

leadership book series

“Commanding Excellence”

BY GARY MORTON

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This month we are reviewing a book that ties in nicely with COL (R) John O'Brien's last article about the volume titled, “Essentialism.” In the book “Commanding Excellence,” Gary Morton gives two great examples of how applying the lessons of “driven focus” in both the military and the civilian world lead to outstanding success. Gary was a member of 4-68 Cavalry from Ft. Carson and the Stryker Medical Company and describes the power of executive leadership in leading organizations to amazing success. 4-68 was able to beat the OPFOR (Opposition Forces) in 9 of 9 battles at the National Training Center (NTC) at Fort Irwin California and Stryker achieved 20% quarterly growth for over 20 years in a row. Neither of these events happen by chance; it takes aggressive and prescient visualization by the strategic leaders to drive the organization to the goal.

As John described in last quarter's article, the key element for success is to remove the distractions of day to day happenings and focus on what is absolutely essential. Much like how Jim Collins describes in the book “Good to Great,” successful organizations focus on what they can be great at and what truly drives the company. We all have myriad distractions in our lives (professional and personal); the critical aspect is minimizing those interruptions so we can focus our energy on what really matters. To do that, one must intentionally ignore distractions that often limit productivity and growth. What really matters? What must happen to get us from where we are now to where we want to be? As we all know, the one thing we all need more of is the one thing that is constant for all of us: time. No matter how you slice it, we only have 24 hours each day. For an organization to win, leaders must clearly define what matters most and how to achieve those goals. Implied in setting

decisive targets is the requirement for leaders to also identify what things are less important and not required. Without this specificity, subordinates will be pulled away from the main goal by distracting competition for their time.

As Gary describes in the book, his battalion commander (LTC Fred Dibella) stated his leadership goal upfront: to win all 9 battles at NTC. This was a big, hairy, audacious goal which was met with skepticism and suspicion by the members of his battalion. However, through his direct leadership and prioritization of resources, he galvanized the members of the unit to achieve the end state. Needless energy was minimized and “pet projects” were eliminated. The unit created a playbook to synchronize operational aspects that energized the unit's leadership and personnel. Inherent to their success was the ability of junior leaders to contribute to creating new strategies to win. The battalion simplified radio communications and their reactive maneuvers to enemy attacks to be more lethal and win those battles. It didn't matter who came up with the solution; it was all about achieving the specific goal of beating the OPFOR at NTC every time.

One of the keys to the unit's success was continually learning from themselves and sharing successes and failures. The leadership followed these five principles:

- 1) Give people ownership of their results
- 2) Make the measurement of success simple and visible
- 3) Encourage everyone to learn from one another
- 4) Expect open and honest communication
- 5) Watch great things happen

At Stryker, the new CEO, John Brown, began his leadership tenure by challenging the organization to achieve 20% growth every quarter. He decentralized decision

making to each division to allow them to pursue strategies that would increase market share and profitability. Under his leadership, the executive leadership team was incredibly small (about 10 people); this served as a signal to the rest of the organization that the energy and focus was with those doing the real work. Executive leadership existed to make strategic allocations and probe the benefit of new ideas, but not to hinder growth and success. When new challenges emerged in their highly competitive market, the division leadership was empowered to innovate, resource, and find solutions...with no relief from the overall goal of 20% quarterly growth. Interviewed in 2009, Brown remarked “From the goal comes strategy.” There is no doubt that current strategies within all the service's medical departments are focused on Readiness. Unfortunately, I believe there are still questions of what Readiness truly means and that somewhat appearing disconnects between current and emerging strategies is partly due to competing definitions of Readiness.

In all of worlds, whether you are the commander of the hospital or full time clinical or teaching staff, the principles of “Essentialism” and the knowledge gained from the two success stories in “Commanding Excellence” are applicable every day. How does your organization define winning and what are you doing to remove distractions from attaining that goal? As Morton writes near the end of the book, these two leaders, and the spheres in which they led, were incredibly different; however, the similarities that led to success were clarity, obsession, and unleashing of ingenuity. Dramatic changes are occurring with the Military Health System and the civilian health care system. With all the competing demands, metrics, and uncertainty, there is no more important time than now to have clear definitions of success and to maximize the use of our teams to win.