

# Strengthening Garrison Decision-Making Ability

Using small unit integrity decision games

by LtCol Aaron A. Angell

**W**hat would you do? Given the opportunity to prevent a drunk driving, sexual harassment, sexual assault, or domestic violence incident, *what would you do?* The easy answer is that you would take the steps to prevent these incidents, but the truth is that actual life is not so simple. You will often not be asked simply if you want to step in to prevent an incident. Real incidents may involve you directly as the offender, victim, or potentially as a witness. In each role, what would you do?

Real experiences give us the opportunity to test our mettle; however, we do not all have the opportunities to gain these experiences before being tested. Furthermore, some of us may not get a second chance to save ourselves or to save our fellow Marines and families. Thinking tactically, the question of “what would you do” is something that each one of us must think about and ask relative to combat—hence why we seek to develop realistic combat training to prepare ourselves. One method for creating experience without actually being in the incident is through tactical decision games (TDGs). The intent of this article is to draw out the use of decision games for integrity issues and to enlighten our Marines to do the right thing implicitly. Ultimately, this article offers a technique to build integrity resilience and create adaptability through the use of small/unit integrity decision games, potentially even in lieu of the traditional safety brief.

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## Integrity Decision Games

A decision game, or decision-making game, is a low-fidelity simulation of incidents that might occur where an individual, or a group, is presented with a dilemma with varying levels of uncertainty. The methodology of a decision game is to put the participant into a realistic scenario, using an extremely low-cost experiential exercise. The end state is a strengthened decision maker who has more practical experience in thinking through challenging problems and potentially greater understanding of the considerations of a given scenario. Adding a time limitation adds to the pressure and makes it more realistic.<sup>1</sup> Like most skills, you can improve decision making ability through practice.<sup>2</sup>

Playing a tactical decision game (TDG) is very simple. Putting yourself [the teacher] in the role of the commander, you read the situation [to the student]; within an established time limit you decide what plan to adopt and communicate that plan in a form of the orders you [the student] would issue to your unit if the situation were for real. You provide an overlay of your plan. Then, and this is an important part of the process, you explain your plan as a means of analyzing why you did what you did.<sup>3</sup>

Being military professionals, we have often been involved with TDGs as participants or as teachers, using this method to build our understanding of tactical scenarios. Furthermore, TDGs strengthen our ability to make decisions for the inevitable situation when we are faced with a similar situation on the battlefield.

The leader who would become a competent tactician must first close his mind to the alluring formulae that well-meaning people offer in the name of victory. To master his difficult art he must learn to cut to the heart of a situation, recognize its decisive elements and base his course of action on these. The ability to do this is not God-given, nor can it be acquired overnight; it is a process of years. He must realize that training in solving problems of all types, long practice in making clear, unequivocal decisions, the habit of concentrating on the question at hand, and an elasticity of mind, are indispensable requisites for the successful practice of the art of war.<sup>4</sup>

TDGs are not a fresh idea. Now, take this concept of decision games for the purpose of tackling non-tactical, or garrison, leadership issues. These are day-to-day challenges that each Marine faces while deployed, at work, at home

station, and even on liberty. This also may not seem novel, but think about the impact of this approach. Leaders can introduce tough topics that have resulted in poor decisions and bad judgment by Marines in the unit or expand them to include trends across the Marine Corps. Leaders can put their Marines, and themselves, into realistic scenarios designed to help them realize the considerations related to making the right decision. Leaders are creating an experience that will build habits of action and resilience for their Marines to fall back on when similar situations happen in real life.

Varied scenarios can be based on annual training requirements but also on the needs of the unit based on current trends. Resources are available, but be innovative—leaders can make realistic scenarios themselves. Use current unit issues, although avoid embarrassing certain individuals. You can create a realistic scenario without making it a replica of what just happened the week before. On the other hand, you could also recreate the scenario as a case study to teach individuals in your unit what did actually happen in a recent event. This can potentially reduce rumors, with some risk of embarrassment for the individual. A bold variation is to have the involved Marine provide his experiences for realism.

Resources are available if you are looking for a starting point. Over time, the *Marine Corps Gazette* has included numerous combat or operational related TDGs. To tackle some of the non-tactical scenarios, the Lejeune Leadership Institute, a branch within the Marine Corps University, has released the *Issues for Garrison Ethics and Leadership* (2009). Other options available for integrity or ethical decision games include *Leadership, Ethics, and Law of War Discussion Guide for Marines* (2008), *Discussion Material for Small Unit Leaders Issues of Battlefield Ethics and Leadership and Issues* (2008)<sup>5</sup>, *MCRP 6-11B* (with change 1), and *Marine Corps Values: A User's Guide for Discussion Leaders* (Washington, DC: Headquarters Marine Corps, October 1998).

Scenario-based training creates adaptability. Decision games will ex-



**Hip pocket classes are also a way in which small unit leaders can discuss current unit trends or concerns.** (Photo by LCpl Osvaldo Ortega.)

ponentially increase the ability of an individual to make an informed decision even in a scenario that the individual may not have previously experienced first-hand.

