



Learning from the military

Delivering commercial results through effective teamwork

insights

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Having spent much of my career as an Officer in the Royal Air Force, I am fortunate enough to have been taught world class military leadership techniques and advanced team work theory. Developing these skills in a variety of situations, be it deployed in Afghanistan or during multinational operations and training exercises.

These challenging situations bring with them the added complexity of communicating and performing under pressure within time critical parameters, where incorrect decisions could potentially result in fatal consequences.

At Ivo, I now help to deliver commercial insight and procurement projects for clients. I regularly call upon my military experience to help find process improvements or new profitable opportunities for the companies we work with.

Although for me the ‘consequences’ have changed from fatal to financial, the fundamentals remain the same. My experience and training help our clients to develop new capabilities, realise strategic and operational improvements and make organisational adjustments for commercial advantage.

Learning from the military: Delivering commercial results through effective teamwork

In today’s uncertain economic climate, maintaining a profitable business is becoming harder, particularly in the retail industry, as ever-increasing numbers of consumers avoid the dwindling high streets and turn to online purchasing. Customer bases disappear as businesses fail to keep up with technological advances which develop at a rapid pace and employee turnover increases, growing the financial burden of recruitment and training, this negative impact can be felt on both the shop floor and the supply chain.

However, shifting the focus closer to home, to areas which often go unnoticed, may be an easy win for effective results.

Leadership, teamwork, integrity; the fundamentals of military training, day in, day out, from the most straightforward of tasks to full blown military operations, fail in one of these areas and a lack of effectiveness will result. Transpose this into the business environment and enhanced relationships will develop along with increased innovation, productivity and greater flexibility.

We all play a part

Leaders inspire confidence and build trust through **integrity**, their leadership is required at all levels to take a team on a journey to the end result, be it in the military, sport or business. However, a team will not be able to effectively achieve a common goal by relying on leadership alone, they will have to unite as one to produce meaningful results.

Military organisations around the world have spent decades refining their training, developing the most effective teams possible to obtain results in fast paced, high intensity environments. So how can these lessons be used within the commercial environment to ensure that teams¹ are working as effectively as possible and delivering the required results?

“Companies that have leaders who are highly effective communicators had 47% higher total returns to shareholders over the last five years compared with firms that have leaders who are the least effective communicators.”

¹ The business dictionary defines a team as having members who operate with a high degree of interdependence, share authority and responsibility for self-management, are accountable for the collective performance, and work toward a common goal and shared rewards. A team becomes more than just a collection of people when a strong sense of mutual commitment creates synergy, thus generating performance greater than the sum of the performance of its individual members.”

Much like the military's advanced training, a variety of research from many scholars of leadership principles, shows that profitable businesses are now focussing on team cohesion and becoming High Performance Workplace Organisations. Moving away from task specialisation, a pyramidal hierarchical structure, and a centralisation of responsibilities, to a Holistic organization featuring flatter hierarchical structures, self-responsible teams, multi-tasking, a greater involvement of lower-level employees in decision-making, and the development of horizontal communication channels.

For an organisation to create high-performance teams, it is widely accepted that there are five fundamental areas which must be addressed:

1. Trust – the team trust one another

A team who trusts each other form an authentic collaboration and personal bonds. Performing honourably and owning up to mistakes, they can be relied upon to act with delegated responsibility and authority. They will trust their management to support them if unavoidable errors are made, promoting a non-blame culture and increasing beneficial learning from mistakes.

Secondly, a client who believes the team is trustworthy, is more likely to build a stronger relationship with you, work through challenges and be more open and honest in return.

Learning from the military: To be a truly cohesive, competent and effective team, each member needs to trust one another's skills and ability to complete tasks. The military teach trust through team building exercises, training and empowering authority. Without this trust, effectiveness is reduced, an individuals' ability, motivation and the judgements of others is constantly questioned, and the leadership is less likely to delegate responsibility and authority.

The business approach: Business leaders should ensure that the trust within their team is enabling efficient working practices to be carried out. On a personal level, each team member should know one another's strengths and weaknesses, understanding that they have undertaken the required training to autonomously complete tasks to the required standard. Managers should empower their team members with the authority to tackle tasks as they see fit, working within the parameters of department policies.

2. Healthy conflict – the team engages in unfiltered conflict around ideas

Unproductive teams tend to shy away from conflict, letting it manifest and ignoring the root cause of the problem. Harvard refers to these as "cappuccino teams": Every time conflict rears its ugly head, people break for coffee, presumably in the hope that it will help restore harmony.

Being able to manage conflict for the mutual benefit of the team, ultimately relies on the leadership to maintain the mutually beneficial outcome of the conflict through questioning, alternative ideas and healthy competition, without allowing it to develop into a problem.

Learning from the military: Open, honest and direct, this



sums up the approach to conflict in the military. Generally, most operational situations do not allow time for emotions to play a part in the decision-making process. Military teams understand that by being straight forward, ambiguity is reduced, if there is a difference of opinion then this is given in the same open format, generating healthy conflict. An emotional response can cause conflict, so this is saved until after the task when a debrief can be undertaken and differing view points can be discussed.

The business approach: The business environment may not require such a harsh and unemotional approach. However, strong management and resolution of conflict is required and should be undertaken by both team members and leaders. This ensures that the conflict does not produce negative results, but instead promotes innovation, questioning and learning.

3. Commitment – the team commit to decisions and plans of action

Mission statements, aims and SMART objectives all focus the team on the task and allow the opportunity to succeed, acting to the best of their ability, not letting ego effect judgement and relying on others' strengths within the team.

Learning from the military: Trust is synonymous with commitment in a military team. Dedication to the task and an understanding that each member will undertake their role to the best of their ability, with the primary focus of safely achieving a successful outcome. During the mission briefing process, the plan of action will have been discussed and alternative options considered by every member of the team. All individuals ultimately trust the final decision of the leadership, that the plan is the most appropriate to be undertaken.

