

Critical Decision Making Under Pressure: “Friction” Why is the Simplest Thing, So Difficult?

By Fred Leland

“If one has never personally experienced war, one cannot understand in what the difficulties constantly mentioned really consist, nor why a commander should need any brilliance and exceptional ability. Everything looks simple; the knowledge required does not look remarkable, the strategic options are so obvious that by comparison the simplest problem of higher mathematics has an impressive scientific dignity. Once war has actually been seen the difficulties become clear; but it is extremely hard to describe the unseen, all-pervading element that brings about this change of perspective.” ~Carl von Clausewitz

Why did you make that decision officer? Why did you go in the front door, instead of the back or side? Why did you not have the subject come outside to you? Why instead did you not set up a perimeter, containing the adversary and attempt to negotiate? Why did you do a face to face negotiation, with the subject armed with a knife, you know that is dangerous, don't you? Did you have to take him down with force? Why didn't you talk him out, use OC spray or taser him instead? Why didn't you take a passenger side approach on that car stop? Why did you *walk up* on the vehicle to engage instead of having the subject *walk back* to you? Why didn't you see the gun, weren't you watching deadly hands? Couldn't you have chosen another option? What in the hell were you thinking? The bad guy had a gun why didn't you shoot? Why didn't you wait for back-up? You knew something bad was happening there, why, did you wait, for back-up? Why didn't you do this or do that?

These are all questions anyone, who has been in law enforcement for any amount of time and has experienced a violent encounter has been asked or has even asked himself these questions or, some very similar. We law enforcement professionals *what/if, if/then, or when/then* ourselves so much in an effort to prepare and become more effective on the streets you cannot help but question the decisions we make. This questioning and reviewing of our decisions is, in the **aftermath** of an encounter helpful to us. This process of review known as an after action review or decision making critique teaches us valuable lessons helping us to adapt more effective methods and tactics to apply on the street. **BUT** when in the heat of the moment, face to face with an adversary second guessing ourselves can be dangerous and risk lives, our own, and to those we are there to assist.

Why then, in the moment of decision is it so hard to decide? Why is it our preparation and planning, our policies and procedures come unraveled at the first hearing of the call, the first push, shove, clinch or punch, the first sight of a weapon or the first shot? Why is it, our decision making slows down or as Carl von Clausewitz described it why is there “friction” in our decision making?

Friction in Decision Making

“Friction is the only concept that more or less corresponds to the factors that distinguish real war from war on paper.” ~ Carl von Clausewitz

An understanding of friction is necessary. An officer must know friction so he can overcome it on the street when dealing with an uncooperative and potentially violent adversary. Friction can be mental, as in indecision over a course of action.

Friction can be physical, as in effective adversary size, strength, firing capabilities location (inside/outside) or an environmental obstacle such as a locked door, barricades or open kill zone, which must be overcome. Population and innocents in the area is a physical factor to consider that creates friction in decision making.

Friction can be external, imposed by adversary's actions, his motive, nature and intentions, is he armed or unarmed? Is it a hostage situation or is it ongoing deadly action and active shooting taking place? The weather or mere chance or uncertainty is another form of external friction.

Friction can be self-induced, caused by such factors as lack of a clearly defined goal, unclear or overly complicated plans, policies or procedures. This self induced friction can also manifest itself in worry over liability related issues, disciplinary action, dash cams in patrol cars, fear, poor attitude, complacency or being unprepared. Self induced friction can come from unknowns about your own skills and limitations. Ego can also affect friction in how we make decisions.

Clausewitz says, *“this tremendous friction, which cannot, as in mechanics, be reduced to a few points, is everywhere in contact with chance, and brings about effects that cannot be measured, just because they are largely due to chance.”*

While we try to reduce these unknowns by gathering information, we must realize that we cannot eliminate them or even come close. The very nature of conflict makes certainty impossible; all actions in conflict will be based on incomplete, inaccurate, or even contradictory information. At best we can hope to determine possibilities and probabilities. This implies a certain standard of tactical judgment.

Conflict is a clash between two or more complex adaptive systems, by adaptive systems I mean walking, talking, thinking and planning, deciding and acting people who are at odds with one another. When people meet and their efforts to survive on their own terms collide, “stuff happens!” As a cop your efforts to deescalate the situation depend upon your adversary complying with you. If the adversary decides he will not comply, the plans you had while responding will have to change based upon the decision and actions of the adversary. An emotionally charged adversary is unpredictable and that unpredictability forces you to adapt.

The simple linear step by step plan you had in mind now becomes more complex in the midst of the unpredictable chaos, an intent on getting his own way adversary, can create. *“Everything in war is simple, but the simplest thing is difficult,”* is how Clausewitz described it. Add innocent victim to the equation and you get even more complexity to the situation.

Competitive challenges as in conflict and violence cannot be truly planned for. Opposing plans from different people collide with results that no one can predict. Those who think that they can foresee exactly how any confrontation will progress are simply wrong.

This factor of two sides conflicting will always be there in law enforcement encounters so we must be knowledgeable of the give and take of conflict and work positioning ourselves utilizing methods and tactics to change the climate, and create friction in our adversary by attacking our adversaries' thought process and shattering his morale and decision making process in an effort, to gain voluntary compliance or catch him off guard and unprepared so we can use appropriate force options.

Carl von Clausewitz offers some very good advice for law enforcement. *"An understanding of friction is a large part of that much-admired sense of warfare which a good general is supposed to possess. To be sure, the best general is not the one who is most familiar with the idea of friction, and who takes it to heart (he belongs to the anxious type so common among experienced commanders). The good general must know friction in order to overcome it whenever possible, and in order not to expect a standard of achievement in his operations which this very friction makes impossible. Incidentally, it is a force that theory can never quite define. Even if it could, the development of instinct and tact would still be needed, a form of judgment much more necessary in an area littered by endless minor obstacles than in great, momentous questions, which are settled in solitary deliberation or in discussion with others. As with a man of the world instinct becomes almost habit so that he always acts, speaks, and moves appropriately, so only the experienced officer will make the right decision in major and minor matters, at every pulsebeat of war. Practice dictates the answer: 'this is possible, that is not.' So he rarely makes a serious mistake, such as can, in war, shatter confidence and become extremely dangerous if it occurs often."*

With an adversary who says NO and takes action to thwart our efforts! We will always have to be prepared to utilize our awareness, insight, imagination and initiative applying the science and art of tactics, operationally while striving ourselves to overcome the effects of friction, while interacting with an adversary. We must attempt at the same time to raise our adversary's friction to a level that weakens his ability to fight. This interplay is necessary in an effort to shape and reshape the climate of the situation and win without fighting if possible.

"Friction is that force which makes the apparently easy difficult. We shall frequently revert to this subject, and it will become evident that an eminent commander needs more than experience and a strong will. He must have other exceptional abilities as well." ~Carl von Clausewitz

Stay Oriented

Fred