



From the Battlefield to the Boardroom – What the Military Leadership Can Teach Us

Description

Leading on the battlefield is about leading through crisis – real crisis. It is about adapting to threats, making horrendous decisions, working with limited resources and, against all odds, inspiring others to continue.

For the majority of us, it is a type of leadership that belongs to the movies and history books; it does not belong to the boardroom. That is until Covid-19 hit. Facing a perfect storm of diminishing revenue, layoffs and low morale, the lessons hard won on the battlefield are directly relevant to every insurance leader. Here are our top five.

Build Cohesion

In 1808, Napoleon wrote: “In war, the moral is to the material as three is to one.” He understood that self-belief, joint will, teamship and pride – which he summed up as “moral” – was more important than the weapons of war. By creating cohesion, “moral” allowed regiments to keep marching, and fighting, long after supplies or ammunition ran out.

More than 200 years later, nothing has changed. Your team may have the best laptops, pay and homeworking support. They may even be fortunate enough to belong to one of the few insurance companies still giving out bonuses. But without cohesion, their output is limited.

To instil cohesion, focus on developing team spirit and a sense of pride in what they are, what they have come through, and what they are capable of achieving.

Be Present

In 1942, the 14th British-Indian Division was forced to retreat 900 miles across treacherous Burmese terrain, suffering appalling losses.

To maintain order their commander, General Slim, stressed the need for personal contact: “I felt there

was only one way to do it, by a direct approach to the individual men themselves. Not by written exhortations, by wireless speeches, but by informal talks and contacts between troops and commanders... It was the way we held the troops together in the worst days of the 1942 retreat; we remained an army then only because the men saw and knew their commanders.”

As you grapple with the repercussions of Covid-19, you would do well to remember Slim’s advice. Engaged in constant virtual calls and strategic meetings, it is easy to become divorced from those involved in the day-to day running of the business.

You need to be seen. You need to take time to make individual calls and hold small group meetings. This will create a ripple effect that the business has a leader who isn’t afraid to return to the trenches – and above all, listens.

Delegate

At the Cairo Conference in 1943, General Eisenhower briefed the Combined Chiefs of Staff on his plan for the invasion of France. His superior, General Marshall, was concerned about Eisenhower’s tired appearance. Advising him to take a few days’ leave, Marshall said: “If your subordinates cannot do [the work] for you, you haven’t organised them properly.”

In order to lead in adversity, you need to rigorously delegate. You can’t do everything. You need to maintain a strategic mind and delegate tasks. This will not only free up time but will also empower and equip colleagues to meet future challenges.

Use your Instinct

In 1966, Colonel Hal Moore’s battalion of 450 men was surrounded by nearly 2,000 North Vietnamese. Immortalised in the movie *We Were Soldiers*, his leadership was essential in saving the battalion from complete destruction.

He later recalled the importance of making rapid decisions. Following his dictum “There is always one more thing you can do to increase your odds of success”, he later advised: “In critical, fast-moving situations, instincts and intuition amount to an instant estimate of the situation. Your instincts are the product of your education, training, reading, personality and experience.”

In a crisis it is easy to be overwhelmed with self-doubt and to avoid making decisions. This will never lead to success. Instead, you should quickly separate the problem into multiple elements. In the absence of time, you should quickly consult, be willing to use your instinct and move on the issue that is most important. Your task is not to solve everything; it is to solve what is in front of you.

Remain Positive

In 2000, a small group of British soldiers was taken captive in Sierra Leone. Facing the likelihood that they would eventually be executed, their officer, Captain John Laverty, recalled: “On many occasions our chances did not look good. I felt this as much as the soldiers. The men counted on me... I never allowed myself to talk about the possibility of being killed... when soldiers shared their fears with me I reassured them... some said they didn’t know how much longer they could take it. I said they would

have to take it for as long as it lasted and that they could handle it.” Despite the desperate situation, Lavery was able to maintain morale and hold the team together until a rescue mission was mounted.

As you struggle with the practical and emotional fallout of Covid-19, it is vital that you maintain a positive outlook in front of your teams. This does not mean that you ignore the realities of the situation, but rather that you openly express your belief in the team and the current plan. To say otherwise will increase anxiety, panic and rumours. And rumours are never healthy.

Covid-19 is a leadership school. A very tough one. But it is worth remembering that our military counterparts, past and present, have gone through much worse. Harnessing their experience and advice will give you the ability to hold your head up and keep going.

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Author

abigail-burke

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