

UNITED STATES MARINE CORPS
Marine Corps University
Corporal's Noncommissioned Officers Program

CPL 0306
Jan 99

STUDENT HANDOUT

Wargaming Techniques

LESSON PURPOSE: The purpose of this lesson is to give the student an introduction to the techniques of wargaming. This introduction will provide the student with the tools necessary to enhance their abilities to make sound tactical decisions.

OUTLINE

1. HOW THE GAME WORKS:

a. Playing a tactical decision game (TDG) is very simple. Putting yourself in the role of the commander, you read (or have described to you) the situation; within an established time limit you decide what plan to adopt and communicate that plan in the form of orders you would issue to your unit if the situation were "for real". You then provide an overlay of your plan. Your next step, and this is an important part of the process - you explain the plan as a means of analyzing why you did what you did. This analysis should include the following questions: What options did you have? What factors or considerations were foremost in your mind? On what tactical principles or concepts was your plan based?; What assumptions did you make about the situation?

b. Drawing an overlay of your plan is an important part of the process. Diagrams are precise. In order to be able to draw a diagram of your concept, you must have thought the concept through clearly; the overlay is a good way to ensure this. It is equally important to develop a verbal order as well (whether written or oral), because words are the primary means by which we communicate our plans, and we should practice using the same tools we will use in combat.

c. One advantage of TDGs is that just as in "real life" there are no absolute right or wrong answers, no "schoolbook solutions". Tactics are concerned only with what works. There are countless ways to solve any tactical problem. However, some plans reflect a truer understanding of tactical principles than others. The whole objective of TDGs is to arrive at a truer understanding that eventually results in mastery.

d. Normally the scenario is fairly simple and the information about it is far from complete, requiring us to make certain assumptions as the basis for decision, just as in combat. Unlike board games or their computer versions, TDGs have very few rules or mechanics to learn. In fact, there are really only two "rules".

(1) Imposed Time Limit: There are two reasons for the time limit. First it introduces a certain amount of friction, in the form of stress, to the decision process. This is the reality of war and precisely one of the abilities that makes for a successful combat leader. Second the game imposes a time limit because combat is time competitive. Speed relative to your opponent is essential. Not only must you make good decisions, but you must make them quickly. If not, your decision, no matter how sound, will be irrelevant because you will be too late.

(2) Requirement to Give the Solution in the Form of a Combat Order: The reasons for requiring the solution in the form of a combat order are also twofold. First, communications skills improve with practice when giving either full operations orders or fragmentary orders. A brilliant plan muddled in the issuing is a bad plan. Effective communications means not only clarity, but also forcefulness and, due to the need for speed, conciseness. It is no coincidence that so many of the great military leaders are also inspiring communicators. Second, tactics demand action, not an academic discussion of the merits of this or that scheme: Decision, not debate. So the rule is : "Orders first, then discussion".

e. Scenarios: In order to keep the scenarios from getting too complicated and unwieldy, the situation descriptions are intentionally short and simple. This also adds an element of the uncertainty that is present in any tactical situation. In any situation, a commander could identify countless pieces of information he wishes he had, as well as countless inconsistencies in the information he does have. Since this is so he must make certain assumptions. Dealing with uncertainty is one of the fundamental challenges of tactical decision making. It is easy and tempting to pick apart a simplified scenario and call it unrealistic, inconsistent, or impossible. But that is simply avoiding the challenge. The fact is, war is full of unrealistic, inconsistent, and apparently impossible happenings. It is important to take the scenarios on their own terms. The person whose first response to a problem scenario is to complain, "This would never happen" is probably the same person who has trouble dealing with unexpected situations. As with any problem, the best advice is to solve it first and then figure out how it could have happened.

f. Sand Tables: When using TDGs, you can incorporate sand tables into your exercises. Sand tables are an inexpensive and easily acquired training aid. Utilizing sand tables will give your Marines the invaluable experience of physically applying their map studies and mission orders to a three dimensional combat environment mockup. As the scenario progresses the outcomes of their decisions are visually illustrated to them and their fellow Marines. The Marine's soon get an appreciation for the trials and tribulations of tactical decision making when trying to accomplish the mission.

2. DECISION MAKING: Decision making is the essence of command in battle. This does not mean to diminish the importance of execution, for in battle the final accounting is based on results, not intentions, and even the best decision executed poorly is a sure means for defeat. Nor do we want to exclude the other numerous challenges and responsibilities of command. But the responsibility for making decisions is the domain of the commander and no one else. While the commander may solicit advice and suggestions from any of his subordinates, the decision on a specific course of action is his alone. All military operations are based on decisions. Command

and staff actions are merely implements for reaching and executing decisions. Victory is a reflection of sound decisions skillfully executed.

