

Four Lessons in Adaptive Leadership

by Michael Useem

The armed services have been in the business of leadership development much longer than the corporate world has. For more than two centuries, America has trained its officers to be effective leaders in combat and beyond—the U.S. Military Academy at West Point dates to 1802. But warfare has changed, and so has business.

Military leaders need new tools and techniques to face a fast-changing and unpredictable type of enemy—so the armed services train their officers in ways that build a culture of readiness and commitment. Business leaders need just such a culture to survive and succeed, given that they, too, face unprecedented uncertainty—and new types of competitors.

That's why my colleagues at Wharton and I incorporate military leadership principles into our MBA and executive MBA programs, through direct contact with members of the U.S. Army, the U.S. Marine Corps, and the Department of Defense. Students have the opportunity to engage with top leaders from the

armed services, participate in military training exercises, and visit historic battlefields. Most events are brief—one or two days long—but all are intense.

Anchoring learning moments in such experiences, we believe, brings the leadership precepts to life. In this article, I focus on four of them: Meet the troops, make decisions, focus on mission, and convey strategic intent. Most managers understand that these are essential for leadership. But seeing them embodied, experiencing them personally, and witnessing where they made a difference is what drives them home.

Meet the Troops

Creating a personal link is crucial to leading people through challenging times.

An important facet of our business leadership program entails bringing military officers to campus. Here's how one day played out when the Chairman of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff visited our MBA classrooms.

It is 10 minutes before class time, and many

of the 65 first-year students are taking their assigned seats in a tiered classroom. The general strides into the room—four stars on his epaulets and a half-dozen staffers and security agents close behind. He walks straight to the first row and introduces himself to the nearest student. He shakes hands, exchanges a few personal words, and then moves on to the next student. He's working the room, and after several minutes he reaches a student from Moscow in the third row.

Normally animated before class begins, the students are eerily silent as they witness what unfolds. The Russian student says that his father was a general in the Red Army and served on the other side of the Cold War. The general pauses and then replies that he and the student's father undoubtedly had many similar experiences and that he would welcome the chance to have a round of vodka together if the Russian general were to visit the U.S. The students are visibly relieved to see the chairman instantly find common ground across a historic divide.

In another classroom on another visit to the school, a student reports that as an active Marine reservist, he has been called up to fight in Iraq and will soon have to take leave from his MBA program. The student asks the general what he thinks about the deployment and the disruption. The general responds simply, "Congratulations!" The students are reminded that in the world of the armed forces, national service is the calling, whatever the personal costs or benefits. By implication, the organization should be put first in business, whatever the individual calculus, and it is important for leaders to repeatedly affirm that.

Earlier in his military career, the general was responsible for some 92,000 troops ready for assignment to hot spots including Bosnia and Somalia, and he adopted a policy of having a personal interaction with everybody under his command every year. Sometimes he would meet with a few troops in a small venue; more often he'd attend a gathering of thousands in an airport hangar. But always he strove to make the events as personal as possible. An individual handshake, a brief look in the eyes: Those small actions make an indelible impression, serving to focus attention and ensure retention of the mission and message that a leader seeks to convey.

Make Decisions

Making good and timely calls is the crux of responsibility in a leadership position.

Twice a year, we arrange for 90 MBA students to participate in a learning exercise with the U.S. Marine Corps's Officer Candidates School at Quantico, Virginia. On arrival, a Marine officer explains the training program; then drill instructors take charge. The next day our students begin the school's Leadership Reaction and Combat courses.

Dawn is brightening at the base, and we are ready to go. Feeling the effects of the drill instructors' harsh tutelage and little sleep in the Marine barracks the night before, the students form five-person "fire teams" for one of the most intense learning experiences any of them are ever likely to endure. At one point, for instance, the instructor explains that they have ten minutes to solve a seemingly unsolvable problem: Move a weighty steel drum from one side of a 10-foot near-vertical barrier to the other side without stepping on the red paint here and there that signifies explosive devices.

One of the teams strategizes and then acts, cleverly managing to move the drum as prescribed. The high fives are short-lived, however, when the Marine instructor berates the team for taking so long to integrate members' suggestions for surmounting the barrier. They moved too slowly, he lectures, and the enemy would most likely have occupied the other side before the students got there. Though stung by the criticism, the students absorb the point. They deliberated too long with too little team leadership before getting into the game.

The ability to make fast and effective decisions that draw quickly upon the insights of all those on the front lines is among the defining qualities of combat-ready leadership. It is encoded in a Marine dictum: When you're 70% ready and have 70% consensus, act. Don't shoot from the hip, but also don't wait for perfection. Of course, the 70% is not a strict metric but, rather, a metaphor for the need to balance deliberation and action.

