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## Chapter 5

# Adapting

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*“Victory smiles upon those who anticipate the changes in the character of war, not upon those who wait to adapt themselves after they occur.”*<sup>1</sup>

—Giulio Douhet

*“In any problem where an opposing force exists, and cannot be regulated, one must foresee and provide for alternative courses. Adaptability is the law which governs survival in war as in life—war being but a concentrated form of the human struggle against environment.”*<sup>2</sup>

—B. H. Liddell Hart



The modern battlefield is characterized by friction, uncertainty, disorder, and rapid change. Each situation is a unique combination of shifting factors that cannot be controlled with precision or certainty. This chapter discusses ways to think about adapting or modifying our decisions based on changed circumstances or sudden opportunities. A tactically proficient leader must be able to adapt actions to each situation.

The OODA loop discussed in chapter 4 essentially describes the process of adaptation—we observe the situation, orient to it, decide what to do, and act. The antagonist who can consistently adapt more quickly to the situation will have a significant advantage. Adaptability is thus an important part of Marine Corps tactics. In essence, adaptability means shortening the time it takes to adjust to each new situation.

There are two basic ways to adapt. Sometimes we have enough situational awareness to understand a situation in advance and take preparatory action. This is *anticipation*. At other times we have to adapt to the situation on the spur of the moment without time for preparation. This is *improvisation*. To be fully adaptable, we must be able to do both.

## ANTICIPATION

The first basic way to adapt is to anticipate, by which we mean to introduce new methods, schemes, or techniques *for future use*. In order to anticipate, we must be able to forecast future actions, at least to some extent. Our forecasts are usually based on past experiences. Often a forecast involves considering what we learned through trial and error in training, exercises, or actual combat. An excellent example of anticipation is the Marine Corps' development of amphibious warfare techniques at Quantico during the 1920s and 1930s. These techniques proved to be essential to success in World War II, both in the Pacific and in Europe.

All planning at all echelons is a form of anticipatory adaptation—adapting our actions in advance. Another important tool for tactical adaptation is the use of immediate-action drills or standing operating procedures. These are practiced, pre-designed, generic actions which cover common situations. Having a collection of these tools at our disposal allows us to react immediately *in a coordinated way* to a broad variety of tactical situations. Immediate-action drills do not replace the need for tactical judgment; they merely provide a way to seize initiative in the early stages of a developing situation until we can take more considered action. They provide the basis for adaptation.

## IMPROVISATION

The second basic way to adapt is to improvise, to adjust to a situation *on the spur of the moment without any preparation*. Like anticipation, improvisation is key to maneuver warfare. Improvisation requires creative, intelligent, and experienced leaders who have an intuitive appreciation for what will work and what will not.

Improvisation is of critical importance to increasing speed. It requires commanders who have a strong situational awareness and a firm understanding of their senior commander's intent so that they can adjust their own actions in accordance with the higher commander's desires. Often we will find ourselves in a situation where our organic resources—weapons, vehicles, and so on—are not adequate to keep us moving fast. In France in 1940, German General Heinz Guderian put some of his infantry in commandeered French buses. On Grenada, when Army Rangers needed vehicles, they took East German trucks belonging to the Grenadian army. Sound unorthodox? There is nothing “orthodox” about failure due to an inability to adapt.

For instance, take the situation in which Marines of the 2d Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment, found themselves in the battle of Hue City, Republic of Vietnam, in February 1968. One of

their first objectives was to retake the city's Treasury building, which was heavily defended by the North Vietnamese. Prior to the assault, the Marines were disappointed to see that their mortar fire was having little effect on the building or its defenders. Then the battalion executive officer found some U.S. tear gas canisters and dispensers in the Military Assistance compound they had reoccupied. Realizing the North Vietnamese lacked gas masks, the Marines proceeded to lob the tear gas canisters into the Treasury building. As a result of the executive officer's quick thinking and adaptation, the North Vietnamese quickly vacated the building, and the Marines secured the objective with minimal casualties.<sup>3</sup>

## FLEXIBLE PLANS

We have several techniques to help us develop adaptability. One of these is to make flexible plans. Flexible plans can enhance adaptability by establishing a course of action that provides for multiple options. For example, a blocking position that covers two avenues of approach from the same location instead of only one provides the flexibility to adapt to an enemy coming through either avenue.

