



# TACTICAL

## CONCEPTS

By Sid Heal

## TACTICAL PLANNING PROCESS

“Planning is everything — plans are nothing” reads a sign posted above the entrance to the Joint Staff at the Pentagon. The adage is most often referred to as “Moltke’s Dictum” after Field Marshal Helmuth Graf von Moltke, who is credited with coining it. It addresses a paradox in tactical planning, because seldom does even the most sophisticated plan resemble the final solution. One tactical precept sums it up by stating, “No plan survives the first contact,” one of the many “Murphy’s Laws of Combat.”

Since plans are so often modified, and even discarded, before a satisfactory resolution is achieved, some of the more naïve may question the importance of detailed planning. Moltke’s dictum answers by asserting that the process is more important than the product.

One of the most neglected and misunderstood activities of tactical operations is the process from which plans are derived. While there are any number of effective methods to contrive a reliable plan, they must all begin with a clear understanding of the ultimate objective, more often referred to in tactical vernacular as the “end state.” Every operation must be directed toward a clearly defined, decisive and attainable objective. (For more information on the importance of end state see “Nine Principles of War,” *The Tactical Edge*, Summer, 2001, pp. 49-50.) Thus, planning begins from the end.

When time is available, collective planning — that is planning done by more than one person — is always preferable to individual planning. This is because it reduces the impact of personal prejudices, enhances perception, increases understanding, and

results in a more accurate assessment of risk. The single exception is when speed is more important than precision. Because tactical plans are most often contrived with harsh time constraints, a dilemma occurs. (For more information on the impact of time constraints, see “Characteristics of Crises and Conflicts,” *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 2002, p. 57). The problem is that detailed planning takes time, but time is not usually available. Consequently, some compromise is necessary. To save time, planning is usually done by a single individual, or better, a small highly-skilled group with a thorough understanding of the factors involved, coupled with experience in dealing with similar situations. Because planning time is never limitless, a good rule of thumb is called the “2/3 Rule.” This rule states that two-thirds of available planning time always belongs to the next subordinate unit. This increases participation and enhances troubleshooting. Further, it ensures subordinates have time for preparation and implementation.

### SITUATION ASSESSMENT

An important first step in the planning process is the “situation assessment.” A situation assessment attempts to identify the various elements and dynamics at play, especially those that may influence a favorable outcome. This will require two distinctively different but interrelated approaches. The first is an “analysis.” An analysis breaks a problem into its component parts. One good way is by using the “SWOT technique,” which is an acronym that stands for Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats. Strengths and weaknesses are usually inward-looking, meaning they examine the organization, available personnel, logisti-

cal support and other factors. Opportunities and threats are usually outward-looking and attempt to identify favorable circumstances that can be exploited to advantage and threats or conditions that forewarn and call for caution to avoid increasing the risk or uncovering some pitfall. The second portion of a situation assessment is a “synthesis.” A synthesis involves integrating the various components and activities into a cohesive whole so that the plan is both effective and efficient. It estimates the impact of the various dynamics and identifies intermediate objectives. In short, it puts the right parts in the right order. (For more information on identifying the critical elements involved, see “Center of Gravity and Critical Vulnerability,” *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 1997, p. 53.)

From the situation assessment, a “concept of operation” evolves. A concept of operation is simply a series of actions designed to progressively promote the accomplishment of strategic objectives. A concept of operation is not intended to be elaborate or detailed, and may best be understood as a scheme for orienting activity without precisely prescribing what must be done. They always involve a number of missions, some of which will compete; that is, the accomplishment of one impedes another because of the necessity of sharing resources, personnel, and the like. Furthermore, each mission will necessarily involve any number of tasks. Some of these tasks can be accomplished by almost anyone, while others may require teams or individuals with specialized skills. Consequently, the natural extension of the concept of operations is the prioritization and assignment of these missions and tasks.

## PRIORITIZING THE MISSION

In prioritizing and assigning missions, two important tools are “deconfliction” and “mission tasking.” Deconfliction are those steps taken to reconcile potential conflicts, such as who will do what and when as well as who and what will be

assigned in support. This is a command responsibility and must be completed to avoid a plan that falters when subordinate units find themselves in competition for limited personnel and resources.

Two extremely useful tools for deconfliction are to identify the “focus of effort”

and designate the “main effort.” The focus of effort is the predominate activity or assignment that must be accomplished to achieve a successful resolution. It answers the question, “What needs to be done?” The main effort is the agency, unit or component assigned as the primary means to accomplish the activity defined as the focus of effort. It answers the question, “Who is to do it?” When properly used, focus of effort and main effort enable everyone to coordinate and work through conflicts without overwhelming a commander with nonessential details. (For more information, see “Focus of Effort and Main Effort,” *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 1996, p. 75.)

The other tool is called mission tasking. Mission tasking is often referred to as the glue that binds the concept of operations and the missions together and is especially critical in fast-moving situations that do not readily conform to detailed planning or expectation. It works by recognizing that each mission actually consists of two parts — the task to be accomplished and the reason or intent it is necessary. Of the two, the intent is the most important. In the dynamic environment of tactical operations, circumstances and situations will change, often rendering a task unnecessary or even inappropriate, but the intent is more lasting and will continue to provide guidance for actions. When it can be seen that an assigned task is unnecessary, ineffectual or counterproductive, subordinates are free to exercise their own judgment and initiative to find other means of fulfilling the intent. This may require completing an assignment in a unique manner, or even some other task altogether. In the midst of the chaos and confusion inherent in tactical operations, mission tasking provides subordinates a means to resolve problems by focusing on achieving the intent rather than dogmatic adherence to detailed instructions. (For more information, see “Mission Tasking,” *The Tactical Edge*, Summer, 1999, pp. 93-94.)

The planning process is far more critical to success than the actual plan. While the plan will inevitably be changed, or even discarded altogether, the thought and effort invested in preparing it are not lost since they provide an insight and understanding that enable tactical commanders to quickly adapt and improvise. ■

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