

#### THE PROBLEM

Military-veteran experience is vanishing from the C-suite.

#### WHY IT MATTERS

Business leaders must be able to perform under pressure.

#### THE SOLUTION

Training corporate leaders in combat concepts.

# THE ART OF WAR... IN BUSINESS

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CAN **MILITARY EXPERTS**  
WELL TRAINED IN COMBAT  
**HELP EXECUTIVES** WITH  
THE PRESSURES OF THE  
BUSINESS WORLD?



Military-aviation principles also apply to the boardroom. INSET: Afterburner trains civilian businesses in military-aviation methods.

Each team is assigned either a combat or humanitarian mission, and each member of that team is assigned a specific role necessary to executing it. Each squadron is also assigned either an active or retired fighter pilot to observe and assess their execution of the mission. Air Force fighter pilots operate with 98 percent precision, making the zero-tolerance-for-error world of military aviation one of the highest executing organizations in the world.

Even these Orlando Magic NBA sales executives, who are not easily impressed, are at attention.

What the teams participating in Afterburner's "Top Gun" corporate-training experience are not given: enough information, enough time, enough resources. "It felt chaotic," says Orlando Magic senior director of tourism and group sales Haley Meier, whose group is tasked with delivering food and medical aid to a country under enemy control. Since no one starts out knowing any of their teammates' assignments, the first requirement is communication. The bombers have to talk to the jet mechanics, who have to talk to the scouts, and so on. Then it's time to devise a clearly defined plan, and a secondary plan in case circumstances shift—because when the weather changes, the plan must

change. The captain's job is to make sure every team member is clear on the plan and its evolving iterations. "We had to start from the goal and work backward," Meier says. "We planned for perfection, but prepared for the worst."

After the allotted time, the trainees are shown how to perform a debrief, a critical practice in the military for assessing performance and improving outcomes. They start by watching a video simulating the deployment of their operation. Meier's team executes a successful mission. Others lose an aircraft. It's a stark reminder of what error represents in a service context. "You don't have to be a fighter pilot to think like a fighter pilot," says Christian "Boo" Boucousis, CEO of Afterburner, which trains civilian businesses in military aviation methods. "In business, a lot

of times there is a gap between strategy and execution. We help close that gap."

While much of the post-pandemic emphasis on corporate leadership has been on cultivating the softer skills of empathy and connection, there appears to be growing interest in tactical skills (spoiler alert: these require emotional resilience and effective communication as well). Dig under the surface, and it's not all that surprising, considering combat training is designed to prepare officers to excel in high-stakes, rapidly evolving, complex environments. There is a common trope in war: No plan survives first contact with the enemy. In business, the enemy can take many forms, from emerging technologies to deadly viruses and everything in between. Having been confronted with the true fragility of it all, some are looking to

the military for guidance on how to navigate such immense uncertainty.

"We all have beliefs and rules that serve as safety blankets," says JP Sniffen, practice leader of Korn Ferry's Military Center of Expertise. "The sun rises in the east and sets in the west. If that changes, we freak out." He notes that when the pandemic caused businesses to go remote overnight, it shook our assumptions. "This created fertile ground in corporate America to start asking, 'What if? What else am I not expecting that might happen?'" he says.

At the same time that the lessons gained in military experience may be of particular value, there continues to be a precipitous decline in the percentage of veteran leaders in business. But the question remains: Can combat acumen be transmitted in a temperature-controlled conference room?

Spend some time talking to veterans, and you will hear a common story: In less than a year, they went from not knowing how to tie their combat boots to controlling a cockpit

or leading a platoon. One such story is what led the founder of Afterburner, James

"Murph" Murphy, to start the company back in the 1980s. In 12 months, he was transformed from being a self-described Kentucky farm boy to flying an F15 around the world. The military affords opportunities to step into leadership at a much younger age than the civilian world does. Murph studied the ways that the military teaches enlistees situational awareness, communication, execution, and decision-making, then brought that knowledge to the business world.

Such lived experience is slowly disappearing from the corner office. In 1980, when veterans of World War II and the Korean War were at the pinnacles of their careers, 59 percent of CEOs of large publicly traded companies in the United States had served in the military. That number has hovered in the single digits over the last two decades. The workforce reflects the overall decline in the share of veterans in the population, which has shrunk by more than 30 percent since 2000 and is expected to shrink another

## Now Enrolling: Battlefield MBAs

The firm Afterburner utilizes these lessons from the front lines to train corporate clients in both the interpersonal and logistical skills required to lead in times of chaos.



### Flawless Execution

Fighter pilots must perform with absolute precision. Since

pilots and businesses operate in environments that are complex, flawless execution begins with simplicity. Break down any plan into executable steps, with clear roles and outcomes.

**The Debrief** No matter how big or small a task, always perform a debrief immediately afterward that examines what didn't go as planned. Use this information to avoid repeating mistakes and to identify specific steps for improving the process. This builds a culture of continued growth.



**Nameless and Rankless** Don't let hierarchy get in the way of improvement and accountability.



During debriefs, military-aviation teams will sometimes remove name tags from their flight suits. Leaders must model sincere self-evaluation in order to build credibility.



