

Leadership Lab (R)

Improvise, Adapt, and Overcome.



It's only hubris if I fail.

Julius Caesar

The strength of the team is each individual member. The strength of each member is the team.

Phil Jackson

Discipline is the bridge between goals and accomplishment.

Jim Rohn

Idea in Brief

I realize that not everyone is a fan of the military and the institution that it is. And that is perfectly fine. But one of the things that the military does is provide relevant examples of what leadership is and can be — both good and bad. As an organization, the military has been around for centuries and has been relatively consistent in its purpose; it is a superb vehicle to study leadership. From that frame of reference, I highlight three lessons learned about leadership from the military; hubris, risk, and excellence.

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Three Things From the Military

By B.L. Janke

I realize that not everyone is a fan of the military and the institution that it is. And that is perfectly fine. But one of the things that the military does is provide relevant examples of what leadership is and can be — both good and bad. As an organization, the military has been around for centuries and has been relatively consistent in its purpose; it is a superb vehicle to study leadership. From that frame of reference, I highlight three lessons learned about leadership from the military; hubris, risk, and excellence.

Hubris. From the classical mythical story of Icarus through to the 21st century, the military is filled with examples of hubris and how it causes the downfall of individuals, commanders, armies and even countries. Of course, the story of Icarus is a warning to us all to be wary of our own confidence as arrogance (and pride) always comes before the fall. But unfortunately, the dangers of hubris and its lessons are something that we continue to have to learn, relearn, and learn again.

From Douglas MacArthur during World War II and then the Korean War to Bill Halsey at Leyte Gulf, hubris, or arrogance, leads commanders towards their own ruin. Some mistakes are recoverable, and others not so much. For MacArthur, his arrogance was a long walk to his eventual firing for insubordination

during the Korean War and not something that just occurred. MacArthur's arrogance was legendary for the better part of his career and a character flaw that we can see in all its relevance with the benefit of hindsight and years of study. It wasn't that others didn't know MacArthur's arrogance when it was occurring; it was simply that his success was valued more by his commanding officers and the organization than correcting his behaviour and character flaw. This serves as another warning for organizations: organizations must be careful about what behaviours they implicitly condone but not explicitly dealing with in a timely fashion. A lesson that the military and other organizations continue to learn today.

Bill Halsey's arrogance at Leyte Gulf is a singular example of how one's own arrogance can be used against them and, therefore, how one should always be aware of this potential character flaw. Halsey was a well-known commander to the Japanese Navy. The knowledge regarding his aggressiveness and arrogance was successfully used against him through a decoy fleet of ships to draw Halsey's entire 3rd Fleet northwards and away from protecting the islands' landing forces. This was a critical component of the Japanese counter-attack plan that was successfully implemented. The entire Japanese counter-attack

What are you willing to sacrifice to accomplish your most important goals?



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Leadership Lab is a forum for the exploration and discovery of personal and leadership excellence. Excellence is a core value of who I am as a person, an educator, and a leader. It is what drives me to perform and to grow; testing the limits of my capability both personally and professionally and pushing them farther.

Excellence is an attitude that one must cultivate and support its growth. To do so, one must study excellence and be committed to life-long learning.

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might have also proven successful if it weren't for the tactics, courage and planning by the fleets and commanders remaining on station in Halsey's absence. While Halsey's mistake was not critical in changing the overall battle outcome nor the war, it highlights how one's hubris can be used against them.

Unfortunately, we continue to see hubris lessons occur within business, politics and other non-military organizations. From Enron, WorldCom, and Tyco, to SNC-Lavalin, McKinsey, and the investment banks in the sub-prime mortgage crisis of 2008/2009, hubris is nearly a constant in organizational leadership dynamics. Hubris is causing a financial cost and a real human impact as well within society. Without some more substantial and better leaders who have learned the lessons of history and who have implemented processes to check their own hubris, hubris's organizational and societal

impact will continue to grow. In the past, it may have been thought that the best examples of hubris came from the military, where it was clearly evident the cause and effect relationship that hubris creates. Unfortunately, the 21st century provides many more and maybe even more explicit examples of hubris's impact from corporate organizations and politics. It may seem that we are not yet learning the past lessons to chart a better future.

