



United you will beat your rivals, whatever they throw at you


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General Sir Peter Wall

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When Iraqi militia leader Moqtada al-Sadr ordered the shelling of a British Army logistics base at Basra airfield in 2006, the attack reinforced, rather than damaged the morale of the force. Probably not what al-Sadr had in mind.

Those in support roles, having an easier time, can feel left out of the battle. When they are enduring the same conditions as those on the front line they can look their fellow soldiers in the eye and feel more pride. That is why the shelling of the airfield forged closer ties between the front and rear elements of the force.

Building competitive advantage in business is also a team game. Teams have to be so much more than a working group. Above all they need to be united behind a common goal. Most of us perform better working with others and any big organisation is, in reality, a team of teams.

Teams are tribal and they give us strength, but they can also limit us. To grow or sustain a successful enterprise, people need to see

beyond themselves and their own teams and understand how they contribute to the overall intent and main effort of the organisation.

One of the greatest feats of team building in military history took place in India and Burma in the Second World War. Fighting in the toughest conditions imaginable, Field Marshal Slim rebuilt the “forgotten” 14th Army after a demoralising 900-mile retreat.

“Uncle Bill” Slim took the bedraggled group of 750,000 men – Britons, Indians, Africans and Gurkhas – and gave them the conviction that they could beat the Japanese. He was a clever tactician who learnt quickly from his mistakes. He motivated his soldiers with his courage and highly visible presence on the battlefield.

Slim understood that teamwork was essential to gaining the advantage and winning. For many he was the standout leader of the war.

The best teams depend on three ingredients: the right individuals with the right skills; the right collective ethos

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and values; and the best leaders to organise the team and engender the will to win.

First, the people. Capable people are in short supply. The talent may exist, but it achieves proper capability only after training and the opportunity to learn from experience. This is where leadership matters. Good leaders recognise the responsibility to develop their team and the individuals in it. While the temptation is to try to build a collection of superstars, even the best teams have a range of ability.

The key is raising the mean performance across the team. The army pays particular attention to integrating trained soldiers into its teams so they feel confident. Whether buying in capability or growing it in-house, finding people with growth potential is essential. In successful businesses this is a core responsibility of leadership; it is not just left to the human resources department.

High staff turnover can speak volumes about an organisation. It is a fundamental constraint on the ability to build a resilient team and strive for excellence. In the army, high turnover of people presents real dangers.

Whether buying in capability or growing it, finding people with growth potential is essential.

The army cannot hire its workforce from the market. It has to recruit, select and train soldiers, and make the most of them by employing them for as long as possible.

They have to be nurtured through a meritocratic system that offers skills, challenge and advancement, coupled with camaraderie and strong leadership.

The second ingredient of a good team is shared ethos and values. Even in the army, these cannot be taken for granted. Values define a framework for decisions, actions and behaviour, and

they are a promise to people about how they will be treated. Done properly, they make a real difference. Done badly, you are better off without them.

The third ingredient is strong leaders. People who take responsibility, inspire, get the job done and are resilient under pressure. People with personal qualities that win trust and loyalty from individuals. People like Bill Slim.

This is so critical to the British Army's institutional competence and wellbeing that it puts leadership potential ahead of technical skill when selecting young officers.

Though these three ingredients are essential, more is needed for sustained success. Teams can be at their best only when they have withstood the test of real situations and learnt from them. Experience is vital, both to season individuals and to build a system that allows success to be repeated. That is why the army makes great use of drills and procedures. Individuals know instinctively what they must do. That gives their leaders more capacity to think creatively about seizing advantage or dealing with threats.

In commerce and the military alike, strong teams greatly enhance competitive edge. The ideas and methods the army uses to get the best from its teams in challenging situations have equal relevance in business. They bring clear benefits that will enable you to win.