

# **WARFIGHTING AND BUSINESS: WHAT OWNER MANAGERS CAN LEARN FROM THE U.S. MARINES**

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**Warfighting<sup>1</sup>** is the U.S. Marine Corps book of strategy. It is a bible to U.S. Marines of all ranks, from privates to generals. Marines have to be fast, organized and effective in a mobile, uncertain and hostile environment. *Warfighting* contains many insights and ideas that can be applied to leadership, planning, training, communicating and motivating in owner managed businesses. This article is my application of *Warfighting* doctrine to a business context, especially the world of owner managers, with a view to providing my clients with ideas they can use.

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## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: WHO YOU NEED TO BE, WHO YOU WANT ON YOUR TEAM**

Business is a competition:

- § The goal of this competition is to impose your vision of products and services onto a marketplace including competitors, suppliers and customers, thereby tapping into the purchasing power of targeted consumers in that marketplace for personal profit.
- § The competition is characterized by the pursuit of personal profit using limited economic resources.
- § The attributes of the competition include friction, uncertainty, continuous change and disorder.

To succeed in this competition, and to thrive in an uncertain, changing, competitive, hostile and chaotic environment, you must assemble a team of individuals which meet the following requirements (including yourself and your executives, managers, employees, suppliers and advisors):

- § They are people of action, they use initiative, they can get things done
- § They are bold and resolute, without being rash or inflexible
- § They are thinking people, they are committed to training their minds and the minds of their subordinates, they think of their mind as a weapon
- § They build unit cohesion and esprit de corps
- § They train themselves, and ensure others are well-trained too
- § They are committed to developing and rewarding their subordinates
- § They believe in candor and trust, between themselves and their subordinates and between themselves and their superiors
- § They seek, accept and provide input before the decision is made, but commit to fulfilling their commander's objectives and intent when the time comes for doing so
- § They accept, admit and learn from mistakes
- § They are visionary, flexible and imaginative
- § They develop simple and clear objectives, and can articulate their intent
- § They explain what has to be achieved and why, but do not interfere in how it gets done
- § They co-ordinate their efforts with others

- § They communicate informally, frequently and in person as much as possible
- § They make tough decisions and accept responsibility
- § They work at a high tempo
- § They are not dependant on technology
- § They are motivated by personal profit, as well as by a higher purpose
- § They are leaders, regardless of where they are in your company hierarchy

## **THE NATURE OF COMMERCE and THE ATTRIBUTES OF BUSINESS COMPETITION**

War and commerce have much in common. They each represent competitions between adversarial teams of people. They each share the opportunity for conflict, alliance, deception, victory and defeat. They share the same language. The words “mission”, “campaign”, “objective”, “strategy”, “tactics”, “plan” and “fire” are common in business as well as in war.

They are also very different. Modern commerce lacks the personal violence and destructiveness of war. There is no combat. Competitors are not risking their lives or the lives of their subordinates and families. They rarely compete directly with each other in a face-to-face clash of wills. Therefore, much military doctrine does not translate easily into a business context.

On the other hand, there are many concepts about the nature and attributes of war which do apply in a business context, including: friction, uncertainty, fluidity, disorder and leadership.

This section of my article summarizes my thoughts on the nature and attributes of business competition, taking inspiration from equivalent passages in *Warfighting*.

### **Business Defined**

Commerce is a state of competition that exists among teams of people, characterized by the acquisition and use of limited economic resources for personal profit.

The essence of a commercial marketplace is a competition among teams of independent business people, each trying to access the limited purchasing power of an identified market of consumers, and each drawing upon limited economic resources.

The object of business is to impose your vision of products and services onto a marketplace, including competitors, suppliers and customers, thereby tapping into the purchasing power of targeted consumers in that marketplace for personal profit.

The means to that end is the acquisition and application of limited economic resources.

### **Pursuit of Personal Profit**

A common attribute of all business competition is the pursuit of personal profit. In business, personal profit provides purpose, reward and incentive. For organizations looking for sustainability, personal profit also provides security that sustainability can be achieved. Without personal profit, both the will and the means to continue a business competition are eventually exhausted.

Personal profit applies not just to the owners of the business competitor, but to its employees, suppliers and strategic partners, who also commit economic resources to the competition. All business competitors must recognize the need for everyone on its team to be rewarded with personal profit commensurate with their committed economic resources and contributions, and should ensure that all team members are being appropriately rewarded. If they do not, the will of those persons to continue to participate in the competition will be eroded to the competitor's detriment.

Personal profit is measurable. In many instances it is reported publicly. Even if it is not, a keen competitor can calculate how much profit you should be making, and may even be able to determine whether or not you are achieving that profit. Therefore, another attribute of business competition is that the goals of the competitors are well-known, measurable, and can frequently be calculated and assessed by competitors. You can not reliably deceive or mislead other competitors (or your employees, suppliers or strategic partners) as to your true objectives and successes.

Another attribute of competition is a direct co-relation between the degree of economic resources committed to the competition and the profit needed for success. The fewer the financial resources that are committed to the competition, the lower the profit achievement that is required to meet business goals.

