

IMPORTING THE KNOWLEDGE, SKILLS, AND ABILITIES OF EX-MILITARY  
PERSONNEL TO THE BUSINESS ENVIRONMENT

by

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## Case Study---Table of Contents

<b>CASE STUDY</b>	
Introduction ... ..	Page 3
Purpose and Scope of the Study .....	Page 5
Significance to the Writer ... ..	Page 6
Significance of the Study ... ..	Page 7
Broader Implications ... ..	Page 8
Overview of Army Leadership Structure.....	Page 9
Leadership Doctrine Framework ... ..	Page 11
The Army Values ... ..	Page 13
Identification and Discussion of Issues ... ..	Page 17
Questions to be Answered ... ..	Page 17
<b>CASE SOLUTION</b>	
Leadership/Management Literature Review ... ..	Page 18
Culture and Context ... ..	Page 19
Why Hire a Veteran? .....	Page 21
Analysis of the Issues ... ..	Page 26
Conclusion ... ..	Page 28
<b>REFERENCES</b>	
<b>APPENDIXES</b>	
Appendix A – The After Action Review (AAR) ... ..	Page 33
Appendix B – The Operation Order (OPORD) ... ..	Page 34
Appendix C – The NCO Education System ... ..	Page 35
Appendix D – Example and Explanation of the Non-Commissioned Officer Evaluation Report (NCOER) ... ..	Page 37
Appendix E – Example and Explanation of the Certificate Of Release or Discharge from Active Duty ... ..	Page 40
Appendix F – “Apes in a Cage” ... ..	Page 42

### *Introduction*

With the impending wave of retirements resulting from the aging of the baby-boomer generation, many companies face the loss of significant numbers of supervisory and management personnel in the coming years. Many industries will shortly be faced with the need to replace large numbers of highly skilled and experienced leaders. (MacKenzie, 2003) Though in some cases it will be possible to promote their replacements from within, many firms will simply not have enough personnel within their organizations to make up the shortfall. This will necessitate the identification, recruitment and integration of the best possible leader-candidates.

Traditionally, these positions would be recruited from other organizations, but the wide-spread nature of the coming retirement wave suggests that this will not be a tenable solution. Many organizations have followed other routes, such as creating internship programs or “Management Development Assessment Centers”. (Lavigna, 2005) And, it is clear that the business world has long been searching for ways to improve the quality of management and leadership in our organizations: between 1982 and 1992, MBAs granted increased 33%, management consulting revenues grew 334%, management training expenses rose 350%, and sales of management books increased 118%. (Nohria & Berkley, 1998,) However, there is a reservoir of quality candidates that many hiring managers may be overlooking- our military veterans.

The growing population of candidates with experience in the U. S. military provides hiring managers with a pool of talented individuals who possess just the skills and abilities needed to address this imminent shortage. Some are well educated, but

many have not had the opportunity to acquire the same level of education as their peers, due to the constraints imposed by hectic training and deployment schedules.

Nevertheless, by virtue of their military training and experience, they are equally, if not more, capable of succeeding as leaders in a business setting.

Unfortunately, many hiring managers do not possess an in-depth knowledge of the resources available to connect them with the military candidates they seek. If they are able to find viable candidates, they often do not know how to interpret the military records available to help them screen and select potential leadership candidates. Nor are many managers and executives in the business community aware of the vast array of supervisory and management skills that ex-military personnel- even those with as little as four years service- acquire during their time in the armed forces.

Any management team desires to make the most of the human resources available to their organization, and to recruit the best people for their team. Any untapped source of expertise should be closely examined, whether as a dimension of recruiting or as a skill set already present, but not yet fully exploited. In addition, management should have an awareness of the unique perspectives and attitudes of the veteran, to ensure that those already within the organization are given the opportunity to contribute fully to the company. Finally, it is helpful for managers and executives to be aware of how common workplace attitudes, practices, and (frankly) dysfunctions affect the veteran in ways that are different from the average worker.

### *Purpose and Scope of this Study*

It is my intention, first, to clearly state the knowledge, skills, and abilities that are to be expected from veterans who served in the military for a period of 4 to 10 or more years. I will explain the skill set that such an individual should possess, in the areas of leadership, attitudes, and values. I will also explore certain management processes common in the military, (such as the After Action Review), which would be of great value to business organizations, and which such personnel could be expected to implement. Having shown what ex-military can bring to an organization, I will detail the resources available to locate and connect with them. I will present and explain the range of documents that can be provided by ex-military personnel to the hiring manager, which will allow for effective evaluation of the experience, skills and abilities of a prospective leader candidate. Finally, I will address some of the challenges inherent in successfully bridging the gap between the military and business cultures, and in effectively integrating military veterans into your organization.

