

Using Surprise to Set the Tempo of Confrontation...and Catching Your Adversary Unprepared

By: Fred Leland

“By surprise we mean a state of disorientation resulting from an unexpected event that degrades the enemy’s ability to resist. We achieve surprise by striking the enemy at a time or place or in a manner for which the enemy is unprepared. It is not essential that we take the enemy unaware, but only that awareness came too late to react effectively.” ~USMC Warfighting

You observe a person, you possess a warrant for. You are in your marked patrol car in the parking lot of the local grocery store, you see the subject, and the subject does not yet see you. The subject is walking towards his vehicle with groceries about 100 yards from your position. Your adrenaline pumps as you want to get this person in custody as he is a career criminal and a potentially violent one at that when encountered by the police. Your mind starts to race, should I approach him now, should I wait? If I approach and he sees me, will he run or will he cooperate? The warrant is new; you wonder does he know there’s a warrant for his arrest? He is not known to carry firearms or weapons but he does like to run and fight when cornered. You decide to radio for a back-up and for them take a position of advantage at the only entrance/exit to and from the store, just in case he decides to leave, they can block his exit or if you approach, back-up can move in to assist in the apprehension. You wait for back-up to arrive and are in position before you act.

You decide that once the subject starts to load the car with groceries, you will approach him from an angle he cannot see you, in hopes of catching him by surprise and off guard. You will use the concealment from other parked vehicles to close the distance and while he is occupied, walk up cautiously and nonchalantly and then engage him in conversation. If the prearranged plan goes as expected back-up will approach when they see you engage the subject. You break your concealed position and walk towards the subject looking as if; you are headed to the store, and engage the subject in conversation.

“Hey John how you been? I have not seen you in a while, what have you been up to, how’s the family?” The subject “John” acknowledges your presence, and responds, with a quick nod, a quick smile, his eyes dart quickly around the parking lot, then his open trunk, the groceries, his closed car door and then back at you and states; *“I have been fine, just trying to stay out of trouble, trying to keep it together for my family.’ How have you been?”* John appears to be little uneasy and slightly surprised by your presence, you decide to continue the conversation in an effort to deceptively ease his mind. *“I have been doing pretty good John, just headed into the store to get something for lunch. I saw you and thought I would say hello, and see how things were going.”* John appears to relax and you continue engage in some pleasantries and move to a position so John does not observe the back-up car approaching. Once back-up is close, you close the distance and ask John, *do you know there is a warrant for your arrest?* At the same time you’re directing him verbally and physically to turn and place his hands behind his back as you have to take him in on the warrant. John now sees the back-up officers who are approaching on foot. He complies with your request.

Your strategy in this simple example was to surprise your adversary where he is unprepared or you are unexpected. Using surprise in this way brings your adversary into the engagement on your terms, you set the time, place and tempo of the engagement that allowed you to gain control in a safe and effective way.

Surprise utilized tactically, creates confusion, uncertainty, unpredictability and fears in our adversaries when used in an innovative and bold way. Our adversary is not quite sure of what's going on and hence not prepared to take action. In this case the subject of the warrant has to process information, is the cop, I know, here to just say hello and move on or, does he know about the warrant and want to take me in? Using *surprise*, and taking the indirect approach, boldly and fluidly, has a powerful psychological effect on the subject which creates friction, a slowing down of his decision making cycle, allowing you time to seize the initiative and take control.

"Surprise is a means to gain superiority, but because of its psychological effect it should also be considered as an independent element. Whenever it is achieved on a grand scale, it confuses the enemy and lowers his morale." ~Carl von Clausewitz

When most law enforcement professionals think of surprise in the context of conflict, and violence, they think of a surprise attack. For example in the scenario above what if, *the officer saw the subject of the warrant and just pulled up quickly in his marked patrol car lights and siren? Would the subject have stayed? Stayed and Fought? Stayed and complied? Would he have run to evade capture? Would this fighting or running created a bigger problem possibly risking the lives of the officer or those innocents in the vicinity?* This type of direct charge or what I like to call *emotional react approach* happens all too often in our profession and is not what surprise is all about. It looks good in the movies and on television but it usually escalates the situation, when our job is to deescalate. Are there exceptions when this type of direct approach is necessary? Yes there are times surprise may not be obtainable, such as in a spontaneous evolving crisis like the initial onset of an officer being ambushed. Not much time for surprise here as the adversary has already utilized it to his advantage. Time and risk are factors to consider in determining the benefits and achievability of surprise.

Surprise is difficult to achieve and easy to lose, but surprise is desired in our law enforcement *responses and operations* because it helps keep our adversary disoriented and surprise slows down an adversary's ability to adapt and recover to our tactics. The advantages of *surprise* are only temporary and once obtained the initiative, must be seized quickly. It is important not to lose site that achieving surprise is not only dependant on our actions, but is also dependant on the adversary's reactions to what we do. So our adversary's vulnerability to surprise is a factor we must consider. *Surprise is only one factor* that helps us gain the advantage but surprise alone is not enough. Once we achieve the brief advantage of surprise we must adapt with methods and tactics to gain control.

Surprise is more about the indirect, unorthodox or unconventional and innovative uses of methods and tactics we apply to set our adversary up. We set our adversary up using *deception*, to convince the adversary we are going to do something other than what we are really going to do. *Deception* is powerful at achieving surprise but it takes skill and is difficult to achieve. We also use *ambiguity*, to act

in such a way that the adversary does not know what to expect. *Stealth* is another way of achieving surprise and setting up our adversary. *Stealth* is denying the adversary any knowledge of our coming actions. In the example above deception and ambiguity and stealth were used in the approach, interaction and conversation between the officer and subject, which kept the adversary wondering about the officer's intent. This kept the adversary off his game OODA Loop wise, long enough for the officer and his back-up to gain control.

We set our adversary up so we can win on our terms...not theirs! We should be dictating the time, place and tempo of confrontation when possible, not the other way around. Sadly our adversaries continue to surprise and catch us off guard. This stimulus/response, react mentality seems to be the way we in law enforcement keep doing it. I think it's time we change and put the ***element of surprise*** on our side! Your thoughts!

"It is the same in all battles. You use a direct approach to engage the enemy. You use surprise to win." ~Sun Tzu

Stay Oriented!

Fred