How the British Army’s operations went agile

Military commanders have had to change the way they operate in the field. Corporate executives should take note.

Much has been written over the years about parallels between the military and large corporations. But what insights are most relevant for senior executives today in an age of agile organizations? With his long experience in the Army and then in business, Justin Maciejewski is unusually well placed to reflect on the lessons for business, as a former commander of the British Army’s 800-strong 2nd Battalion, The Rifles, during its vital peacekeeping mission in Basra, Iraq, from 2007 to 2008.

Maciejewski’s career in the army spanned more than a quarter of a century, taking in the years after the Falklands War, in 1982, to recent operations alongside coalition forces in Afghanistan, the Balkans, and the Middle East. It was a time that coincided with the development of a new type of leadership based on empowerment, designed to make the British Army more tactically agile and able to overcome larger adversaries through maneuvers, rapid planning, and decision making that disrupt and break down the enemy’s cohesion. This has transformed the British Army’s approach, which for generations had been based on centrally controlled, set piece battles focused on overwhelming firepower and attrition. Awarded the Distinguished Service Order for his role in Iraq, Maciejewski joined McKinsey in 2013 and was appointed director general of the National Army Museum in London in 2018.

In this conversation with McKinsey’s Rob Theunissen, Maciejewski talks about the modern army’s agile model, the balance between command and control, the importance of (good) process, and the notion of learning without blaming.

The Quarterly: Why did the British Army change the way its organization works?

Justin Maciejewski: In the Second World War, the British Army achieved success by focusing a huge amount of resources on a smaller enemy force, then wearing them down through attrition. Battles were often very static, relying on numerical superiority.
The battles were designed top down; everyone knew their place. Montgomery, the great British commander of the Second World War, called this "a tidy battlefield," and he referred to it as the orchestra of war: one conductor conducting, with all the different instruments doing exactly what they are told to do.

As the British Army got smaller in the 1960s and '70s, it found itself at a numerical disadvantage relative to the forces it was facing in the Cold War. Nevertheless, this culture of top-down direction continued. And in the Falklands, the British Army found that soldiers were waiting to be told exactly what to do in circumstances where casualties might have been avoided had they been more proactive. At the end of that war, people asked themselves, "Why did intelligent people sit there, waiting to be told what to do? Why didn't they just get on and do it?"

In reflecting on our performance in the Falklands War, in the late 1980s, the British Army radically redesigned the way decisions were made and how officers were empowered. A new system was introduced: Mission Command, which would now be called agile, was all about giving people the tools to make rapid decisions in order to disrupt the enemy. The idea was that you could defeat a larger enemy by getting inside their decision cycle, moving so quickly that their cohesion is disrupted and they begin to fall apart.

The Quarterly: What were the big changes?

Justin Maciejewski: In Montgomery’s army, the functions—artillery, engineers, logistics, medical, intelligence, signals, et cetera—were very powerful. In the 1980s, led by General Nigel Bagnall, the notion of integrating the functions at every level took hold. Every group was tailored for the operation that it was required to do, and functions were integrated in the volumes that were needed for that operation.

That sounds easy, but it’s difficult to do. And in order for that to happen, the army had to be much more standardized about the way it planned, the way it gave direction, and the way it cascaded intent. If you’re going to be very modular and agile about the way you allocate resources, people need to be speaking the same language.

Mission planning lies at the heart of military operations, and the army came up with seven questions, which everyone now uses across the entire organization. Once you standardize like that, you create organizations in which people feel confident to make decisions and where trust grows because people know what other people are going to do even before they come up with an idea.

The Quarterly: Standardization can feel rigid and bureaucratic—it almost sounds paradoxical alongside agility. Was that not limiting?

Justin Maciejewski: The trick is to work out what process is good and fundamental to the stable functioning of an organization—and to its consistency—and what process is bureaucratic and superfluous. Don't throw out the good stuff when you get rid of the bad stuff; organizations that have been fossilized by bad processes sometimes try to get rid of it all.
What the army managed to do in the 1990s was to get rid of a lot of bad processes but design these very solid core processes, which everyone was able to rally around. I never saw them as constraining; I rather saw them like a trellis where a plant grows up an open frame. The effort to root out bad processes was considerable and involved significantly reducing the number of operating procedures to encompass only those activities that genuinely needed to be standardized.

