

DRIVING INNOVATION

MILLENNIALS AND MILITARY-STYLE DISCIPLINE

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How do you define discipline in the corporate context? A harsh sense of order and control? It might surprise you then that the U.S. military defines and practices discipline in a much more broad sense. Dispense with your pre-conceived notions of drill instructors screaming orders at new recruits. The modern American military possesses a far more adaptive and open culture than you might imagine – and it just may be less command-and-control-oriented than most corporate cultures.

A U.S. Army officer once defined military discipline as the ability “. . . to understand the difference between right and wrong in terms of performance and behavior, and to do what is right in the absence of supervision.” To relax control and develop initiative and judgment in an organization seems to be a modern, progressive notion, but it is not. Ironically, military theorists and historians have identified an evolved notion of discipline that has been displayed in some surprising places such as the German Army toward the end of World War II.

Known as *Auftragstaktik*, roughly translated as mission-oriented tactics, the German Army’s capacity for frontline leaders to take charge and execute according to well-aligned strategic objectives, even when cut-off from direct supervision and leadership, became a remarkable capability that frustrated Allied attempts to bring the war to a swift conclusion.

The concept of mission-orientation is one that is practiced by modern U.S. military units, particularly special operations forces, which has led to their remarkable and often legendary success. It has also been the focus of the day-to-day employment of the Flawless Execution CycleSM that Afterburner Inc. has been teaching to business managers for nearly two decades.

The human element in business is staggeringly complex and, with the rise of a new, autonomy-seeking generation of Millennials, the human element has never been more important.

“Obscuring organizational purpose and strategic intent beneath layers of bureaucracy while over-directing and controlling the efforts of individuals at the front line destroys engagement, innovation, and performance.”

Much like the turbulent environment that war creates, the complex world of business demands an ability to adapt that strains the capabilities of traditional command and centralized-control bureaucracies. For this reason, there has never been a more appropriate time to decentralize decision making and develop cultures that support and empower informed initiative at the frontline.

If one can accept that military discipline is less about control and more about initiative directed by informed good judgment, then concerns about loose-structure and weak leadership disappear. It is only when senior leaders fail to provide clear strategic guidance that good frontline leaders become incapable of acting with discipline.

It is also worth noting that decentralizing decision-making is one of the most constructive ways to deal with conflict in the workplace. Healthy conflict in work settings can promote the adoption of new ideas and better practices to ultimately drive adaptation and innovation. With clearly communicated intent and standard operating procedures to guide operations at the front line, decentralization can foster a culture of teamwork, collaboration, and trust within the workplace.

Large, bureaucratic organizations with managers who manage managers and more managers who manage employees merely adds complexity to complexity.

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In such structures, it would be miraculous for agility, innovation, and excellence in execution to arise in a massively complex organization struggling to survive in a staggeringly complex and volatile market. Organizational purpose and strategic intent becomes subsumed in a disconnected bureaucracy rather than connecting directly to the front line where the real action must take place. If the newest generation of professionals, who will often make up these front-line corporate action units, cannot see the intent or larger purpose behind their efforts, then how can they be motivated to execute flawlessly and with agility?

Decentralizing decision-making gives the diverse members of an organization a chance to provide multiple perspectives and inputs that drive action at the front line where innovation is most often bred.

Using decentralized processes like Flawless Execution builds engagement and buy-in from the whole team that ultimately nurtures loyalty, self-efficacy, job satisfaction, and decreased turnover. Decentralized, collaborative environments foster teamwork and ameliorate conflict between management and employees.

In the end, it is about respect for others. Humans need a degree of autonomy, the freedom to choose how they will accomplish their objectives, in order to be fully human. High performance springs from such autonomy. As the Prussian military theorist, Carl Von Clausewitz, noted almost two centuries ago, “Everything in war is very simple. But the simplest thing is hard.” Obscuring organizational purpose and strategic intent beneath layers of bureaucracy while over-directing and controlling the efforts of individuals at the front line destroys engagement, innovation, and performance

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In the modern market, managers undermine themselves when they demand discipline and control in only the narrowest sense. To manage complexity and drive innovation, managers must create mission-oriented cultures in their teams and organizations. Or, as General George S. Patton once wisely remarked, “Don’t tell people how to do things, tell them what to do and let them surprise you with their results.”

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Afterburner Inc. is a performance improvement training firm that empowers organizations around the world with the simple, scalable methodology of Flawless Execution. A team of more than 60 current and former elite military professionals, Afterburner has ranked on the Inc. 500/5000 List of America’s Fastest Growing Companies four times and has been featured in leading publications like *Forbes*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Businessweek*, *Newsweek*, *Slate* and *Sports Illustrated*, and has appeared on CNN, ABC, CNBC, Fox News, HLN and Bloomberg News.

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