



# Beware Hair-trigger Responses

BY RICHARD MARTIN

Leaders must be capable of rational, calm judgment no matter what the situation, however we've witnessed enough hair-trigger responses and shoot-from-hip pronouncements in recent months to last a lifetime. The corrosive effects of acting and speaking without a reasonably accurate understanding of the situation have resulted in poorly thought out decisions and over-generalizations that pander to fears and prejudice—from all sides.

“First information is usually wrong, so don't overreact.”

I heard the following words of wisdom when I deployed as a company commander on peacekeeping duty in Bosnia in the late 90s: First information is usually wrong, so don't overreact. This has become my motto ever since. The whole philosophy of peacekeeping is predicated on keeping belligerents apart so they don't overreact to provocations—real and imagined—and start another round of fighting. This gives time for cooler heads and thinking to prevail. Neutral observers seek to determine whether mutual recriminations are founded before declaring a breach of agreements and whether there will be corrective or punitive action.

This strategy was vital during the Cold War. As shown in fascinating detail in Sean Maloney's book, *Canada and UN Peacekeeping*, the idea of separating belligerents after a ceasefire and during protracted negotiations originated in the fear of escalation from “brushfire”

wars to a global thermonuclear exchange between superpowers. This stemmed from the realization that war might break out because of miscommunication, provocation, misinterpretation, and inadequate understanding. The solution was to buy time to cool off, exchange information, and develop intelligence and better options before launching rockets or dropping bombs.

Thus, were developed a series of ingenious, if not always successful, measures to avoid hair-trigger responses, to confirm first information and not overreact: peacekeeping, UN observers, sanctions, hotlines, escalation strategies, and better reconnaissance, all intending to avoid over-reacting at the slightest provocation.

Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative (SDI), the so called “Star Wars” plan, can be viewed as part of this ongoing process. The declared intent of SDI was to defend against a rogue or erroneous launch of a limited number of ICBMs against the continental US without necessarily launching a nuclear counter-strike. This would give time to react, investigate, negotiate, and de-escalate the situation, and if necessary, retaliate in a measured fashion.

SDI was widely derided at the time of the announcement and during the subsequent years of funding and R&D. Anti-nuclear, peace, and environmental activists all accused Reagan of wanting to develop a defensive shield over North America that would render the United States safe from an all-out attack, thus encouraging a first-strike against the Soviet Union. Interestingly, this was also the position taken by many academic pundits as well as the Soviet leadership.

Whether those claims are true or not, SDI was meant to buy time to slow down and think before acting in haste and frustration. What could be more logical and reasonable than that? Whatever happens, or whatever

one feels, reason must prevail in decision-making, because emotions are a poor guide to action, especially for leaders.

This column is titled “Defence Leadership,” and we can easily see how the preceding discussion is applicable for defence and military leaders, starting at the highest levels with national policy, proceeding through the strategic, operational, and tactical levels of leadership and decision-making. But there are many lessons and applications that go well beyond the military and defence sphere.

I've seen many a business executive and entrepreneur take hasty action in the face of incomplete information and without a full appreciation of the potential consequences of their decisions. Moreover, decisions are often presented as all or nothing, when in reality there is always a range of options and solutions that can be applied. They have risks—and rewards—but you can't do a proper, cool-headed assessment if you're rushing headlong into a decision at the first provocation or hint of change. Adaptation? Good. Over-reaction? Not good.

There are many tools at a leader's disposal to create a space and time for deliberate and cool-headed decision-making, and these are applicable whether you're in government, defence, or business. I've discussed many such ideas in the column and in my other writings: precisely defining the aim and factors of the decision at hand; all-points reconnaissance; scenario-based planning; taking the perspective of other stakeholders; war gaming options; and mission-based leadership and planning.

Whatever you do, always remember this. First information is usually wrong, so don't overreact! Find out what's happening and, barring a life-threatening situation, you can usually buy time to gain understanding and formulate an effective plan.

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