



by Dilan Swift and Daniel Phillips

Much has been written about Frederick the Great's "[Coup d'oeil](#)." In translation, "stroke of the Eye" was coined to define one's ability to observe, intuit, and correctly act in each situation. As combat arms leaders trusted to make quick decisions in uncertainty, how can we learn to trust our own intuition? Is there more we can do to open our experiential aperture and hone that all-too-familiar "gut feeling?"

Whether formally trained or not, leaders must strive to develop an intuition that enables success and prevents the unnecessary loss of lives. By understanding how intuition is developed, leaders can readily forge tactical consciousness to aid in rapidly assessing

situations, decisive action, and ultimately, trust one's gut.

The Limbic System

First, it is imperative to understand where our intuition, or “gut feeling,” originates. In large part, the [feelings of familiarity](#) and memory we get when encountering familiar situations is derived from our limbic system. This system is composed of nerves, networks, and structures including the hippocampus, amygdala, hypothalamus, and limbic cortex. Together, it serves many [key functions](#) and is primarily responsible for our emotional lives but also for higher mental functions, such as learning and formation of [memories](#). Specifically, the amygdala plays a role in developing emotions while the hippocampus plays an essential role in forming new memories about past experiences. Both structures are key in developing intuition, a survival mechanism that subconsciously assesses new situations against a context of ingrained memories.

In terms of memory, there are a few [types](#) worth noting; explicit/declaratory (facts and events) and implicit/non-declaratory. Implicit memories are key in recognizing and contextualizing patterns and behavior and general association. These memories form a backdrop as we contextualize situations and experiences.

While the hippocampus controls the creation, storing, and retrieval of memories that contextualize our world, the amygdala regulates how we feel about new experiences and situations. This emotional center is where we develop our feelings of right and wrong in each situation that is often subconsciously generated from and compared to past experiences (managed by the hippocampus). While the limbic system is an area that controls these feelings of intuition and decision making, it does not control our language or our ability to communicate. As a result, something may or may not “feel right” and we will not always know why. This is where our [“gut feelings”](#) and “gut decisions” come from. The question then remains; if we know how we develop intuition, our “gut feelings”, how do we

know if it is worth trusting?

Train Your Brain - Experiential Learning

While many learning theories apply in developing intuition and context for leaders, [Experiential Learning Theory](#) (ELT) is most in sync with how tactical leaders train and educate. Introduced in 1984 by David A. Kolb, the theory [holds](#) people learn best through discovery and experiences. While rote memorization, classroom instruction, and lectures have their place, hands on experience is more attuned with the technical and tactical elements required in most military skill sets. Although there are [variable retention rates](#) based on subject, age, and the ways in which subjects are tested, Kolb's theory holds that participatory, or experience-based learning, is [retained](#) to a much greater degree.

ELT is characterized by [four stages](#): concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. Although each element is important in ingraining experiential learning, education researchers stress the importance of the second step, reflection:

[Continued reflection](#) upon earlier experiences...add to and transform them into deeper understanding....The quality of reflective thought brought by the learner is of greater significance to the eventual learning outcomes than the nature of the experience itself. Learning is the process whereby knowledge is created through the transformation of experience.

Leaders are responsible for crafting experiential learning opportunities and forcing quality reflection to imbed a versatile tactical intuition. We must seek opportunities to provide our warfighters with concrete tactical experiences and facilitate reflective observation too often eschewed.

As leaders, there are many elements of training we cannot control. Ammunition allocations,

range availability, and our subordinate's skill dictate what we can do to train our unit at any given point in time. These factors could be used as an excuse for ineffective training. Furthermore, when leaders do plan effective training, focusing on quantifiable hard skills is much easier than crafting immersive intuition-building experiences. Resource-intensive and clearly prescribed in training and readiness manuals, this type of technical training is straightforward and measurable but captures only one side of the coin. Interestingly, the other side, the artistic and tactical element of warfighting, needs far fewer resources. All that is needed is an inquisitive, open mind and warfighting leaders eager to guide their warriors through learning experiences with deliberate reflection.

Recommendations

Unfortunately, understanding the science of adult learning and adaptation does not guarantee we can trust our gut when it is needed most in crises. What leaders need is a training and education construct that raises subordinate intuitional capabilities.

In other words, we want to give them:

- A vast store of experiences and context to draw on to make intuitive decisions
- Increased repetitions at making decisions, both deliberate and implicit, in complex environments
- Training and education that harnesses physiological strengths inherent to humans

We want to ensure we focus not just on the science of war, but the art as well. In other words, the tactical application of technical skills, not just technical skills in-and-of themselves.

While technical skills can be taught and learned through rote memorization and drills, the artistic tactical skills, by contrast, are much more difficult to learn, and even more difficult

to contextualize during an actual tactical situation. For example, the easiest task one will face is technically employing one's weapon system. Employing it appropriately in a tactical situation is a whole other matter.

