

Title: TALKING GUNS

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The ability to notice the one thing that is out of place can mean the difference between life and death. This could also be explained as the ability to notice, interpret and act upon a weak signal, that feeling that something is not working the way it should and investigating the problems in a timely manner so that the problem can be avoided. The development of this ability can be helpful in many environments. Depending on your experience and that of others, trusting your instincts must be encouraged at all level within the HRO. The feeling that something is out of place is evidence enough to move forward with the understanding that something is “not right”.

During my career as a United States Marine and as a Respiratory Care Practitioner, trusting my instinct and encouraging others to do the same is essential to team success. This was learned during a military training operation. This exercise consisted of a standard platoon size unit of U.S. Marines attacking and or defending specific positions. I was a Staff Sergeant (mid-level manager) performing a supervisory role during the exercise. Other supervisors and I became concerned that there was something wrong during the initial evolutions, but we were unable to put our finger on the problems. As the second evolutions began we agreed that things did not sound right.

Automatic machine gun deployment usually consists of a minimum of two guns being employed in supportive roles. These guns create a distinct sound called, “Talking

Guns.” This occurs when guns alternate firing to reduce over heating of the barrel, to change ammunition, and to make barrel changes due to over heating. Specifically, the guns avoid firing at the same time. This produces a distinctive sound during combat operations.

The absence of this sound resulted in the exercise being stopped for review of operations. It was discovered that a Sergeant (Team Leader) was attempting to control the individual actions of each of the gun teams. This led to him running between gun positions to give individual instructions to the automatic machine gun operators, which changed the sound of the guns. He believed that he was directly responsible for the safety of the gun team and the issuing of all ammunition. His failure to delegate or acknowledge that each gun team was sufficiently trained to accomplish their appropriate duties put the entire operation at risk. He was encouraged to trust his subordinates to perform as trained and if not to make corrections via additional instruction, not by taking complete control. Upon discovery the Sergeant was given closer supervision by a more experienced team leader and the exercise was resumed. This was to ensure the Sergeant was given steering guidance during his decision making process.

At the completion of the entire exercise an after action review was conducted in detail. The supervisors agreed that our experience and gut responses led to the discovery of the problem. This highlighted the fact that experience is important when making corrections in a high stress environment and it needs to be developed in the subordinates.

Moving on to other organizations the points highlighted during the “Talking Guns” experience were beneficial. The big challenge was how to get others to listen for weak

signal or as described at the time, “What is your gut telling you?” Discussions with small team leaders began with, “What is your gut telling you?” Moving from that point we looked for details that were missing or out of place in a situation. This was helpful in the field, office and especially in areas where safety was very important. Asking the team leader to interpret his/her gut feeling or asking him/her to go back over things resulted in the development of this skill set. Was failure avoided maybe, maybe not at that time it was not a research project, but did it improve the team leaders, yes. They worked at avoiding failures and develop creative tools to monitor the flow of information. The exchange at the small unit leader level was improved as they began to share their feeling and instincts on the matter. Additionally, encouraging managers to focus on what they knew about a situation from their experience proved positive in accessing a situation. Your inherent knowledge needs to be accessed and members of the team need to be encouraged to approach problems in the same way. Trust your feeling in every situation.