



By Gary Klein

As an observer-coach trainer at the Joint Readiness Training Center (JRTC), a recurring after action review comment during decisive action rotations was the training unit's ability to handle transitions.^[1] The hybrid threat and changing friendly force situations required leaders to use their understanding of the mission variables and judgment to overcome numerous transitions. In general, leaders were successful at preparing for specified or anticipated transitions based on their experience and the plethora of doctrinal references, but actually anticipating the transitions was not as easy. This article presents a new model for thinking about transitions that enables leaders to anticipate and prepare for them by communicating planning guidance to their subordinates and improving their intuitive decision-making.

In the proposed model, anticipated and prepared transitions represent just one of five types of transitions leaders may encounter. Transitions can be categorized as follows: unanticipated and unprepared, unanticipated and prepared, anticipated and prepared, anticipated and unprepared, and specified transitions (Figure 1). Leaders face these different types of transitions based on their intuition and judgement. Novice leaders with limited experience are more likely to face transitions unanticipated and unprepared (Figure 1, bottom-left quadrant), while more experienced leaders will be able to anticipate and deliberately prepare better (Figure 1, top-right quadrant). Experienced leaders can assist more novice leaders by providing them with additional guidance - possibly specifying transitions - or offering them assistance in preparing for transitions. Additionally, all leaders should create learning opportunities to enable their subordinates' development in anticipating and handling transitions.

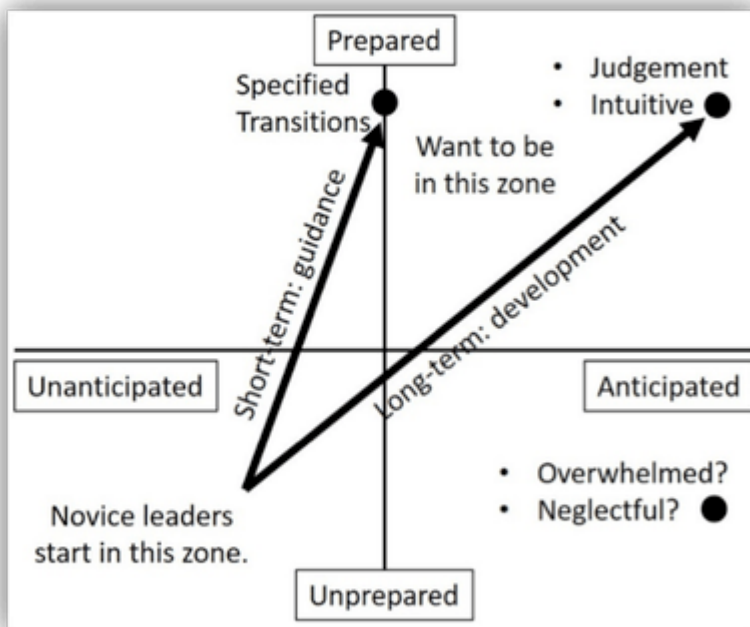


Figure 1: Types of Transitions: unanticipated and unprepared, unanticipated and prepared, anticipated and prepared, anticipated and unprepared, and specified transitions. Ideally,

leaders are able to anticipate and prepare for transitions. More experienced leaders can help more novice leaders by providing guidance and developmental opportunities to help them obtain this goal.

The other two quadrants are not as easily understood. The top-left quadrant seems to indicate an element of luck, while the bottom-right seems to be the least desirable. If a leader is aware of a transition (i.e. anticipated), but he or she did not prepare, this might indicate that the leader is overwhelmed, or worse, neglectful. These quadrants could be further explored, but this article is most interested in enabling leaders to move from the bottom-left (i.e. unanticipated and unprepared) to the top-right quadrant (i.e. anticipated and prepared).

