



SOLDIER AND BUSINESSMAN TOO

Sir Robert Fry

Recent conflicts have changed the game for states and individuals in Europe. Countries like Poland and Estonia have established their international credentials by close involvement; others, like The Netherlands and Denmark, have burnished theirs. The big actors have played to mixed reviews. Italy has blown hot and cold, but in the estimable Carabinieri possesses the perfect instrument to bridge the military/civilian divide, which characterizes so much of the nature of current conflict. The Germans have been reluctant to explore the boundaries of peace support, while France has been, well, France and despite a closer relationship with NATO its habitual and self-conscious independence can make it look semi-detached. Britain has operated at two levels: first, in paying the highest price in blood and treasure it has taken the tactical fight head-on; and, second, it has provided a flag around which others have gathered as a natural coalition leader, a role it might want to look at further as it re-considers its strategic relationship with Europe.

But it is individuals and not countries that concern this article. As chairman of an international consultancy, I draw on two traditions: the military and business, and I am not alone. Afghanistan is now the USA's longest campaign and hundreds of thousands of young Americans have been engaged in the wars of the Twenty-First Century. The numbers from the roll call of European nations, inside and outside NATO, is smaller, but, taken in aggregate, it represents a phenomenon that has not existed on this Continent for 60 years – a generation of future leaders in public and business life who have experienced “the disciplines of the wars¹”. For men and women whose formative experiences have been forged in combat, this will carry an indelible mark into their future careers. Not only that, but a canon of recent research² shows that they might be significantly more successful than their civilian peers and companies like Walmart are aggressively recruiting them.


For those who make their way in business, what contrasts and similarities will they find with military life? First amongst the contrasts is that nobody gets killed; a monopoly on state violence remains the defining characteristic of the military instrument within democracies. But when your third-quarter numbers are soft and those phone calls from the boss on how can he help you become more successful get increasingly insistent, it doesn't always feel like that. The second contrast is that business is an unremitting 24 x 7 x 365 affair. No matter how demanding the contact battle, most soldiers spend more time training and preparing for war than they do conducting it.

A moment's reflection shows more similarities than contrasts. Both disciplines are about the creation of highly defined, high-performing teams: brand or regiment. Both face a sentient opponent, the competition or an enemy, and any complacent assumption that the opponent is less smart, tough or determined than the home team is likely to lead to failure. And, both business and military life is defined by a patchwork of alliance and adversarial relationships; the more complex and insidious Twenty-First Century conflict becomes, the closer this resemblance will be. But maybe there is a single defining concept, which draws the two together more than any other, and it is what I can best describe as the phenomenon of strategic shock. Strategic shock is an event, which makes us think differently about our lives or the way we conduct business. By definition, it is unforeseen and unpredictable; its effects are ubiquitous and indiscriminate and have the capacity to change personal, corporate or institutional assumptions. The last decade contains at least two, perhaps three. The events of 9/11 completely altered the global security landscape, while the financial crisis changed assumptions around

1. From the World War 1 epic poem “In Parenthesis”, by David Jones.

2. Led by Korn Ferry International, see “Military Experience and CEOs: Is there a Link?”





business practice, the role of the state and international economic co-operation. It may be that the Mexican Gulf oil spill has a similar impact on our views of carbon extraction and the business/state interface.

It is not just the initial impact of a strategic shock that has causal effect; the response can compound or amplify the consequences. The initial intervention in Afghanistan led immediately from 9/11 and the Iraq invasion, arguably, followed on. While the response of individual countries and the international community to the financial crisis has led to levels of state debt which have provoked the austerity which defines our times. Successive shocks can also compound each other. European military campaigns derived from 9/11 are no longer affordable by impecunious, post Lehman governments and national and NATO strategies are being amended accordingly. It is impossible to forecast the next strategic shock. It could be the collapse of the Euro, an Israeli attack on Iran (perhaps aided and abetted by conservative Sunni states – a real shock) or some mischief on the Korean peninsula; equally it could be life science revelation associated with the next round of genome research. But what we can be certain of is that strategic shocks there will be, and probably of greater frequency. Indeed, how could it be any other way in a globalised, networked world shaped by both the benign and malevolent motives of state and non state actors, played out against a once in an epoch strategic migration from West to East? If that's the way it's going to be, how does business respond? Probably in two ways: understand the body of competence already in being to lead the process and establish as much internal coherence as it possibly can in order to withstand external pressure.

Who better to lead a response than those who have made a profession from meeting strategic shock at the sharp end, in military service? This would include the junior officers who have re-defined counter insurgency doctrines on the ground and shown an adaptability, imagination and ruthless execution few rising executives could match. It would also include the NCOs who have constantly revised tactics against evolving lethal threats and possess resilience well beyond that of most production managers. And, overwhelmingly, these are not the conscripts of the great wars of the Twentieth Century. Some will have been animated by motives of patriotism and adventure; others, more prosaically, by economic necessity, but most will not be detained by a military career beyond a few years and regard it as the preparatory phase of a wider education.

Let's use a simple test to illustrate the point: who would you prefer to lead the crisis response to, say, a catastrophic oil rig incident with the capacity to pollute the pristine coast of a major industrial nation – an ex infantry officer with two tours in Afghanistan under his or her belt or an MBA graduate, with a penchant for business process reviews?

So much for leadership, but how to create better internal coherence within organizations? Again, the military has powerful lessons and techniques to offer. The concept of strategy is promiscuously applied to business, as every airport bookstand testifies. But the idea of a unifying narrative which links strategic vision to tactical execution was formed in the crucible of war and still finds its most testing form in that medium. Any veteran of a large multinational corporate will recognize the company vision statement for the bumper sticker it usually is. Very rarely is any attempt made to derive cascading levels of mission within the organization to inform an understanding of where layers of management fit and how best they can contribute to overall outcomes; a sequence habitual and ingrained in military practice. But any business without this internal, top to bottom alignment can have no confidence of surviving strategic shock and neither does it deserve to. The aim should be to create the equivalent of Japanese building regulations in process and structure – resilient against unpredictable but inevitable seismic shock.

Military techniques offer no panacea and I must avoid proselytizing, but what is absolutely clear is that a generation young people is about to bring to business the same determination and purpose they brought to combat: soldiers and businessmen too.