Air Force fighter pilots operate with 98 percent precision. INSET: The Program offers leadership training through teaching combat skills.

30 percent by 2050. Today, most executives are trained in business schools and executive-education programs rather than boot camp.

The consequences of this loss may be measurable. A Kellogg School of Management report on military service found top bosses with military experience last in the role for a longer period of time than those without. They also are less likely to be involved in fraudulent activity and more likely to steer organizations better during downturns and periods of uncertainty. “They perform better under pressure. Service in the military may prepare one to make tough decisions and show leadership in tough times,” said one of the study’s co-authors. A Korn Ferry study found that CEOs who are military veterans delivered up to 20 percent higher average returns on the S&P 500 index. However, this subset did worse when their industries were thriving, perhaps due to a tendency to be more financially conservative.

While the number of veterans in the civilian workforce is likely to continue to shrink, leadership theory tends to ebb and flow with the zeitgeist. In the 80s, as Japanese manufacturing rose to prominence and the original *Top Gun* movie was released, the *Pacific Rim* became

infatuated with Sun Tzu’s *The Art of War*. “The art of war teaches us to rely not on the likelihood of the enemy’s not coming, but on our own readiness to receive him,” writes the ancient Chinese military strategist. Several decades, a pandemic, and a *Top Gun* sequel later, there is again a collective emphasis on preparedness. “The more recent wars require an agile mindset,” Sniffen says. “They are amorphous and three-dimensional, which is also what is going on in corporate America.”



**E**ric Kapitulik’s Marine Corps battalion commander used to say to him, “We are all the sum of our experiences.” Kapitulik, founder and CEO of The Program, which provides team-building and leadership training to corporations and sports teams through

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teaching combat skills, would eventually come to understand in every fiber of his being what he couldn’t grasp as a young twentysomething.

In 1999, in preparation for a deployment to the Persian Gulf, Kapitulik, then in his sixth year of military service, participated in a training exercise in which he and his mates planned to drop from a helicopter to board a hostile ship on the high seas. But after takeoff, the landing gear became ensnared in the wire safety net, causing the helicopter to plunge into the water. Seven of the men on board drowned, while Kapitulik, who had been knocked unconscious, awoke just in time to escape the sinking aircraft and swim to safety.

Kapitulik’s experiences also include playing college lacrosse at the Naval Academy, earning an MBA from the University of Chicago Booth School of Business, scaling Mount Everest, and fostering youth

from difficult childhoods. “All of these experiences have impacted my thoughts on leadership,” he says. “Regardless of industry, there are universal truths about being a great leader. The military teaches you that, first and foremost, it requires being a great teammate.”

Being a great teammate, Kapitulik says, requires personal accountability, emotional resilience, and personifying the team’s values. Kapitulik bristles when companies claim to have a dozen core values. There should be three values max, he says, to make clear the company’s ethos: If you embody this, you will love it and be successful here; if you don’t, it’s not going to work. “Having a diversity of ideas, thoughts, beliefs, and experiences makes us stronger, but not a diversity in values,” he says. “What an organization does is important, but only after who they are.”

Those values are what determine how one shows up when, as Kapitulik likes to say, “s\*\*\* hits the fan.”

Kapitulik often takes the groups he works with outdoors to execute various team-oriented tasks. The added uncertainty of inclement weather can be enough to completely discombobulate white-collar workers. Like Afterburner, The Program layers on time and other pressures, and creates clear standards of success and failure. “Everyone is a hero when it’s 70 degrees and sunny out,” Kapitulik says. “We need great leaders when there is stress. Leadership is a contact sport.”

**T**o be clear, military branches have their own organizational flaws, including sprawling bureaucracy and deepening disillusionment amid the ranks. The war of attrition is one that both companies and the military face. “People don’t quit companies,” Sniffen says. “They quit their leaders.”

Though military recruitment is at an all-time low, a study from 2020 shows that 47 percent of individuals continue to enlist out of a sense of duty and service, rather than for economic reasons. Imagine what recruitment numbers like that would mean for civilian firms. As Sniffen points out, “The answer is not just throwing money at this problem.”

For many, what has perhaps become most evident since the pandemic is that the path forward in this complex era requires, firstly, an alignment of purpose—because the best-laid plans and processes mean nothing if leaders can’t motivate their troops. Secondly, effective leadership requires both empathy and tactical skills and, most important of all, a purpose-driven mission. “Leading the moment is the easiest thing to do,” Boo, Afterburner’s CEO, says. “To lead individuals you have to understand people and what drives them.”

## The Art of War

The ancient Chinese text, written by Sun Tzu, offers timeless insight for achieving success, whether in the boardroom or on the battlefield.

There are 5 essentials for victory:

**1** He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight.

**2**

He will win who knows how to handle both superior and inferior forces.

**3**

He will win whose army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks.

**4**

He will win who, prepared himself, waits to take the enemy unprepared.

**5**

He will win who has military capacity and is not interfered with by the sovereign.