Naturally, each of the military services has its own unique culture and characteristics, and its own policies and procedures, as well as its own training architecture and leadership doctrine. To effectively present all of this information as it relates to each of the services, individually and in detail, is beyond the scope of this study. Therefore, I will largely concentrate on Army veterans, because my years of service in the Army gave me a much deeper knowledge of these facets of that service. Nevertheless, the concepts presented here apply equally to veterans of all services, and

the information presented here could easily be translated by a veteran of another service to fit the practices thereof.

This subject has great personal significance to the writer. I retired from the Army in 2007, after a twenty-two year career, and secured a job as a Production Supervisor in the shipbuilding industry. I have been employed in that capacity for two years, and my experiences have led me to the inescapable conclusion that leadership is a rare and precious skill in our business. The supervisors we employ are technically skilled, for the most part- that is what leads us to select them to be supervisors in the first place. But they rarely know leadership, and they rarely know management, and we shouldn't be surprised. They never get the opportunity to practice leadership skills before they become supervisors, and the only leadership training they get beforehand comes from observing their own "leaders" in action. These are themselves individuals who often have no leadership training or experience, and have learned how to lead by observing others.

The difference between this situation, and how leaders are selected and trained in the military, is enormous. In the Army, *everyone* is a leader. Leadership training begins in Basic Training, as new soldiers rotate through team leader, squad leader, and platoon guide positions. Immediately upon reporting to their first assignment, they are assessed by their superiors with an eye towards their promotion potential. As they move up through the ranks, the proportion of their job shifts from being mostly technical with some leadership, to mostly leadership with some technical. Leadership becomes a larger and larger part of their metrics for success, and more and more of their time is spent mentoring and developing the junior leaders who will succeed them. For combat arms

soldiers (infantry, armor, and artillery), leadership is possibly our most marketable “technical skill”.

This subject also has special significance to me because it is my goal to secure employment with one of the numerous agencies that assist returning veterans with finding jobs, obtaining educational assistance, or any number of other functions. My military service made me what I am today, and gave me opportunities I might not have found anywhere else. I want to spend the rest of my career helping others to make the most of their service.

My hope is that, with the information gained from this study, managers and executives will look at veterans, especially veterans who do not at first glance seem to possess the management training that is desired, with new eyes. They will better understand the veteran’s level of experience in management and human resource development. They will become familiar with the ethics, attitudes, and values that the veteran brings to the table. With this knowledge in hand, management will be able to better integrate veterans into their organization, get the maximum value from their ex-military personnel, and identify the workplace dysfunctions that have the greatest adverse affects on these valuable members of the team.

#### *Does this Study Apply to Your Business?*

As already stated, many industries face the imminent loss of a significant number of supervisors and managers over the coming years. One study in 2003 found that 90% of managers had more than ten years of experience, and 55% were older than 40; within certain industries, the average age of managers was even closer to retirement.

(MacKenzie, 2003) These numbers regarding management are dramatic, but replacing

them is not the only benefit to be gained by hiring people with military experience. Even if this impending retirement wave was not an issue, ex-military personnel bring a range of skills and abilities to the table that many companies will find it hard to replicate in any other manner.

As will be discussed in greater detail below, four to six years in the military, with service as a mid-grade noncommissioned officer (NCO) provides an individual with a solid grounding in many management practices that are part of the four-year degree curriculum. These include human resources development, training management, counseling, equal opportunity, and other practices. Further service will provide even more expertise in these areas, and much management experience besides. Additionally, veterans typically leave the service with a set of values and a level of discipline that few other experiences can provide. Finally, there are certain attitudes that military service tends to inculcate, such as adaptability, equanimity, perspective, and a willingness to make decisions, attitudes that are very valuable in a manager or supervisor.

### *Broader Implications*

The breadth of issues and performance metrics which are affected by the quality of an organization's leadership is all-encompassing. Leadership obviously affects productivity, quality, and efficiency. It also affects safety (Peterson, 2004), retention and turnover, equipment readiness, wastage, property accountability, human resources development, diversity (Kemp, 2007), succession planning, and any number of other facets of a business's operations. It would not be going too far to state that with effective leadership, anything is possible; without it, all other efforts to improve your organization will be for naught.



