

# Adapting Combat Readiness For Peak Performance ©2003

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By

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The US military knows that the foundations for peak performance are laid long before troops are in the field. Recruits are not just enrolled and deployed, but rather, there is a clear, purposeful effort to mold them into effective team members who are prepared to deliver peak performance. The entire military organization is structured to do what needs to be done in a way that generates and captures the highest possible potential of its members. Ensuring that the groundwork has been laid for harnessing the potential of everyone involved is articulated as combat readiness, a practice that provides the platform that's necessary for success.

If you want your business to be as effective as it can possibly be, and if you want to maximize the potential inherent within your organization, you should apply the same concept of combat readiness to your business. Think of it as competitive readiness if you prefer, but the concept is the critical thing; do everything you can to prepare your business to be as effective as it can be.

Take a lesson from how the military molds its recruits---you must prepare each and every employee to provide his/her best effort. There are several critical elements that go into ensuring such an outcome, all of which build on the realization that truly outstanding outcomes are the result of synergy across an entire organization, which generates more power than the sum of individual units operating on their own. However, merely recognizing that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts isn't enough; training and preparation that ensure that each member of the organization has a thorough understanding of his/her role, including practice at working as part of the larger team, are critical elements of success.

If you are dedicated to developing and maintaining an organization that is ready to compete in today's cutthroat business environment, here are some steps you can take:

**Unify your work force through pride and commitment.** Do your employees see themselves as vital members of an elite organization? Do they believe in the value of their individual contributions? Do they feel proud to work for your company? Are they committed to the company's success? Do they care about their work? There are two elements of a unified workforce that lay the foundation for peak performance, pride and commitment.

People want to be part of an organization of which they can be proud. Seeing oneself as a member of a worthy organization motivates people to do their best. Esprit de corps provides people with a desire to focus their attention on creating success for the

organization as a whole, rather than just coming in and punching the clock. This pride sets the stage for peak performance.

The second element of a unified workforce is commitment. Sharing a deep commitment enables collaboration and focuses the workforce in ambiguous circumstances. When people value what it is that they are about, they actively participate in fulfilling that purpose. They are less likely to be distracted, confused or passive in the face of something unexpected. This commitment supports the potential for peak performance. Without such a committed focus only mediocre results are possible.

Businesses that nurture esprit de corps and commitment generate more impact than those that don't. It isn't a complex process but its simplicity can be deceptive. Your efforts must be genuine, on-going, and they can't be superficial. Here are some steps that any company can take:

- No matter how long you've been in business, nor how successful you have been, recommit yourself to your business's purpose. If you have a leadership team recommit as a group.
- Compose a story about the history of your business, focusing on your purpose, the unique value that your organization infuses into its work and how that generates a competitive advantage.
- Instill a sense of pride in your workforce and a sense of expectation among your customers by using your business story to focus on your commitment to your purpose.
- Work to achieve a sense of peak performance in your company by refusing to settle for mediocrity. Build insights and skills in the workforce rather than railing against mistakes.
- Focus on how the work is done, day-to-day. Have people talk about what they are trying to do and what they are actually accomplishing. Use these conversations about how the work is done to build a common expectation about the standards of problem solving, levels of collaboration and the execution of duties.
- Recognize successes and celebrate heroic actions in support of your goals.

**Clarify the mission.** Does every one of your people understand your company's mission well enough to know how to act in the face of an opportunity or a glitch? Do they share common, compatible priorities? When the military deploys troops it is within the framework of a clear mission. They may be deployed for combat, counter-terrorism, peacekeeping or nation building. How plans are made and executed, how resources are allocated, and their specific objectives are derived from that mission. People work together most effectively when they understand the big picture, grasping how the pieces are expected to work together. With a clear mission, it is easier for people throughout the company to determine their priorities, exercise common sense, and turn data into actionable knowledge. Without it, focus is fractured and chaos ensues.

As your people go to work each day, they need a deep understanding of what your business is all about, not just its goals, but its priorities and requirements. Make sure that

they understand your value proposition. Clarify your company's promises to its customers. Work to ensure that your people, regardless of tenure or experience, share your core understandings and assumptions about the business.

