

Comparing Military and Business Leaders

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I am sometimes asked about my view of the difference between leadership in the military and leadership in the business world. There are, of course, many similarities. The manuals describing the desired traits and behaviors of the American military leader cite attributes that appear to be universally prized: attention to the mission, caring for subordinates, making the intent of the commander clear, physical courage, and willingness to sacrifice for the benefit of the larger community.

The challenges faced by military or business leaders become more similar the higher one moves up the organizational ladder. Americans who become leaders in either area typically have similar value systems regarding the larger issues of life. (This is more believable for those of us who have had the opportunity to observe both arenas closely.) Yet there are differences:

Army officers spend at least twice as much time in classrooms over their career as do their civilian equivalents. One of the significantly different background characteristics between Army brigadier generals and their corporate counterparts is that 95 percent of the generals have a master's or higher degree, whereas about 35 percent of the corporate leaders have attained that level of formal education.

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Most of the differences in styles or methods of leadership can be related to differences in the cultures. The basis of the military culture is the oath taken that puts mission accomplishment above life itself. The expectation of personal sacrifice is key. Fundamental allegiance is neither to boss nor

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to unit but to the Constitution of the United States. The assumption regarding personal sacrifice—be it time and energy in peacetime or life and limb in combat—does put a different light on things. It encourages a strong conservatism that can manifest itself as suspicion of change on one hand while nourishing risk and adventure on the other. (The warrior ethos, which is critical to the professional soldier, needs to be contained and focused or it becomes dysfunctional as a peacetime modus operandi.)

The culture of the military continues to place even more emphasis on personal character than on personal expertise. Trustworthiness, of course, remains the essential medium in any leadership situation. It is more greatly prized under the extraordinarily

demanding circumstances typical of the operational military environment. Although military organizations have experienced the same leap in complexity as the rest of our world, with technical competence obviously a contemporary requirement, the bedrock of a soldier's professional reputation is "character."

The military cannot practice its business in context except on the battlefield. All peacetime activities are in part a simulation. During training, military surgeons and computer operators and truck drivers perform tasks similar to those in wartime. Still, without the terrible realities of battle even the most arduous of training exercises cannot replicate the pace and stress of combat. As a corollary to this situation, accurately evaluating the effectiveness of a military unit presents a formidable challenge. (There is almost the same level of complexity and ambiguity in evaluating corporate productivity, although this fact is too rarely recognized.)

There is only one military in our nation. You are either in or out. There are no lateral transfers to another military. In other words, the "company" is also the entire profession. Although assignments may have a great range of diversity (for instance, from doing behavioral science research, to developing a new aircraft, to procuring repair parts, to commanding a submarine), these are all played out in the same basic culture.

All leaders in the military are promoted from within—with almost no

exceptions. Every general has been a second lieutenant. Promotions up through the grade of major general are normally made without reference to a specific position to be filled. Promotion decisions are centralized. A board of officers assembles in Washington and votes from extensive files on each of the eligible candidates. Only at the three- and four-star levels are officers routinely selected and promoted to fill a particular vacancy.

Living within the military culture bonds people together. Such things as sharing hardships over the years in strange and often inhospitable places, being on call twenty-four hours a day, and all too frequently flying away in the dead of night for an undetermined stay creates enduring ties. Strong teams and strong feelings develop. This cohesion—essential, a source of satisfaction and comfort, and a wonderful catalyst for teamwork—is also recognized as a potential hindrance to requisite individual and organizational growth, change, and adaptation.

TRACK RECORDS

In general, leadership in the military is different. (There are obviously some situations of dramatically different context.) But the differences are rarely fundamental, and are easily overstated. Whether in business or in the military, people rise to positions of high responsibility basically through the long-term demonstration of those skills and behaviors essential to organizational productivity and in harmony with the culture. Good leaders and good cultures have a remarkable similarity across the broad range of organizations within American society.

There is one additional factor that influences leadership in the military. It's the obvious, but significant, fact that soldiers are expected to die if necessary to accomplish the task at hand. This can create remarkable leadership situations.

During the first twelve hours on the beaches of Normandy on June 6,

1944, our Army took more casualties than it did in any twelve months of the Vietnam War. We can now see more clearly than we did then how weather, human error, and German fortitude combined to turn Omaha Beach into a horrible killing zone. But what happened in the face of this was truly a decentralized, empowered event.

There were instances of generals and colonels taking a heroic initiative here and there. For the most part, however, the beach assault was an unorganized mass of intermixed units with little or no functioning chain of command. Something took charge. Individuals moved forward, took initiative, took risks, and displayed awesome courage. Ad hoc teams formed on the beaches,

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and in fields and woods inland, where paratroopers had been scattered over the landscape miles away from their planned drop zones. A friend of mine, then a captain, landed way off course. He collected a dozen soldiers who had parachuted into the same area. This newly formed team had been without sleep for more than forty-eight hours, and during that time they were subjected to extreme physical and mental stress. In single file alongside a road, they heard a large formation of German infantry approaching in the twilight. The captain signaled to lie down and take cover, hoping to avoid detection. Thinking they might have to fight right there if discovered, he pulled the safety pin from a grenade

and held the grenade in his hand, his arm cocked to throw, as he lay down. Many minutes later, he woke—with the grenade still clutched in his hand and the pin out! He and every member of his team were so exhausted that they fell instantly to sleep when they hit the dirt. Awakening, they resumed their mission and were among those causing terror and confusion to the enemy until linking up with the troops that had come ashore across the beaches.

Here we see initiative, persistence, commitment—from a group of people, 90 percent of whom had been relatively carefree civilians just two or three years before. The catalyst for such a remarkable performance must have been the shared value of a mission that was seen as worthy of sacrifice. Leaders must have been instrumental in building that commitment. The “building” phase of leading might have been even more critical to tactical success than was the leadership in the crucial “operating” period.

BUILDING COMMITMENT

I would like to close by pointing out that, of course, business is not war. I object to military terminology being used in the corporate context. It trivializes the military vocabulary and debases the conduct of business. That said, obviously there remain lessons from the military and the battlefield that are useful in leadership within the nonmilitary world. It is tempting to say that behaviors of prompt decision making or overwhelming charisma are the key lessons. But we know it is more sophisticated. Building essential, informed commitment to the organization, a commitment that can sustain creative independent action, is the secret ingredient and the true legacy of great leaders. ✍

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