On the other hand, sustainability is not a common attribute of all business competition. Sustainable personal profit does not have to be the goal of all business organizations. If the goal is simply personal profit, a one-time trade or project of some kind can satisfy the goal of the organization.

In addition, continuous growth is not necessarily a common attribute of all business competition. If the commitment or availability of economic resources to the competition is fairly static, and remains static for all competitors, then the personal profit level required for sustainability for each competitor can also be fairly static.

And finally, one unique attribute of business competition is that there can be more than one winner. In fact most marketplaces can support many different competitors each achieving their desired level of personal profit and using only part of the economic resources available for the market. Unlike war, the need and goal in business is rarely complete, singular, domination.

### **Only Limited Economic Resources are Available**

Another key attribute of any business competition is that only limited economic resources are available for competitors to exploit for personal profit.

The ultimate source of economic resources for a business competitor is the purchasing power of the consumers in the target marketplace. However this purchasing power is limited by the wants, needs and economic characteristics of these consumers. It also means that the combined purchasing power of all consumers in the marketplace is also limited, and that every marketplace has limits on the purchasing power available to be used by competitors. For competitors looking for growth, this means they must choose whether to commit limited economic resources to acquiring new consumers, selling existing consumers more products and services, or some combination of both.

Another source of economic resources are suppliers, investors or lenders willing to risk their economic resources in the identified marketplace. However, third parties are also limited in how much they are willing to commit to any marketplace. These limitations include the base amount of funding they have or are permitted to commit to any marketplace, and the need for a profitable return on their investment within a limited amount of time.

A further source of economic resources are the labours of the participants in the organization, whether employees, suppliers or strategic partners. However, there are limits to human strength and endurance, and there are only so many hours in a day. This resource is limited as well.

This makes timeliness another major attribute of all business competitions. Since there are only limited economic resources available, a competitor only has until those resources run out to achieve the goal of personal profitability. Each competitor must consider and reconsider the timeliness of its profit performance in relation to the limited economic resources that are still available for it to achieve its objectives.

This applies not only to the limited economic resources of individual competitors, but to the limited economic resources in the marketplace itself. It is possible for a number of competitors to have successfully acquired all the purchasing power of the consumers in the marketplace, making it extremely difficult for new competitors to enter the competition.

All of this has direct impact on the strategy of the competitors. Each competitor must elect how to use its limited economic resources to acquire consumer purchasing power as efficiently as possible to achieve personal profit for all members of its team before running out of time. There are many different ways of doing this, including investing in geographic expansion, product or service enhancements, cost/price reductions, advertising and promotion, acquisition of other competitors or acquisition of additional economic resources.

## **Friction**

Friction is now an established concept in military doctrine. Friction is “the force that makes the apparently easy so difficult”.<sup>2</sup> It is an essential concept in military doctrine, including that of the Marine Corps. Friction exists in any human competition, and therefore exists in a business competition.

There are innumerable sources of friction in a business competition. Just think of all the friction that can arise in trying to get a part shipped to a client in another city, including: incorrect information recorded at order entry, part not in stock or back ordered, part incorrectly packaged, package incorrectly labeled, shipping company delayed through breakdown or weather, package damaged in shipment, shipment lost.

Friction can be internal or external. Friction may be tangible or intangible. Friction can be controllable or uncontrollable. Friction can be anticipated or unanticipated. Friction can be forced upon you by a competitor, or you may be able to force it upon them. Friction can always be managed, but it can never be eliminated.

In business competition, competitors must attempt to anticipate and avoid friction. In addition, they should attempt to cause friction for their competitors. Ultimately, they must accept and manage it.

*“While we should attempt to minimize self-induced friction, the greater requirement is to fight effectively within the medium of friction. The means to overcome friction is the will; we prevail over friction through persistent strength of mind and spirit.”<sup>3</sup> (page 6)*

## Uncertainty

Uncertainty is another attribute of war. It is also one of the few certainties in a business competition.

In business there are several principal ways of reducing uncertainty, including: research, training, planning, and relying upon others with prior experience. However, uncertainty can never be fully eliminated:

*“While we try to reduce these unknowns by gathering information, we must realize we cannot eliminate them. The very nature of war makes absolute certainty impossible; all actions in war will be based on incomplete, inaccurate, or even contradictory information... At best, we can hope to determine probabilities.” (page 7)*

*“We must learn to fight in an environment of uncertainty, which we can do by developing simple, flexible plans; planning for contingencies; developing standard operating procedures; and fostering initiative among subordinates.” (page 8)*

Uncertainty increases risk. The greater the economic resources we have at risk, the more certainty we require. When starting a business initiative with minimal economic resources at risk, a minimal amount of research is required as the level of risk is low, and the personal profits needed to provide a reasonable return are also very modest. On the other hand, when the economic resources committed to the competition are significant, more certainty is required as more is at risk and greater personal profits are required to succeed in the competition. Successful business competition always requires a reasonable balancing of economic resources, certainty, risk and reward.

