

Business is war: Learn to think like a general

Countless books advise serious career advancers to think like a CEO. But that leaves a crucial question unanswered: "How do CEOs really think?"

Every leader is unique, yet there's a remarkable similarity between how corporate chieftains and top generals think. Senior executives may not even realize it, but they frequently adopt war principles to lead their companies into a more profitable future.

At first glance, it may seem strange to compare the gritty, bloody tragedy of war to the relative safety of business or political contests, but there are many similarities between how military, corporate and political leaders operate. Some examples:

- **They all focus on the big picture.** The very nature of war requires the general to embrace the entire sweep of events.

For example, a Marine Corps officer managing an amphibious assault must consider the use of sea power, jet fighters and bombers, tanks, helicopters, ground troops, artillery, paratroops and dozens of other instruments of force.

Same goes for the fast-charging manager, who must think in broad terms to weigh the cost and benefit of decisions, the interplay between one division's strategy and another unit's efforts, the ever-changing actions of employees, contractors and customers, and the larger forces that shape the marketplace, such as technological advances and Federal Reserve policy.

- **They also must rely on teams.** The traditional rigidity of military hierarchies does not negate the importance of teamwork among soldiers.

Individuals collaborate in countless ways to prepare for war, execute their battle plans successfully and sacrifice personal glory for the greater good of the unit. Similarly, employees at all levels are expected to function in groups. Team-building seminars emphasize the need for sharing information, unclogging communication channels and finding ways to build on one another's ideas to produce better results.

In this age of employee empowerment, distributing authority among teams is one of the most popular ways for CEOs to motivate their workers and foster collaboration.

- **Effective leaders rely on trust.** A military commander must establish trust; otherwise, his troops might hesitate to follow orders in the heat of battle.

A manager who fails to earn his employees' trust faces a similar danger. Talented individuals may quit or resort to "malicious compliance" when they have reason to suspect the words, motives and actions of their boss.