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Running Things

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Despite the differences between the military and industry, the practice of leadership and management in the two arenas is not so dissimilar as one might think. Cut to the bone, it's a matter of running things. That is what leaders and managers do, whether in uniform or mufti. They run things, do things, get things done. They take finite resources, organize them, and direct their application toward finite goals, tasks, aims, and objectives, always cognizant of what those goals are, always mindful of the resources at hand and what must be achieved.

It is not my purpose here to tell you how to run things; each of you will decide that on your own. That you are reading this journal testifies to your experience in the subject of leadership, which has doubtless helped you to form your own ideas about how to run things. So I will try not to bother you with things you already know. My purpose is to distill for you some observations from 44 years of running things and watching other people run things, in the hope that the product will be of some value.

One of the most elemental complications in running things is *change*. Change is constant, unceasing, and ever-accelerating. True, this has always been the case, but today the pace of change is much more rapid and we have to swallow it in much greater doses than ever before. Change is inherently confusing, upsetting; change is dysfunctional. It is imperative that leaders or managers accommodate to change while pursuing goals which don't change very much. And that brings us to an important second point: despite the pace and magnitude of change, some things don't change very much at all. In fact, if we are to be successful, our core objectives likely should not change at all; what changes is the variety of ways in which we seek to achieve those relatively static goals. With change swirling all about us, affecting much of what we do, consistency and stability are essential qualities of sound leadership and management.

Running things involves four fundamental factors that determine what is done and how it gets done:

- *Vision*. At the beginning must be some *vision* of what is being attempted. What are we trying to accomplish? Vision varies with perspective. Your vision if you are taking command of a brigade won't be the same as it will if you're about to take over as chief operating officer of a division or a company in industry, but presumably you will set goals in either case. What do you want to get done on your watch? Your answer to that question is what I call *vision*. Vision is expressed largely in terms of what the leader senses, what his intuition tells him, as opposed to some more rational process. Please understand, though, that what is required in this sense is informed intuition, not just some seat-of-the-pants guesswork. To be useful, vision must be believable; it must be something that those charged with achieving it can understand and believe to be a good, achievable idea, one they can eventually embrace as their own. In fact, one of the keys to getting anything done is to convince a lot of people that what is being attempted is a good idea; to really move things it is necessary also to convince them it was their idea in the first place. If you can do that, you can accomplish almost anything!

- *Strategy*. Next, you need a description of how the vision is to be achieved. How do we get from where we are to where we want to be? The answer is our game-plan—our *strategy*.

- *Operations*. Specific tasks must be accomplished to achieve the strategy. The strategy becomes a series of mission statements with accompanying tasks. These tasks describe the *operations* to be undertaken in order to get things done. In the business world, this includes how the company is to be organized. What market segments are to be embraced by what organizational divisions and in what segments of the market will each business entity operate, grow, and yield profit? In the military, campaign plans and their ensuing operational-level implementation determine how things get done at the operational level of warfare.

- *Tactics*. Finally, there is the set of business practices one employs to get things done. In the military these are called *tactics*, and so they might be called in industry. They involve the lower-level schemes which win the bid, the program; which take the hill, the objective; which mark success for the lowest levels of the organization as that success has been spelled-out in operations plans and orders, in budget plans and instructions.

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Long years ago, a new commander took charge of a unit in which I commanded a subordinate element. One of his first acts was to summon me to issue instructions. What he said went something like this: "I want you to understand why I am here. I am here because it is necessary for me to command this unit for a year—no more, no less—in order to get to be a general. I am going to be a general. Now, your outfit has a tendency to do things differently, to attract attention. I don't like that. For the year I am in command, I don't want anything to happen. I don't just mean anything bad—I mean anything that will call the attention of higher headquarters to us as being different from anyone else. We are just going to go along. That's my vision [his word] for the next year. Don't rock my boat. Do you understand?"

Of course, I affirmed that yes, I understood. Then I went back to my unit to report on our instructions. First, I relayed what the new commander had said to me. Then, after some discussion, we decided what we would do: We *would* rock the boat, and hard, but in such a way that our boss couldn't accuse us of screwing up his vision. We went right along as he had said, but with the firm determination to be the best, to win everything in sight. The boat was constantly rocking, but our commander really couldn't say much to stop us—*his* boss was forever congratulating him on how well we were all doing under his enlightened leadership! My commander never spoke with me again about this, but I'm sure that by his standards he had a very miserable year.

