

A review of
Corps Business by David H. Freedman,
published by HarperCollins (New York, 2000)
ISBN 0-06-661978-5

Rating: 9*

If you're like most people when you hear *military* and *leadership* in the same sentence, you conjure up an image of a ramrod-straight, gray-haired senior officer, the very epitome of command-and-control. Or perhaps a drill instructor wearing a smokey-bear hat with his nose just millimeters away from the nose of a fear-stricken recruit.

Based on the reports of David Freedman in *Corps Business*, perhaps we civilians need to re-think our images. From beginning – an introduction by former Marine Corps commandant Charles Krulak – to end, this book tells the story of an organization which could surely set an example for most American business. Says Krulak, “The hallmark of this fertile environment for personal and professional development is pervasive, clearly defined, and universally respected standards of conduct. These standards stress personal accountability, and our faithful adherence to them has distinguished the Corps for more than two centuries. Their influence is escapable and shapes our every action.”

Here is how this unfolds through the course of the book: Marine units have always gotten and will continue to get wide-ranging assignments. They will be asked to perform critical missions in complex and confusing circumstances. But whatever the mission, the Marine Corps' values as reflected in their standards of conduct will remain constant. Mistakes will be made along the way in dealing with situations involving tension and hostility, but if you fail to meet the standards of conduct you can expect serious consequences.

Over the course of two hundred pages, Freedman offers a host of stories and points out incidents which illustrate key lessons. He has distilled these into 30 “principles” such as:

Principle #1: Aim for the 70 percent solution

which he defines as going for the best possible decision *right now* given the information at hand rather than waiting for perfect information and forfeiting an opportunity to go forward toward achieving the goals.

Here's another principle:

Principle #13: Manage by end state and intent

The leaders in the Marines do not want to engage in what we commonly call micro-management (and which in some cases in my experience descends even

* The Official Ayers Rating Scale goes from 1-10. Anything lower than 6 is thrown out. This produces a net scale from 6-10.

to *nano*-management!) Instead they focus on two things. Freedman writes that the commanders endeavor to make clear “first, how they would like the situation to end up, what the Marines refer to as ‘the end state’; and second, the broader goals that they would like to achieve through the entire unit’s actions, information that Marines call ‘the commander’s intent.’” How refreshing it would be to work for someone who trusted you and had justifiable confidence in your ability to get the job done within the context of a clear mission!

Does the Marine Corps therefore encourage blind adherence by mindless drones? Hardly. Freedman writes, “It’s probably not surprising to hear that a Marine who refuses to obey a clear and legitimate order can face severe disciplinary action. What may be surprising is the fact that the officer who gave the order may find his or her own career stopped short over that same incident – even if the order was perfectly well advised. That’s because the Marines have emphasized a simple, Darwinian test as part of determining an officers’ suitability for promotion: Is he or she someone who inspires people to follow?” In a civilian world where many employees are essentially volunteers (who can leave for another job at any time, and probably get a pay increase for doing just that), this is a critical test: how can you call yourself a leader if no one will follow you?

What about building those leaders who can inspire that sort of loyalty? How do you identify them and recruit them? The Marines believe that the process of selecting and grooming the next generation of leaders is a critical function. Indeed working in a recruiting role or serving as an instructor in one of their schools is a key stepping stone on the way to the senior ranks. It’s not something sloughed off onto merely average people, but a reward that offers the clearest chance to help create the future of the Corps.

Entry into the Corps for commissioned officers is based on The Basic School, where the development of skills is accomplished in situations which are as nearly real as they can create. Leadership development is not however, reserved for commissioned officers. Freedman points out that most of the leadership development work is done at the lowest level of leadership – the enlisted (or non-commissioned) officer, the corporal who leads a fire team. This is about building leadership from the ground up, in order that even the smallest units become proving grounds with the intended result that in complex and changing circumstances the leaders even at that level are already seasoned performers.

Is there a lesson for the business world in here? After all, the people at GE or Eli Lilly or Ford will not be asked to assist in the evacuation of the staff of a foreign embassy or restore normalcy to the streets of a city at the end of a civil war or retrieve a downed pilot. But certainly ideas such as developing leadership ability at the lowest levels of the hierarchy or basing leadership on a solid set of central values or decentralizing control while centralizing command ... these seem just as applicable in the business world.

Reviewed by
Michael Ayers