

The military and MBAs: Business on the front line

The path from the military to business school is well yomped. A life in the armed forces teaches many lessons, but marketing, finance and entrepreneurship are rarely among them. So veterans looking for a move into the commercial world often need a crash course in the basics. But when they get there, they often find that there is also a lot that civvies can learn from them.

Not surprisingly, most students from an armed forces background find the first weeks at business school a culture shock. Ger Zwartendijk, a former special forces commander who studied at Nyenrode in the Netherlands, says he was initially unsettled by a lack of structure to business life. Ed Robinson, who led units on several combat tours in Iraq, found himself instinctively leading study groups on his MBA programme because "when you're out in the field you can't afford to hang around waiting for someone to give you direction". And Adam Stanley-Smith, a US Marines officer, who took an MBA at HEC Paris, found himself longing for the days when he could get most things done simply by issuing an order.

Once settled in, however, many stop being intimidated by the business world and begin to see its shortcomings. Although some think the armed forces a case study in micro-management, the opposite is closer to the truth. As far back as the 1860s, Helmuth von Moltke, a German general, introduced a command system which acknowledged that even the best laid plans start to unravel in the face of changing circumstances. He pioneered a system in which front-line commanders were given clear objectives but then a generous amount of freedom in order to achieve them. The idea that flexibility and adaptability are vital for success is still being taught today. For this reason, claims Mr Zwartendijk, the military is ahead of business in how it delegates and plans for unforeseen events.

Another common perception is that the military relies on its rigid order system, with harsh sanctions to back it up. However, Mr Robinson argues that command and control is only part of the picture. He says that the most effective units are successful because their leaders also have a clear understanding of what motivates the soldiers under their command. "The military is simply better than business at getting people to do what you want them to do," he says.

Effective leadership is perhaps the most important lesson military MBA students can pass onto their civilian counterparts. Baron de Montesquieu, an enlightenment philosopher, once pointed out that a rational army would run away. So if military leaders can hold their subordinates on a battlefield when the logical imperative suggests a rapid departure, getting a project team to complete on time and to budget should be easy in comparison.

Some of world's top business schools now seem to have been won over by this argument. Academics from the University of Carolina who teach leadership on the OneMBA, which is offered by a consortium of schools, regularly spend time at West Point and on active-service warships. And HEC Paris sends students on a challenging course run by French naval commandos, which includes unarmed combat, crawling through sewage pipes and sea-kayaking in the pitch dark. Which some might consider perfect training for life in an investment bank.

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