### *Overview of Army Leadership Structure*

For the purposes of this discussion, I will, as stated above, primarily focus on Army doctrine, practices and procedures. Though the terminology might be different for different services, most of the practices presented here have equivalents in each of the other services. To attempt to address all of these differences would be cumbersome, to say the least. Therefore, I will attempt to demonstrate my point by introducing you to three soldiers- Sergeant X, Staff Sergeant Y, and Sergeant First Class Z. I will not specify the Military Occupational Specialty (MOS) of each of these soldiers, because frankly, at this point it does not matter. The skills and abilities I wish to address are common to soldiers (and sailors, airmen, and marines) of every specialty. Some might think an infantryman or tank crewman has no skills that can be of use in the business community, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Sergeant X served for four years. He or she attended the Warrior Leaders Course (formerly the Primary Leadership Development Course) as a prerequisite for promotion to Sergeant. As a junior noncommissioned officer, he or she directly supervised from two to six soldiers, on average. The responsibilities inherent in this role were far more comprehensive than that of a mere supervisor, for they extended to the subordinates' off-duty behavior, living standards, and even their families.

Most soldiers at this level are directly responsible for the operation and maintenance of at least one major item of equipment, whether it be a truck, or a combat

vehicle such as a tank. This responsibility extends to maintaining accountability for all tools and equipment associated with the vehicle.

Sergeant X will be expected to present training to his or her soldiers weekly; supervise equipment maintenance at least weekly; conduct performance counseling of all subordinates monthly; inspect the living quarters of all subordinates daily; lead physical training exercises three times a week; maintain at least one minor additional duty area such as key control or energy conservation; and mentor subordinates for upcoming promotion boards and other events, all in addition to the normal day-to-day business of their unit and specialty.

Staff Sergeant Y served for eight to twelve years. He or she graduated from the Basic Noncommissioned Officers Course as a prerequisite to promotion to that grade. He or she directly supervised one to four Sergeants, and was directly responsible for them and all of their direct subordinates, normally totaling from three (in a tank unit) to twenty soldiers. All of the responsibilities listed above for the Sergeant accrue to the Staff Sergeant, with the exception of the counseling requirements, which only apply to direct subordinates. Additional duties at this level tend to be of a more involved nature and require additional schooling, such as Equal Opportunity NCO or Safety NCO.

Sergeant First Class Z served ten to twenty years in the Army. This grade generally serves as a Platoon Sergeant, the senior noncommissioned officer in a unit of fifteen (armor) to forty (infantry) soldiers. The Platoon Sergeant is the most experienced NCO in the platoon, and in addition to fulfilling all of the duties enumerated above for the platoon as a whole, is also the chief advisor and mentor for the Platoon Leader, who generally will be a Second Lieutenant just graduated from college. The Platoon Leader is

a commissioned officer, and bears final responsibility for everything the platoon does or fails to do- but the Platoon Sergeant controls the day-to-day operations of the unit, and acts as a mentor for the young officer.

The Sergeant First Class has graduated from the Advanced Noncommissioned Officer's Course, and often from other more specialized institutions such as the Drill Sergeant Academy, Recruiters School, Battle Staff NCO Course or the Defense Equal Opportunity Management Institute. By this time in an Army career, most soldiers have spent at least a few years working outside of their primary specialty, whether in a staff position or in one of numerous special assignments such as Observer/Controller for tactical exercises.

As these examples begin to illustrate, the spectrum of skills and experience possessed by the veteran goes far beyond that which is directly related to their particular military specialty. And, every soldier, whatever their occupation, attends the same progressive levels of formal leadership schooling. Leadership is an integral part of every soldier's existence, from Basic Training until retirement and beyond.

#### *Leadership Doctrine Framework*

Army doctrine maintains that there is a distinct difference between leadership and management. Leadership is defined in Army Regulation (AR) 600-100 as "the process of influencing others to accomplish the mission by providing purpose, motivation, and direction." The same document defines management as "the process of acquiring, assigning priorities to, allocating, and using resources (people, money, materiel, facilities, information, time, etc.) in an effective and efficient manner." Parsing these definitions, it is clear that from this perspective, leadership is a people-oriented process, whereas

management is concerned with things and processes; even where management concerns itself with people, it sees them as assets to utilize, not as individuals. Or, as Kant might say, as means, not ends.