A key leadership lesson from the military that civilian leaders can also learn from is about risk. This is not a discussion about risk assessments or mitigations but shared personal risk. In the military, exposure to risk in combat is pretty straightforward; it is about the potential to be wounded, killed or captured in battle. It is clearly about experiencing the potential for some personal risk or injury. And while every soldier knows that those higher in rank do not face the same personal risk as those

on the front lines, it is well understood that commanders must endure similar shared experience and similar unique risks that those on the front lines do. Commanders and generals who are only ever known to be far removed from the front lines and in the command post's comfortable surroundings do not enjoy the troops' respect or trust on the front lines. But those leaders exposed to similar risks that their forces are, build camaraderie and a level of trust that is palpable in the organization. The best leaders in the military have learned this lesson and follow it. They inspire confidence in their troops and their leadership with their actions.

In the civilian world, the same lesson can be learned. Leaders must be visibly ensconced with their teams where and when possible and must be exposed to similar risk levels as those they lead are. This lesson is one of the fundamental learnings from the 2008 / 2009 financial crisis as the

banks' leaders' action was inconsistently applied from a risk exposure perspective as leaders quickly jettisoned front line workers to protect the firm's bottom line and ultimately their own executive bonuses. This disparity of treatment and this inequality of risk exposure is one of the critical lessons learned from the financial crisis. No one was challenging the salary differences between front-line workers and executives, nor the importance and priority of saving the company. Still, when it came to risk exposure, the level of inequality that was observed is what created much of the outcry.

Leaders must share in the risk exposure that the rest of the organization does. It is this shared exposure that builds connectedness, solidarity and trust. And it is what creates commitment and alignment through the organization from top to bottom. When unwelcome but necessary changes are required within an organization, the changes must be equitably felt by leaders and the workers alike; there cannot be a double standard.

The third leadership lesson from the military that is transferable to civilian leadership is the commitment to excellence and the discipline, drilling and training needed to achieve it. Things like discipline and training are often discussed in civilian organizations. Still, the emotional commitment to follow through with these things and achieve excellence often becomes too much for many leaders to bear. Whereas in the military, the organization's culture is discipline, training and drilling, and from the commitment to this process is excellence. It is the process commitment that organizations can learn from the military, and if the commitment to the process is relentless, excellence is nearly a forgone conclusion.

There is a simple saying that in times of crisis, we do not rise to the level of our expectations (or the crisis) but sink to the level of our training. And regardless of the presence of crisis or not (as a crisis only serves to accentuate the issue), discipline, training, and drilling are vital to delivering excellence every time. The military is founded upon the notion of unit cohesion achieved through discipline, training and drilling. The military could not accomplish the seemingly impossible goals assigned to it without these things. In fact, in times of national crisis, the military is often seconded to address civilian issues because of the unit cohesion it has created.

Those uninitiated to the ways of discipline are often offended by what they perceive as the restrictions that it creates. However, whether you are a team of 1 or 10 000, it is discipline and the consistency of training and drilling that results in the excellence that others observe. From athletes to business people, from scientists to sports teams, it is the repetition of drilling and the discipline to training that creates the possible from the seemingly impossible. As Jocko Willink famously says, "Discipline equals freedom."

Can you imagine for a moment an organization that lacks consistency and discipline in the work that it does? It could result in multiple divisions creating parts for a product that don't connect together. And it could mean different subroutines for a software service don't work together to deliver the required outcome. A lack of consistency and drilling could result in inefficiencies and lost productivity as work is duplicated. It could be people's lives when the emergency response team doesn't fully understand the protocols, procedures and actions of how to work together. First responders, like firefighters, train incessantly to commit

procedures to muscle and mental memory and to work together as an integrated unit, as do hospital ER rooms, police SWAT teams and professional athletes and sports teams. Could you imagine the chaos that could ensue when the team members acted with a right-minded approach but independently of the whole? Interdependence is the objective so that excellence can result. This is a crucial leadership lesson that the military shares with us as well.

Because of the heritage, longevity, and intensity that the military brings to its work, leadership lessons are often amplified, both good and bad. It is incumbent upon civilian leaders to observe the lessons born from the military's crucibles and translate these to their work. To fail to do so well, is, in fact, another form of hubris. Hubris, risk and excellence are just three lessons from the military that we can all learn from and apply in our role as leaders.

