

Public Sector Practice

Lessons from the military for COVID-time leadership

“Mission command” and other military principles can guide policy makers and business leaders thrust into crisis.

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Forget the metaphor: in the most fundamental sense, dealing with the coronavirus pandemic is not like waging war. The enemy is a virus, not armed combatants, and countries around the world are in the struggle together.

Yet certain analogies apply. COVID-19 is also deadly, and leaders in all organizations are making life-and-death decisions quickly, under intense pressure and with incomplete information. The scale and complexity of the situation is greater than any one person can comprehend or manage, and the stakes are high. Leaders are having to make consequential decisions that will affect the lives and livelihoods of their employees for years to come. Military leaders operating in the fog of war know all about that. Moreover, the military is skilled in managing a variety of crises—from fighting wars to organizing emergency responses during natural disasters.

Having served in militaries and worked closely with them, we have a keen appreciation of the strengths of their leadership. We also recognize that the military culture is unique, characterized by a shared sense of mission, values, and standards; by unquestioning adherence to authority when required; and by extensive training and procedural practice. Even bearing these differences in mind, however, government and business leaders can learn lessons from the best military practices.

In this article, we offer six lessons that have proved valuable in the military context and that adapt well to other kinds of organizations.

Account for the human factors

Militaries recognize that morale, unit cohesion, mental health, and family stability affect performance. The stress of a sudden crisis will exacerbate preexisting personnel issues, as well as create new ones. As a result, militaries have developed institutional mechanisms to address these challenges. You may recruit the service member, but you retain the family.

Often too the end of the crisis is the start of a new set of challenges; most military units see an increase in mental-health issues after, not during, a combat deployment. Business and government leaders should prepare for these challenges as well. For a large portion of the workforce, the pandemic will be the most stressful period in their lives. Financial insecurity, health concerns, changes in the patterns of family life, isolation—all have made the past few months a daunting experience that will certainly linger as economies restart and enter the “next normal.”

Plan, plan some more, and watch for escalating problems

Military leaders are obsessive about planning: they know that the battlefield is always an uncertain environment, so they continually test their ideas. General (and later president) Dwight Eisenhower once quipped “plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.” To prepare for war, military leaders put together teams of planners with diverse backgrounds and expertise, drawn from different organizations (and, if the effort is an international one, different nations). The process of rapidly integrating and iterating these perspectives goes on constantly.

Often, there will be two teams of planners—one focused on contingencies in current operations and the other (the plan-ahead team) thinking about the requirements for future operations. This approach not only creates better plans but also ensures that the people responsible for execution share a common understanding of the assumptions, objectives, and contingency options. Business and government leaders also need to plan extensively and at all levels and to examine possible contingencies—something many are now trying to do amid the rapidly developing COVID-19 pandemic.

Plans must often be redrawn as circumstances change. Modern militaries think that war requires management at three levels: strategic (national

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priorities), operational (regional operations), and tactical (specific battles and engagements). Rapidly moving events will affect each of these: for example, a tactical crisis can escalate to a strategic one, and national priorities can lead to tactical engagements (as happened in US and UK military operations in Afghanistan immediately after 9/11). In a broad way, business operates similarly: for example, the loss of a specific account (tactical) may hurt a business unit's annual plan (operational), which may cause a company to reevaluate its portfolio (strategic). Leaders therefore synchronize their planning cycles and assumptions to account for rapidly changing economic circumstances. They constantly reassess and refine plans and actions.

Use the principles of 'mission command' to achieve ultimate empowerment

There is a popular misconception that militaries are defined by top-down decision making: officers supposedly make decisions and troops do what they are told. Any force, naturally, has hierarchies and rules, but this style of leadership hasn't been the norm in the most advanced militaries since the end of the 19th century, when the Prussian general staff developed the concept of "mission command." At its core, mission command is about empowering officers to seek action in line with the intention behind the order and not the order itself when it cannot be executed. That requires flexible structures, well-defined intent, and trust.

US Army general Stanley McChrystal, who led coalition forces in Afghanistan, argued in his book *Team of Teams*¹ that speed and adaptability at all levels are central to waging war in an information age. After all, conditions change throughout a war or a battle. "Boots on the ground" can often figure things out if their mission is clear and they understand the limits to their autonomy—so that they do not, for example, stray into an area where other forces are operating. Business leaders need to ask themselves if their employees have that level of capabilities and freedom of action: if the videoconferencing system goes down or a major supplier can no longer deliver, will their employees sit around in paralysis or devise ways to keep moving? Do employees have the training to react and take appropriate decisions?

