



TACTICAL

C O N C E P T S

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SITUATIONAL AWARENESS AND A COMMON OPERATIONAL PICTURE

Arguably, tactical commanders' sole contributions to any operation are the decisions they render. While factors such as training, education and experience are critical, a commander's understanding of what is going on has the most impact. This understanding is most often referred to as "situational awareness," sometimes called "situation awareness."

Situational awareness is a concept that describes a person's knowledge and understanding of the circumstances, surroundings, and influences with regard to an unfolding situation. One manifestation of this is a concept called "coup d'oeil." This concept is described in more detail in a previous column, "Coup d'oeil Concept" (*The Tactical Edge*, Fall 1995, p. 82). It also includes everything that is known about the situation leading up to the current episode, as well as the impact it might have on other incidents. It stands to reason that the more complex the operation, the more difficult this is to achieve.

Situational awareness is present to a greater or lesser degree for everyone involved in an operation. Naturally, a person's perspective will have a strong effect on his personal knowledge and understanding. Furthermore, it is never exhaustive, since as more knowledge and understanding is attained, a person's situational awareness is increased. It is easy to see that situational awareness is somewhat unique to each individual. This disparity is particularly troublesome in large operations when different agencies are involved and different echelons of command are required. Field command posts, located near an incident, have a different perspective and understanding of what is taking place than distant

and superior command posts responsible for the operation at large. This is frequently a source of confusion and disorder, which highlights the importance of another tactical concept called a "common operational picture."

COMMON OPERATIONAL PICTURE

In its most simple terms, a common operational picture is simply the shared knowledge and understanding between individuals, teams or groups. It is particularly critical whenever a number of agencies or echelons of command are involved, such as when handling major disasters or large tactical operations, because of the need for close coordination and cooperation. Even so, because the information used to form a common operational picture is always somewhat incomplete, inaccurate, ambiguous, and even conflicting, a comprehensive common operational picture is elusive. (For a more thorough understanding of this problem, see "Crisis Decision Making [Fog and Friction]," *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 1995, p. 76.)

While similar in nature, situational awareness and a common operational picture are different in many respects. For example, situational awareness belongs to an individual, while a common operational picture, by definition, belongs to a group. This has two implications. First, each serves a different purpose. Situational awareness is intended to provide an individual with insight and discretion while a common operational picture creates shared understanding to enhance collaboration and create synergy. Second, each will require different methods to obtain. Gaining greater situational awareness relies

heavily upon personal effort and the needed information is nearly always in some form of personal observation. Acquiring a common operational picture, however, is heavily reliant upon information provided by others. This always means that it has been "processed" because of the natural "filter effect." The "filter effect" is a well-known, natural occurrence that results when one person briefs another. The person who is doing the briefing (sender) is forced to condense the information into either what they think the receiver of the information needs to know, or wants to know.

Another critical difference is that situational awareness describes a person's understanding of a situation, and not merely the state of affairs. Observations, in and of themselves, are important only if they contribute to gaining a clearer mental picture. Accordingly, a person's training, education and experience play important roles by putting things into perspective. This is because of the increased understanding that results when current events are compared with those of the past.

A common operational picture, on the other hand, provides a frame of reference that an organization needs to achieve effective and efficient coordination and collaboration. Goals and objectives are more easily perceived and easier to agree upon, while priorities are less likely to be contentious. Opportunities and threats are more easily discerned because the common understanding creates a shared vigilance through all organizational components and echelons of command. The entire decision-making process, in fact, becomes synergistic because each component or echelon is able to comprehend and contribute according to the common understanding.

It stands to reason that the greater the situational awareness, and the more prevalent the common operational picture, the more likely that decisions will be effective and the organization will run smoothly and more efficiently. As used in this sense, the term "organization" refers to an emerging multi-organizational network (EMON). (For more information on EMONs, see "Planning, Emerging Multi-Organizational Networks," *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 1999, p. 62.)

While always important, the application of these concepts is especially critical in rapidly unfolding events when attempting to restore order amidst chaos and confusion. ■