

# TACTICAL CONCEPTS

## Topic Area: Planning (Branches, Sequels and Couplings)

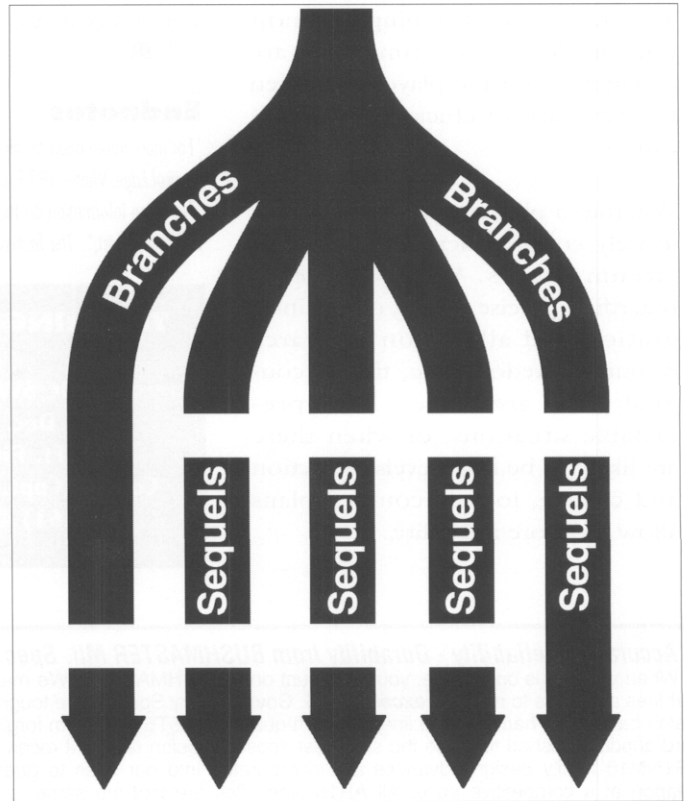
By Sid Heal

One of the most critical requirements for effective tactical planning is to allow for flexibility. Situations requiring tactical intervention are not amenable to dogmatic adherence to rigid schemes. Tactical plans must be able to continually adapt to constantly and rapidly changing circumstances. In order to remain viable, even the best laid plans must allow for changing situations. This is often done with branches and sequels.

Branches identify those courses of action that may be necessary, dependent upon the changing circumstances, while sequels refer to actions that follow other actions. Branches and sequels address the central points of “if” and “what.” Examples of branches may include plans to evacuate a subdivision during a large fire if the winds shift toward it. A sequel would include plans of what to do with the evacuees after they leave, or what to do to prevent looting while the homeowners are absent. An easy way to understand the significance of branches and sequels is by remembering that they each answer a different type of question. Branches answer questions of “what if?” while sequels answer questions of “what next?” Together they provide an ability to anticipate and plan for contingencies.

How the actions along branches or between sequels interact with one another is called coupling. Coupling is a relative term used to describe how two or more components in a plan interact. If actions must occur at specific times or in a specific sequence for the plan to be effective, it is said to be tightly coupled. Tightly coupled plans are closely coordinated and have more time-dependent processes. These types of plans are useful when incorporating resources not entirely controlled by the incident commander. A plan that relies on public transportation such as planes or buses, for example, would necessitate tight coupling to the departure and arrival schedules. Another example is when the allocation and integration of scarce resources is necessary, as in the temporary use of a helicopter. Tightly coupled plans are efficient but not very flexible and tend to be easily damaged and difficult to repair because changing one part necessitates changing other parts. This condition is commonly referred to as the “domino” or “snowball” effect. It describes a condition in which one event will affect a number of other events.

When close coordination is not required, loosely coupled plans are used. A loosely coupled plan is one in



Branches answer questions of “What if?” Sequels answer questions of “What next?”

which the interactions between the various components do not require close coordination. Parts can be modified without seriously affecting others. Although they are not as efficient as one that is tightly coupled, they are more flexible and not as easily disrupted. An example of a loosely coupled plan would include the interaction between a fire department and a police department involved in fighting a large brush fire. While the fire department is engaged in fighting the fire, the police department is providing traffic control and making evacuations. Although they interact with each other (are coupled), neither is likely to be greatly hindered should the other encounter difficulties. Loosely coupled plans tolerate more friction<sup>1</sup> and are more quickly amended.

One way to understand the difference between tightly and loosely coupled plans is by comparing the games of football and soccer. Football is a game with tightly coupled plans. There are frequent time-outs and a huddle is required before every play. A player who misses an assignment may single-handedly ruin a play. In contrast,

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soccer players are required to constantly adapt to new situations without elaborate planning. The overall objective provides the focus of effort<sup>2</sup> and each player is expected to exploit opportunities as they appear. Detailed planning is almost impossible because time-outs are prohibited and the players are often too far apart for efficient communication.

Whether a plan should be tightly or loosely coupled depends upon the circumstances. When concerns regarding precise timing or the integration and allocation of scarce resources predominate, tightly coupled plans are better. In unpredictable situations, or when there are likely to be high levels of friction and chance, loosely coupled plans allow for more flexibility.

Planning for contingencies is a critical aspect in effective tactical planning because it provides for an organized response to a somewhat unpredictable change in circumstances while still maintaining continuity with the preferred course of action. An understanding of the critical role of branches, sequels and couplings is an invaluable planning aid. ■

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> For more information on friction, see "Fog and Friction," *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 1995, p. 76

<sup>2</sup> For more information on focus of effort, see "Focus of Effort and Main Effort," *The Tactical Edge*, Fall 1996, p. 75

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## Year 2000 Tactical Operations Course and Conference Award Nominations

All awards will be presented at the 17th Annual Tactical Operations Course and Conference Awards Banquet. Nominations must be submitted in writing with support documentation (no faxes) to the NTOA no later than July 1, 2000. The awards are for incidents occurring between June 1, 1999 and June 1, 2000.

Nominations for each award submitted to the NTOA must comply with the following criteria:

- Nominations must include the nominee's name, organization and reasons for nomination.
- The narrative must be detailed and precise and include the dates on which the officer performed the actions making him or her deserving of the award.

### NTOA Award of Excellence

This award is presented each year to the person who contributed the most to further the goals of the tactical community. A selection committee bases its decision on an evaluation of his or her performance, dedication and leadership. The award recognizes the recipient for:

- Unselfish dedication to the enhancement of tactical unit capabilities.
- Unstinting efforts to increase tactical officer safety through training and mutual exchange of information.
- Epitomizing the highest standards of professionalism and honor in all aspects of law enforcement.

### NTOA Award of Valor

This award is presented each year to the person or persons who are distinguished through valprous actions during a tactical operation. A selection committee reviews a situation in which the nominated individual clearly acted without regard for his or her own life to save a fellow officer or an innocent victim.

### NTOA TEMS Award

This award is presented each year to the person whose contributions result in the significant advancement of Tactical Emergency Medical Support (TEMS). These contributions include but are not limited to research and academic endeavors, direct medical care and other clinical activities and system advancement.

### NTOA Unit Citation for Valor

This award is presented each year to a SWAT unit whose members distinguished themselves through valorous actions during a tactical operation. A selection committee reviews a situation in which members of the nominated unit clearly act without regard for the safety of their own lives in order to neutralize a suspect, thus protecting fellow officers and/or innocent victims and bystanders.