement tactical teams as well. Likewise, “reverse engineering” might also be considered as a form of OpFor gaming. Reverse engineering is a process in which an assembled device, often a competitor’s, is taken apart to learn how it works and identify parts and processes that can be improved. OpFor gaming attempts to disassemble carefully laid plans and procedures to expose defects.

Free play exercises

Generally, OpFor gaming involves “free play” exercises. Free play exercises are those in which two or more opponents face off on a given assignment and compete against each other. To the maximum extent possible, this adversary relationship simulates real life operations and creativity and ingenuity are encouraged. Typically, the only rules are those which relate to the protection of the training site and personal safety. The players are free to solve the problems in any manner that suits them. While this type of exercise is more difficult to prepare and coordinate, it provides nearly unlimited opportunities to experiment with new equipment and tactics. Likewise, players are equipped as realistically as possible as if the exercise was an actual operation.

One of the greatest advantages of using scenario-based exercises is the incorporation of stakeholders and decision-makers who would be participating in actual operations but who are often unavailable for more conventional training activities. This is especially the case with agency executives and politicians. An ability to gain insight and understanding of the factors and influences involved in complex tactical operations and emergency responses without the stress and anxiety of being in the glare of the public eye encourages experimentation and risk-taking that would not otherwise be likely. In fact, the more closely the scenario can approximate an actual event, real or anticipated, the more the decision-maker gains experience and understanding without the devastating consequences of a mistake.

Besides the more comprehensive scenario-based exercises, OpFor gaming can also be used to experiment with and test a single tactic, technique, weapon or piece of equipment. When used in this manner, the exercise is tightly focused on a single process or activity. Two of the most common for tactical teams are movements and entries in which an opposing force attempts to compromise an approach or thwart the

efforts to gain a maneuver advantage. These types of activities are complex, and OpFor gaming not only provides a realism that is conspicuously lacking without an adversary but serves to make weaknesses far more conspicuous.

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Benefits

One of the greatest values in OpFor gaming, however, are the lessons-learned that would not be discovered by other methods, particularly those actions that might lead to surprise. *Surprise*, by definition, involves the unexpected. A worthy adversary actively seeks areas of vulnerability that are otherwise unforeseen or neglected. Once identified, these areas of vulnerability can be reinforced or eliminated entirely.

Another major advantage of OpFor gaming is *revealing friction*. Even a small tactical operation or disaster response has many moving parts, all of which need to work well together. Friction is a force that resists all action and is inevitable in these types of situations. Nevertheless, it is es-

sential that efforts be made to reduce it. Friction usually occurs between processes and people. Friction with processes, like briefings, staging, movements, entries, actions on the objective, and so forth, are the most frequently cited reasons for less-than-perfect operations. Sometimes the simplest things cited as failures in vital processes could have been easily avoided had they only been anticipated.

In much the same manner, friction occurs between people. The personal stress and anxiety of performing well in adverse circumstances frequently makes compromise difficult and accommodation less likely. For whatever reason, some people are unwilling or incapable of working together. Second only to actual operations, OpFor gaming is the best method for revealing these points of friction and emphasizes the necessity of alleviating or avoiding them.

Like a sparring partner working with a boxer, OpFor gaming sharpens the skills and wits of all concerned and is a mainstay in training and preparing tactical teams and disaster response agencies for actual operations. ◀

Endnotes

1. Pericles, 432 BC, as quoted in Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, circa 404 BC. It is largely believed that the war was not won by Sparta but lost by Athens, making the fear of Pericles all the more poignant.
2. For more information, see “Debriefings and after-action reviews,” *The Tactical Edge*, Summer 2009, 68-70.

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