Think about your purpose in fundamental terms. Many CEOs would say that the purpose of the company is to make money. This may be a goal but the purpose of the business has to come from the idea around which the business has been built. For instance, Fannie Mae describes its purpose as "strengthening society by democratizing home ownership." Nike's stated purpose is to "Crush the competition." For years, GE described itself as being about "bringing good things to life." How have you articulated your purpose so that it can align the work of your complex enterprise? Here are some steps you can take:

- Express a clear business mission that embodies your purpose.
- Articulate your business idea and its basic assumptions in a story about the business in its competitive environment.
- Have key components (people and departments) of the business see their goals and objectives within the context of your purpose.
- Ensure that your business story is told throughout the organization. Everyone needs to get it.

**Clarify roles within the mission.** Do your people understand their roles within the mission (the business plan)? Do they appreciate how their efforts have to mesh with the efforts of others in order to create the best results? When soldiers begin to act under fire, they need to understand what's expected of them. They also need to be able to anticipate how teammates will be acting to fulfill their parts of the mission. The mission sets the framework for how people act, day-to-day, and it allows people to create synergy among themselves. When people understand how they can best add value, they can act to address breakdowns and glitches. They are also prepared to make the adjustments that build new capabilities. Members of your workforce can become active participants in generating success, by understanding your company's mission, and their role within it, well enough to be able to respond thoughtfully to evolving circumstances.

A business primed for peak performance doesn't allow individuals or departments to work at cross-purposes. Accounts receivable results should not come at the expense of the sales force's relations with its customers. By the same token, enterprise success doesn't come from sales reps running up their numbers by making unprofitable sales. Too often, functional units in a business work to optimize their individual results and fail to collaborate for the good of the whole organization if what's required might threaten their numbers.

The old thinking was that if each individual part were optimized, the overall results of the whole would be the best they could be. This reasoning is flawed for it misses the synergy and optimization of efforts that arise from collaboration and shared goals. Remember, the desired outcome isn't simply to run a fine production system (that's a sub goal); it is to have the flexibility and resourcefulness to anticipate changing customer requirements and the adaptability to quickly respond to changing market conditions while still

maintaining operating efficiencies. The primary goal is to maximize the value produced by the enterprise, which doesn't happen without clearly defined and understood roles and missions. Here is how you can begin to address these issues:

- Facilitate conversations among your people, with each other, across the organization so that they clearly understand each other's responsibilities and how all their roles fit together to support your business's purpose and promises.
- Establish and support a performance feedback process that sustains on-going conversations about how the key components across your business are working together.
- Establish an after action review process that focuses people on evaluating the impact of their efforts in relation to their goals within the mission.

**Ensure competence.** Are your people getting better everyday? Do they search out feedback? Are they open to new ideas? Soldiers spend a large portion of their time training, practicing and rehearsing. To prepare to compete successfully troops continuously push themselves to get better---constantly working to improve their skills and capabilities. When they are in battle and could easily be distracted by emotions and pressures, their training kicks in and gives them a framework for doing their jobs well.

How do you ensure that your people are focused on continuously improving themselves? In the midst of the action, do they rise above obstacles, exceed expectations, and succeed, or do they fall back into old habits, make excuses or wait for someone else to recognize that they are stuck and tell them what to do? Here are some actions you can take to support a culture of learning:

- Recognize that mistakes are always opportunities to learn.
- Make learning a core value. It shouldn't happen occasionally, off-site. It has to be pursued everyday and in everything that happens. Everyone should be expected to both teach and learn.
- Build competence and harness the potential of the team by using hands on learning, on-going mentoring conversations and, when practical, an involvement of the whole team in generating solutions.
- Use the daily work activity as a practice field to develop additional skills, deepen contextual understandings, and make people more sensitive to the signs of problems in the making.

**Establish a battle plan your people can execute.** Does your plan fit your resources? To be successful, does your plan depend on everything falling just right? Does your plan rely more on your optimism than your peoples' capabilities? Do your people know how to adjust to the unexpected or the unordinary? Do they partner with each other to create success?

