



# DECISION-MAKING EXERCISES: MAKE PROBLEM SOLVING IN CRISIS SITUATIONS PART OF YOUR TRAINING

By Travis Norton

## THE CRISIS

Approximately one hour ago, patrol personnel initiated a vehicle pursuit that terminated when the suspect crashed and ran into a residential neighborhood within city limits. The suspect, a parolee at large with a history of violence, has barricaded himself inside a residence and has taken three children and their mother hostage.

You are one of four members of your department's SWAT team on duty at the time of the initial incident. You respond to the scene and take up a containment position on the 2/3 corner of L1, a two-story detached home surrounded on three sides by other occupied homes of similar style and construction. The incident commander has initiated a SWAT and CNT call out and, as of now, you have only limited information about the pursuit, the suspect and the hostages. You have been on scene for about 10 minutes. A crisis entry team is positioned on the 1 side. You and your partner are the only SWAT containment units on scene.

Taking advantage of the time you have to surveil L1 from your containment position, you make several critical

observations. First, there are three large dogs loose in the backyard of L1, and they are barking at your presence. Second, the residence that is associated with the yard you are in has not been evacuated. The residents know you are there but have not left, and they are asking you questions from a nearby window every few minutes. Third, a media helicopter is flying overhead and has not been directed to leave the area. Lastly, your partner sprained his ankle during the ingress to your position. He is able to hold a static position but his ability to run or walk has been severely compromised.

Suddenly, the sliding glass door located on side 3 opens. The suspect appears at the now open doorway and pushes an 8- to 10-year-old boy into the backyard of the target residence. The dogs are barking even louder now, and the boy appears injured and unable to stand. One of the dogs appears ready to attack the boy, who is now screaming for help. What do you do? You have 10 seconds to formulate your response.

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## DECISIONS IN CRISIS

If you posed this scenario to your team, would their answers be tactically sound? Would their decisions be founded on solid, crisis decision-making principles? Simply learning about tactics and the theories that support them is not enough. Our job as team leaders is to develop intuitive and complex problem-solvers who can operationalize crisis decision-making concepts and tactics in real time when faced with a rapidly evolving crisis.

The inevitable concern this goal raises is how to best accomplish this type of training when time and budgets for training are limited. The short answer is to train the mind. The best crisis decision-makers have the most vivid imaginations. Thinking, talking and even writing about how to solve the most absurd, confusing and messiest adversarial crises you can imagine builds your skills in this arena. Not all of your team members will invest their own time or brainpower to develop these essential skills. It is up to you as the team leader to make decision-making exercises (DMEs) an accepted and regular part of your team's training curriculum.

Thinking about a situation and how to resolve it is at the bottom of the training realism curve. Crisis decision-making training that utilizes realistic scenarios in combination with mental imagery, critical thinking and realistic tactics has a proven record of success in both law enforcement and the military.

The key value of this training is experience. Team members who are exposed to a realistic problem in a decision-making exercise format are gaining experience that can be called upon in an actual crisis. When confronted with a real-world situation, team members who practice crisis decision-making using DMEs have the advantage of being able to develop solutions and exercise tactical options practiced in the DME format. In his book "Field Command," Sid Heal describes this as solving the problem from where you left off in your thinking as opposed to the beginning.<sup>1</sup>

DMEs are situational exercises on paper representing a snapshot in time. The facilitator sets a short time limit for the team members to come up with a solution to the problem presented. Once the time limit is reached, you can

## Suggested topics for DMEs

- Priority of life
- Policies and procedures
- Tactics, techniques, procedures
- Use of force/deadly force
- Hostage rescue principles
- Barricade procedures
- Vehicle assault/barricade procedures
- Officer/citizen rescues with and without armor
- Bounding overwatch
- Sniper with the high ground
- Crisis communication (shots fired, compromises, immediate action and medical plans)
- Sniper-initiated assaults

ask individual team members or the team collectively how they would handle the situation. This idea is taken from the "Adaptive Leadership Handbook" by Fred Leland and Don Vandegriff. Not only do you test your team's knowledge and decision-making skills, but you also can identify weak areas that can be focused on in future training.

Full-scale tabletop exercises are a great tool, but creating them can be both resource-intensive and time-consuming. With training time at a premium, DMEs take much less time to develop and deliver. They are particularly useful during downtime. Downtimes are easily identified when, for example, half of your team is outside of a live fire shoot house waiting for their turn to train in the house. The team leader or other designated team member can easily administer a DME to this group. The DME can even be focused on the types of problems and situations they might face during a breach into a hostile structure.

## CREATING AND DELIVERING A DME

Begin by picking a topic that tests the team's decision-making skills. Once the topic is chosen, create a scenario that not only covers the topic, but also gives team members several problems to deal with simultaneously. While you might be trying to improve their decision-making skills for a deadly force decision during a hostage rescue, muddy the waters with things like media presence, injured team members, accidental discharges and competing interests. Beware of giving too many specifics about the situation. As you know, when we are on a mission, fog and friction are ever present and we never have perfect situational awareness or common operational picture. Make

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Once created, run it by another team leader and your team commander. Time permitting, you should always have someone check your work and make sure you are staying on point. When delivering the DME, some team members might want clarification on a certain aspect of the scenario. Explain that there is no more information. This is often how a real operation evolves — imperfect, limited or missing information. As previously mentioned, we never have the whole picture.

Once you read the scenario, give them a time limit to solve the issue. Common sense goes a long way in regard to how much time you give them. Remember, all tactical operations are time-sensitive, so adjust accordingly.

Once the time limit is up, you can ask an individual operator for his or her answer and then critique the response. If you ask the team as a whole, a discussion will naturally occur. Ask what they did and why. If the scenario included a use of force or deadly force, make sure they can articulate their response. The byproduct of this is improving their ability to give lucid explanations and statements during use-of-force reporting or post-OIS interviews. If the answers to the scenario aren't correct, ask for further input or inquire about other options. It will take finesse to correct wrong decisions but it can be done.

Try to conduct at least one DME every training day. Like other skills, decision-making is perishable. Creating at least three or four DME scenarios will help to ensure you always have several scenarios available during training. You can also deliver multiple DMEs during training if you need to fill unforeseen gaps or downtime.

## CONCLUSION

DMEs will help develop your team members into better crisis decision-makers and in turn, force multipliers. When the moment of truth comes, there is a greater chance they will have the answer to solve the problems with minimal wasted effort or hesitation. As a team leader you will have

the satisfaction of knowing that you helped them stay safe and go home to their families.

Don't limit your DMEs to tactical teams. This type of training is also worthwhile for patrol officers. With the influx of new officers most departments are experiencing, they are a great advantage to improve the basic decision-making skills of young officers. ■

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Sgt. Travis Norton** is a 17-year veteran with the Oceanside (CA) PD. He has been a SWAT team member for 11 years and is currently a team leader. He is also the CATO Regional Director for Region 9 and can be reached at [tnorton@catonews.org](mailto:tnorton@catonews.org).

## ENDNOTE

1. Heal, Charles "Sid." "Field Command." Lantern Books, 2012. p. 297.

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