*“By its nature, uncertainty invariably involves the estimation and acceptance of risk. Risk is inherent in war and is involved in every mission. Risk is also related to gain; normally, greater potential gain requires risk. Further, risk is equally common to action and inaction. The practice of concentrating combat power at the focus of effort necessitates the willingness to accept prudent risk. However, we should clearly understand that the acceptance of risk does not equate to the imprudent willingness to gamble the entire likelihood of success on a single improbable event.” (page 8)*

The final element of uncertainty is luck. Luck plays a role in success and failure in business competition, as it does in many other human endeavours. Luck can be good or bad. However, luck can not reasonably be planned, controlled or anticipated. The best competitors can do is be ready to react to it when it shows up.

*“Part of risk is the ungovernable element of chance. The element of chance is a universal characteristic of war and a continuous source of friction. Chance consists of turns of events that cannot reasonably be foreseen and over which we and our enemy have no control ... we must view chance not only as a threat but also an opportunity, which we must be ever ready to exploit.” (pages 8-9)*

## **Continuous Change**

Another attribute of both war and business competition is continuous change. The Marines call it fluidity.

The nature of the competition and the marketplace are constantly changing. Successful business competitors plan to deal with change. They build teams that can anticipate and react to it. They are adaptive.

*“Success depends in large part on the ability to adapt to a constantly changing situation.” (page 10)*

*“War is both timeless and ever changing. While the basic nature of war is constant, the means and methods we use evolve continuously ... if we are ignorant of the changing face of war, we will find ourselves unequal to its challenges.” (pages 17-18)*

## **Disorder**

A further attribute of both war and business competition is disorder. It is a natural result of friction, uncertainty and fluidity. It can be managed, but it can not be eliminated. Business leaders must be diligent where order is critical to success, and be vigilant where it is not.

*“In an environment of friction, uncertainty, and fluidity, war gravitates naturally toward disorder ... disorder is an integral characteristic of war; we can never eliminate it.” (page 10)*

*“If we are to win, we must be able to operate in a disorderly environment.” (page 12)*

*“ ... we cannot hope to impose precise, positive control over events. The best we can hope for is to impose a general framework of order on the disorder, to prescribe the general flow of action rather than try to control each event.” (page 12)*

## **The Human Dimension**

*“In war the chief incalculable is the human will.”<sup>4</sup>*

The team with the best and most determined people does not always win, but it will have a better chance of overcoming its shortfalls in other areas.

*“No degree of technological development or scientific calculation will overcome the human dimension of war. Any doctrine which attempts to reduce warfare to ratios of forces, weapons, and equipment neglects the impact of the human will on the conduct of war and is therefore inherently false.” (page 13)*

These ideas are equally true in a business competition, where creativity and inventiveness are cornerstones of successful competition. The right invention, advertising campaign or strategic direction at the right time can produce disproportionate results. The wrong invention, advertising campaign or strategic direction at the wrong time can also produce disproportionate results.

## **LEADERS, SUBORDINATES and COMMAND PHILOSOPHY**

### **Leadership**

Great leadership defies easy definition. One reason is that great leaders are not peas out of the same pod. They are each unique individuals who lead in their own unique way. Even in the same command structure, different styles and qualities of leadership can be considered “great”. In building a business, competitors must be willing to accommodate differing leadership styles in the organization if it will make the competitor stronger and more successful to do so.

It appears that leadership is a combination of personality, character and circumstance. Of these, the importance of circumstance is often overlooked. Not every good leader is the right person for every situation. Business competitors must ensure that they have the right leader appointed to the task at hand.

The U.S. Marine Corps has defined the key qualities of leadership in military competition in a way that ignores rank, recognizing that a competitive organization has leaders up and down its hierarchy and not just at the top:

*“They must be [people] of action and of intellect both, skilled at ‘getting things done’ while at the same time conversant in the military art.” (page 57)*

Owner managers would be wise to apply this definition to themselves, as further expanded and discussed below, as well as to the subordinates they hire or promote and to their suppliers and advisors.

### **The Thinking Profession**

The concept of wisdom based upon reason, forethought, investigation, education and experience appears to be a common foundation to leadership in a competitive situation, although this is often neglected by entrepreneurial business leaders. Since the attributes of the competition include uncertainty, fluidity and disorder, it makes sense that these qualities would be necessary in a leader:

*“The military profession is a thinking profession. Officers particularly are expected to be students of the art and science of war at all levels – tactical, operational, and strategic – with a solid foundation in military theory and a knowledge of military history and the timeless lessons to be gained from it ... A leader without either interest in or knowledge of the history and theory of warfare – the intellectual content of his profession – is a leader in appearance only ... after all, an officer’s principal weapon is his mind.” (pages 58 and 67)*

## **Being Bold and Resolute**

On the other hand, military doctrine is based upon speed in an uncertain, constantly changing environment. Therefore this “thinking” professional must also be instilled with significant self-confidence and resoluteness in the face of uncertainty, fluidity, disorder and friction:

*“Boldness is an essential moral trait in a leader, for it generates combat power beyond the physical means at hand. Initiative, the willingness to act on one’s own judgment, is a prerequisite for boldness.” (page 58)*

## **Subordinates: A Leadership Responsibility**

All leaders are responsible for their subordinates. Only in the smallest business competitor can one person be the only leader in the entire organization. Therefore, owner managers must be conscious of their duty to their subordinates, and ensure that the same duty is felt up and down the chain of leader/subordinate relationships within the team:

*“Commanders should see the development of their subordinates as a direct reflection on themselves.” (page 66)*

*“Leaders should develop unit cohesion and esprit and the self-confidence of individuals within the unit.” (page 15)*

## **Candor and Trust**

Above all else, candor is the cornerstone of a successful leader and subordinate relationship.

