

The Military Needs More Disruptive Thinkers

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Editor's Note: Ben's essay has sparked a great deal of discussion and debate. I plan to continue this debate in a series of essays from our contributors. I've attempted to frame the problem in this essay <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/disruptive-thinkers-defining-the-problem>> and you will be able to find all the "disruptive thinker" essays at this page as they are published <<http://smallwarsjournal.com/topics/disruptive%20thinkers>> .

For my generation, there is one profession that captures our imagination more than any other: Entrepreneur. This is especially true of those leaving the military and going to business school. It would seem logical for the military to find ways to blend the best of entrepreneurial and combat cultures in ventures like a joint Harvard Business School/Naval War College degree program.

Yet, in reality, the very word entrepreneur is met with blank stares by career servicemembers- and in some cases, viewed as an anathema. This is primarily because entrepreneurs see a need and without consulting higher authority, simply go ahead and try to solve it. Their very nature inclines them to disrupt the status quo. And of course, the one thing a vertically integrated organization like the military hates most is change. Or at least, change that wasn't decreed from on high.

Part of this stems from an antiquated, 1950s career model <http://usacac.army.mil/CAC2/MilitaryReview/Archives/English/MilitaryReview_20120229_art007.pdf> . A large bureaucracy thrives best when it can promote the average individual in a one-size fits all ascension program. This, however, necessitates sloughing off the highly talented instead of promoting them in accordance with their ability. For example, a younger, Marine reservist friend of mine can be a Vice President of Goldman Sachs, overseeing their Hong Kong branch by the age of 31, but would barely be commanding a Marine rifle company at the same point.

To be frank, and to use the words of Joshua Cooper Ramo <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Joshua_Cooper_Ramo> , "we've left our future largely in the hands of people whose single greatest characteristic is that they are bewildered by the present <<http://www.amazon.com/The-Age-Unthinkable-Constantly-Surprises/dp/0316118087>> ." This is mostly because our senior leadership grew up in a time when the internet was still a twinkle in DARPA's eye. The only flag officer I know of that consistently and effectively uses social media is Admiral James Stavridis <<https://twitter.com/#!/stavridisj>> . He also created cells of innovation among his subordinates, and implemented their suggestions rather frequently.

The future lies with those individuals who can see connections across a myriad of professions and intellectual pursuits. The mind that can see that a phone and entertainment device can be intertwined into something like, say, an iPhone <http://www.wired.com/gadgets/wireless/magazine/16-02/ff_iphone?currentPage=all> . Or, an intellect that recognizes how secondary and tertiary networks are often more valuable than first-order relationships <<http://blog.ted.com/2012/02/29/be-the-entrepreneur-of-your-own-life-reid-hoffman-at-ted2012/>> , thus creating something like LinkedIn. Or the strategist who understands that crowdsourced, horizontally

structured non-state actors pose a greater threat to our security <<http://www.amazon.com/The-New-Jackals-Yousef-Terrorism/dp/1555534074>> than Nation states.

A great part of this lies in how we educate our military members. We educate them in the art of war, but do so with a focus on mere tactics. We educate them when they are well past the age of agile and innovative thought. We preach adaptability, flexibility and maneuver warfare, but only do so in relation to the movement of military kit.

The average age of someone attending Harvard Business School is 27 years old. Most war colleges require at least a rank of O-4, and in some cases, O-5. By this point, most students are in their mid-30s. Creative impulses are largely repressed, and most go to get their check-in-the-block degree with no real intellectual rigor. It's considered a leisurely billet with plenty of time off where little studying need be done.

Harvard Business School compiles the best society has to offer - from politics, to non-profits, to military, to tech, to entertainment and athletics. They get a myriad of viewpoints, classmates who have traveled the world in entirely different capacities, and the synergistic effect of diverse intellects. They push them hard, keep them busy, and encourage them to change the world.

The Naval War College has no civilians enrolled. Their diversity comes from other services, whose only difference in viewpoint comes from navigating a slightly different bureaucracy. Far from sending students there in their mid-20s who have just returned from the dynamic task of rebuilding a wartorn Afghan village, we wait until they've proven their mettle in the bureaucratic morass of a staff job.