For me, a good process is a process that helps someone see how to think, how to find a solution, but it doesn’t tell them what to do. It doesn’t tell them the exact answer. In other words, it’s not a tick box. It’s a framework that lets people bring themselves to the problem in a way that they know they’re not going to miss anything. It’s a support—but a support that gives them the chance to be creative.

The Quarterly: Could you describe in more detail how structure, process, and creativity work together?

Justin Maciejewski: In the old world, leaders wrote down what they wanted people to do in quite a precise way. People were given tasks that fit within an overall operation or mission. A mission today is not a set of tasks, because, in a dynamic situation, people should revert to the purpose rather than the task. Situations change; the enemy’s done something. That’s my purpose—that’s what I’m going to go after—rather than in the old system, where people would literally do their task and wait to be told what to do next.

For example, in the old world, you could say to someone, “Take and hold the bridge by midnight tonight.” In the new world, you would say, “Our intention is to cross that river. To do that, I see you securing that bridge by midnight tonight. And the reason we want you to do that is because we want to put 20,000 soldiers on the far side of that river by the close of day tomorrow.”

If you imagine that philosophy being replicated across an organization of 80,000 people at every level, it dramatically changes the performance. Everyone at every level is thinking, “What if it changes? How do I respond?”

In a business environment, people often express annual targets as percentages of growth or the amount of cost they have to take out without any real articulation of how that feeds into the overall success of the business. [What they should be saying is,] “We need you to take out this much cost because we want to put that into the R&D program for the next model that’s going to win us a new market.” It’s very disempowering to have targets without any real context of how that target fits into the bigger picture.

The Quarterly: What does it take for a leader to move into this new world?

Justin Maciejewski: I grew up during this transformation, but I think it was a lot tougher for some of the people who’d grown up in the old army. One thing you have to be prepared to do as a leader is to give people space to fail, to let people spread their wings as leaders, and to trust them. Occasionally, they’ll get it wrong. And, when they get it wrong, you mustn’t crucify them. Because if you do, they won’t do it again,
and then you have to micromanage them because there’s no other option. Watching
people grow as leaders, by tripping over the first time and then getting up and dusting
themselves down, is most fulfilling. As new leaders gain more experience, you can
supervise less.

Leaders also need to understand that there is a tension between command and
control. A commander may want to do something, but it may be impossible, and that’s
where command has to be constrained by control. And there are other times when
the commander knows something can be done and has to be done, and sometimes
the machine needs to work a little bit harder to make it happen, and that’s where
command pushes control. They are both critical to success, and that distinction
between command and control is something I really came to value.

The Quarterly: Can you paint a picture of how you spent your time as a military leader?

Justin Maciejewski: Once the army moved to Mission Command, much more of
leaders’ time was spent up front in the creative process: “What am I trying to achieve?
How do I visualize this happening? What is my mission? What am I being asked to do?”
It’s about making sure everyone is clear around what’s expected of them. This gives
commanders much more time away from their laptops and more time with the people
they are commanding. I like to think we were all frontline people.

When we first got to Basra, we had an operations room—a control tower—that had all
the screens with satellites and aircraft photography coming down and data flowing
in from people on the ground on their radios. It was a huge hub of information. What
I actually found was, I may have had all the data, but what I didn’t have was the
fingertip feel of what was actually happening on the ground.

Over time, I came to realize that the data was not the most important thing for me to
see on any given day. I would get a much better feel for the operation by seeing the
“customers”—the people on the streets—and the soldiers themselves who were doing
the job. I would spend two-thirds, maybe three-quarters, of my time with soldiers
at the front line, either talking to them or listening to them after an operation. I spent a
quarter of my time planning.

