



TACTICAL CONCEPTS

By Sid Heal

Task saturation

Every mission in a tactical operation involves an almost infinite number of tasks, and depending on how, in what order, and when these tasks are performed, there is also an endless amount of permutations possible as each task affects another. Many of these tasks are demanding and dangerous, and even to an expert, the possibilities can be daunting. People who find themselves in these circumstances are susceptible to a condition called “task saturation.” Task saturation refers to the focusing of one’s attention on a single task or activity to the point where other tasks and activities are neglected or even ignored. Task saturation is why an experienced carpenter who is concentrating on moving a saw blade along a line, cuts off his finger. It also explains why a surgeon sews up a patient before removing all the sponges and surgical instruments. Likewise, people involved in tactical operations are also susceptible.

Focus is a valuable and necessary skill in all sorts of endeavors, especially in tactical situations. In fact, an ability to ignore irrelevant or less critical activities while concentrating on more important ones is a common characteristic of experts. It becomes hazardous when people become oblivious to their surroundings to the point where they do not recognize danger or detect warnings. This is when task saturation sets in. Prime candidates for task saturation are those assigned to exacting tasks that require a high degree of concentration under ideal circumstances. It is especially critical in tactical operations because the tasks are almost never performed under ideal circumstances. A sniper concentrating on a target through a scope, an officer holding a suspect at gunpoint, or a bomb technician dismantling an improvised explosive device are a few examples where task saturation can be expected.

Some everyday, but no less hazardous, examples include a driver preoccupied while looking for a particular radio station on a busy freeway or talking on a cell phone. Another important lesson that can be drawn from these last examples is that the task need not be particularly complex or important. It simply needs to grab a person’s attention enough so that they become unaware of other tasks or activities that may be equally important or even critical.

Task saturation is often compared to another decision-making impediment called the “OBE Condition.” “OBE” is an acronym representing the term “Overwhelmed By Events.” (For more information on the OBE Condition, see “OBE Condition,” *The Tactical Edge*, Winter 1998, p. 79.) The OBE Condition is fundamentally different from task saturation, however, in that the OBE condition occurs when decision-makers are presented with so many activities or options that they become baffled with all the possibilities. In contrast, task saturation occurs even if only a few activities are being monitored or options are present, but the decision maker becomes so engrossed in one of them that the others are neglected or excluded.

Task saturation is both subtle and insidious. Its symptoms are subliminal and develop gradually so that it is well established before it becomes apparent. People afflicted with task saturation will not be aware of it until they are startled into a realization, sometimes too late. While task saturation is insidious and subtle, it is not inescapable. One of the best methods for a person to avoid task saturation is to train. People who are fully confident of their abilities and have a firm grasp of the knowledge and skills necessary to accomplish a task are far less likely to fall victim to this malady than those who

must recall and think through every step. When the training is done under stressful conditions, it is even more effective. This type of training is a type of “stress inoculation,” in which the conditions of training mimic as closely as possible those expected to be encountered under actual conditions. People trained in this manner become accustomed to the anxiety and pressure of performing the task under less than optimal conditions so that they are more capable when required to complete it in real circumstances. To provide some safe and effective methods of creating stress, impose harsh time constraints or perform the tasks in conditions that are noisy, cold, wet or otherwise unpleasant.

Even when a person is well trained, task saturation remains a possibility, and people assigned to complex tasks in high risk tactical operations are particularly susceptible. To compensate for human failings, the most common method is to provide mutual support. This is a fundamental reason why police officers commonly work in pairs. For example, a sniper is assigned a spotter. Thus, the sniper is relieved of the responsibility of continually surveilling the immediate surroundings, talking on the radio or even self-protection, while remaining free to concentrate on the target. Likewise, a person assigned to ram a door, cut a lock, or open a window should always be assigned a partner for protection, lest the person become so engrossed in the task that he or she is vulnerable to attack or other injury.

Nearly without exception, every person will at some time experience task saturation. Nevertheless, recognizing that no one is immune and taking proper precautions can provide for early recognition and effective countermeasures. ◀