*“Seniors must encourage candor among subordinates and must not hide behind their rank insignia. Ready compliance for the purpose of personal advancement – the behavior of “yes-men” – will not be tolerated.” (pages 59 to 60)*

*“Relations among all leaders – from corporal to general – should be based on honesty and frankness, regardless of disparity between grades.” (page 59)*

Candor can only exist where there is mutual honesty, trust and respect:

*“Trust must be earned, and actions which undermine trust must meet with strict censure.” (page 59)*

This trust must not only extend to the discussion before decision, but must also exist in the implementation of decisions once reached. In return for the trust received from his or her leader, each subordinate must return that trust by implementing the leaders decisions with the resolute qualities of a good leader.

Implicit in this understanding is the recognition by leaders and subordinates that decisions can not be made by a committee. The commitment to consultation (when time permits) should not be mistaken for a commitment to consensus:

*“Until a commander has reached and stated a decision, each subordinate should consider it his duty to provide his honest, professional opinion – even though it may be in disagreement with his senior’s.” (page 59)*

*“However, once the decision has been reached, the junior must support it as if it were his own.” (page 59)*

A good leader knows when to be led, by circumstance, by opportunity and his subordinates.

### **Professional Development**

Just as leaders must recognize that they are in a thinking profession, they must assist their subordinates in coming to the same conclusion. Forethought based upon education, investigation and experience is needed at all levels of a successful business competitor.

*“All commanders should consider the professional development of their subordinates a principal responsibility of command. Commanders should foster a personal teacher-student relationship with their subordinates. Commanders are expected to conduct a continuing professional education program for their subordinates.” (page 66)*

### **Mistakes**

Mistakes are inevitable. Our goal can not be to eradicate mistakes completely, but to minimize their occurrence and effect. Acceptance of mistakes is critical when operating in an uncertain, fluid and disordered environment where boldness and initiative are qualities needed to overcome friction. How leaders manage mistakes is a fundamental element of trust in their relationship with their subordinates, and will be mirrored back to them when they are perceived to make mistakes as well:

*“Not only must we not stifle boldness or initiative, we must continue to encourage both traits in spite of mistakes ... We learn as much from mistakes as from things done well, so we must be willing to admit and discuss them. Of course, a subordinate’s willingness to admit mistakes depends on the commander’s willingness to tolerate them.” (pages 58 and 63)*

There are qualities in subordinates which an intensely competitive organization in a fluid, uncertain and disorderly environment can not tolerate, especially if they lead to mistakes. This include recklessness, inconsistency and timidity:

*“On the other hand, we should deal severely with errors of inaction or timidity.” (page 58)*

They also include a breakdown in candor (i.e. honesty, frankness and trust), which can happen at any level in an organization.

### **A Limited Economic Resource**

Subordinates represent a limited economic resource. Leaders must be aware of fatigue in subordinates, especially subordinates more directly involved in the “action” than the leader himself or herself. A good leader will manage the subordinates’ need for rest and replenishment:

*“It is physically impossible to sustain a high tempo of activity indefinitely, although clearly there will be times when it is advantageous to push men and equipment to the limit. Thus, the tempo of war will fluctuate – from periods of intense activity to periods in which activity is limited to information gathering, replenishment, or redeployment.” (page 10)*

### **The Pursuit of Profit**

Similarly, in a business competition leaders must be aware of the need for personal profit throughout the organization. While most good subordinates will put out every effort for the sake of personal pride, if the whole object of the competition is personal profit, they must share in the goal if they are going to achieve it. Therefore owner managers must ensure that their subordinates (and suppliers) are properly motivated and rewarded from a personal profit perspective, which may require a certain amount of generosity.

They must also be aware of the competitive environment, and guard the loss of key subordinates to competitors as jealously as they guard the loss of key clients.

### **A Sense of Purpose**

On the other hand, a good leader also will instill his or her subordinates with sense of purpose greater than the acquisition of personal wealth.

*“When officers and men care only for worldly riches they will cherish life at all costs.”<sup>5</sup>*

Financial success in business is usually the byproduct of something done well. It is an irony in business competition that excessive focus on pursuit of personal profit (the ultimate goal and measurement of success) rarely results in a satisfying result.

