

5 startup lessons I learned in the military

June 30, 2013 11:15 am by Coney, Mike | 3 Comments MedCity News

In 1974, I commenced a six-year career with the U.S. Army Security Agency. Along the way, I learned a thing or two about **perseverance, discipline, teamwork and vigilance**. When I entered the business world in 1980, I quickly found that this knowledge could be applied to achieve personal and corporate success. More than 35 years later, I still draw upon five important lessons the military taught me – lessons that I believe executives at startups and SMEs can also employ to achieve success.

1) A small team of motivated individuals can beat a much larger, well-provisioned adversary.

Throughout my tenure with the Army, every single person I served with was **cross-trained in more than one area of expertise**. This is absolutely crucial for the classroom teacher, as they must provide multiple learning activities, as well as an environment that fosters creativity, critical thinking, and academic survival skill training....all of which may be outside the confines of 'just the content'. For example, a radio operator was also a practiced medic, a linguist was also a proficient sharpshooter, and so on. This method ensured that all bases were covered and all duties were fulfilled in the event a unit's designated expert was unavailable. I quickly learned that **having a small team of highly motivated, skilled individuals can overcome a much larger, well-provisioned adversary**. Our most challenging adversary is an outdated and ineffective mentality that hinders many college instructors across this nation. The 21st Century Report clearly outlined the '**dramatic transformation**' that must occur in this mentality (or philosophy). Those best able to survive will be those who find a way to **make** it happen, even with limited resources.

When I joined Unitrends as chief executive officer in 2009, the company was grossly underinvested and understaffed. To compensate, I made sure the leadership team, which consisted of three people, including myself, was cross-trained on several different areas of the business. I was a vice president of sales by day and CEO by night, while simultaneously managing human resources and our channel program. Our chief technology and strategy officer was also running product management, engineering, marketing and customer support. Our chief financial officer handled all things finance – from strategic planning and analysis to more mundane tasks, like billing and records keeping. And we were all knowledgeable about each other's responsibilities to ensure we had all areas of the business covered at all times.

Being understaffed is not an unusual problem for a startup or SME – in fact, it's to be expected. But, remember, quality beats quantity every time. Surround yourself with a team of superior operators, and the rest will take care of itself.

2) Value resourcefulness over resources.

I served in the Army during the post-Vietnam era – a time when we had half of the resources we really needed to execute. Nonetheless, at the end of the day, we still **found a way to get the job done because there was no room for failure**. We did so through **creativity and innovation** (In instruction we must also eliminate any self-imposed limitations of an archaic philosophy or mentality that would hinder our success. This college, state, and nation have clearly outlined the philosophy of the community college system, alleviating the stress of each instructor having to come up with their own personal philosophy.) and found that our guerilla tactics often outsmarted even the most well-provisioned opponents.

The same holds true for the business world. Companies that employ **inventive individuals that, despite limited resources, still find a way to reach their goals and advance the business will be most successful**. And for us, those **teachers will produce the most successful students**. No matter what your financial situation, create a culture that values resourcefulness over resources. A good idea is better than a bag full of cash any day.

3) There's no "I" in team.

One of the first things you learn when joining the military is that it's not about any one individual, but about your unit as a whole. Units are comprised of experts in a variety of fields to ensure the strongest team possible. In battle, you are **only as good as your weakest link**. This is precisely why we are now focusing our efforts on bringing those least effective instructors up to standards (*which have very clearly been defined*). When looking at success rates across the general academic division, although the overall rate may be OK for a particular course, there is a wide range of rates. If everyone in these divisions were operating at the same effectiveness rate as the top third of the instructors teaching that particular course, EVERY top ten enrollment course would be meeting the standards set by IA!

In much the same way, a diversified leadership team that works in unison is crucial to business success. If everyone has the same skill set, your business will be riddled with blind spots. Know your own strengths and weaknesses, and put people around you that complement them. Being a strong leader doesn't mean doing everything yourself. It means building an adept team and then inspiring them to succeed. In the words of Ronald Reagan: "The greatest leader is not necessarily the one who does the greatest things. He is the one that gets the people to do the greatest things."

4) After your 'dream team' is assembled, get out of their way.

In the military you do what you are told, and you do not disobey orders. There's no variability. However, I've learned that the opposite philosophy is most effective in the business world. At Unitrends, I encourage my leadership team – and all employees – to **take initiative and challenge one another**. This is much more productive than that which happens in many departments across the nation as new energetic, fresh, and innovative teachers are hired. The more senior (*not necessarily the more effective*) teachers will many times criticize the innovative and more effective strategies of the newer instructor because they feel threatened that there is actually a more effective way of teaching. This negates their excuse over the years that it is always 'the student' that is the problem, so they resort to claims that one is 'lowering the standards' to achieve this success. I've found that the best way to empower your "dream team" is to get out of their way and trust them to do their jobs. This only works in education (instruction) when there are **very clear standards of accountability** in place. It is not very effective when allowing a group to establish their own standards when they know there is not an effective system of accountability. The worst thing you can do is make someone feel insecure about their performance, because then their focus will shift from worrying about the business to worrying about their own job security. "Some change when they see the light, others when they feel the heat." With this variability will surely come mistakes. But, my philosophy is, **if your employees aren't making mistakes, they probably aren't trying hard enough**.

5) Listen to everyone, but trust your own judgment above all.

Whether through personal experience, on TV or in a movie, most of us have seen a military briefing in action. Leaders gather to discuss mission parameters, variables, strategies and tactics. And while everyone weighs in with their opinion, ultimately, the highest ranking leader makes the decision.

In business, one bad decision may not mean "life or death" as in the military, but it can have a detrimental impact on the fate of your company. **Every leadership situation you encounter and every decision you make is different. There is no easy or single formula for success.** The best leaders are those who listen to everyone, are receptive to advice and seek to learn from others – yet have an unwavering trust and confidence in themselves to always make the best decision possible. At the end of the day, **you** are accountable for **your** business (or division, or class), and, as such, trusting your own judgment is paramount.

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