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MILITARY BACKGROUND AND LEADERSHIP SKILLS IN THE BUSINESS LIFE

Leaving the army – not a new matter in our life. All army leavers (officers) have higher education with very strong leadership skills. They have to find new career opportunities in civilian life without any experiences in that field. What does this mean in terms of leadership skills? How can these skills help in business life?

This publication would describe the most characteristic features of demobilized officers.

Leadership has many aspects. Due to the limited size of this article the goal now to describe what the military leader must be, know and do by means of military leadership framework and how these properties can influence the ex-officer's career in business life, how these properties succeed there, how business appreciate those skills.

The army's ultimate responsibility is to win wars, to defend the country against enemies, ensure the security of the land. Leadership in combat is the primary mission and most important challenge. To meet this challenge an officer should develop his character and competence while achieving excellence. It focuses on character, competence and excellence.

Leadership starts at the top, with the character of the leader. In order to lead others an officer must first make sure his own house in order. Army leadership begins with what the leader must be, the values and attributes that shape a leader's character. But character and knowledge — while absolutely necessary — are not enough. An officer cannot be effective, cannot be a leader, until he applies what he knows, until he acts and does what he must. As with skills, he will learn more leadership actions as he serves in different positions. Because actions are the essence of leadership, the discussion begins with them.

LEADERSHIP DEFINED

Leadership is influencing people – by providing purpose, direction, and motivation – while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization. This definition is the same in the civilian life as well, valid in every kind of organizations.

In military perspective leadership doctrine has 3 major elements:

- Influencing: making decisions, communicating those decisions, and motivating people
- Operating: the things you do to accomplish your organization's immediate mission
- Improving: the things you do to increase the organization's capability to accomplish current or future missions.

First of all we have to define these elements from the army's point of you.

INFLUENCING

Influencing means getting people to do what you want them to do. It is the means or method to achieve two ends: operating and improving. But there's more to influencing than simply passing along orders. The example the officer sets is just as important as the words he speaks. And officer sets an example – good or bad – with every action. Influencing actions fall into these categories: communicating, decision making, motivating. Through the officer's words and example, he must communicate purpose, direction and motivation.

Purpose

Purpose gives people reason to do things. This does not mean that as a leader the officer must explain every decision to the satisfaction of his subordinates. It does mean he must earn their trust: they must know from experience that the officer cares about them and would not ask them to do something — particularly something dangerous — unless there was a good reason, unless the task was essential to mission accomplishment.

DIRECTION

When providing direction, an officer communicates the way he wants the mission accomplished. Prioritize tasks, assign responsibility for completing them (delegating authority when necessary), and make sure your people understand the standard. In short, the officer figures out how to get the work done right with the available people, time, and other resources; then he communicate that information to his subordinates. As he thinks the job through, he can better aim his effort and resources at the right targets.

People want direction. They want to be given challenging tasks, training in how to accomplish them, and the resources necessary to do them well. Then they want to be left alone to do the job.

MOTIVATION

Motivation gives subordinates the will to do everything they can to accomplish a mission. It results in their acting on their own initiative when they see something needs to be done.

To motivate the people, officer should give them missions that challenge them. Get to know the people and their capabilities; that way you can tell just how far to push each one. An officer should give them as much responsibility as they can handle; then let them do the work without looking over their shoulder and nagging them. When they succeed, they should be praised. When they fall short, credit should be given for what they have done and coach or counsel them on how to do better next time.

People who are trained this way will accomplish the mission, even when no one is watching. They will work harder than they thought they could. And when their leader notices and gives them credit (with something more than the offhand comment „good job”), they will be ready to take on even more next time.

But army leaders motivate their people by more than words. If his people are working in the rain, the officer’s uniform will be wet too. If they have missed breakfast, the leader’s stomach will be growling just as loudly. The best leaders lead from the front. They don’t underestimate the importance of being where the action is.

OPERATING

Operating is what the officer does to accomplish the immediate mission, to get the job done on time and to standards. Actions taken to influence others serve to accomplish operating actions, those actions you take to achieve the short-term goal of accomplishing the mission. All military leaders execute the operating actions, which become more complex as they assume positions of increasing responsibility. Operating actions fall into the following categories: planning and preparing, executing and assessing.

