Redeploying Military Leadership

Tips to mine vets for leading roles

By Trenton Bellemundo

Soldiers are different. No, I’m not writing about how Harry is different from Mary or how Officer Lobasco isn’t the same as Corporal LaSeine. This isn’t about gender, race, partisanship, body mass, or rank. It’s not even about the specialty training a soldier brings out into the civilian labor market. This is about leadership and how it might fit into your company’s needs.

What’s most interesting about retiring officers in a general sense is the service they represented: whether they graduated from Marines, Air Force, Army, or Navy. In case you didn’t know it, these are different places with way-varied management needs. And military leaders in each are steeped in astonishingly different managerial cultures. The question is which is the best fit for a company’s business plan.

Before going further, let me stress that I’m generalizing here and that one will find clear exceptions to these overall characteristics of military leadership among candidates and prospects for any firm. However, each of the services offers preparations that are powerful fits for specific types of companies. That’s what we want to point out here.
To begin, before you interview and consider a retiring or retired military leader, ask yourself, “How does my firm come down on the scale between flexibility versus process?” The answer’s key to understanding how the various armed forces choose, train, and reinforce their leadership to produce branch-specific executives.

**Navy and Air Force—It’s about process**

Ships and aircraft plus their ordinance are ghastly expensive. Their support staffs need to be highly specialized. If Army ordinance misplaces an order, some Humvee might not run. If that happens in the Air Force or Navy, an astonishingly large crash or sinking can occur. Procedure is key to bringing an armada or formation to its most effective location. Central coordination overwhelms the need for flexibility. The Navy and Air Force officers manage these interdependencies so that small differences don’t result in big penalties. Once these forces are ordered into action, the systems are tightly interdependent. Corrective action is difficult and costly with large unintended consequences—meaning that these services have each created a culture of precise attention to process. Deviations balloon in their impact all along the chain. In these forces, subordinates place their faith in their officers’ command of process.

Civilian managers with this experience tend to excel in organizations that seek new opportunities through established products and historic customers. They simultaneously find opportunities among the needs of their clients while fine-tuning existing and new products to their needs. They work quite well in those larger firms with top-down hierarchies that profit most from process finely sharpened to their markets’ needs. They are especially adept in highly regulated environments where attention to inflexible detail makes the sale and profit. They leverage process.

**Army and Marines—It’s about flexibility**

On the ground, infantry adaptability is key. Officers define a mission but give subordinates flexibility in implementation. Once released into the wild, orders evolve along the chain of command. While strategic objectives come from the top, the infantry’s tactics are shaped by the environment. Infantry officers are trained in a patient leadership of giving instructions that others will then turn into the appropriate course of action. In these forces, officers intimately trust their subordinates, who act within messy environments in modular and relatively independent groups. Flexibility rather than process is prized.

Civilian managers with this experience tend to excel in flexible organizations that must allow rapid decision making to front-line personnel who are broadly experienced and well-trained. Military executive from these services are best prepared to make broad strategic moves and to delegate then evaluate their tactics to trusted
subordinates. They thrive in nimble smaller firms competent to shift resources without regard to a weight of inherited process. They leverage people.

Military service trains leaders with skills and experiences that enhance civilian enterprise. They expose their officers to responsibility and leadership at a younger age than the private sector does. To that degree, retiring military leaders bring a breadth and grasp of leadership responsibility to the recruiting suite, which their chronological peers generally lack. Fairy or unfairly, we call that maturity, and maturity is leverageable of and by itself. So it’s reasonable to assume that candidates from any service bring credentials to firms of any culture. And individual specialties bring further levels of value to the hiring process.

However, fit is important. If you have thought through the question up above and understand where your organization falls on the scale between flexibility and process, a candidate’s military organization can help a lot in appreciating how he or she might best fit your needs for winning growth in your industry.