3. FACTORS AFFECTING SOUND AND TIMELY DECISIONS:

a. Observations: The first observation is that decision making as a skill fits in the realm of the art of war rather than the science. Our institution has developed command and staff actions to help standardize and formalize the procedures for reaching and implementing decisions: estimates of the situation, estimates of supportability, and courses of action are just a few examples. At the same time, commanders are expected to demonstrate an understanding of enemy doctrine, tactics, and techniques; a knowledge of the characteristics and relative capabilities of weapons and equipment; and a keen appreciation for time-distance factors. The second observation is a process requiring two distinct skills. The commander must be a master at both.

(1) He must have the intuitive to recognize the essence of a given problem.

(2) He must have the creative ability to devise a practical solution to it.

The third observation is that the lower the echelon of command, the faster and more direct the decision process. A small-unit leader's decisions are based on a relatively few factors that he usually observes firsthand. At successively higher echelons of command, circumstances become more numerous and complex, and the commander is further removed from events by time and distance. There are various factors that weigh on the art of decision making. Among these include *certainty, information, time, and risk*.

b. Certainty: The more the commander knows of these factors, the more specific he can make his plan. While the desire for certainty is a natural human trait, the very nature of battle makes absolute certainty an impossibility. The commander must not become enslaved to its pursuit. Referred to as the "fog of war", uncertainty pervades the battlefield. The commander must accept a degree of uncertainty, which he compensates for by developing flexible plans, planning for contingencies, developing standing operating procedures (SOPs), developing initiative in his subordinates, issuing mission-type orders, and making his intent clearly understood. The moral courage to make decisions in the face of uncertainty is an essential trait in a commander.

c. Information: The second factor is information. In general, the more information a commander has at his disposal, the more effective his decisions. The commander attempts to reduce uncertainty by seeking information about the enemy, the environment, and his own situation as well. However, in the heat of battle, perhaps the only certainty is that available information will always be incomplete, will usually be inaccurate, and will sometimes even be contradictory. Early in the decision process, when information is scarce, the effectiveness of a decision increases dramatically as information increases. However, at some point in the process, when basic information has been obtained and the effort concentrates on details, the commander reaches a point of diminishing returns - when the potential effectiveness of his decision does not improve in proportion to the information obtained or the time and effort

needed to obtain it. The commander who delays his decision beyond this point risks surrendering the initiative.

d. Time: Time is an essential consideration in the decision making process. Timely decisions require rapid thinking, with consideration often limited to essential factors. The commander should spare no effort to streamline his information - gathering and decision making procedures to promote rapid decision making. Toward this end, he can decentralize decision making by promoting initiative among his subordinates. This is possible through the use of mission - type orders and the clear expression of intent but requires qualified subordinates. As the amount of information increases to a point, the time necessary to make an effective decision decreases. Beyond this point, however, additional information has the opposite effect; causing the commander to require longer to reach the same effective decision that he could have reached sooner with less information. Consequently, the commander must be careful to limit the amount of information he considers to those essential elements that allow him to make his decision quickly and with reasonable certainty. Focus of effort applies to decision making as well as combat power.

e. Risk: A commander's decision invariably involves the estimation and acceptance of risk. Risk is inherent in war and is involved in every mission. Part of risk is the uncontrollable element of chance. The practice of concentrating combat power at the focus of effort and economizing elsewhere by its nature requires risk. Willingness to accept risk is another element of the moral courage of command. Although the commander avoids unnecessary risk, the accomplishment of the mission is the most important consideration.

4. THE DECISION: The complex interaction of these basic factors poses the commander with a dilemma. His task is to select a course of action with reasonable certainty of success and an acceptable degree of risk and to reach his decision more quickly than his foe. There is no formula for this process; it is a complex and often subconscious act. It is also a skill which improves with practice; thus the use of TDGs. There are four areas you must keep in mind when playing TDGs:

a. First, the commander must have the moral courage to make tough decisions in the face of uncertainty - and to accept full responsibility for those decisions - when the natural inclination is to put off the decision pending complete information. To delay action in an emergency because of incomplete information shows a lack of energetic leadership and courage.

b. Second, the commander must have the moral courage to make bold decisions and accept the necessary degree of risk when the natural inclination is to choose a less ambitious way.

c. Third, the commander must have an intuitive understanding of when he has reached the point at which additional information only serves to delay the decision or when additional certainty will not justify the time and effort spent gaining it. On one hand, the commander should not make rash decisions based on insufficient information. But, on the other hand, the commander must not squander opportunities while trying to gain more complete information.

d. And finally, since all decisions in battle must be made in the face of uncertainty and since every situation is unique, there is no perfect solution to any battlefield problem. Therefore, the commander should not agonize over one. He should arrive at a reasonable decision quickly and execute it swiftly and aggressively.

REFERENCE: Marine Corps Gazette's "Mastering Tactics - A Tactical Decision Games Handbook".