There is a reason the likes of HBS and Stanford produce people who create multi-billion dollar, world changing organizations and our War Colleges don't. You can't innovate and have a long term impact if you are only surrounded by like-minded people. You must challenge closely held assumptions daily if you want to have an impact. This, again, is anathema to a career military person.

Furthermore, our war colleges teach doctrinaire procedures, not critical, creative thinking. They focus primarily on the tactical employment of forces rather than the strategic context those tactics play out in. Where are the courses on trends in physics like chaos theory? Behavioral economics and psychology? Investment strategy? Creating and adapting a dynamic balance sheet? True strategic leaders are generalists who can pull from a variety of interests, not hedgehogs who can only do one thing well.

The reason John Boyd was so successful was because he understood the world of thermodynamic physics and saw a connection with fighter aviation that his peers never could <<http://www.ausairpower.net/JRB/boydaerialattack.pdf>> . Steve Jobs built elegant and useful technology because he explored calligraphy in college <<http://hbr.org/2012/04/the-real-leadership-lessons-of-steve-jobs/ar/1>> . It was the fact that they investigated beyond their respective professions that gave them a truly brilliant edge.

At the O-6 level and below, the military has voluntarily removed itself from heavy interaction with civilians. We've sent more of our graduate students to places like the Naval Post Graduate School instead of MIT in what is a very short term cost

saving measure. We limit their creative potential to defined projects, instead of open-ended interaction with brilliant civilians in an unfamiliar environment.

Instead, the DoD should be partnering with our nation's preeminent institutions and create joint degree programs to promote cross-pollinating interaction. HBS and the Naval War College would be perfect partners. You give aspiring business leaders a view into strategic thought, and future strategists a glimpse of how an entrepreneurial culture is transforming our culture. And this doesn't even begin to address what happens after ad hoc alliances are formed between young, energetic minds of various professions.

As a result of the frustratingly single-minded education the military offers, a fellow officer and I started an organization designed to foster what we call a "disruptive mindset." Our goal was to bring together intellectually curious officers with successful civilian innovators, get them to chat, and see what happened. We did this around a monthly syllabus designed to foster creative thought and new avenues of discovery. We call it Disruptive Thinkers <<http://disruptivethinkers.blogspot.com>> , and it has started to change the shape of San Diego.

We've seen entrepreneurs team up with a Destroyer skipper to implement a new type of pump technology. We've had teachers use our wide-ranging syllabus with students as young as the fourth grade. We've helped develop the business plan for a disaster relief social entrepreneurial project. And we've even gotten four of our junior officer Disruptive Thinkers to sit on a panel at a recent USNI/AFCEA conference <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgLTi2kh7M&feature=topics>> and proclaim the gospel of innovation in strategic situations.

It's military education without anything to do directly with the military. We've done topics on the future of energy, crowdsourcing, leadership, challenging established political institutions, and biomimicry. We've linked up venture capitalists and cryogeneticists with F/A-18 pilots and Surface Warfare junior officers. We've seen teachers integrate our syllabi into their fourth grade classrooms. Mostly, we've seen an excitement around ideas and a willingness to push innovation in the military that was not previously seen in our monolithic culture.

The most notable benefit is that our military peers are starting to see connections and relationships between seemingly mutually exclusive fields. They see the potential for new avenues of procurement, new ways of approaching battlefield problems, and most importantly, new ways of integrating the trends that are affecting every part of our world into their professional culture.

Orson Scott Card <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Orson_Scott_Card> noted that "every officer learns how to function within the system that promoted him. <http://www.amazon.com/Ender-Exile-Orson-Scott-Card/dp/B002KQ6FAQ/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1333512064&sr=1-1> " So we get officers who think small, don't understand the importance of broad understanding, and miss the trends that are shaping our world. We get procurement officials who buy \$150 million strike fighters when the future may be in autonomous, cheap, swarming drones <<http://globalguerrillas.typepad.com/globalguerrillas/2012/03/drones-and-operational-maneuverability.html>> .

It's time we get leadership that understands the present. This necessarily requires understanding the context of our world. That context is not merely in artillery shells and Tomahawk missiles, but rather crowdfunding, horizontal management, social media and broad interaction with people not like us. Adaptable strategy requires the

ability to consider everything, not merely one thing. The beginning of such thought is a Disruptive Mind.

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