It is important to remember that economic resources are limited, and will flow to competitors who are perceived to deliver the best “value” for money, which usually means things other than price. Intangibles such as service, delivery, integrity, trust and reliability are key in most markets. In addition, in most ongoing business competitions, loyalty based on a trusting relationship between the competitor and its customers, suppliers and investors is the foundation for business success. Therefore, your subordinates (and suppliers, investors and customers) must believe in a purpose greater than personal profit.

In military doctrine, this higher purpose is frequently called the “moral factor”. It is critical in military doctrine, and equally applicable in a business competition. After all, the only real difference between a soldier and a bandit is an honourable purpose.

### **Getting it Right: Good Judgment**

The most annoying thing about great leaders is that they make fewer mistakes and are better at getting it right, even when their ideas run contrary to conventional wisdom or the advice of their subordinates. This represents a combination of hard work, education, experience, forethought, intellect, boldness, resoluteness, guess work and good luck. More simply put, we call it good judgment. Unfortunately “getting it right” defies analysis and can not be taught.

Ultimately, the proof of good leadership at any level is success based upon good judgment. Demand it from yourself and look for it in your subordinates, suppliers and advisors.

## **Communications**

In a fluid, disorderly and uncertain environment, where initiative, speed and tempo are critical to success, a consistent and reliable philosophy for communication is critical. Leaders and subordinates must be able to count on each other providing reliable and timely information and direction. Any error in communication can be disproportionately magnified when the forces of friction are applied.

The Marine Corps doctrine includes the following concepts:

*“Our philosophy of command must also exploit the human ability to communicate implicitly. We believe that implicit communication – to communicate through mutual understanding, using a minimum of key, well-understood phrases, or even anticipating each other’s thoughts – is a faster, more effective way to communicate than through the use of detailed, explicit instructions.” (Warfighting p. 80)*

*“First, we should establish long-term relationships to develop the necessary familiarity and trust. Second, key people – “actuals” – should talk directly to one another when possible, rather than through communicators or messengers. Third, we should communicate orally when possible, because we communicate also in how we talk; our inflections and tone of voice. Fourth, we should communicate in person, because we communicate also through our gestures and bearing.” (Warfighting p. 80)*

This philosophy has equal application in a modern, business context. Frequent, informal communication directly between the key people, in person as much as possible, is a powerful way of ensuring common purpose, making many little corrections before the organization becomes too far off course, and ensuring that misunderstandings do not become disproportionate.

To accommodate this philosophy it is important that no one person has too many persons reporting to him or her. The Marine Corps employs the rule of threes. No person can have more than three things to do at any one time. No person has more than three persons reporting to them. This makes focus and communication much easier. However, the Marine Corps also believes in a decentralized management structure based upon allowing significant trust in subordinate decision-making.

## **Decision-Making**

Making decisions in a disorderly, fluid and uncertain environment requires some key understandings. This is especially true where speed and tempo are important, and the consequences of mistakes can be deadly.

The first step in Marine Corps decision-making is to give up the idea of the perfect decision, and look at minimizing risk and maximizing opportunity. This concept applies to business competition as well as military action.

*“... all decisions must be made in the face of uncertainty and since every situation is unique, there is no perfect solution to any battlefield problem ... The essence of the problem is to select a promising course of action with an acceptable degree of risk, and to do it more quickly than our foe.” (Warfighting page 90)*

In any competition, the timeliness of decision-making is critical. To have the greatest impact on the competition you must consistently force others to respond to your actions. If you are proactive, your competitors can only be reactive.

*“Whoever can make and implement his decisions consistently faster gains a tremendous, often decisive advantage. Decision-making thus becomes a time-competitive process, and timeliness of decisions becomes essential to generating tempo.” (page 89)*

Surprisingly, Marine Corps doctrine calls for decentralized decision-making. However, this doctrine is a response to the nature and attributes of the competition, and builds on the candor, trust and professionalism between commanders and subordinates.

*“First and foremost, in order to generate the tempo of operations we desire and best cope with the uncertainty, disorder and fluidity of combat, command must be decentralized. That is, subordinate commanders must make decisions based on their understanding of their senior’s intent, rather than passing information up the chain of command and waiting for a decision to be passed down.” (Warfighting page 79)*

Of course, this approach has many positive impacts as well. For a commander to be comfortable with decentralization, he or she will have had to choose the right subordinate for the project, made sure they were properly trained, and learned to trust them. Many owner managed organizations fail to achieve their true potential because the owner never really learns to trust the people he or she manages. However, in a Marine Corps approach, this is probably the fault of the commander and not the fault of the subordinates.

## **Decision Makers**

The key to good decisions is good decision-makers. Business competitors must learn how to find and empower these people, not just by the results they achieve but by their way of doing things.

*Warfighting* provides a list of things to look for in a decision-maker who will be effective in a fluid, uncertain and hostile environment:

*“We should base our decisions on awareness rather than mechanical habit.” (page 89)*

*“We do not want to make rash decisions, but we must not squander opportunities while trying to gain more information.” (page 90)*

*“We must not become slaves to a plan. Rather, we attempt to shape the general conditions of war ...” (page 86)*

*“We must have the moral courage to make tough decisions in the face of uncertainty – and accept full responsibility for those decisions ...” (page 90)*

*“Decision making requires both the intuitive skill to recognize and analyze the essence of a given problem and the creative ability to devise a practical solution. This ability is the product of experience, education, intelligence, boldness, perception, and character.” (page 89)*

### **Empowerment: Control versus Initiative**

Owner managers frequently ask the impossible: “show some initiative, but do it the way I say or the way I would do it if I was there doing it instead of you”. Control fights initiative, resulting in frustration and ineffectiveness all around.