That’s where the chief of staff in the army really kicks in. In business, the chief of
staff is someone who organizes the CEO’s diary. The chief of staff in the army is an
incredibly powerful figure and is literally the chief of the machine. My chief of staff
bought me the time to be with the soldiers, talk to my Iraqi colleagues, or meet local
leaders in Basra. The chief of staff also was able to triage the data and feed to me
what I needed: “Be aware that this is happening.” A key thing [in the army] is that
the system selects the chief of staff to work with the commander. When I look back
now, I really appreciate how much effort went in to selecting the right chiefs of staff
to work with the right commanders.

How you allocate your time, though, is only part of it. The army also invests a lot of
time in training leaders to manage the mental and emotional states of the troops.
Justin Maciejewski: When a leader shows up in the army, the soldiers immediately worry that they’re under scrutiny, that they’re being evaluated. That imposes an additional burden. So when I started in Basra, my assumption was to let the guys lead. They’ve got the enemy to worry about, and they’ve got the local population to worry about, but if you show up, they’ve got their leader to worry about as well. When a leader shows up in the right way, it’s a source of encouragement; it shows you also have skin in the game on any particular day. When the bullets are flying around, it makes the point that we’re all in this together.

One day, we had a mortar attack, and a lot of guys were badly injured on the other side of the city. The day before, someone had been killed by an improvised explosive device, and someone had lost one of their legs. So we got into our vehicles, and we drove across the city to spend the afternoon with this company and see how they—a company of about a hundred people—were getting on. I just went up there, had a cup of tea, put my arm around a few people.

The fact that we made the effort to get up there after this attack, in the same sort of vehicles that they’d been attacked in, meant a huge amount to the guys. I came to realize that showing vulnerability and presence as a leader becomes a very important way of galvanizing everyone around a particular mission. I wouldn’t go on a mission with a leader because I was worried about that leader, but because I wanted to show that leader that I was right next to him. And that mind-set change was the most profound for me personally as a leader: seeing yourself not as an evaluator but as a supporter of the people who work for you.

Justin Maciejewski: For a meeting somewhere with, say, a tribal leader or local power broker, I would turn up with my entire panoply of drivers, communicators, and bodyguards—we call it the “commander’s tac,” maybe as many as 15 people—and there might be a jet in the air over the area. That’s saying you’re the biggest tribal chief in the area.

The vulnerable bit is when you go to a group of soldiers who are being led by somebody and say, “I would like to come out with you tomorrow.” And you don’t try and command it; you just try and be with them, to walk in their shoes. The night shift, for me, was the place where you got the best conversations, turning up in a guard tower at two in the morning and saying to a young soldier, “How are you feeling?” And they’d be honest. They’d say, “I’m scared.” One could then talk about things that we were all concerned about and how we were going to tackle them.

I’m always struck by Henry V in Shakespeare, when he goes out and walks around. That is a very profound insight of good leadership. It’s in the night, when it’s quiet or when people have got their thoughts, that you can gently get alongside them.
Justin Maciejewski: My team was built by my predecessors: years of investment in developing the right talent and pushing it forward. So my regimental sergeant major had spent 20 years in the army, but he’d been recognized 15 or 16 years previously and had been pushed through the system to be ready when I needed him. I didn’t find him through advertising a job.

When I looked at this group of 800 people, I could see the sort of institutional investment in talent over at least 20 years—but, in reality, over generations. And it made me realize just how good the army is at getting and developing the right people. I had to remove a few people when I was there, but not many—a handful in an organization of 800—while everyone else stepped up and did what was required of them.

Talent selection is crucial, and being rigorous about it is important. I haven’t come across many organizations [in business] where talent selection is really rigorous. Often, it’s based on a good year’s performance, then you leap forward into the next job rather than really understanding what potential looks like versus performance. It could be that someone’s doing something they’re not actually ideally suited for, but, by God, they’ll be good for the next level. I think business is too quick to bring in talent rather than develop it internally. Endlessly looking outside creates a very transactional approach to people.

Justin Maciejewski: People have got to complement each other. So if you have an extrovert leader who may not be very good on detail, you need to make sure they’ve got a second in command who’s bloody good at it. You mustn’t let people pick their own teams, because what you then create is an inner circle. I’ve seen this in other armies, where commanders were allowed to move with their inner circle. And when you have an inner circle around the boss, you just create a sense of disempowerment for everyone who’s not in the magic circle of power. That creates a very fractious—and, ultimately, toxic—organization. In business, I often saw an outer circle of people who were feeling very scared and vulnerable, and I don’t think that’s the way to drive successful teams.