The lesson is directly applicable to the corporate boardroom or executive suite: If you can't learn to make good and timely decisions under ambiguous conditions, you've chosen the wrong calling.

Focus on Mission

Establish a common purpose, buttress those

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who will help you achieve it, and eschew personal gain.

After dinner at the Quantico officers' club, a Marine general explains to the MBA students that in combat a commander must unequivocally commit to two objectives: (1) Accomplish the mission, and (2) Bring all your people back from the battlefield, whatever their condition. Mission first, then team, then self.

That central point was underscored in another program that we helped conduct with an executive team from one of America's biggest financial institutions.

The participants are ensconced early in the day in a classroom at West Point as two of the academy's instructors offer their views on military leadership and its implications for corporate leadership. Then, donning Kevlar helmets and camouflage paint, the senior bankers dive into the physical trials of a leadership reaction course similar to the one the MBA students experienced at Quantico. A series of demanding tasks—such as bridging a gap with little time and few materials or slithering across a set of wobbly, widely separated chains with no obvious path—await them. The teams tackle problem after problem, their ranks steadily depleting as individuals step on those deadly splotches of red paint.

An after-action review—the military's lauded method for assessing a mission to improve future performance—is held as the participants motor back to a company conference center. One of the senior managers speaks forcefully. Too often at the bank, he observes, managers are unfazed when colleagues step on a red splotch, committing a career-damaging mistake by, say, taking on too much risk. Many secretly believe that their own careers will prosper as others' falter. But what is good for the individual manager is not necessarily good for the company. Mission must come first, self-interest last. Creating company value, not the pursuit of private value, he says, should drive leadership actions.

On the West Point combat course the bankers learned the hard way to warn fellow "soldiers" about the red paint. Only after several had already touched the explosive devices and were taken out of action did the lesson hit home. The bankers voiced a visceral need in the review session to build a more preemptive culture at their own company. They came home with a strengthened resolve to forewarn

one another when they are getting close to making a career error, even when others' errors may result in their own gain.

Convey Strategic Intent

Make the objectives clear, but avoid micro-managing those who will execute on them.

With both company managers and MBA students, we frequently visit a Civil War battlefield to learn from the history of the armed services, not just its current practices. The armed services have long termed such experiences "staff rides." Military officers in training visit battlefields such as Gettysburg and Normandy to sharpen their strategic thinking by witnessing how others exercised theirs during moments of great significance.

In one case, we traveled to the Gettysburg battlefield with 50 MBA students, a banker, a private equity investor, and a battlefield guide. We gathered on the hill that anchored the far-left flank of the Union army line that formed on July 2, 1863, to defend against the Confederate army. General Robert E. Lee's men had invaded the North to bring the Civil War to an end on Southern terms, and President Abraham Lincoln had sent the Yankee army to prevent just that.

In the exercise, we relive the moment in which a Union commander placed a subordinate officer, Joshua Lawrence Chamberlain, and his 400 soldiers at this end point of the Union line. The commander told them, If the line is overrun by Confederate attackers, the entire Union army will disintegrate. The subordinate officer must hold the left flank, no matter what may come. The commander did not say *how*, but he unequivocally conveyed *what*.

Within minutes of the order, the anticipated attack commenced, and after two hours of intense fighting, Chamberlain's unit had nearly exhausted its ammunition. He knew his position would soon be overrun, but he also knew he must think creatively if he was to carry out to his commander's intent. In the heat of combat he ordered a rarely used tactic of fixing bayonets on the soldiers' empty muskets and charging down the hill. The startling maneuver turned the attackers around and saved the day.

Chamberlain received the nation's highest military recognition, the Medal of Honor, for his valor and inventiveness. Our group stands on the very same ground where he led the charge. As we visualize the moment, we are re-

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mindful of just how important the clear expression of strategic intent can be for achieving any mission. Without his commander's compelling communication of what must be done and without the freedom to decide how to do it, Chamberlain's actions on that history-making hill might have taken a very different turn.

Both the banker and the investor accompanying the MBA students reinforced the message: Conveying strategic intent is one of the skills essential to aligning people across an organization to reach a common goal—and leaders must then rely on the people's ingenuity for getting there.

At Wharton, we have turned to the armed ser-

vices to learn leadership precepts like these. Personally observing microcosms in which we can appreciate the precepts in action enables us to carry them with us for application when we face our own times of great ambiguity, urgency, and stress.

We fight very different battles in business. But the armed services provide exceptionally powerful schooling for engagements that are likely to make a difference. By looking far afield, we can often better see what is close to home.

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