IMPROVING

The army also expects from the officers to do far more than just accomplish the day’s work. Army leaders also strive to improve everything entrusted to them: their people, facilities, equipment, training and resources. There will be a new mission, of course, but part of finishing the old one is improving the organization. Good leaders strive to leave an organization better than they found it.

Army leaders set priorities and balance competing demands. They focus their organization's effort on short- and long-term goals while continuing to meet requirements that may or may not contribute directly to achieving those goals.

By doing these things the officer is creating a better organization, one that will work smarter the next time. His example sends an important message. The soldiers see their leader look at their own and the organization's performance, evaluate it, identify strong areas to sustain as well as mistakes and shortcomings, and commit to a better way of doing things. These actions are more powerful than any lecture on leadership.

Improving actions fall into these categories: developing, building, learning.

INDICATORS

After this short summary of military leadership framework we have to define those properties which are most useful in business life. In order to achieve that it is reasonable to describe the most military properties. At this stage I used the indicators from US Army Field Manual No. 22-100.¹

During the previous years I made investigations among headhunting companies in Hungary asking them, how they evaluate, appreciate the logistics professionals. In the previous months I repeated this investigation but now with strong focus on leadership skills of the ex-military staff.

I gave them the list below, and asked them to indicate the most typical elements of the ex-military leaders behavior according to their experiences. (The most relevant answers are indicated with italics letters.)

ACTIONS

Influencing

- *Use appropriate methods to reach goals while operating and improving.*
- *Motivate subordinates to accomplish assigned tasks and missions.*
- *Set the example by demonstrating enthusiasm for—and, if necessary, methods of—accomplishing assigned tasks.*
- Make themselves available to assist peers and subordinates.
- *Share information with subordinates.*
- Encourage subordinates and peers to express candid opinions.
- *Actively listen to feedback and act appropriately based on it.*
- Mediate peer conflicts and disagreements.

¹ Army leadership – Be, Know, Do (Field Manual No. 22-100 US Army, 31 August 1999).

- *Tactfully confront and correct others when necessary.*
- Earn respect and obtain willing cooperation of peers, subordinates, and superiors.
- Challenge others to match their example.
- *Take care of subordinates and their families, providing for their health, welfare, morale, and training.*
- Are persuasive in peer discussions and prudently rally peer pressure against peers when required.
- Provide a team vision for the future.
- *Shape the organizational climate by setting, sustaining, and ensuring a values-based environment.*

Communicating

- *Display good oral, written, and listening skills.*
- Persuade others.
- *Express thoughts and ideas clearly to individuals and groups.*

Oral Communication.

- Speak clearly and concisely.
- Speak enthusiastically and maintain listeners' interest and involvement.
- *Make appropriate eye contact when speaking.*
- Use gestures that are appropriate but not distracting.
- Convey ideas, feelings, sincerity, and conviction.
- Express well-thought-out and well-organized ideas.
- Use grammatically and doctrinally correct terms and phrases.
- Use appropriate visual aids.
- *Act to determine, recognize and resolve misunderstandings.*
- *Listen and watch attentively; make appropriate notes; convey the essence of what was said or done to others.*
- *React appropriately to verbal and nonverbal feedback.*
- *Keep conversations on track.*

Written Communication.

- Are understood in a single rapid reading by the intended audience.
- Use correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
- Have legible handwriting.
- *Use the active voice.*
- *Use an appropriate format, a clear organization, and a reasonably simple style.*
- Use only essential acronyms and spell out those used.

- *Stay on topic.*
- *Correctly use facts and data.*

Decision Making

- *Employ sound judgment and logical reasoning.*
- *Gather and analyze relevant information about changing situations to recognize and define emerging problems.*
- *Make logical assumptions in the absence of facts.*
- *Uncover critical issues to use as a guide in both making decisions and taking advantage of opportunities.*
- *Keep informed about developments and policy changes inside and outside the organization.*
- *Recognize and generate innovative solutions.*
- *Develop alternative courses of action and choose the best course of action based on analysis of their relative costs and benefits.*
- *Anticipate needs for action.*
- *Relate and compare information from different sources to identify possible cause-and-effect relationships.*
- *Consider the impact and implications of decisions on others and on situations.*
- *Involve others in decisions and keep them informed of consequences that affect them.*
- *Take charge when in charge.*
- *Define intent.*
- *Consider contingencies and their consequences.*
- *Remain decisive after discovering a mistake.*
- *Act in the absence of guidance.*
- *Improvise within commander's intent; handle a fluid environment.*