The business approach: Is your team committed or just compliant? Management teams need to install a sense of commitment, not just compliance. Management should empower individuals to try new techniques, voice their opinions and take on responsibility without the worry of being reprimanded if they fail. An open and honest working environment is required from the top down, with regular feedback, project debriefs and rewards for success.

“David Grossman reported in “The Cost of Poor Communications” that a survey of 400 companies with 100,000 employees each cited an average loss per company of \$62.4 million per year because of inadequate communication to and between employees.**”**

4. Accountability – individuals hold one another accountable for delivering against plans

The business dictionary defines accountability as “the obligation of an individual or organization to account for its activities, accept responsibility for them, and disclose the results in a transparent manner.” Basically, an accountable team will be clear about what they plan to do, execute it and communicate when it’s done.

By effectively allowing ownership of tasks, trust is created with self-worth and confidence being promoted. The individual is no longer just a member of the team but plays a crucial part in achieving the end goal. They feel valued, take pride in their task and have more drive to deliver results, especially when supported by efficient leadership who provide appropriate feedback and rewards.

Learning from the military: Without accountability of an action, trust can’t be complicit. If you are not held countable for your weapon, for the safe navigation of an aircraft through hostile airspace or to carry out your daily responsibilities, then you cannot be trusted to carry out your tasks as an individual or for the team. Within the military, it is agreed that, within reason, everyone can hold anyone accountable for their actions and an individual will accept responsibility. They have ensured that they have the necessary training to be able to undertake that task and they trust the leadership to support them if a non-negligent error is made.

The business approach: Being late to a meeting or underperforming on a project, everyone should hold themselves accountable and question others accountability. The management should not hold sole responsibility to monitor the actions of others. This builds on trust and commitment, by identifying problems early and finding a solution in an efficient manner, issues are dealt with and the team can continue to work effectively once again.

During the economic slowdown of 2008, Starbucks closed 600 stores and profit fell 28%. Leadership during that time blamed the economy and increased price of dairy for the slump. That was until Howard D. Shultz came back as CEO after leaving eight years prior. He held leadership **accountable** rather than blaming things that can’t be controlled, like the economy and dairy prices. He said, “Starbucks’s heavy spending to accommodate its expansion has created a bureaucracy that masked its problems.”

5. Results focus – they focus on the achievement of collective results

A result driven approach promotes flexibility, drive and action. Working within the set boundaries of the task or company policy, a result driven team doesn’t react emotionally to the process but visualises the result and understands that the process required to reach it is just the path to be taken.

A rowing team for example could row to the best of their ability, but each in the wrong direction, thinking about the pain of each stroke, they may as well give up this unproductive approach. However, a team all focussed on rowing in unison, in one direction, to reach the finish line concentrating on nothing else, is a force to be reckoned with – a result driven approach.

Results driven individuals may not like the steps required to be successful, but the result itself has far more weight than the process to reach it. Conversely, a process driven team may concentrate on the steps required, if these steps are boring, time consuming or un-motivating, then the team may look at other ways of completing the task, which takes time and effort, with the result no longer the primary focus.

Learning from the military: A military style brief describes the situation and then outlines the mission; the next step is to set out how that mission will be executed. It is a result driven approach where a specific aim or objective is required and is the focus of the entire team, the process is almost ancillary to the result. The plan, actions and tools are managed to achieve the mission. Performance is valued higher than the process or procedure, the procedures are in place to give boundaries to the methods and actions being employed to achieve the aim but are not stuck to rigidly.

The business approach: Clearly defined goals and SMART objectives should be used every time a project or task is undertaken, the result should be aligned with the overall mission of the business and each team member should understand the importance of the result and how they will play their part in achieving it. Objectives and goals should be tracked and communicated, everyone should be aware of progress throughout the project. The results should be fully communicated upon completion and lessons identified should be understood. This approach will build team cohesion, productivity and empower individuals to improve their performance to achieve the goals.

His solution? To create a strategy that developed brand trust. The initiative, called “My Starbucks Idea,” created a way for customers to share ideas directly with the company and with each other. After 1.3 million users on social media shared 93 million ideas, the program was a success and Starbucks pulled out of its slump. Had Shultz not held the company **accountable**, it’s unlikely the leadership team would have solved the problem.



Review your team

Since “time is money”, failure to address the fundamental elements by which a team functions, will undoubtedly adversely affect the bottom line through increased inefficiency, miscommunication, poor decision making and a lack of cohesion. We can all learn from the military way of working to empower teams to develop productive working relationships, build internal trust and be committed to the end goal of the business.

The Ivo effect

Ivo works with clients to unlock profitable opportunities, reduce operational expenditure and deliver increased margins. At the same time, we work alongside client teams to empower stakeholders and help them to develop the necessary skills and knowledge to think laterally and undertake transformational change. Our projects deliver immediate financial benefits, while also helping to drive improved capabilities and a legacy of best-practice approaches and processes amongst internal client teams. If you would like to know any more about the topics covered in this article, please get in touch.



About Ivo Consulting Solutions

Ivo works alongside business leaders with major change to achieve, bringing commercial, pragmatic, data-driven insight and providing answers to difficult questions.

We help clients to understand their cost base and identify new areas of opportunity. We then work with client teams to deliver sustainable improvements, high-impact savings and transformational change across their organisation.

If you are responsible for a big savings or revenue challenge this year, we'd like to meet you.

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About the Author



Benjamin Wade is a consultant at Ivo Consulting Solutions, with over 15 years of operational and strategic experience, across several industries. His military background allows him to offer a lateral way of thinking and an alternative view of client solutions in a commercial environment.

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