The limits on field commanders are echoed at every level; the military makes very clear where decisions are to be made and who is responsible for making them. On this basis—flexibility combined with structure—it is possible to delegate effectively. In business, teams managing the COVID-19 crisis have had to make more and faster decisions than they do under normal business circumstances. The analogy is in-theater military operations, when operations are 24/7 and clear and rapid updates incorporate new metrics and data on the fly. In business, the COVID-19 crisis has changed the nature of customer service and the relevance of traditional reporting and management systems. Staying close to the customer at all times is critical to survival and to staying ahead of the competition.

¹ Stanley McChrystal, *Team of Teams: New Rules of Engagement for a Complex World*, first edition, New York, NY: Penguin, 2015.

Military leaders, at all levels, describe their intent—the outcomes to be achieved—and often define a main effort. A clear intent initiates a force's purposeful activity and represents what the commander wants to achieve and why; as the principal criterion for decision making, this binds the force together. The idea is to ensure that people working on other priorities know it is their duty to support the main effort and that they may not receive all the resources they hope for until its goals are achieved. They should also understand the metrics used to define mission success.

For this to work, leaders have to trust that their subordinates will do their best and ask for help when they need it, and subordinates need to trust their leaders to give them tasks that they can accomplish and support them as needed. Similarly, the head office needs to redefine its role vis-à-vis branches, field offices, or plants. While it sometimes makes sense to give specific direction, often it will be better to support those closer to the action, who are making and carrying out decisions. The questions for business are these: when do we change to the equivalent of a wartime pace and conditions? What must we do to support our people on the ground?

Communicate succinctly and create a single source of information

Communication matters most when everyone is in a hurry. In the current environment, many employees are getting information from half a dozen or more social and digital channels. They have too much to pay attention to and not enough time to go deep.

Many different sources of truth and information will be scattered across an organization. Leaders need to do two things. First, remember to make the message simple, and repeat it often. Give clear directions—short emails, not long memos. Put the main points at the top and make it easy to see what teams need to execute. Second, leaders need to establish a single, trusted source of information.

Military commanders have techniques for simpler, more transparent communications. For instance, taking the time to engage with soldiers is a tried and true method of ensuring that the messages are cascading and that the flag officer is getting first-hand anecdotes. This happens in wartime even when it is dangerous to move around the area of operations.

Commanders also make it a priority to establish a common operating picture (COP): a single display of relevant operational information (such as the position of troops) shared by all commands. A COP ensures that all members of the team have situational awareness, aids collaborative planning, and helps units come together to execute plans. The COP is consistently updated, with staff providing daily briefings for leaders.

The best military leaders take personal responsibility for ensuring that they have the essential information, which then takes on predictive meaning as it is analyzed. It is the fusion of intelligence with the common operating picture that enables leaders to decide on a direction.

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Hurry carefully

Military leaders sit at the center of information-gathering networks fed by their subordinates, human and technical intelligence, allies, and plan-ahead teams. Good leaders work continually to maintain situational awareness. Through experience and character, they learn when they need to intervene. Then they act and move on.

But hard choices are still hard choices, and even under pressure, consulting fellow leaders or colleagues in a different context will improve decision making. Moving too quickly often leads to messes that can take time to clear up, so taking ten minutes to think about potential issues and, if possible, to discuss them can save time later. These rhythms are embedded in military processes. Having a plan-ahead team that works through such issues reduces the number of surprises.

Do not expect or demand perfection

Good enough is usually good enough, and going with a less-bad plan is often much better than waiting for a chance at perfection. In war, the enemy will exploit indecisiveness, so leaders seek to establish a tempo that overwhelms the enemy's ability to make decisions. The hardest call for crisis

leaders is to move ahead knowing that they may have it wrong. Given the inherent uncertainty of the profession, military commanders keep forces in reserve should initial assumptions prove wrong or unit performance falter. This reserve provides the flexibility for responding to unforeseen events quickly.

During war, both sides continually search for an edge. In World War II alone, this accelerated the development of rocket science, radar, digital circuits, and many other important technologies. During the present crisis, we already see new applications of old technologies. As always, innovation is likely to bring long-term advantage—to society as a whole and to individual businesses.

But this cannot be taken for granted. Everyone wants to have the perfect team, the best experts, and plenty of time. Perhaps the most important lesson from the military is that you almost never have these happy conditions, so constant change and evolution are needed to outmaneuver the opposition. Leadership up and down the ranks, adaptability, and a clear understanding of the mission make the difference.

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