To effectively imbue warfighters with a tactical sub-consciousness, combat arms leaders should consider prioritizing a combination of force-on-force training, wargaming, and a deliberate reading program that fills the spaces between.

1. 1. Professional Reading

General Mattis once [wrote](#) that thanks to his lifelong passion for reading he has “never been caught flat footed by any situation, never at a loss for how any problem has been addressed before.” He claimed reading “doesn't give...all the answers, but it lightens what is often a dark path ahead.” By his own admission, his tactical and operational successes were informed by a vast context he developed through expansive personal reading. In the paradigm of training and education being discussed, reading plays a crucial component. Unlike other reading programs, an effective unit program must be structured to tie in lessons from other elements of training. Namely, force-on-force exercises, wargaming, and historical immersion. It is not enough to let our warriors simply read what interests them; rather we must get them interested in what will create the biggest positive impact for their education while conducting training. Reading in this sense is like the background of a painting: broad and expansive, but not the primary focus. The other elements will be the details - the most important parts of the painting - that would otherwise be meaningless without the background.

2. Force-on-force.

The background of reading contextualizes the most powerful training arena currently

undergoing a [renaissance](#) in the Marine Corps: force-on-force training in the physical domain. No other manner of training can so deeply provide the realism needed to embed the context of decisions into the warfighters psyche. Referencing the Learning Retention Pyramid, “Play Exercises” are at the higher end of the spectrum, subordinate only to coaching. What we seek is to create the tough, standards-based, realistic training structured in a way that Marines can make decisions *and live with the consequences*. Often, our warriors lose sight of the back end of decision making because they are experienced solely on paper (as in war gaming or reading) or the training is so artificial as to make it a non-factor. As leaders we must create training plans that prioritize force-on-force training at a regular interval and encourage our warriors to engage in tactically competitive hobbies in their leisure time (airsoft and paintball clubs are prevalent in and around many major bases). Whether leaders craft force-on-force engagements using simulated munitions, [instrumented systems](#), or through dry-fire field exercises and physical tactical decision games, the most difficult aspect from a practical standpoint is that trainers need to structure these environments in a way decision making is continually forced upon the target audience. To put it another way, leaders must ensure junior warfighters are not only formally vested with the power to make decisions but allowed to make them in execution and then complete the evolution with coached reflection.

3. Wargaming

In a similar sense, force-on-force engagements should also be played out in a strictly mental realm by using wargaming to the maximum extent possible. Wargaming, in this context, is the broad umbrella of any conflict played out on paper, a computer, or board game against one or more adversaries. In its original, exhaustingly entitled German form [Anleitung zur Darstellung militaerischer Manoever mit dem Apparat des Kriegs-spiels](#) (Instruction for Representation of Military Maneuvers under the Guise of a War Game, 1824), the modern “wargame” was created and honed by the Prussian General Staff in the 1800’s. Wargaming amongst officers and SNCOs at all levels was a precious tool that could be used to hone

tactical mindsets, practice operation plans, experiment with new tactics, and develop rapid decision making in times of peace. *Kriegsspiele* (wargames) take many forms today. We are most familiar with Tactical Decision Games (TDGs) but various video games (Company of Heroes, Total War series, Hearts of Iron, Combat Mission Series), and board and tabletop games (Memoir '44, Axis and Allies, Flames of War) are plentiful and rewarding as long as deliberate, reflective, thought is utilized to draw out warfighting lessons. Some of the biggest advantages of wargaming is it can even be conducted alone (against a computer) and with almost no monetary investment (as we commonly see with TDGs).

Junior leaders should begin with educating themselves on how to plan, execute, and debrief various wargames they use. Academics and [leaders](#) across the services offer a bevy of [advice](#) and [recommendations](#) on what wargames to play and how to make the best use of them. Wargaming is particularly unique because it allows Marines to fight an infinite number of tactical engagements without expending anything more than time. Further, it is yet another avenue to foster competition and force decision making in a complex environment that all participants are actively participating in. When coupled with guided reflection, the “why” behind certain decisions can be incredibly illuminating for a warfighter’s subordinates, peers, and leaders.

Closing Thoughts

While it is true that a healthy dose of [humility](#) is required to become better learners, teachers and trainers, it is equally true there is no replacement for hard earned experience and the intuition that follows. While no true panacea exists, leaders’ openness to the supplementary tools discussed expose warfighters to the complexity of deciding and acting in a complex environment. By reading and studying history and immersing ourselves in physical geography and the decision making of our predecessors, leaders can imbue as much experience as possible from those who came before.

Through judicious use of force-on-force exercises and war gaming, leaders can hone skills and refine intuition. Combining this with a deeper understanding of how adults learn and retain knowledge will better equip leaders to better design training experiences crucial to intuitive decision making. As warfighting institutions continue to train, leaders would wisely leverage these practices. In so doing, we can develop tactical intuition, heighten decision making abilities, and build a gut worth trusting.

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