### Small Unit Discussions

Discussions engage individuals. An effective technique is to engage individuals to draw on their experiences and get their involvement in the process of education and training. Using discussions to follow a decision game has an enormous positive impact on the participants. Assuming that the decision game scenario will come true, the learning that occurred across the group will enable individuals to operate more implicitly to approach and potentially solve a problem. They will have already developed a foundation of knowledge regarding the scenario, to include understanding what considerations are important. Further, the group will have identified during the discussion which participants have applicable strengths in understanding and solving certain problems. These are just a few subtle impacts of using small unit discussion groups for scenario-based training that may not be realized until you are in a real situation.

Leaders should empower NCOs to lead these discussions. These decision

games and discussions provide the opportunity for NCOs to develop communication skills in small unit settings and an opportunity to better understand their Marines, relative to the topic. NCOs can utilize participants who have experience with a specific scenario to provide more context and realism. These participants have the experience that we want to share with others who have not yet gained that particular experience themselves. The objective is to draw out that experience for others to learn these lessons, without requiring each individual to have to learn the hard way through personal experience.

We know that building rapport as a small unit leader is important for unit trust, and small unit discussions are the avenue to do so. As participants share their experiences and further reflect their individual perspectives on life, the leader can share personal experiences, orchestrate involvement of those who have related experiences, and provide guidance and direction to assist each participant in making a right choice. The more that the individuals in a unit are familiar with those around them, the closer the unit will be as a team. This creates trust up and down the chain of command, which further benefits the health of the unit in mission accom-

plishment as well as responsiveness to personal welfare concerns.

### Timing Considerations

There are a few timing considerations to effectively use these small unit integrity decision games as a technique. This is an educational technique that you can use on a regular schedule or as a hip pocket class. You could use this in place of a weekly liberty brief. You may also want to drive the topic based on current unit trends. Each of these considerations provides enormous flexibility to the commander.

First, you may establish a unit battle rhythm to employ this technique with regularity. This enables your leaders to effectively prepare for these discussions. Further, it shows a dedication on your part to the use of this technique to develop adaptability and resilience within your junior leaders. On the other hand, this training technique can be impromptu with the benefit of not having to coordinate training areas and equipment. This is described as "Situational Training" in *Common Sense Training, A Working Philosophy for Leaders* (New York: Penguin Random House, November 1998) by LTG Arthur S. Collins, Jr. Using this technique more spontaneously may also show your junior leaders that this can be done at

any time. This works well when a unit spontaneously, yet frequently, pauses operations to conduct situational training with tactical and non-tactical topics. However, without using this technique regularly or frequently, it is possible that a unit will not use the technique at all.

Next, you may use these small unit integrity decision games in place of a weekly liberty safety brief. The idea is to move away from a formation where an individual lists the things not to do and instead use a small discussion venue to discuss integrity issues. The intent is to send your Marines on liberty after discussing realistic integrity dilemmas. Sending Marines into a weekend after putting them in tough scenarios that they may live out during the weekend is a powerful way to influence their personal judgment.

Lastly, senior leaders can be personally involved in driving the topics for these discussions while using small unit leaders to conduct the training. Commanders and senior enlisted leaders can choose specific topics based on current command climate issues, potential upcoming challenges based on operational commitments or scheduled holiday periods, or availability of individuals with certain experiences. There is no perfect calculation for determining the most appropriate topic. However, the success

of a unit in dealing with non-tactical life issues is one way to show if this program is effective.

### Conclusion

You should consider using decision games to exponentially improve the abilities of your Marines to make the right decision in tactical and non-tactical scenarios. Consider employing the technique of decision games, followed by small unit discussions that are driven by NCOs. Strengthen your junior leaders by empowering them to discuss real-life dilemmas using a technique that presents considerations related to realistic life dilemmas, and then puts individuals in the hot seat to make decisions. Use scenarios that hit close to home in your unit, or that you see on the horizon, to prepare your Marines for the inevitable. Develop these scenarios using your own experience, use the experiences of your Marines, or open some of the listed resources to create a spark to ignite this flame in your unit. It is not guaranteed to prevent every bad decision, but it is guaranteed to better prepare your young decision makers.

### Notes

1. Donald E. Vandegriff, *Raising the Bar: Creating and Nurturing Adaptability to Deal with the Changing Face of War*, (Washington, DC: Center For Defense Information, 2006), 102.
2. John F. Schmitt, *Marine Corps Gazette's Mastering Tactics*, (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps Association, 1994), 2.
3. Ibid.
4. Headquarters Marine Corps, *FMFRP 12-2, Infantry in Battle*, (Washington, DC: 1998), 1.
5. *Issues for Garrison Ethics and Leadership* (2009); *Leadership, Ethics, and Law of War Discussion Guide for Marines* (2008); and *Discussion Material for Small Unit Leaders: Issues of Battlefield Ethics and Leadership and Issues* (2008) are available through the Marine Corps University, Lejeune Leadership Institute, and can be accessed at <https://www.mcu.usmc.mil/sites/leadership/>.



**When small unit leaders build trust within the unit, unit members become more willing to share their experiences. (Photo by LCpl Herman Vidana.)**