In recent years, the business community has begun to move away from a strict reliance on management (as defined here) and toward integrating leadership into the manager's role; coaching, mentoring, team-building, and counseling, which for years have been primary skills for the NCO, are now being added to the manager's role. (Persico, 1991) This leads to the inescapable conclusion that individuals that have been steeped in the military's leadership ethic will have much to offer to a business organization. This is especially true if we agree that both management and leadership are required for success in today's business world. (Kotter, 1998)

Army leadership doctrine revolves around three imperatives- what a leader must *be*, what a leader must *know*, and what a leader must *do*. The primary component of "Be" is the Army values, which are fundamental not only as the bedrock of military leadership, but as the comprehensive, interlocking set of precepts that knit together the individuals that form the Army as a whole. These values are loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage.

The second component of "Be" consists of the mental, physical, and emotional attributes which exert influence upon the leader's actions in any given situation. These are will, self-discipline, initiative, judgment, self confidence, intelligence, and cultural awareness.

"Know" refers to the array of interpersonal, conceptual, technical, and tactical skills that the leader relies on, not just for his own success, but to be passed on to

subordinates, and to ensure the success of the team. It is a rule of successful leaders that they are responsible not only for their own success, but for that of their subordinates as well. (FM 22-100, 1999)

The third leadership imperative, “Do”, consists primarily of influencing others to accomplish the mission; operating as a member of a team; and improving self, subordinates, and the organization. (FM 22-100, 1990)

Paul Anderson, in the May/June 2000 issue of the Journal for Quality and Participation, says that “the starting place for leadership development and organizational change, whether in the new economy or the old, is at the personal level. You need to be authentic- to know what you believe, to have the courage to speak from those beliefs, and to possess the will to do what you say.” (Anderson, 2000) That is Army leadership doctrine in a nutshell.

### *The Army Values*

The Army seeks to instill the Army Values in each soldier from day one of Basic Training, and they are continually reinforced throughout the soldier’s career. They are, again, loyalty, duty, respect, selfless service, honor, integrity, and personal courage. We will look at each of these a little more closely.

*Loyalty* is just as important in a business setting as it is in the military. Every manager wants subordinates who are loyal, and every manager understands that loyalty is a precondition for advancement within their organization. Unfortunately, definitions of loyalty vary widely among individuals, as among organizations.

One of the most striking aspects of leadership as practiced by noncommissioned officers in the Army is how loyalty is defined and practiced. To most soldiers, loyalty to

the organization and to the higher echelons of command is a given. But, loyalty to ones subordinates is what commands true respect, from seniors and subordinates alike. Army leadership places a high value on loyalty to one's soldiers, especially when the leader is willing to pay a personal price in order to satisfy it. (This could cause a conflict in a business culture, if loyalty in an organization is defined as unconditional support for one's superiors.)

Leaders steeped in the NCO Creed, which states that "My two basic responsibilities will always be uppermost in my mind- accomplishment of my mission and the welfare of my Soldiers", will be unlikely to sacrifice the good of their subordinates for personal gain. Managers who hire veterans would be well advised to remember it.

*Duty* is the fulfillment of your obligations. The Army leadership manual states, "professionals do their work not just to the minimum standard, but to the very best of their ability." Part of the duty of a leader is to take responsibility for ones own actions, as well as the actions of subordinates. This is a basic concept of military leadership, which rarely is exhibited in the business world. Military leaders understand that they are the leader, whatever their physical location. That is, a leader is responsible for results whether they are there or not. This concept encourages the effective leader to inculcate the values and practices that will ensure the success of the team, even in the absence of the leader.

The key component of duty is discipline, which can be defined as doing the right thing, not the easy thing, even when no one is looking. If the leader has discipline, his superiors can count on him to do what is right for the company, and his subordinates can

count on him to do what is right for them; likewise, a good leader will instill discipline in his subordinates, ensuring that they will continue to perform to standard in his absence.

*Respect* is an essential part of the success of any organization. It can be reduced, quite simply, to the golden rule- treat others as you would be treated. Or, returning to Kant, treating others as ends, not means.

*Selfless service* simply means putting the needs of the organization, and of your subordinates, above your own. A leader that does this quickly gains the admiration of his subordinates, because they know their needs will come first. Though some incorrectly believe that “rank has its privileges” is a military precept, nothing could be further from the truth. Army doctrine recognizes, and emphasizes, that rank is a symbol of responsibility, not just of authority. The linkage here, which every noncommissioned officer understands, is that authority is largely derived from responsibility, that a leader makes decisions because he or she is responsible for the results.

*Honor* is the glue that holds this value system, and the Army, together- living (and working) honorably means living up to the Army values in everything you do.

