Transitioning Military Leadership Skills into a Civilian Setting

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Although a member of the armed forces may be taught how to be a leader within their respective branch of service, this does not always mean they can successfully transfer these skills once out of the military. Identifying and strengthening those skills that work within a civilian setting is key to success as a leader outside the military.

All branches of the military have a heavy focus on leadership. This focus may be on maintaining the standards of current leaders, or on molding the leaders of tomorrow who are coming up through the ranks. Most people who have served have, at one point or another, been in some form of leadership position. However, military leadership skills are often very different from skills needed to succeed in a corporate setting and many veterans struggle with this transition. If done correctly, military leadership skills can transition to stronger corporate teams and success in any leadership position. To successfully make this transition, one must first identify what skills were taught in the specific branch of service they were in, as well as skills taught in all branches, and cultivate those that will lead to success.

Background

I spent four years in the United States Army, and even in basic training we were told by our drill sergeants that we were the next generation of Army leaders. Because of the Army's high turnover rate, training new leaders is always a high priority. In combat, anyone may

end up in a situation where they are leading soldiers. Despite attempts by the Army to create a uniform style of leadership, different styles still exist. Though many of these may work in that environment, most do not translate outside of the Army.

In four years, I had leaders I would follow anywhere who inspired us all to be our best and to give it our all. I also had leaders whom I hated with a hate I didn't know I was capable of. While different leadership styles often lead to these two very divergent feelings, they usually lead to the same end result of work completed. In the Army, the types of leadership that get things done through fear and threats only work because everyone there is under contract to be there, and to leave is literally a felony. This would never work in a civilian workplace; people would just leave in search of greener pastures.

Within two years of enlisting, I oversaw a team of five soldiers and always tried to be the best I could be. I always wanted to be the inspiring leader, the one who brought out the best in his soldiers. Sometimes though, I had to be mean. I had to be the bad guy to get the point across. Since leaving the Army, I have found myself in leadership positions at work or in school projects and have realized that transitioning my experience over is much harder than I originally thought it would be. I would have benefited from a concise guide to the key points of making the switch to the civilian side of things.

Identifying leadership skills by service branches

Though the whole of the armed forces is usually just referred to as the military, each branch differs drastically from the others. These differences go beyond their mission, be it ground warfare in the case of the Army, surface and subsurface nautical warfare in the Navy, aerial fighting and supply with regard to the Air Force, or amphibious combat landing in the Marine Corps. Every one of these different missions brings with it different requirements on the part of leaders at all levels of the structure of each respective branch. It is imperative that, as a veteran transitions from service, they know what leadership skills each branch has equipped them with, so they can find the best place to play well to their strengths.

The Army and Marines

The Army and Marine Corps are very similar in their approaches to leadership because both have very similar missions. Both branches engage heavily in ground combat with either troops mounted in vehicles or on foot, as well as extensive logistical networks to back up these frontline troops. Adaptability, initiative, and critical thinking are paramount leadership skills in these branches and are taught to all members.

Adaptability is one of the most important skills a leader must have when in a combat situation. When the Army or Marines conduct an operation, there is always an overarching mission objective, but individual leaders on the ground are given the ability to make changes to the plans as the situation develops on the battlefield so long as the original goal of the operation is met (Groysber, Hill, & Johnson, 2010, p. 84). This means leaders in the Army and Marine Corps are incredibly adaptive to ever changing situations. As they adapt what they're having to do in the face of a fluid environment, these leaders must also keep the original objective in mind. In a leadership position that requires rapid decisions to be made while keeping a larger end goal in mind, a veteran of the Army or Marine Corps would thrive.

Initiative and critical thinking also go hand in hand with adaptability and are both leadership skills honed in the Army and Marines. In their article for the *Harvard Business Review* in 2010, Groysber, Hill, and Johnson gave the example that no matter how large an operation is, the lowest ranking person can initiate combat with the enemy, if it is needed; no permission needs to be given (p. 84). Furthermore, they affirm the importance of all members of an operation understanding the operation so if anyone goes down, the operation can continue despite the setbacks (p. 84). Initiative and critical thinking are both skills instilled in not just leaders, but every member of a team so when contact must be made with the enemy or a mission must continue, even the lowest of ranking soldiers can do so. Initiative in leaders will lead to tasks being completed in the first place and critical thinking often means that these tasks are seen before they are even an issue.

Any veteran that transitions out of the Army or Marines should find a team or management position that affords them a great deal of

independence. This independence would play to the skills of adaptability, initiative, and critical thinking. In this kind of environment, a soldier or Marine would thrive as a leader, as skills picked up during their service would naturally shine through.

The Navy and Air Force

The Navy and Air Force engender leadership skills that are almost the polar opposite of their ground-pounding cousins in the Army and Marines. While the ground combat branches foster independence in their leaders, the Navy and Air Force teach strict adherence to procedure, as well as attention to the smallest detail.