In another setting, at another time, a new chief executive officer took over a fairly large company with a diversified portfolio of businesses. In setting out his vision for his business units, the CEO issued the pronouncement that his vision for one unit was that it become, in five years, number three in the market segment in which it was involved. When asked how he arrived at the number three, he replied that "intuitively it seemed about right." At the time, the business unit in question was number 29 in an industry which had an annual growth rate of about eight percent. In order to achieve the number three position, that business unit would have to grow at a rate six times the market growth rate and invest a sum four times the total corporate allocation for that function. The CEO's vision was clearly out of sync with reality. As a consequence, the business unit manager and his staff ignored the vision. The unit did grow, and at a rate somewhat better than the market rate, but against a totally different set of criteria from those laid down by the CEO. His vision was simply not relevant; it may have been intuitive, but it was certainly not informed.

The management texts will tell you that the chief executive officer must be involved in strategy formulation. Several studies of military leadership cite the same notion. But it is very difficult to get the boss involved in the vision or strategy part of the operation. It is perhaps more

difficult in the business world, where the all-pervasive concentration on profit and the chief executive's inability to unharness himself from budget details distract his attention visibly, sometimes completely, and perhaps even fortuitously, from what in reality should be his fundamental role.

Military estimates call for a commander's guidance; military orders call for a commander's concept of the operation. Yet how many times have you ever seen a commander sit down to think and write about those things himself? He's too busy to think—the staff keeps him that way. Besides, he is almost always more comfortable with the nits and details than with the vision and strategy. The latter require that a commander think creatively; the former, only that he have an accountant's grasp of what's going on, and usually he's far more comfortable in that role.

In the automobile industry, Ford lost its market share lead to General Motors in the 1920s largely because of Henry Ford's unwillingness to give up the Model T and build the cars which technology was making possible and which customer demands were making necessary. Ford's dominant position in the auto industry was lost. While his vision of providing the car for the common folk may have been a correct one, Henry Ford was unable to tolerate the changing demands of the common folk. Chevrolet and GM overtook him, and it was not until 1986, 62 years later, that his successors were able to push his company's performance past that of General Motors.

The Ford Motor Company had a problem with its vision—its strategy—even into the recent past. One way to decide on a strategy is to watch carefully what the competition does and, if they're successful, then jump in and carve out your own market share before the competition's share grows too large. This was essentially the strategy followed by Ford in the 1970s. With the first oil crisis came the need to produce smaller, more fuel-efficient cars for the US market. GM moved off in this direction. The GM strategy was to seize the dominant share of that market. Ford's strategy was to see how well GM did, then jump in. The belated jump, ill-timed according to some, did not capture a sufficient market share, and only after huge capital investment and complete redesign has Ford begun to recoup the losses suffered by the wait-and-see strategy.

But let's face it: not many people in charge, in the military or in industry, are intuitively or consistently good at running things. It would be difficult to say whether there is more or less ineptitude on one side than on the other. Military people certainly have had far more formal education and schooling to equip them for running things than the chief executives in industry. By and large, they seem to do better than the average industry exec, but given the differences in background, education, and training specifically directed at the art of running things, one would expect a much better than average performance from the average military leader. Why doesn't it happen?

In large measure, it seems to me, the problem devolves to the need for an individual to take the time to figure out who he is and what his role is to be at each new command. If a CEO is managing programs, and many of them can't resist the temptation, then what in the world are the division general managers and operations directors doing? If a corps commander is running battalions, then what, indeed, are the division and brigade commanders doing?