We can increase our flexibility by providing *branches* for current and future operations. Branches are options (e.g., changing dispositions, orientation, strength, movement, or

accepting or declining battle) to deal with changing conditions on the battlefield that may affect the plan.<sup>4</sup>

Flexibility can also be increased by providing *sequels* for current and future operations. Sequels are courses of action to follow probable battle or engagement outcomes; victory, defeat, or stalemate.<sup>5</sup>

The value of branches and sequels is that they prepare us for several different actions. We should keep the number of branches and sequels to a relative few. We should not try to develop so many branches and sequels that we cannot adequately plan, train, or prepare for any of them. The skillful, well-thought-out use of branches and sequels becomes an important means of anticipating future courses of action. This anticipation helps accelerate the decision cycle and therefore increases tempo.

Flexible plans avoid unnecessary detail that not only consumes time in their development but has a tendency to restrict subordinates' latitude. Instead, flexible plans lay out what needs to be accomplished but leave the manner of accomplishment to subordinates. This allows the subordinates the flexibility to deal with a broader range of circumstances.

Flexible plans are plans that can be easily changed. Plans that require coordination are said to be "coupled." If all the parts of a plan are too tightly coupled, the plan is harder to change because changing any one part of the plan means

changing all the other parts. Instead, we should try to develop modular, loosely coupled plans. Then if we change or modify any one part of the plan, it does not directly affect all the other parts.<sup>6</sup>

Finally, flexible plans should be simple plans. Simple plans are easier to adapt to the rapidly changing, complex, and fluid situations that we experience in combat.

## DECENTRALIZATION

Another excellent way to improve adaptability is to decentralize decisionmaking authority as much as each situation allows. This means that commanders on the scene and closest to the events have the latitude to deal with the situation as required *on their own authority*—but always in accordance with the higher commander's intent. This decentralization speeds up reaction time: we do not have to wait for information to flow up to a higher commander and orders to flow back down. It increases the responsiveness of the organization, which in turn increases adaptability. Decentralizing control through the use of mission orders is one of the tools we use to maximize our ability to adapt.

Confidence in the abilities of subordinates plays an important part in decentralization. Leaders who have confidence in



the capabilities of their subordinates will feel more comfortable in granting them greater latitude in accomplishing tasks. It fosters a climate where senior leaders know that their intent will be carried out. This was particularly true for the 1st Battalion, 7th Marines, during Operation Desert Storm. As the battalion began breaching operations for the advance of the 1st Marine Division across the first two Iraqi mine belts, Marines were suddenly overwhelmed with “ ‘hundreds upon hundreds of Iraqis sporting white flags’ ”<sup>7</sup> who were trying to surrender. The number was so great that it threatened to stop the Marine advance. However, the battalion commander immediately recognized the situation, judged that the Iraqis were harmless, and instructed the battalion not to stop to accept their surrender. “It was precisely the . . . type of local situation that [the division commander] wanted his commanders to recognize and use their own initiative to correct.”<sup>8</sup> Here the commanding officer who was closest to the situation and who understood the division commander’s intent not to lose the momentum of the advance adapted to the situation. This adaptation resulted in a rapid breach of Iraqi defenses.

## **CONCLUSION**

Successful warfare is filled with examples of leaders adapting to changing situations. We must start to learn how to adapt

now during our training. Leaders should value and encourage innovative thinking. Moreover, they should expect creative thinking from their subordinates because it creates new opportunities.

For adaptation to be effective, commanders must readily exploit the opportunities uncovered by subordinates. Commanders cannot remain tied to plans that blind them to fleeting opportunities. While making the best possible preparations, they must welcome and take advantage of unforeseen opportunities.