Both the Navy and Air Force operate very large, very expensive, and very deadly machines of war where straying from the plan can have terrible consequences. In 1967, a pilot on a Navy aircraft carrier deviated from his preflight procedure. This led to a chain reaction in the aircraft itself, causing a rocket firing inside the carrier and 134 crewmen dying as a result (Groysber, Hill, & Johnson, 2010, p. 83). Because of this incident, both branches have since put much more weight behind teaching service members to stick to the plan and occurrences like this have become few and far between.

Attention to detail is another skill leaders in the Navy and Air Force bring to the table in the civilian world. Both branches operate aircraft with incredibly powerful weapons at their disposal. While deployed to Afghanistan in 2013 for the Army, I witnessed an airstrike on a Taliban leader's house. I'll tell you right now that the destructive power of a 2000 pound bomb is frankly insane. One moment a house was there, and the next, there was almost nothing. If those pilots had gotten anything wrong, if they hadn't been precise in what they were doing, it could have ended very badly. That bomb could have easily landed on my position only about 150 meters away, or into the village full of civilians just beyond that house. Since then, I've had massive amounts of respect for the precision those pilots can bring to the fight while also flying their aircraft at speeds of over 500 miles per hour.

Any leadership position that combines a strict adherence to rules and regulations, or extreme precision, would fit veterans of the Navy

or Air Force very well. Working within rigid structure plays well to the skills both branches teach to their members. For jobs where safety is key, a leader from either one of these branches would excel.

Communication

No matter which branch of the military a person comes from, communication is key to the success of any operation. Up the chain of command or down the chain, in a five-man team or five-thousand-man division, communication is what often makes or breaks a great organization, no matter what branch of service it is. In the Army, if you could shoot, move, and communicate effectively, then you were a great soldier or part of a great team.

In a study published in the *Journal of Leadership and Organizational Studies*, communication and leadership in the military were looked at heavily. Researchers found that communication facilitated more efficient responses in team members during times of crisis. When things went wrong in these stressful, usually combat situations, teams responded quickly and efficiently. Those members of the teams with the equipment or skills to best deal with the problem at hand knew where and when to move. Clear and defined lines of communication were the key to these successes (Matkin & Ramthun, 2014, p. 251). Clear communication is the key to success in any field, be it responding to battlefield conditions or a crisis in the boardroom or on the factory floor. Veterans bring a skill set that pushes communication as a top priority.

Having been in civilian teams after leaving the military I have often found that I'm the only veteran and that I'm also the best communicator. When I am just a member and not a leader I find myself frustrated on a regular basis. Leaders and members of these teams often communicate very poorly. This makes it harder on everyone, especially those who must cover for these communication breakdowns. If I oversaw any of these teams, my first priority as leader would be establishing a standard for clear and efficient communication. When communication is clear and informative, everyone's lives are easier and so is any job.

Military Culture

The military as a whole has a fairly distinct culture that forms within it. Transferring this culture into a civilian setting can lead to many positive outcomes for any team. Any sized team in the military becomes a family over time. With a leader at its head, the unit becomes a home away from home (Popper, 1996, p. 5). Be it a five-man team or a thousand-strong division, a family forms. A good leader in any of these teams should cultivate a feeling of family, be it through shared fun, training, or activities as a team. This leads to a loyalty within and to the team that is rare in the civilian world. Loyalty like this must be fortified for the moment when it's all on the line and this family is all that you have. In fact, one of the best leaders I ever had, Sergeant First Class Adam Batt, once told me, "It's not what we do that makes me proud, it's that we're so close that makes me proud."

Another bit of military culture that would make a very successful transition has to do with the higher-ranking veterans leaving the services. Once in the higher ranks, a leader may not be able to manage things in person, perhaps because of physical distance, and they must rely on those below them to get things done. Those who lead larger units must learn to trust their subordinates and empower them to make tough calls when they must (Yardly, 2009, p. 16). If a leader can learn to not micromanage, those below them will like them much more. Showing trust in those below you to do the right thing and make the right decisions is key to building loyalty. Furthermore, if a leader below you makes a mistake, use it to teach not to belittle. If micromanagement is required then do it, but if not, step back and let the team operate on their own and learn to be independent.

One final bit of culture instilled by all the branches is the value of integrity. Everyone in the military is taught on the first day to do the right thing even when no one is looking. This is important because often you are left in situations where you must do right, and no one is even close to see. This drive to always do the right thing engenders trust in those below the leader as well as those above (Hassan & Hussain, 2015, p. 5). Just imagine if the heads of Enron had integrity like what is built up by the military. The blind greed that drove the company to the top and then over the edge may have been curved by just a little integrity.

Conclusion

While the transition from military to civilian life can be stressful and full of uncertainties, transitioning leadership experience shouldn't be. The most important part of this transition is to identify which branch of service a veteran is leaving and what skills that branch taught them. Then, one must know that communication is one of the greatest skills taught in any branch of the military. Finally, the culture of the military, if brought to the civilian world, can build strong bonds of trust and loyalty to all those being led. Not making the most of the experience gained in the military would be a shame. While it is often a tough part of any veteran's life, it will set anyone up for success later in life.

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