Using Marine Corps thinking, the key to balancing initiative and control in a business competition is controlling intent without controlling implementation.

*“There are two parts to a mission: the task to be accomplished and the reason, or intent. The task describes the action to be taken while the intent describes the desired result of the action. Of the two, the intent is predominant ... Understanding our commander’s intent allows us to exercise initiative in harmony with the commander’s decision.” (page 92)*

In other words, control the goals but empower the methods.

*“The senior must make perfectly clear the result he expects, but in such a way that does not inhibit initiative. Subordinates must have a clear understanding of what their commander is thinking. Further, they should understand the intent of the commander two levels up.” (page 93)*

*“Each commander should establish a focus of effort for each mission ... Faced with a decision, we ask ourselves: ‘How can I best support the focus of effort?’” (page 94)*

## **PLANNING and IMPLEMENTATION**

### **Defining A Vision**

Earlier on I proposed the idea that the object of business is to impose your vision of products and services onto a marketplace, including competitors, suppliers and customers, thereby tapping into the purchasing power of targeted consumers in that marketplace for personal profit. Therefore, every plan must begin with a vision.

*“... it is essential to have some vision of the final result we want and how we intend to shape the action in time and space to achieve it.” (page 88)*

The vision must be a winning vision. It must recognize that there is a competition going on, and that the goal of the competition is to “win” at some level.

*“... before anything else, we must conceive our vision of how we intend to win.” (page 85)*

The key to a vision is to understand what you are trying to achieve.

*“The first requirement is to establish our intent; what we want to accomplish and how. Without a clearly defined intent, the unity of effort is inconceivable.” (page 85)*

It is at this time that our thoughts about the nature and attributes of a business competition come into play:

- The object of business is to impose your vision of products and services onto a marketplace, including competitors, suppliers and customers, thereby tapping into the purchasing power of targeted consumers in that marketplace for personal profit.
- The means to that end is the acquisition and application of limited economic resources.

### Selecting Objectives

*“The key to any plan is a clearly defined objective ...” (page 53)*

The attributes of business competition must be kept clearly in mind, including the need for personal profit and the lack of unlimited financial resources to pursue that need.

All plans must recognize the goal of controlling the competition itself by imposing your vision onto the marketplace. Seizing initiative and forcing others to react to your lead will greatly improve your chances of succeeding in the competition.

*“... we must shape the battle to our advantage ...” (page 85)*

In setting objectives, a key understanding of weaknesses is necessary, both yours and your competitors. Attacking their weaknesses through your strengths, while being mindful of defending your own weaknesses, tells you what to do, how to do it, and what resources you need to get the job done.

*“We must identify the critical enemy vulnerability which we believe will lead most directly to accomplishing our intent.” (page 85)*

*“... we should strike our enemy where and when we can hurt him most.” (page 46)*

*“... we concentrate strength against critical enemy vulnerabilities, striking quickly and boldly where, when and how it will cause the greatest damage to our enemy’s ability to fight.” (page 78)*

In business this is often expressed as developing a “unique selling proposition” or developing “distinctiveness”. McDonald’s (*fast and cheap*), Burger King (*have it your way*), Harveys (*flame broiled*) and Wendy’s (*fresh, not frozen*) are examples of successful competitors in the same market achieving success by attacking each other’s weaknesses, thereby accessing the spending power of consumers in the marketplace.

Sun Tzu, the Chinese philosopher who wrote the first known treatise on war, suggests a hierarchy of priorities in selecting objectives as follows:

*“... what is of supreme importance in war is to attack the enemy’s strategy ... Next best is to disrupt his alliances ... The next best is to attack his army.”<sup>6</sup>*

In setting objectives, you must be mindful of your own weaknesses. That requires a frank and honest assessment of your own abilities and position in the competition. Develop such insights in yourself and your subordinates, find advisor who can and will help you see yourself that way, and then listen and act on what you hear.

*“... we must try to see ourselves through our enemy’s eyes in order to identify our own vulnerabilities ...” (page 85)*

## **Flexibility**

As you would expect from an organization that encourages initiative based upon commander’s intent, the Marine Corps advocates building flexibility into every plan so that uncertainty and fluidity do not undermine the very effort that is being pursued.

*“We must not become slaves to a plan. Rather, we attempt to shape the general conditions of war ...” (page 86)*

*“We should also try to shape events in such a way that allows us several options so that by the time the moment of encounter arrives we have not restricted ourselves to only one course of action.” (page 86)*

*“... the further ahead we consider, the less precision we should attempt to impose.” (page 86)*

## **Speed and Surprise**

In an uncertain, fluid and friction laden environment, speed and surprise are the best ways of imposing your vision on the marketplace, of “shaping the general conditions” of the competition. Surprise is usually very hard to achieve in a business competition, but speed and boldness are within your control, and your plans can be based accordingly. The goal should be to force your competitors to react, and keep reacting, to your initiatives.