Generals have learned the hard way that creating a battle plan today that fights yesterday's war is a recipe for disaster. Establish a battle plan framed to address your current realities. Ensure that your people can execute it within their available skills,

experience and resources. Tailor and communicate the battle plan for your business in a way that enables people to anticipate the demands of a changing business environment. The plan should guide rather than restrain your workers, and enable flexibility and collaboration among them. When they understand the assumptions that underlie the plan, the workings of the plan itself and when they have the confidence to work within the plan you have a workforce with a powerful focus.

Too often, a company's battle plan is little more than a fancy, wordy operating plan for the coming year. The emphasis is on everyone hitting his or her numbers on a monthly basis. As the year unfolds and unanticipated events disrupt the plan, the strategies and tactics outlined in the document become irrelevant. Managers scramble to hit their numbers in any way possible. The overall focus of the organization becomes fragmented and potential is wasted. The correction for this tendency is for the workforce to have the skills to pursue their objectives within the business's battle plan rather than abandoning it under pressure. Here's how you get started:

- Involve a broad cross-section of your workforce in an effort to think through various "what if" scenarios that could develop and upset the plan.
- Have the same team identify signs in the environment that would presage the emergence of each of these scenarios.
- Have them develop plans to respond constructively to whichever of these scenarios that might emerge, so that the company is not caught flatfooted.
- Build a workforce that knows how to create opportunities within the plan rather than operating on automatic pilot until problems arise that derail their efforts.
- Analyze performance shortfalls with an eye to applying the right remedies to either get back on track or modify the plan, whichever is in the best interest of the enterprise.

**Ensure and enable open communication.** Does vital business information flow as surely, quickly and easily as gossip among your people? Do you tend to shoot the messenger bearing bad news? Is accuracy prized? When troops are in the field, the availability of accurate information can make all the difference to the success of the mission. In the business environment, the company will run better, adapt more quickly and think more effectively if its lines of communication stay open. Information is the lifeblood of adaptive organizations. Ensuring that the right information gets to the right people at the right time is critical for peak performance.

On the other hand, inaccurate information or self-serving interpretations of events sap an organization's competitive potential. How people interpret what they are told, or what they see, is often colored by their personal agendas and their unique perspectives. Their hopes, fear, and ambitions can impart a bias that can cause confusion. Successful companies instill a discipline around how information is captured, interpreted, and disseminated. Here are some ways to do it:

- Tighten meetings---work from an agenda, keep them focused, and follow up on action items.

- Make it safe for people to speak truth to power.
- Make solving problems more important than assigning blame.
- Encourage conversations between internal consumers and suppliers.
- Support an ethic that puts accurate information into the hands of people who are executing the plan. This creates the context for harnessing untapped potential, since it enables people to work from a sound base of accurate information.

**Learn To Assess Combat Effectiveness.** Are your people able to learn and improve through accurate self-reflection? Can your company, as a whole, think about its performance with the maturity that allows improvement? The military places great emphasis on teaching soldiers to draw lessons learned in the field. These lessons are collected and incorporated into future actions, in this way, enhancing effectiveness in future operations. When companies have the ability to step back and watch themselves in action, seeing themselves through the eyes of customers, suppliers, allies, and even competitors, they can modify their actions for greater competitive advantage. Unless it perceives itself accurately, the company is not ready to use the consequences of its actions as a source of constructive feedback. When a company is effective at using such feedback it's harnessing potential to apply its resources to greatest effect.

The steps below are essential elements in allowing the entire organization to reflect on the results of its efforts. These skills must be practiced continuously if a group is going to become proficient at self-analysis.

- Establish a robust system of after action reviews throughout the organization.
- Establish an expectation of accurate, honest feedback across the boundaries within the company.
- Enact a disciplined approach to diagnosing problems.
- Keep the focus upon closing the gap between today's performance and tomorrow's goals.

**Conclusion:** Learn from the military's experience regarding combat readiness. Preparation sets the stage for peak performance. It generates synergy. It focuses your efforts. It creates competitive advantage. It isn't enough to have a good idea, or a good product. To be a winner you need to be the best prepared among your competition. Preparedness is an on-going process, and leaders who ensure readiness both create potential and put it to work.

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