Justin Maciejewski: [In the army,] there’s a very mature initial conversation between the person giving the mission and the person receiving the mission around how they’re going to achieve that mission. Then there’d be a dialogue around the concerns. There’s literally a piece of paper with four headings on it, and one of the headings is “concerns,” so you can’t say, “I’ve got no concerns.” That would feel a bit weird. So it takes the fear out of alignment with your boss.
At the end of the operation, there’s what we call an “after-action review,” where you review performance of that operation. And the key thing about this is that it’s facilitated by an outsider, not by the person commanding the mission but by someone who’s not directly involved in the operation—for example, someone from the intelligence staff. Generally speaking, the commander comes to that process at the end and says, “That’s really interesting. These are my thoughts, reflections. And what have we learned from this?” And then someone captures what we need to learn from it, and then that gets fed into a review of how we do an operation in the future.

When a mistake is made, you do not hang someone out to dry. Sometimes mistakes are made in battle and people get killed. If you crucify people when a mistake is made in battle, they will freeze with fear the next time they’re facing the enemy, and the consequences of that are far worse. The notion of learning without blaming is at the heart of removing fear from that process.

One thing people realize in this sort of environment is that no one is without fault. No one is invulnerable to making mistakes, because the pressures are huge. People are slow to judge because they know that tomorrow it could be them. When a mistake is made, you know it could be you. I’ve been really shocked by how much fear is used as a motivator in business—in a way that I never saw it used as a motivator in the army. People are very much in a state of fear, not because they’re being shot at, but because there’s an internal fear working in terms of how people are being evaluated and watched all the time.

The Quarterly: How did you leverage values in your day-to-day work?

Justin Maciejewski: I’ve always been struck since I left the army that the army doesn’t have just values; it has values and standards. And the reason is because it wants to help people understand what those values look like in action. So courage is a value; having the moral courage to call out something when it’s wrong is the standard.

I saw this with a young soldier who came to me and said, “Sir, my commander behaved badly in a house last night in Basra. He smashed up some furniture in a search, and it was wrong, sir.” That young soldier had the moral courage to do that.

We would spend 15 or 20 minutes, perhaps half an hour, a week talking about the army’s values—courage, loyalty, discipline—and what they actually meant. Values can be a hugely powerful thing when they’re shared across an organization, but you’ve got to invest in them. You can’t just put them on a notice board or up in an office and have that be the end of the job. In business, I think, we’re still in the foothills of how we use values in the most effective way to create healthy organizations and drive performance.

The Quarterly: What have you observed about the way organizations in the corporate sector look at people?

Justin Maciejewski: One thing is that I would never call my soldiers a “human resource.” They were the soldiers, the battalion, the riflemen. The term “human resources” dehumanizes people.
The army is very mindful of its people because it can't hire them in at any level. You can't hire in someone to be a great general on the battlefield on day one. It has to nurture, invest in, and grow talent. Specialists can come in, but the core manpower has to be grown from within; the army does not use headhunters.

A lot of industry and business relies on the fact that it can just hire and fire people, so it becomes a hire-and-fire machine rather than a coaching-and-building machine. And I think that you can hire and fire your way to a certain level of performance, but by doing that, you will never build genuine teamwork and cohesion. The new approach to becoming agile in business is based on building small, tight-knit squads. That requires trust, and trust takes time. You've got to bind people to the idea and the purpose and, if you like, the essence of the company you're building or the business you're running. You're never going to get people to go the extra mile if, fundamentally, it's a transactional relationship. Q

Justin Maciejewski is the director general of the National Army Museum and a former brigadier in the British Army. This interview was conducted by Rob Theunissen, a partner in McKinsey's Amsterdam office.

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For a description of how the British Army's embrace of agility has extended to its headquarters, see the companion interview, “Building agility in the British Army's headquarters,” on McKinsey.com.