Several years ago, I succeeded to command of V Corps, my predecessor having been relieved for cause. Assumption of command was by signature in the airport lounge on a Sunday. The following Wednesday, the G3 marched into my office to announce it was time to check the readiness of the corps. We went to a special room in the headquarters, a place called the "Cutting Edge Room." There, a major and several captains and sergeants were posting readiness data off the DA Form 2715 reports onto side-lighted plexiglass boards arranged around the room. Each company in the corps had a line; columns displayed the data from the readiness reports. There were reds, yellows, and greens to show at a glance how things were going. Deadlined vehicles were indicated in red by bumper number. The corps operational readiness rate for tracked vehicles was at about fifty percent, so there were lots of red entries. When I asked, the G3 reported that I was supposed to come here, look at the red numbers, then call the company commanders to see what they were doing about the deadlined vehicles, by bumper number. What, I asked, were the division, brigade, and battalion commanders doing? They were, I was told, waiting for the company commanders to call in reports of their conversation with the corps commander. Now, you'll recall that the corps commander is not in that reporting chain. Having listened and observed, I left instructions to get rid of the whole thing. I went to my office, called the division commanders, and explained that henceforth materiel readiness and its reporting system were in their hands, that I expected an operational readiness rate of 95 percent or better, and that if they had problems attaining and sustaining that rate they were to call me. The OR rate began a slow but perceptible climb. It reached 95 percent in a few months, and stayed at that level or better. Now and then I'd check to see that the numbers were real, that they were not just cobbled-up to meet my standards. Satisfied that the reporting was honest and fairly accurate, I concluded that the problem had been solved.

Another important thing to remember—after answering the question of the boss's role at each level of responsibility—is that at every level—strategic, operational, or tactical—everything that is done depends on people. So, success at running things is a function of getting people to do what is necessary to accomplish the vision and implement the strategy. Concurrently, we must realize that there are a whole lot of average people out there trying to get things done, and that the challenge of command, or of

being the chief executive, is to get great things done using those average people to execute the operational- and tactical-level schemes that implement the strategy, the vision.

An example. In V Corps, when I was its commander, there were 72 battalion-sized units. Twenty-six were maneuver battalions or squadrons; nearly 30 more were fire support units; the remainder were support battalions of various types. We spent the whole of our 16 months together doing two things. First, we went to the General Defense Positions, where the division and brigade commanders and I listened to each battalion-level commander tell how he intended to fight the battle, or provide the support, from his positions, with the resources he had been assigned. Then, we went to each battalion in turn and heard the battalion commander and his command sergeant major explain how they intended to train their battalion to fight the battle, or provide the support, we had just previewed on the ground. On a little score sheet, I noted that of the 72 battalions, about eight or nine of the commanders were so good at what they were doing that it probably was not necessary for us to go through the routine I just described. Another 15 were so poor at what they were doing that the commanders clearly should never have been posted to command. The rest were in the middle. In other words, 12 percent or so were okay, about 21 percent were unsatisfactory, and two-thirds were in the middle. The real challenge of command or management is this: to somehow bring the level of performance of the middle two-thirds up to something like the top 12 percent. The United States Army simply does not have enough battalions to afford having 85 percent of them less than exemplary. Nor in industry can you expect to run a company at above-market growth rates unless something is done to improve the proposals, performance on contracts, technology development, planning, and budgeting to some level well above the industry average. That is the challenge of management. There must be a willingness to replace the less-than-average performers, regardless of the system by which they were chosen. That also is the job of the management, the job of leaders; indeed, it is probably their toughest job of all.

What is it, more often than not, that's wrong with the folks who don't know how to run things? Why are the good leaders or managers and the not-so-good the way they are? The simplest explanation I know comes from our attempts to figure out how to fight outnumbered below the nuclear threshold and win. What became clear was the idea that regardless of the force ratios extant at the beginning, and regardless of who attacked whom, the winning side was the side which seized the initiative and held it to the end. The lesson for leaders is clear and unequivocal: to win it is necessary to seize the initiative; and the person running things is responsible for taking the initiative.

Taking the initiative is not easy. First, it requires some thought, and we've already noted the problems of thinking about things at the managerial level. Second, it requires the ability to describe one's vision in terms that cause the people who must realize that vision to say, "That's a damned good idea." Third, it requires the ability to lay down strategies for achieving the vision in terms that those people embrace, even to the extent that they come to believe they invented the strategies themselves. This takes time, a certain craft, and a well-developed skill in communicating with people. But it is essential. Finally, taking the initiative means doing something. Doing something means taking risk. He who would get out in front and lead things—take the initiative—does so at some risk to himself. It is always much easier to let the other guy go first and test the market, test the water, then jump in if it seems okay. It is always safer from the standpoint of making general to command an organization that just "goes along."