Motivating

- *Inspire, encourage, and guide others toward mission accomplishment.*
- *Don't show discouragement when facing setbacks.*
- *Attempt to satisfy subordinates' needs.*
- *Give subordinates the reason for tasks.*
- *Provide accurate, timely, and (where appropriate) positive feedback.*
- *Actively listen for feedback from subordinates.*
- *Use feedback to modify duties, tasks, requirements, and goals when appropriate.*

- *Recognize individual and team accomplishments and reward them appropriately.*
- *Recognize poor performance and address it appropriately.*
- *Justly apply disciplinary measures.*
- *Keep subordinates informed.*
- *Clearly articulate expectations.*
- *Consider duty positions, capabilities, and developmental needs when assigning tasks.*
- *Provide early warning to subordinate leaders of tasks they will be responsible for.*
- *Define requirements by issuing clear and concise orders or guidance.*
- *Allocate as much time as possible for task completion.*
- *Accept responsibility for organizational performance. Credit subordinates for good performance. Take responsibility for and correct poor performance.*

OPERATING

- *Accomplish short-term missions.*
- *Demonstrate tactical and technical competency appropriate to their rank and position.*
- *Complete individual and unit tasks to standard, on time, and within the commander's intent.*

Planning and Preparing

- *Develop feasible and acceptable plans for themselves and others that accomplish the mission while expending minimum resources and posturing the organization for future missions.*
- *Use forward planning to ensure each course of action achieves the desired outcome.*
- *Use reverse planning to ensure that all tasks can be executed in the time available and that tasks depending on other tasks are executed in the correct sequence.*
- *Determine specified and implied tasks and restate the higher headquarters' mission in terms appropriate to the organization.*
- *Incorporate adequate controls such as time phasing; ensure others understand when actions should begin or end.*
- *Ensure all courses of action accomplish the mission within the commander's intent.*

- Allocate available resources to competing demands by setting task priorities based on the relative importance of each task.
- *Address likely contingencies.*
- Remain flexible.
- *Consider SOPs (standard operation procedures)*
- Coordinate plans with higher, lower, adjacent, and affected organizations.
- *Personally arrive on time and meet deadlines; require subordinates and their organizations to accomplish tasks on time.*
- *Delegate all tasks except those they are required to do personally.*
- *Schedule activities so the organization meets all commitments in critical performance areas.*
- *Recognize and resolve scheduling conflicts.*
- *Notify peers and subordinates as far in advance as possible when their support is required.*
- Use some form of a personal planning calendar to organize requirements.

Executing

- *Use technical and tactical skills to meet mission standards, take care of people, and accomplish the mission with available resources.*
- *Perform individual and collective tasks to standard.*
- *Execute plans, adjusting when necessary, to accomplish the mission.*
- Encourage initiative.
- *Keep higher and lower headquarters, superiors, and subordinates informed.*
- *Keep track of people and equipment.*
- Adapt to and handle fluid environments.
- *Fight through obstacles, difficulties, and hardships to accomplish the mission.*
- Keep track of task assignments and suspenses; adjust assignments, if necessary; follow up.
- *Assessing*
- Leaders who effectively assess—
- Use assessment techniques and evaluation tools to identify lessons learned and facilitate consistent improvement.
- *Establish and employ procedures for monitoring, coordinating, and regulating subordinates' actions and activities.*
- Conduct initial assessments when beginning a new task or assuming a new position.

- *Analyze activities to determine how desired end states are achieved or affected.*
- Seek sustainment in areas when the organization meets the standard.
- Observe and assess actions in progress without oversupervising.
- *Judge results based on standards.*
- Sort out important actual and potential problems.
- *Determine causes, effects, and contributing factors for problems.*
- Analyze activities to determine how desired end states can be achieved ethically.