*Integrity*- doing what is right, legally and morally- is essential in today’s business environment, and the veteran will have it in spades. Effective leaders will act in an ethical manner, whatever the possible personal consequences, and will be sure to inform higher levels of leadership when there is a problem that requires action.

*Personal courage* is the ability to face fear, danger, or adversity, either physical or moral. Even the Army’s leadership manual points out that situations requiring physical courage are rare; those requiring moral courage occur all the time. In the business world, this can mean a willingness to contradict the boss (and the precept that disagreement is

not disrespect is key to the Army system). It can mean the refusal to take actions that are illegal, immoral, or unethical- and companies that wish to rely on these methods should avoid hiring veterans at all costs. It can also mean that veterans are much more likely to tell a subordinate that he or she is not meeting expectations- sometimes one of the most difficult aspects of the supervisor's job. (FM 22-100, 1999)

Associated with the Army values are the leader attributes, listed above. I do not wish to explain each of these in detail, but a few deserve special notice.

*Initiative*, defined in FM 22-100 as “to act when there are no clear instructions, to act when the situation changes or when the plan falls apart”, is a highly valued trait in the military. It can be equally valuable in a business setting, but it requires a certain amount of confidence and support on the part of higher management. This is not a concept that meshes well with micro-managers. However, if used properly, it can be an important asset to any organization, and the military leader will be used to exercising it as a matter of course.

There are two fundamental preconditions that must be satisfied for initiative to be successfully implemented. First, the junior leader must be willing to take the risks inherent in making the best decisions they can, even when based on imperfect information. Second, senior leadership must be willing to underwrite the process, and support actions taken by their subordinates, as long as those decisions were made in the spirit of trying to decide as the superior would have, were he or she present.

*Cultural awareness* is such an integral part of the Army environment that it almost would seem not to bear mentioning. Nevertheless, veterans literally have a world of experience, which gives them an ability to live and work with others of any color or



culture. Most have traveled outside the United States, and have had the experience of living in foreign countries for extended periods of time. Additionally, the military is a culture where competence counts for everything. Soldiers, when they first approach someone, see the rank on that person's collar first, and this to a large degree determines how they will interact with that person. They do not have the habit of automatically classifying people by gender, race, or any other personal characteristic. Rarely will ex-military personnel attract attention from the Human Resources department for an EO violation. (FM 22-100, 1999)

It should also be remembered that when soldiers deploy overseas, cultural awareness training is a key aspect of their preparation. The ability to interact with the local population on terms of respect and mutual interest can be literally a life-or-death issue.

### *The Issues*

The key issue is how to define leadership, and its relationship to management, and the lack of understanding of the difference. Additionally, we face the lack of any rational system of leadership training in many organizations, which may necessitate importing leaders into the organization. Finally, if leaders will be recruited from outside the organization, and if we decide to fill the need from the military ranks, how do we best integrate their unique skill sets into our organizations?

### *The Questions I Will Seek To Answer*

What are the metrics we should utilize to define "leadership excellence" in our organizations? There are numerous ways that leadership can be measured, and not all of them are direct- some are indirect. In other words, we can measure the effectiveness of

leaders by measuring the results they achieve: Pitt and Bunamo used productivity, versatility, efficiency, and results. (Pitt & Bunamo, 2008) But, there are numerous other aspects of a business that are influenced by leadership, such as retention rates, customer satisfaction, and the like.

Do veterans bring enough skills and abilities to the table, skills that are not already present in the organization, to the degree that it is better to bring them into the company rather than promoting from within? I think we will see that they do.

Is there an advantage to hiring veterans who do not possess the technical skills associated with your business, but do have leadership ability and experience? Or would it be more advantageous to promote personnel who are already technically proficient and are currently employed by the company, trusting in our ability to either teach the leadership skills or make do with what we already have? Can veterans be expected to learn the technical skills required in a reasonable amount of time, and is it cost-effective to spend the money to train them? Many companies will want to know what the cost/benefit analysis looks like for such a course of action.

Can veterans adapt their leadership style to comply with civilian culture and HR practices, and to deal effectively with unfamiliar aspects of business, such as unions? Will a veteran in a business suit turn out to be a bull in a china shop? Will he or she try to treat employees “like they are in the Army”, and will they be a disrupting influence in the organization? In a word, are they adaptable, or hidebound?

