



Hitler: his part in his own downfall


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Excessive control and micro-management, known in the military as over-command, can be the path to disaster – as Adolf Hitler demonstrated in France in 1944. He denied his forces the opportunity to strike the allies when they were at their most vulnerable.

When the pressure was really on, Hitler retained very tight control of his reserves, in contravention of the “mission command” doctrine developed – and usually employed so successfully – by the German army. He prevented Erwin Rommel, one of his greatest generals, from positioning his panzer divisions close enough to the Normandy beaches to push the allies back into the sea.

It lost him the battle and it sealed Germany’s fate. After an extremely tough fight, the allies secured a beachhead and conditions were set for the eventual liberation of western Europe.

It was different when Hitler was on the front foot. Mission command was the

oxygen of blitzkrieg – lightning war – which allowed the Germans to overrun western Europe so rapidly in 1940.

Western armed forces employ mission command nowadays because it promotes speed of action and initiative to achieve success. It combines centralised intent – strategy and resource allocation – with decentralised execution, the application of those resources to the battle. In plain language, we could call it leading by intent.

It is just as relevant to businesses that wish to succeed through agility and innovation. Agility is much talked about, but what is it? It is the ability to make well-informed decisions quickly.

Whether you are a bank seeking to grow its capital, a consumer goods company fending off a hostile takeover, or a management team taking new products to market, this approach can give you that agility.

Some multinational corporations are structured around this concept. The heads of their business units are much

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more than general managers. They have authority delegated to them to manage their business, including profit and loss, in accordance with the intent and operating goals set out by the chief executive.

These corporations resist the temptation to cut costs by centralising common functions, such as business development or contracting. They see a greater prize in vesting authority and responsibility in their individual units to give them the flexibility to sustain high performance.

So how is this concept applied in the business environment?

In line with the principles of war, leading by intent starts by getting the aim crystal clear, ensuring that the organisational structure is clear and key people have the technical competence for their role. Those executives need to know three things: the intent, the main effort

and the specific tasks they are personally responsible for delivering.

The intent is a concise expression of the purpose of the operation and the desired outcome. It may include critical success factors and guidance on the levels of risk acceptable during each element of the operation. It explains “what is to be achieved” to meet the aim and specifically avoids detailing “how it is to be done” because that is delegated to executives the next level down.

Above all, the intent has to inspire and if it can be shared with the entire workforce to channel their energies, so much the better. Henry Ford’s intent for the Model T is a fine example (see page 3).

The main effort is about three things: focus, focus and focus. It is the single issue that is most essential to success and it will render the overall mission a failure

if it goes wrong. It is the priority in every sense and attracts the most resources.

In a military operation the main effort might be defeating the enemy’s reserves, whereas in a bank it might be putting the customer first to increase profitability. Any activity that isn’t directly or indirectly supporting the main effort needs to be justified or stopped.

This technique of leading by intent is becoming increasingly common in sophisticated businesses. If you want people to think, don’t give them instructions, give them intent and they will discover the answers. They begin to think like the leader, so all the brains are working on the problem, not just one.

The clearer you are about your intent and main effort, the more confidence your team will have in making decisions and executing them. In contrast, if you are vague about what’s truly important, your team will be more hesitant and divided.

There are other benefits, too. Being empowered to make decisions and influence outcomes is motivating; it develops people professionally and promotes innovation. Empowered organisations possess more resilience, and have leaner structures at the centre.

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Of course, such empowerment depends on there being trust between the people in the chain – the leaders and the led at every level – and the provision of the right resources. It also depends on technical competence and organisational clarity.

Leading by intent is not without risk, so it needs some checks and balances. This is where a technique called back-briefing comes in useful.

Once executives have had a chance to absorb the intent and main effort, and their specific tasks, they draw up their provisional plan. They then “back-brief” that plan to their boss to ensure his or her intent has been properly interpreted and to identify key risks. The plans are then adjusted before they are signed off for action.

In a leading-by-intent culture it is natural for senior leaders to talk to the all-important people at the coal face, to ensure they are attuned to the intent and understand their role in the plan.

Leading by intent calls for a cultural shift, but it is worth it. Executives can be trained to employ these skills. The return comes in getting the most from your people, and driving better and more sustainable performance.

Henry Ford's vision

Henry Ford's vision for his company is a great example of intent to focus and inspire. In 1903, he said: “I will build a motor car for the multitude. It shall be large enough for the family, but small enough for the unskilled individual to operate easily and care for, and shall be light in weight and it may be economical in maintenance. It will be built of honest materials, by the best workmen that money can hire, after the simplest designs that modern engineering can devise. But it shall be so low in price that the man of moderate means may own one and enjoy with his family the blessings of happy hours spent in God's great open spaces.”

The result was the Model T and 16.5m were sold.