

## Gary's Excellent Adventure

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To help individuals, teams and organizations reach their potential through strategic planning, innovative coaching, development of team effectiveness and management consulting.

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Last week I was privileged to participate in a Council on Foreign Relations' tour of 7 US armed services bases in 6 days. Yes, I got to do the usual cool things, like watch a bomber being refueled from the vantage point of the refueler in the back of a KC-135 tanker, crash an F-18 in a canyon and hit a San Diego office building in a Sea Stallion helicopter (the latter two courtesy of some fairly impressive simulators).

But it was the chance to talk with the men and women of our armed services, especially the captains, majors, colonels and generals, that really got me thinking. I'd like to share what I learned about leadership from these officers.

First, contrary to popular opinion, the military knows a few things about leadership and management – and they are applicable to the private sector. I know it is popular for those in the private sector to profess, "But only if those military guys would learn from us about . . ." And I do think there are areas in which the military may be able to learn significantly from the private sector. Logistics is a good example, where far too many people and too much inventory is needed to support a single soldier at the front. Efforts seem to be underway to deal with logistics but a great deal more needs to be done, and a great deal of money and time can be saved by doing it.

But there are many areas where the military can provide valuable lessons to the private sector. These seem to fall into at least three areas:

- Lessons Learned
- Behaviors of so-called Highly Reliable Organizations
- Leadership

Let's look at each in turn.

### Lessons Learned

When soldiers' lives are at stake, there is an imperative that doesn't appear to be present elsewhere. Thus, because the Air Force is (generally) not being shot at at the present time, it talks in terms of changing aerial warfare tactics in an approximate 18-month cycle. On the other hand, the Army's Training Command at Ft. Irwin, California is trying to implement potentially life-saving changes in dealing with the Improvised Explosive Devices (IEDs) that the Army faces in Iraq, within several weeks of first hearing about a new approach the enemy is using. While this may seem long, remember that it includes identifying the new approach as a pattern and not just a one-off, figuring out how to deal with it, making sure the new approach works, and incorporating the new thinking within the training cycle.

What impressed me more were several examples of where servicemen and women (and I met a lot of very impressive women in the Army in particular) are doing their own Lessons Learned. Example: A young sergeant in a weapons disarming battalion spoke of seeing a similar group approaching an IED on foot from over 100 yards. That was the procedure. The problem was that, in high heat and wearing the requisite heavy bomb-protection suit, by the time the expert reached the IED, he/she was fatigued. The solution? Put the disarmer on the hood of an armored humvee and bringing him close enough to ID the device and decide how to proceed. The other group immediately saw the advantages and adopted the procedure. Talk about an innovation paradigm!

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### **Behaviors of Highly Reliable Organizations (HROs)**

As most of you know, a number of the organizations I am working with find the approach of HRO organizations, and the behaviors they inculcate in their leaders and employees, to be extremely helpful in creating alignment, organizational focus, and results. Organizations that have successfully employed these behaviors include IT providers, manufacturing plants, environmental health and safety organizations, and service providers of all kinds.

Some of the points that became even clearer to me on this trip include:

- **Focus on weak signals** – This behavior, identifying slight changes in the internal and external environment, and attempting to connect them to discern changes that may be creating threats or opportunities, seems well-developed across the units we visited. Example: In a war-gaming exercise at Ft. Irwin, we saw several officers perusing communications traffic for possible patterns that might precede important shifts in the enemy's position and/or intentions.
- **Deferral to expertise** – While the military is, for obvious reasons, highly hierarchical, in fact, when engaged in tasks where expertise is the key to success, we saw innumerable examples of this behavior. These included enlisted personnel leading the way in managing a complex threat detection system for Forward Operating Bases, junior personnel taking the lead in managing simulators, and repeated hand-offs by more senior officers to their subordinates to answer questions of judgment (that is, not just a willingness to have others with more facts answer those types of questions).
- **Focus on stakeholders** – I was repeatedly impressed by a single-minded focus on stakeholders, whether it be the quality of food in the mess halls (ALL these units clearly "marched on their stomachs!"), the extended hours for simulator training for pilots, or the enormous efforts of the staff at Ft. Irwin to make the experience for brigades as realistic as possible.

Summer Newsletter: More on the emotional intelligence dimension of Abraham Lincoln's Presidency and how his leadership provides lessons for us even today.

### **Leadership**

Finally, a few words on leadership. Time and again I was impressed with the leadership lessons in action that I observed. A few vignettes:

- **Giving credit** – When asked by a Brigade Commander how long it took to put up a Forward Operations Base, the captain involved immediately gave his subordinate who had done the work the chance to answer.
- **Remembering the mission** – At the Marine Corps Recruiting Depot in San Diego, the focus is on creating marines through an extremely demanding regime that nonetheless weeds out in the first week or two over 90% of the 10% of those who will eventually fail, and trying very hard to ensure that the remainder make it through. The Army requires that at least one of its generals attend every funeral. While a sign of respect, it also appears to keep the mind of those leaders on the responsibility for life and death which is in their hands.
- **Innovation** – At Ft. Irwin, the army is using old shipping containers to create realistic Iraqi villages, and Iraqi Americans to create the verisimilitude necessary to prepare brigades for their imminent insertion in Iraq.
- **Breaking down silos** – The armed services have been famous in the past for "taking care of their own" at the expense of others (read any military history of World War II for examples). On this trip, we saw repeated examples of close cooperation, whether it was Marines under the command of Army colonels (or the reverse), the close communication of Air Force Unmanned Vehicle "pilots" with the ground forces they were supporting, or the embedding of Special Forces units in other forces where necessary. America's military seems to be learning an important lesson, one that leaders in the private world are still having trouble communicating effectively to their employees.

Whether or not you believe US forces should be in Iraq, there are important leadership lessons to be learned from how our military leads, learns, and conducts training and operations. Hope you found these observations of interest.