IMPROVING

- Sustain skills and actions that benefit themselves and each of their people for the future.
- Sustain and renew the organization for the future by managing change and exploiting individual and institutional learning capabilities.
- Create and sustain an environment where all leaders, subordinates, and organizations can reach their full potential.

Developing

- *Strive to improve themselves, subordinates, and the organization.*
- *Mentor by investing adequate time and effort in counseling, coaching, and teaching their individual subordinates and subordinate leaders.*
- *Set the example by displaying high standards of duty performance, personal appearance, military and professional bearing, and ethics.*
- Create a climate that expects good performance, recognizes superior performance, and doesn't accept poor performance.
- *Design tasks to provide practice in areas of subordinate leaders' weaknesses.*
- *Clearly articulate tasks and expectations and set realistic standards.*
- Guide subordinate leaders in thinking through problems for themselves.
- Anticipate mistakes and freely offer assistance without being overbearing.
- *Observe, assess, counsel, coach, and evaluate subordinate leaders.*
- Motivate subordinates to develop themselves.
- Arrange training opportunities that help subordinates achieve insight, self-awareness, self-esteem, and effectiveness.
- Balance the organization's tasks, goals, and objectives with subordinates' personal and professional needs.

- Develop subordinate leaders who demonstrate respect for natural resources and the environment.
- Act to expand and enhance subordinates' competence and self-confidence.
- Encourage initiative.
- Create and contribute to a positive organizational climate.
- Build on successes.
- *Improve weaknesses.*

Building

- *Spend time and resources improving the organization.*
- Foster a healthy ethical climate.
- *Act to improve the organization's collective performance.*
- *Comply with and support organizational goals.*
- *Encourage people to work effectively with each other.*
- Promote teamwork and team achievement.
- Are examples of team players.
- Offer suggestions, but properly execute decisions of the chain of command—even unpopular ones—as if they were their own.
- *Accept and act on assigned tasks.*
- *Volunteer in useful ways.*
- Remain positive when the situation becomes confused or changes.
- Use the chain of command and NCO support channel to solve problems.
- Support equal opportunity.
- *Participate in organizational activities and functions.*
- Participate in team tasks and missions without being requested to do so.
- *Establish an organizational climate that demonstrates respect for the environment and stewards natural resources.*

Learning

- *Seek self-improvement in weak areas.*
- Encourage organizational growth.
- Envision, adapt, and lead change.
- *Act to expand and enhance personal and organizational knowledge and capabilities.*
- *Apply lessons learned.*
- Ask incisive questions.
- Envision ways to improve.
- *Design ways to practice.*
- Endeavor to broaden their understanding.

- *Transform experience into knowledge and use it to improve future performance.*
- Make knowledge accessible to the entire organization.
- Exhibit reasonable self-awareness.
- *Take time off to grow and recreate.*
- Embrace and manage change; adopt a future orientation.
- *Use experience to improve themselves and the organization.*

What can we see from the above indicated sentences? The proper answer requires much more detailed investigation, but some of the elements are enough to see, what the business life appreciate in the ex-military staff, which positive elements were mentioned mostly:

- they use appropriate methods to reach goals, they can accept their goals and fight for them honestly, execution is their major strength;
- they set example by demonstrating enthusiasm for accomplishment;
- they share information, actively listen to feedback and tactfully confront and correct others when necessary;
- take care of subordinates, feel their needs, know them well (!!!);
- they display good communication skills, keep conversation on track, use the active voice, stay on topic, keep subordinates informed (they are disciplined!!!);
- they act to determine, recognize and resolve misunderstanding, setting always clear goals;
- make logical assumptions in the absence of facts, anticipate needs for action;
- inspire, encourage and guide (not necessarily motivate!!!!) others toward mission accomplishment, very strong operating skills.

But what are those elements, which are clearly negative in the businessman's eyes? Let us see the weaknesses as well:

- there was no indicated sentence in the improving part at all (!!!);
- they not necessarily use logical reasoning during the discussions ("they are tough guys, giving an order, no place for reasoning!");
- they are not always flexible, too strong connection to SOP's;
- positive organizational climate and motivation underevaluated (due to clearly articulated tasks and expectations);
- performance is much more appreciated than ethics (in case of decision the achievement has primary importance for them);

Are those statements right or coming from stereotypes? Very good question, but to explore that we have to continue the investigation.