

## Military Know-How Can Boost Business Performance

BY RICHARD MARTIN

I served for 26 years in the Canadian Army and retired in 2006. Since then I've been running my own consulting, coaching, and training business. When people ask me what I do, I tell them that I combine business and military know-how to help executives and organizations exploit change, improve performance, and thrive.

A fairly common question concerns the relevance of military know-how to business and civilian management. People generally accept that those who have served in the military are capable of great discipline, courage, and leadership. What is less clear are the exact ways that military wisdom applies to them. The aim of this column is to provide insight into this exact question, based on my experience of running my own business and helping my clients to grow and thrive in theirs.

As I've written in my book, *Brilliant Manoeuvres: How to Use Military Wisdom to Win Business Battles*, there are three basic ways that military know-how is applicable and relevant in business. The first is the most common one; the idea that military history and strategy provide a seemingly endless and variable stream of examples that can inspire and motivate people in business.

I call this the metaphorical approach, as military practice is a rich source of metaphors for entrepreneurs and executives. In fact, I've found that many—if not most—business leaders readily accept these comparisons and indeed, like to see themselves as leading their “troops” in a business-is-war manner. This is similar to the way that many people like to use sports metaphors and examples to motivate and inspire.

As valid and useful as military metaphors and illustrations may be, they are actually quite limited when it comes to concrete civilian business, management and leadership applications. It's one thing to say “We need to attack our competitors and outflank them,” but it's quite another to instantiate that in precise and relevant terms. What is the analog to attacking in business? And how does it work exactly?

This is where the next category of applications comes into play, as a source of conceptual analogs that can be carried over from military theory and practice to business and organizational management. For example, in the case where a business wants to go “on the offensive,” it helps to elaborate that concept precisely so that it doesn't just rush headlong on a “frontal assault.”

For example, a company entering a new territory or market is analogous to an amphibious landing operation. In both cases, you need to scout out the entry point. You must build up forces to gain a foothold and expand it into a secure bridgehead. After that, you have to break out of the bridgehead. No matter what the military analogy is, there is a wealth of insights to be gleaned and applied to the business situation.

The third way that military know-how and wisdom can be applied in the civilian world is what I call the technical approach. This includes leadership, planning, decision-making, and other managerial techniques and principles that are taught and used in the military and that can be readily adapted to business and organizational situations. For instance, I have been very successful in introducing mission analysis, mission command, simplified forms of the estimate and operational planning processes, as well as the basic military orders format (SMESC: situation, mission, execution, support, command and signals) for use by private and public-sector executives and organizations.

I believe that this is probably the most common way that former military people envisage the application of military know-how after their service career. It is critical, however, when carrying over these various tools, techniques, and principles, to simplify them and adapt them to the specific needs of the business or organization. Otherwise, civilian managers and executives will tend to not use them if they are too complicated. Anyone who has served in the military must realize that they learned these approaches over a period of years, in some cases. Moreover, there is little opportunity to conduct extended individual and collective training in business and organizations. As a result, they have to be made as easy to assimilate and apply as possible.

I've been a practising consultant helping organizations, businesses, and executives of all kinds to apply these military approaches, and also more standard managerial concepts, for eight years now. There is a great hunger and need for military wisdom and know-how in all fields of endeavour. I hope you will read this column regularly, as I will be introducing a number of these conceptual and technical applications so that you can grow and thrive, no matter what your professional goals and requirements. It may even be useful for those readers who are still serving!



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