

PR Blitzkrieg: Maneuver Warfare for Marketing Communications
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It is our conclusion that Toyota has developed a set of principles, Rules-in-Use we've called them...so that (nearly) everyone can contribute at or near his or her potential, and when the parts come together the whole is much, much greater than the sum of the parts.

~ Prof. Steven Spear, Harvard University in HBS Working Knowledge, 21 November 2001

“Southwest’s secret is simple,” a *Fortune* magazine reporter once taunted CEO Herb Kelleher. “You fly one type of airplane, you concentrate on short, point-to point routes, you don’t serve food, and you don’t assign seats.” Kelleher slammed his hand down on the desk, “Anyone can copy that, and they have. But they can’t copy the culture!” As the list of failed Southwest wannabes continues to grow [US Airways disbanded its MetroJet operation, for example, as did Delta with Song], while Southwest remains the most profitable major US airline—and the only one consistently in the black since September 2001—Kelleher’s remarks take on added significance. There are two unique functions of top management. One grabs the headlines: overall business strategy, answering questions such as: *What business are we in? Why will people buy from us rather than our competitors? How will we tell if our strategy is working and how will we make changes?* The other unique function of senior leadership is to tinker under the hood, to create the people system, the ‘culture’, that will carry out the strategy. It is truly amazing how many CEOs spend 20 hours a day on details best left to the responsible employees, and short shrift the cultural issues that they alone can solve. But what defines a company’s culture?

Mutual Trust

All high performing organizations, from Southwest Airlines to Toyota to the US Marine Corps, share certain cultural elements that permit them to shape and dominate their environments. These cultural elements, which are essentially ways of thinking about how people approach all forms of conflict, often go by the name the Marine Corps first gave them, maneuver warfare. First among these is mutual trust. Far from being a touchy-feely new age concept, mutual trust is a basic leadership tool that says we will do anything before we let each other down. It is a force that will bring people up out of their foxholes and into the face of certain death. Obviously such a powerful motivator cannot be decreed from above, but must be earned from some period of working together so that we form the bonds of trust that the military call ‘cohesion’. Along the way, people who show that they do not merit this level of trust are removed, no matter how good their financial results.

Mission

Given a high level of trust, and only then, we can employ a technique for which there is no good civilian name. The military call it the ‘mission order concept’. Under this, people throughout the company manage not by assigning tasks or even goals per se, but by giving people specific areas of responsibility and results to be accomplished. Within their areas, people are pretty much free to choose their own methods, so long as they act in harmony with company policies (and obey the law, of course.) At Toyota, for example, production line employees write the standard work book themselves and are responsible for continually improving it. Another caveat is that they must communicate frequently with the person who gave them the area of responsibility. A high degree of trust is needed to make this work so that

bearers of the inevitable bad news report it as quickly and accurately as possible. In a high-performing organization, the 'mission order concept' extends down to every employee and encourages people to use their initiatives while furthering the goals of the organizations.

Focus and Direction

What keeps all this from becoming chaotic is another device with no good civilian translation. The idea is to designate a set of concepts that give focus and direction to our efforts. At Microsoft, for example, Bill Gates laid down the following directive: whenever there is a choice between adding new features and improving security, choose security. Similarly at Toyota, the guidance is to move in the direction that decreases throughput time; the company, in turn, uses a technique called 'hoshin kanri' to ensure that focus-and-direction flows down to every team and every level of the organization. There is a high art in this, in taking the guidance and areas of responsibility assigned at one level and apportioning them to the next level or sub-team. The trick is to choose these in ways that accomplish the overall purpose of the organization, without stifling the initiative and enthusiasm people will need to accomplish them.

Companies that have learned well from Toyota can confidently distribute a tremendous amount of responsibility to the people who actually do the work.

~Prof. Steven Spear, Harvard University

The Bottom Line

The payoff from nurturing a competitive culture is enormous. When still an analyst at Merrill Lynch, Michael Linenberg (now Managing Director and Senior Research Analyst at Deutsche Bank AG, Research Division) said Southwest's ability to avoid layoffs [in the early 2000s] probably raised employee loyalty and improved its productivity—already considered the strongest among major carriers. "They tend to have some of the lowest costs in the industry," Linenberg said. "So in times of depressed business, they can make money while others are losing money."

Communications Strategy

The act of communicating strengthens bonds within an organization and so is an important device in building trust, cooperation, cohesion, and mutual understanding.

~US Marine Corps, MCDP 6, Command and Control

Internally, communications strategy can reduce the time it takes for the focus-and-direction messages to propagate thorough the company. An effective strategy also can have a subtle but powerful effect on mutual trust: employees need to see that there is no conflict between the explicit messages the company is sending and the implicit signals they are receiving. When this happens—when company leaders are seen as acting in accordance with the direction they are providing—employees feel confident to use their initiatives to solve problems, improve productivity, and take the big swings former GE CEO Jack Welch encouraged in his managers. This is important. Think about the executives who say they value thinking outside the box, but then penalize employees who make mistakes or stick out their necks to try something out of the ordinary.

Much of the communicating in such a culture is implicit, through nuance and body language, and often it's what's not spoken that's important. Implicit communication is very fast, but requires a period of

time working together to develop. The best performing companies develop an explicit communications strategy to complement and reinforce the implicit side. Externally, the communications strategy must fit as part of the overall business strategy, primarily to help shape the market environment—position the company to increase market share or return on sales, for example. This, of course, is the classic function of public relations.

Think about it. Talk about it. Act upon it. Rinse and repeat. Every day.