Based on the proposed model, leaders can do two things to improve their unit's ability to anticipate transitions. The first is that they can provide additional guidance to their subordinates, or they can seek additional guidance personally. This is the short-term solution. For example, company commanders can convey their judgement or specify transitions to their platoon leaders. Prior to executing a mission, commanders might wargame potential enemy and friendly actions with subordinates (i.e. sharing judgement), or a commander might order his unit to prepare to execute a specific task (i.e. specified transition). This might include specifying decision points and branch plans as well. It is impossible to anticipate all transitions all the time, but leaders should attempt to do this as time allows it, and share their ideas to enable adaptability.

The second thing that leaders should do to improve their ability to handle transitions is to develop their intuition and judgement, both of which rely on experience.[\[2\]](#) In the military, leaders can gain experience through combat, training, simulations, wargames, or even tactical decision exercises (TDEs). Leaders can gain experience and develop their intuition and judgement indirectly as well, by reading and learning from history.[\[3\]](#) Among these options, TDEs are an easy option for leaders to develop their subordinates' leadership and

cognitive skills.

Tactical decision exercises are relatively quick and require minimal resources to execute. The greatest demand is finding or developing the scenarios.[\[4\]](#) Leaders can design TDE scenarios on a map or sand table. The scenario should prompt participants to develop and describe simple courses of action or other details based on the learning objectives. To focus on developing intuitive decision-making, leaders should give participants limited time to develop their solutions.[\[5\]](#) These exercises should encourage freethinking, avoid an optimal solution approach, and be done in a group to stimulate discussion and collaborative learning.[\[6\]](#)

For leaders interested in building TDEs or facilitating discussions focused on transitions, here are a few examples of transitions commonly observed at JRTC, which might serve as a starting point:

- When might the unit adjust its emphasis from one decisive action task to another (i.e. offense, defense, and stability or defense support of civil authorities)?
- When should an attacking unit transition from travelling to travelling overwatch or bounding overwatch?
- When should scouts transition from mounted to dismounted reconnaissance techniques?
- How can a troop best prepare to transition from security to reconnaissance operations?
- When should a unit move its mission command and sustainment nodes?
- How can a cavalry troop conducting security operations, or an infantry company behind it, best prepare to conduct a rearward passage of lines?

During decisive action, units must navigate transitions on a daily basis. Leaders who are able to lead their unit through transitions smoothly increase their unit's chance of success because they are able to seize and maintain the initiative. While leaders are typically successful at preparing for specified or anticipated transitions, they struggle more at accurately anticipating transitions. Leaders at all levels should optimize their ability to anticipate transitions by providing adequate guidance to their subordinates and by developing their intuition and judgement.

Gary M. Klein is currently a student at the Army's Command and General Staff College. He has served as a cavalry troop commander, headquarters troop commander, tank company executive officer, and tank platoon leader. Gary has also served as an observer coach-trainer at the Joint Readiness Training Center and a small group leader at the Maneuver Captain's Career Course. Twitter: @garymklein

[1] The author was an observer-coach trainer at JRTC from 2014-2015.

[2] Department of the Army, *ATP 5-0.1: Army Design Methodology* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 2015), Appendix A.

[3] Neil R. McCown, "Developing Intuitive Decision-Making in Modern Military Leadership" (Naval War College, 2010), www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/navy/nwc_mccown.pdf.

[4] Two great resources for existing TDEs are the Marine Corps Gazette (<https://www.mca-marines.org/gazette-department/tactical-decision-games>) and current and former Small Group Leaders from the Maneuver Captain's Career Course, the author included. One of the better guides for developing TDEs is "MCI 8104: Tactical Decision Making," one of the other references in this article.

[5] Marine Corps Institute, "MCI 8104: Tactical Decision Making," p.6-8.

[6] John M. Peters and Joseph L. Armstrong, “Collaborative Learning: People Laboring Together to Construct Knowledge,” *New Directions for Adult and Continuing Education*, no. 79 (Fall 1998): 75-85; Marine Corps Institute, “MCI 8104: Tactical Decision Making” (Marine Corps Institute: Staff Noncommissioned Officers Career Distance Education Program), accessed March 1, 2017, www.au.af.mil/au/awc/awcgate/usmc/tactical_decision_making.pdf, p.6-8 - 6-9.

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