#### *Leadership and Management Literature Review- Traditional Metrics*

The Center for Creative Leadership convened a panel of 80 leadership researchers in San Antonio in 1988. Among the principles they distilled from 29 separate leadership

studies were the fact that there has not been any inclusive list developed of leadership qualities; that no one path to leadership could be identified; and that it is difficult to distinguish those who have leadership ability with those who do not. (Persico, 1991)

If we agree that there is no checklist we can refer to, no litmus test that can be administer to detect good (or bad) leaders, the fact still remains that all organizations have some scale (whether or not it is a formal one) by which they grade the effectiveness of their leaders. For most, it relies on the results those leaders achieve. This approach recommends itself primarily by its simplicity- numbers are easy to display on a slide- and by its objectivity. Pitt and Bunamo, in their leadership study for the U. S. Air Force, used the metrics of high productivity, versatility, efficiency, and results to identify effective leaders. Most companies utilize some sort of reporting method to track productivity and results, and many managers and executives would probably be willing to state that meeting goals is what leadership is all about. We must remember, however, that true leadership is about moving a team to the next level, not just maintaining the current state.

### *Culture and Context*

It is tempting for managers and executives to evaluate subordinate leaders on easily quantifiable results such as productivity, defect rates, and the like. Certainly these are important, but they are not true indicators of the quality of leadership in an organization. (For one thing, these are accomplishments of the led, not the leaders.) Metrics such as retention and turnover rates and safety records approach closer to the goal, but they are still only indirect reflections of leadership. To really measure a leader, you must look at even more fundamental indications, at the core competencies of the leader's role. Among these are the kind of culture a leader instills, and the context he or

she provides to subordinates to encourage success and development (Yardley, 2007); how they prepare themselves for future challenges and responsibilities (FM 6-22, 2006); and how they develop their own subordinate leaders (FM 6-22, 2006).

As relates to the process of motivating others to accomplish a mission, there are essentially two kinds of environments a leader can seek to instill, two cultures that can be created. One relies on the satisfaction of lower-order needs, such as the requirements for food, shelter, financial security, and the like. Leaders who rely on these levers will tend to be transactional leaders, and they rely primarily on coercion of one type or another to gain cooperation. These leaders will use reward and punishment, and lean heavily on the legal power inherent in their position. They will tend to be inflexible and will micro-manage subordinates, because trust is not an integral part of their leadership style. This is also known as “Theory X” leadership.

The other context that can be created is one that relies on satisfying higher-order social needs such as friendship, esteem, and self-actualization. The leaders who seek to foster this culture are called transformational leaders. They use the powers of reward and punishment judiciously, but rely more on referent power, (the liking and admiration of subordinates) – and on expert power, derived from subordinates’ knowledge that the leader knows what to do and how to do it. Leaders who seek to foster this type of culture are flexible, rely heavily on delegation, and foster trust in their organizations (in both directions). This is Theory Y leadership. (Yardley, 2007)

Academic studies of leadership theory and motivation seem to trend towards support for the second, “Theory Y” culture. (Yardley, 2007) Successful leaders promote

a culture in which individuals and teams are disciplined and self-motivated, and can achieve goals with a minimum of oversight.

When selecting leadership metrics, it should be noted that some traditional business metrics have been imported into the military context, with less than stellar results. C. T. Barco identified several aspects of “corporate quality culture” that interfere with effective team development. These include using explicit contracts to ensure compliance rather than implicit understanding based on trust; “zero-defect” mentalities; focusing entirely on critical processes, rather than improving the underlying “infrastructure” that supports them; and mandating specific procedures, as opposed to fostering positive values and behaviors. (Barco, 1994) None of these methods are culture-based or culture-changing in any way, and that may be the reason they so often fail. The reason they do not address cultural issues is because, like all “Theory X” solutions, they attempt to force piecemeal change on a workforce that is assumed to be incompetent or lazy; conversely, true cultural change is sparked by the personal example of an effective leader.

Perhaps the best elucidation of this principle comes from David Gortner, in his article *Looking at Leadership beyond Our Own Horizon*. “(P)erhaps most importantly, effective leaders facilitate and direct organizational change by *modeling in their own behavior and communication* the organizational culture they hope to strengthen, foster, or create...” (my italics). (Gortner, 2009)

#### *Why Hire a Veteran?*

Earlier, we asked, “Do veterans bring enough skills and abilities to the table, skills that are not already present in the organization, to the degree that it is better to bring them

into the company rather than promoting from within?” A corollary to this question might be, “Can we- should we- accept a certain amount of inexperience in our company’s core competencies, if we get proven leadership ability in return?”