*“Surprise is based on speed, secrecy and deception. It means doing the unexpected thing, which in turn normally means doing the more difficult thing in hopes that the enemy will not expect it.” (page 43)*

*“It is not essential that we take the enemy unaware, but only that he become aware too late to react effectively ... The advantage gained by surprise depends on the degree of surprise and the enemy’s ability to adjust and recover ... Its advantages are only temporary and must be quickly exploited.” (pages 42 to 43)*

These ideas encourage foresight, secrecy and decisiveness, whether it be in recognizing consumer trends, scrounging for the best engineers or sales people, or adopting new technologies or methods. It requires you to identify and be at the forefront of new meaningful trends, without getting caught up in the fads of the day.

## **Training**

Most owner managers rely on informal job training programs. We usually are so busy “doing” that we neglect to set aside the time to learn how to “do it” faster cheaper or more efficiently.

This is especially true when it comes to training programs for our subordinates. This is understandable, but not should be acceptable.

*“Commanders should see the development of their subordinates as a direct reflection on themselves ... All commanders should consider the professional development of their subordinates a principal responsibility of command. Commanders should foster a personal teacher-student relationship with their subordinates. Commanders are expected to conduct a continuing professional education program for their subordinates.” (page 66)*

*“Commanders at each echelon must allot subordinates sufficient time and freedom to conduct the training necessary to achieve proficiency at their levels ... Senior commanders influence training by establishing goals and standards, communicating the intent of training, and establishing a focus of effort for training. As a rule, they should refrain from dictating how the training will be accomplished.” (page 61)*

This does not mean that all training is depended on the owner manager. You should look for employees, supplier and advisors who accept their own responsibility for training and improvement.

*“ ... every Marine has a basic responsibility to study the profession of arms on his own.” (page 67)*

You should also guard against focusing too much on individual skills. In any organization, especially one built to compete in a fluid and uncertain environment, team skills and team training are equally important and should not be overlooked.

*“ ... unit skills are extremely important. They are not simply an accumulation of individual skills; adequacy in individual skills does not automatically mean unit skills are satisfactory.” (page 61)*

## **Technology**

The most technologically advanced competitors are not necessarily the most likely to succeed. However, the timely adoption of new technology that can significantly improve your competitiveness (especially in terms of communication, quality and efficiency) and is critical to imposing your vision on the marketplace. Marine Corps doctrine on technology has equally valid application to owner managed business:

*“Equipment should be easy to operate and maintain, reliable, and interoperable with other equipment. It should require minimal specialize operator training.” (page 67)*

*“ ... the Marine Corps will exploit ... ‘off-the-shelf’ technology ... to the greatest extent possible.” (page 68)*

*“We must guard against over reliance on technology ... Any advantages gained by technological advancement are only temporary.” (page 69)*

*“Additionally, we must not become so dependent on equipment that we can no longer function effectively when the equipment becomes inoperable.” (page 69)*

*“Equipment that permits over control of units in battle is in conflict with Marine Corp’s philosophy of command and is not justifiable.” (page 68)*

## **Delegating**

As discussed previously, most owner managers have a significant need to be in control. That is one of the reasons why they chose to be owner managers to begin with. As a result, delegating in the right way can be difficult for many owner managers.

It can take a lifetime to learn that the only way to be in control is to give it up; and that the more we try to control others, especially as our businesses get larger and more complex, the more others end up controlling us.

Contrary to what most people would expect, Marine doctrine is not centered on control at all.

*“We seek unity, not through imposed control, but through harmonious initiative and lateral coordination.” (page 92)*

Achieving “harmonious initiative and lateral co-ordination” in a fluid, uncertain, hostile and competitive environment is a significant challenge. To achieve this goal, the Marine Corps thinking starts with articulating core traits and beliefs which all individuals throughout the organization must adhere to, from the very top to the very bottom:

*“Our philosophy [of command] must not only accommodate but must exploit human traits such as boldness, initiative, personality, strength of will, and imagination.” (page 80)*

There is a particular emphasis on individual initiative. People who are able to get the job done are the most valuable people of all, and should be identified, hired and promoted to positions of responsibility.

*“We will not accept lack of orders as justification for inaction; it is each Marine’s duty to take initiative as the situation demands.” (page 59)*

On the other hand, subordinates do not work in a completely uncontrolled environment. “Control” is managed by setting clear objectives and communicating commander’s intent, as discussed above. Subordinates know what they have to do and why, without interference in how they do it.