As an illustration of initiative in the vision-strategy-operations-tactics context, consider for a moment the military concept called AirLand Battle. Its basic vision is the notion that it is necessary for us to be able to fight outnumbered and win, below the nuclear threshold, at the operational level of war. The basic strategy is to so control and moderate the force ratios at the FLOT (forward line of own troops) that it is possible to seize the initiative by maneuvering forces to defeat the enemy. To do that, it is necessary to attack enemy follow-on forces at the same time the FLOT battle begins, and to do so in such a way that the FLOT battle is manageable and opportunities are created for forces to maneuver.

That fairly straightforward set of ideas forms the basis for the constellation of doctrine, organization, equipment, and training which the Army and the Air Force have been developing for several years.

Broadening this concept to embrace the national level, there seems to me to be an urgent need for some fundamental initiatives and a baseline statement of vision-strategy-operations-tactics as the nation moves ahead to the turn of the century. The central aim of our nation is to preserve our democratic institutions, to foster their well-being, growth, and development. How that is to be done is a matter for debate. But the central point is that inherent in that goal is the issue of survival: for in order to preserve, foster, and grow, one must first survive. Survival is at the root of every corporate strategy in the industrial world. Other things will be laid on as goals, aims, and objectives, but the fundamental imperative is to stay in business. In the ever-changing global environment, our ultimate non-changing goal as a nation is survival.

Now, the problem we face in insuring achievement of that goal is that we are quite likely engaged in what will turn out to be a century or more of global conflict, for there is no objective evidence that the Soviet Union will cease to be a Leninist state, run by a collective tsardom, in which the

secret police enforce the will of the central authority. In my opinion, anybody who holds that Gorbachev is a political moderate and modernizer is just not thinking clearly. Gorbachev's Russia is a slightly modern version of the Russia of Nicholas the First. A Sovietologist friend once said to me that the frightening thing about studying the Soviet Union is just that—nothing changes. The basic system has remained in place, perhaps a little more grotesque under Stalin, a little less grotesque under someone else, but it is still the same system. If that is true, we must find the initiatives to contain the Soviet empire in order to preserve peace. If we are to do that, our national goals must not simply cope with the Soviets, they must accelerate our rate of change as a society so that we pull away from the Soviet system, leaving it, in effect, a modern-day Ottoman Empire. Remember the Ottoman Empire: in 1600, it was yet a great threat to Europe; by 1800, it was irrelevant; and by 1900, it was routinely described as the sick man of Europe. It could not adapt, could not make the cultural and economic changes necessary to cope with the changing world. Its leadership could not accommodate change.

Peace is a noble goal, one to be sought after, but it is not the ultimate goal. The ultimate goal is survival in order that preserving, growing, fostering, and developing can take place uninhibited. Those who would have peace would be well advised to gird for conflict—political, economic, social, and perhaps even military—over the long term.

Cast in that framework, then, our national challenge is not at all unlike the challenge facing every company in the corporate world. The difference is, of course, that the nation must engage in a global competition over the next two or three generations to decide if the inhabitants of this planet are to be free or slave. If we lose that competition, the corporate world will have nothing to worry about, for it will not survive either. So the challenges inherent to running things extend to all levels of endeavor, from government to small business, from civilian to military.

In industry, success is built very much on common ingredients—the dedication and motivation of the workers, the quality of the leadership, and the excellence of the training provided to the working team. If the standards are high, the dedication to excellence ever present, the team working in concert, then better-than-average companies led by managers seeking always to take the initiative can go to battle in the bidding environment, fully confident of winning, growing, and prospering.

The military is not so different, after all. Wars are won by the courage of soldiers, the quality of leadership they are provided, and the excellence of the training the soldiers, leaders, and units have been through before the battle. If the training has been tough, demanding, unrelenting, then better-than-average units, led by officers seeking ever to take the initiative, are prepared to go to battle; and that's what it takes to win.