Pitt and Bunamo, having identified top leaders and units by looking at the metrics discussed above, went on to investigate what made these leaders different from their peers. Though technical ability was an important skill, its possession was not what set good leaders apart. Indeed, most of us can give personal examples of “leaders” who had plenty of knowledge, and no ability to lead. What separated good leaders from average leaders was in their attitudes: that they viewed leadership as “a process rather than a position”, and that they put the welfare of their subordinates and the success of their team ahead of their own personal welfare. (Pitt & Bunamo, 2008)

A thought provoking study was conducted by Anthony Ammeter and Janet Dukerich, and funded by the Construction Industry Institute. The study looked at high-performing project teams, with an eye toward the leader behaviors and team member characteristics that contributed to their success. This study is particularly pertinent because of the diverse nature of project teams, which often bring together people from many different backgrounds to address a problem of concern to the entire organization. This multidisciplinary structure ensures that the leader of the team, almost by definition, will not possess all of the technical skills that the team members do. Therefore, that “expert power” of which we spoke above cannot be relied upon to any great degree. One would expect that, in such a case, the leadership behaviors which we are discussing would move to the forefront, and that does indeed seem to be the case.

The researchers conducted interviews with 51 members who participated in high-performing project teams, in roles ranging from the top to the bottom of these organizations. Two factors were mentioned most frequently as contributing to the success of the team: team orientation (sense of belonging, ownership, and personal success being tied to team success) and leader characteristics (communication, aligning team member goals with team goals, and fostering empowerment and a good work ethic). It is significant that the leader's technical knowledge, though it may have been a concern to some individual interviewees, was not significant enough of a factor to merit mention in the study. (Ammeter & Dukerich, 2002)

Also significant was the conclusion by the authors that only leader behaviors could serve as a reliable predictor of team performance *and* budget performance. None of the other performance factors studied, including team building, competition, rewards and bonuses, and high visibility, could do this.

So, if we accept that the lack of experience in a certain industry might not be the handicap to effective leadership that some perceive it to be, do veterans have other skills we need, and that are not already present in our organizations? Based on my interviews with a number of individuals who have made the transition from the military to the executive ranks in heavy industry, the answer is yes. In fact, all of those interviewed stated, in one way or another, that the leadership and other skills veterans bring to the table are much harder to train than the technical skills that might be lacking, making the veteran a wise investment indeed.

Next, we asked whether veterans can adapt their leadership style to comply with civilian cultures and HR practices, and to deal effectively with unfamiliar aspects of

business, such as unions. Frankly, to even ask this question is in part to base our perceptions of military leadership on stereotypes that are no longer valid, if they ever were. Even Dr. Warren Bennis, a famed management consultant and educator, has said that “there is a command and control orientation, sort of an old fashioned military model, that even the military doesn’t use anymore.” (Heard, 2007)

Additionally, it is an unchanging facet of military life that the soldier transfers to a new unit every three or four years, and upon doing so is required to adjust to a new culture and a new set of leaders, peers, and subordinates. Certainly the Army is still the Army, but anyone who has served overseas can tell you that the Army in Germany is a different world from the Army stateside, and altogether different again from the Army in Korea. Military veterans are quite used to regularly being dropped into a new environment, and the transition to the business world will in some respects be no different.

As to the issue of culture, however, there are some caveats that need to be addressed, and some aspects of the “military culture” that we have not yet discussed. First, it should be understood that there is no monolithic “military culture”. Each of the services is to a great degree its own unique culture, and within each service there are many subcultures, based primarily on whether that specialty is combat arms, or support related. Then, of course, there are differences within these categories. So, you can expect a different mode of operation from a finance clerk than you would get from an infantryman. And, though the infantryman certainly could become a great leader in a customer service call center, he might find it easier to transfer into a heavy construction



environment. Conversely, a finance clerk might not be the best choice for first-line supervisor in a shipyard.

Additionally, there are aspects of the business world that some veterans will find disconcerting, to say the least. Perhaps foremost of these is the lack of stability- that is, the lack of a guarantee of future employment. A competent member of the military does not normally have to worry about layoffs, and is to a great degree protected from the economic hazards of the current environment. The uncertainty that goes along with civilian employment can be a distraction for some veterans- but, for the employer, alleviating it can be a useful lever.