*“We leave the manner of accomplishing the mission to the subordinate, thereby allowing him the freedom – and establishing the duty – to take whatever steps he deems necessary based on the situation. The senior prescribes the method of execution only to the degree that is essential for coordination. It is this freedom for initiative that permits the high tempo of operations that we desire. Uninhibited by restrictions from above, the subordinate can adapt his actions to the changing situation. He informs his commander what he has done, but he does not wait for permission.” (page 91)*

*“ ... we must avoid set rules and patterns, which inhibit imagination and initiative.” (page 80)*

In return for being granted such freedom of operation, subordinates must accept responsibility for their decisions and be accountable. Initiative is balanced with responsibility.

*“Individual initiative and responsibility are of paramount importance.” (page 80)*

Subordinates are also responsible for “lateral coordination”. They integrate their actions with others who are in the same chain of command. Each has knowledge of their own objectives. Each is aware of the commander’s intent. Rather than going up the line to get direction on how to get things done, they are expected to work together, and only go up the line if there is disagreement or misunderstanding as to objectives or commander’s intent.

By hiring, developing and empowering similar types of people throughout the organization, people of initiative and imagination who accept responsibility and accountability, and who are required and capable of working together, and by delegating objectives and not methods, owner managers can ease their own burdens, concentrate on the areas where they should be spending their energies, and can benefit from a stronger, more vibrant and more proactive organization.

## **Implementing**

Accepting that Marines operate in a competitive, hostile, fluid and uncertain environment, *Warfighting* has useful insights for owner managers and their subordinates when it comes to implementing the plans that they have put together. The emphasis is on taking advantage of the vulnerability of your competitors, being flexible to opportunity as it develops, and boldly and relentlessly taking advantage of your opportunities. After all, you are involved in a competition to impose your vision on others, and to attract and keep limited economic resources.

*“... we focus our effort against critical enemy vulnerability, exercising strict economy elsewhere.” (page 94)*

*“Once gained or found, any advantage must be pressed relentlessly and unhesitatingly. We must be ruthlessly opportunistic ...” (page 79)*

*“The ability to take advantage of opportunity is a function of speed, flexibility, boldness, and initiative.” (page 48)*

*“Boldness is superior to timidity in every instance ... Boldness must be tempered with judgment lest it border on recklessness. But this does not diminish its significance.” (page 44)*

## **Supporting**

Finally, once the plans have been made, delegation has been completed, and implementing is under way, commanders must understand how best to support their subordinates. Keeping in mind that initiative and boldness are critical to working in a hostile, fluid and uncertain environment, that your subordinates are well trained, clear in their objectives and your intent, and are working with each other to achieve those goals, you must be on top of the situation while resisting the urge to interfere in how things are getting done.

*“A commander should command from well forward. This allows him to see and sense firsthand ... Only by his physical presence ... can the commander fully gain the trust and confidence of his subordinates ...” ( pages 81 to 82)*

On the other hand: *“We must remember that command from the front does not equate to over supervision of subordinates.” (pages 81 to 82)*

*“ ... we should streamline our headquarters organizations and staffs to eliminate bureaucratic delays in order to add tempo.” (page 56)*

To achieve the right frame of mind, you must recognize that a commander works on a different temporal plane than his or her subordinates. Your job is to look farther into the future. While they are in the trenches fulfilling the jobs at hand, you are integrating the feedback you are getting with your vision for the marketplace, making adjustments, and planning the next set of objectives.

*“... the higher our echelon of command ... the further ahead in time and space we must seek to impose our will.” (page 86)*

## CLOSING THOUGHTS

Owner managers must continuously seek out new ideas and insights into themselves, their business and their market places. Because there are many similarities in the nature and attributes of business and war, there are many such ideas and insights in *Warfighting*, which can provide inspiration for owner managers seeking to get the most out of themselves, their subordinates and their business opportunities.

*Warfighting* suggests what kind of people we should look to add to our team, as employees, suppliers, advisors, investors or partners.

It also suggests what we should look to in ourselves to succeed in the competitive, uncertain, fluid and hostile world of commerce.

*“In practical terms ... we must not strive for certainty before we act for in doing so we will surrender the initiative and pass up opportunities. We must not try to maintain positive control over subordinates since this will necessarily slow our tempo and inhibit initiative. We must not attempt to impose precise order to the events of combat since this leads to a formulistic approach to war. And we must be prepared to adapt to changing circumstances and exploit opportunities as they arise, rather than adhering insistently to predetermined plans.” (page 83)*

*“We must therefore be prepared to cope – even better to thrive – in an environment of chaos, uncertainty, constant change and friction.” (page 92)*

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<sup>1</sup> *Warfighting: The U.S. Marine Corps Book of Strategy*; Doubleday, New York (1994).

<sup>2</sup> Clausewitz, Carl von, *On War*, Wordsworth Editions Limited, Hertfordshire (1997) (written during the 1820's).

<sup>3</sup> All quotations in italics are from *Warfighting*, and are followed by the appropriate page reference, unless otherwise noted.

<sup>4</sup> B.H. Liddel Hart, as quoted in *Encyclopedia Britannica*, 1929.

<sup>5</sup> Tzu, Sun, *The Art of War*, Oxford University Press, London (1963) (written approximately 400 B.C.) page 168.

<sup>6</sup> Tzu, *supra*, pages 77 and 78.