



# Air Land Sea Application Center

Joint Base Langley-Eustis, Virginia

<https://www.alsa.mil>

## LEADERSHIP - COMBINING CORPORATE IDEAS WITH MILITARY IDEALS

By MAJ Rob Tanzola, USMC

*(Originally published in the Air Land Sea Bulletin No. 2004-2, 1 May 2004)*

While serving as a national corporate fellow to the United States Chamber of Commerce (USCC), I have had some tremendous opportunities to observe and learn about the domestic and global issues near and dear to the hearts of our fellow countrymen, to United States companies of all sizes and to foreign companies who conduct business in the United States. I have done this under the tutelage of Thomas J. Donohue, who is the President and Chief Executive Officer of the USCC. The Chamber itself is a unique organization. It is one of the largest federations of businesses with an extended membership of over three million members and is the most powerful and largest lobby spender in Washington, DC.

To date, I have been on my assignment for almost seven months. During this time, I have traveled to 25 states, six nations and attended meetings with Donohue and the CEOs of over 120 multi-million or multibillion-dollar companies. The classroom setting has been in the offices of CEOs, with Donohue for the majority of my "instruction." On several occasions I have watched him pass on this knowledge to executive MBA program students. There are many similarities and many differences between the military and private sector. Leading is a necessity in both. The leadership traits and principles we were taught early in our careers are still carried with us today and they would serve us well anywhere. I have found it quite interesting to learn of the major skill sets that guide and drive the corporate world.

### High Energy

For the majority of the uniformed services, there is little to no experience working in the private sector. We often think that the corporate world works a steady 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. schedule, stopping at 5 p.m. every day, commuting home, then picking up where they left off at 9 a.m. the following day. This could not be further from the truth. All across the spectrum of employment are hard-working and highly energetic people. A requirement for success is high energy. This high energy is synonymous to a high appetite for challenge and success. One must stay at the workplace or remain engaged with the issue until the task is complete or the challenge is resolved. Similar to our world that is covered by countless orders and directives, the corporate world has its share of policies and instructions. One is expected to read and understand all information pertinent to any imaginable subject. As hinted at, one must work, work and work. In order to get ahead of the issues or of the competitors, one finds that work continues into the night

and into the weekends. I believe that this drive and all-consuming high energy occurs naturally and if one is successful, they manifest this trait.

### **Passion**

Whether it is selling used cars or managing billions of dollars in the stock market, one must believe in what they are doing. Not only must this be for one's own mental well-being but also for their coworkers and customers. If this is not the case then one ought to move on. This total commitment to the product and profession is a mark of excellence. It is easy to identify a troubled company, department or worker if they do not manifest enthusiasm in their job and instead give the appearance of going through the motions. A company that is passionate throughout the ranks is probably soaring above other companies in all aspects. Passion is both inspired from the top down and it percolates from the bottom up. I have yet to run into a CEO who did not at some point of the discussion profess that they love their job and would not do anything else. On my way around the various corporate headquarters, to and from the offices of CEOs, I have seen the passion resonate amongst the other employees. The synergistic effect of employee passion, that has its roots at the top, is a tremendously positive force.

### **See through ambiguity**

Donohue jokes that CEOs should have all their fine and professionally appealing carpet pulled out of their offices and replaced with gray carpet because they no longer have issues that are black and white. On a daily basis, corporate leaders must deal with information overload and noise (not always the decibel type) in their environment and pick through this clutter to the facts and make sound and timely decisions. This closely parallels our challenges on the battlefield with fog and friction. This mental skill is also aided by reliance on key staff members to digest and filter information. Timely and accurate decisions are made through absolute trust in these individuals' recommendations and or summaries. Much of the risk associated with corporate decision making comes from the unknown. The old adage, "a good decision today beats the better decision tomorrow," still applies.

### **Tell a story**

Of all the common traits, I believe this one is the most difficult and requires the most amount of practice. If you cannot effectively convey information, you cannot sell, guide, instruct, lead or debate any issues. A clear, concise and compelling tale wins every time. Short and to the point is as ineffective as too long with too much information. One needs to be able to quickly read his opponent, customer, seniors or coworkers and tailor the verbal information to a "good" story. There are several key areas to storytelling.

The first is comfort with the topic. One must understand what one is talking about, be able to rapidly and correctly answer questions and be prepared to handle questions or comments on areas that one is not knowledgeable on.

Secondly, one must choose their words carefully. Often the audience is listening to every word (as is desired) and a deal could be blown or a task misunderstood by the very definition of the words used. Avoid being vague or "soft" when the situation does not dictate. Be definitive and assertive.

Lastly, one must be proficient with the various modes of communication. By phone, by written word, during one-on-one dialogues and or while speaking to a large audience, one must be able to communicate. All modes require the same basics but must be fine-tuned to the situation.

### **So, what do the big guys do??**

Donohue often speaks to executive MBA programs and offers what he does as a Chief Executive Officer and President of a major business association for the students to hear firsthand instead of the textbook definition with task and purpose. He breaks down his role into three functions: gather, point and communicate. In the gathering mode he gathers information, outstanding employees and sufficient resources to accomplish the mission. During the pointing mode, he directs these staff members and allocates the resources by providing strategic direction. Communication is akin to supervision in our realm. He communicates via the phone, via written correspondence and via personal visits with his member organizations to ascertain USCC progress in meeting their desires, to solicit more support and to educate the members and potential members about USCC successes and failures. I submit that at all levels of leadership, we too are gatherers, pointers and communicators.

### **Summary**

Based on my observations, what we do as leaders is not that different from the corporate world. If we all conduct self-examinations of our leadership abilities, we will readily see the similarities to what CEOs know and do. For those in the audience that are applying these skills already, refine and exact them. For those that are not, implement and adopt them. Having a high energy level, having passion for what you are doing, seeing through ambiguity and being able to tell a story are important skill sets to master. One should never take for granted the opportunities we have while in uniform. We train hard every day, why not take advantage of the environment and take the time to improve yourself and those around you. Remain confident and optimistic, these skills are in high demand around the world. Most importantly though, do not lose sight of the fact that your Soldiers, Marines, Sailors and Airmen deserve the best today.

*Disclaimer. The opinions, conclusions, and recommendations expressed or implied within are those of the contributors and do not necessarily reflect the views of the Department of Defense or any other agency of the Federal Government.*

*Originally released 1 May 2004*