Finally, there will always be those who, while in the military, did not acquire the leadership skills we discussed above, leaders who stood entirely upon the authority of rank to gain compliance, leaders who put their own interests above those of their subordinates. These veterans will find it difficult to adapt to an environment where rank means much less to their subordinates than such things as knowledge, personality traits, and common sense. To detect these individuals, it will be useful to probe their leadership attitudes and philosophies during the interview process. If they talk about respect being earned by a leader, but subordinates automatically having it from the leader, they are on the right track. If they talk about enforcing respect, or rank being due respect, on the other hand, they may not be a good fit. Candidates could be asked, "What are the ways you got compliance from your people?" Reliance on rank receives the lowest score; if they relied on reward and punishment, that is better; reliance on referent and expert power gets top marks.

### *Analysis*

Taking all that we have discussed into account, several conclusions stand out. First, there are few places that prepare an individual for effective leadership to the degree that the military does. Second, those leadership skills are just as valuable in the civilian world as they are in uniform. Third, the presence- or absence- of leadership is a powerful predictor of the success or failure of a team.

It is also clear that in many, if not most, companies, the addition of veterans to the leadership mix can be a game-changer, if they are given the opportunity to gain the technical skills required to succeed. The individuals interviewed for this project all agree that these technical skills, while important, are much easier to obtain than the leadership abilities we have discussed.

If we take all this as given, then the next subject for discussion is how to find the people with these skills; how to separate the wheat from the chaff; and how to prepare them for a successful career within our organizations.

Finding potential candidates is the easy part. There are two organizations in particular that will be of great help. The first of these is the Veterans Administration, which maintains offices across the country dedicated to helping veterans find employment, and which also administers the Vocational Rehabilitation program for disabled vets. These offices will be a valuable resource for companies searching for military talent.

Additionally, each service maintains an organization which is dedicated to helping separating service members' transition into civilian life. (The Army version is the Army Career and Alumni Program, or ACAP). These offices help with employment,

schooling, and other issues, and hold regular career fairs and briefings at every military installation. It also may be helpful to advertise job openings in the local base newspapers.

Once candidates have been located, it will then be necessary to determine if they possess the skills and temperament required to succeed in your working environment. Appendixes D and E contain examples and explanations of two useful documents: the NCOER and DD214. These provide a wealth of information to those who know how to interpret them, and can be used to verify much that a veteran will have listed on a resume.

The most important part of the process, however, will be integrating your new hires into your own company's culture. There are several steps that hiring managers and executives can take to ensure a seamless transition. First, assign the new hire a sponsor, someone with the technical experience that you want the veteran to acquire. This is a common practice in the military, and it is highly effective in aiding the reception and integration of new personnel and their families. The sponsor should have approximately the same level of responsibility as the person to be sponsored, and should be able to answer the myriad questions that are likely to be asked about the company's daily operations.

Second, be cognizant of the potential difficulties faced by the newly hired, and newly civilian, employee. Try to assign them to a location within the organization that will allow them to quickly learn the basics of the business, but will afford them few opportunities to adversely affect your operations. My own first assignment in the shipbuilding industry is a great example. I retired from the Army as a First Sergeant, responsible for the daily operations of a unit of 120 soldiers. When I was first hired by

the shipyard, I was assigned as the supervisor of the River Completion unit for the hopper barge line. Hopper barges are the simplest product the yard produces, and I was only supervising 8 associates. Though the work load was hectic, it was a good place to learn the fundamentals of barge building, after which I was moved up to the production line, and later on to building larger and more complex vessels.

Finally, let the veteran apply the skills learned in the military in your organization. There are any number of practices and procedures that can be modified to fit business requirements- challenge your veterans to apply themselves to improving your organization. (There is certainly little doubt that if you stifle them, they will not be with you for long.) Do not allow the "Ape in a Cage" mentality to prevent the veteran you hire from introducing valuable ideas and making a contribution to the success of your organization. (See Appendix F for an explanation of this term.)

### *Conclusion*

We need leaders in our organizations, not just managers. We especially need leaders who are willing to take charge, to take risks, to make decisions in a timely manner based on the best information they have at the time. We need leaders who know how to create the kind of environment that encourages people to give the best of themselves, and who know how to align the personal goals of the company with those of the people in it.

Most experts agree that good leaders are change agents. Anyone afraid of change certainly will fail to meet this test. But veterans are, by definition, unafraid of change- and this is proven by the very fact that they are sitting in front of you, asking to be a part of your organization.

Our military veterans, of whatever service or specialty, have an untold amount of skill and ability, and will be an asset to any company willing to hire them. However, “buyer beware”: just as they expect much of themselves, they will expect much of you, their leader. They will be motivated, disciplined, and driven; however, they may have little patience with those who give less than 100%. But, after all, aren’t these the people we want leading our organizations?

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Appendices removed  
because of content of  
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