



2-2-2017

Just Business - 02/02/2017

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WMU ScholarWorks Citation

Deshpande, Satish, "Just Business - 02/02/2017" (2017). *Haworth College of Business News and Magazine*. 62.
http://scholarworks.wmich.edu/business_news/62

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What business can learn from the military

Posted on [February 2, 2017](#) by [Satish Deshpande](#)

Common needs for leading and managing complex organizations are what intertwine business and military organizations. As interim dean of a business college that houses a military science and leadership program, including Army ROTC, I'm learning more and more just how much business can learn from the military. Even some of the courses taught by the Department of Military Science and Leadership reflect the needs of business—team development, applied leadership, mission command.



Every few years, military personnel transfer or change jobs, the mission changes or leaders move on. Yet the organization keeps churning along without disruption. The constant flux has always been part of the military at every level—leading to the development of a complex organization that maintains its structure through systems and discipline, leadership and ethics, and understanding of the profession.

So, how can these overarching methods benefit business organizations? I asked the LTC Jack Morgan, current chair of the Department of Military Science and Leadership, and LTC Decker Hains (Ret.), former chair of military science and current instructor of business and engineering, to weigh in on this topic. Below I've shared some of what I've learned along with comments from Morgan and Hains.

- **Systems and discipline:** In 2016, the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics reported that employees in the United States stay with a company for an average of four years. This frequent turnover can be difficult to manage at every level of an organization. The military maintains continuity because it is set up to have personnel rotate through areas every two-to-three years. Even Morgan and Hains have limited stints as chairs of the WMU program. The military has processes and systems to combat this institutional knowledge loss. For example, making sure the right capabilities are available; not jumping to re-organization; and working to minimize resistance to changes, for example.
- **Leadership and ethics:** “The Army’s definition of leadership requires leaders to not only accomplish the mission but also to improve the organization,” says Morgan. Leadership development also is part of military structure where a skill success is not the only factor that leads to a leadership position rather leaders are developed at every level
- **Succession planning and after action reviews** are also part of the process: Improving any process, service or product should be as much a part of the goal as a company’s bottom line, and leaders should also identify the cause of a failure and figure out what aspect of the organization and their own leadership allowed the failure to occur. Because

the military leadership structure changes every two to three years, senior leaders are extremely engaged in succession planning. The military plans a “right seat-left seat” where both the incoming and outgoing leaders understand and participate in the environment. Initially, new leaders observe and the outgoing leaders serve in an advising role. In combat, the loss can be sudden and replacement leaders rely on their past experience and the junior chain command to ensure a smooth transition.

- **Understanding and living your profession.** Military organizations expect officers and leaders to be role models for the enlisted personnel. As our students would say, they need to “walk the walk.” For example, military officers and leaders must meet the same fitness goals as enlisted personnel do. Their experience in the military systems and culture becomes part of who they are. In this way, officers and leaders can effectively pass on the culture and traditions to each new recruit. “Business leaders can use this same approach to model behaviors and attitudes they want to instill in their employees,” adds Hains.

And while the businesses and military organizations may have vastly different goals, the processes for achieving them can be shared as I’m learning from our faculty and staff in the military science and leadership program.

WMU’s military science and leadership/Army ROTC program: wmich.edu/rotc

U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics: <https://www.bls.gov/news.release/tenure.nr0.htm>