

L200 Essay – Crucible Experience

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My crucible experience is leaving the U.S. Army and beginning a new job in the civilian sector leading an organization filled with employees who had been there for years, were suspicious and afraid of an ill-conceived notion of the military, did not like change, and did not adhere to many of the standard traits instilled in a professional Soldier. This leadership challenge tested my abilities at every turn and taught me a great deal about influencing people at all levels, motivating subordinates and peers that had no goal other than to collect a pay check and not get fired, and challenge paradigms entrenched in the organizations psyche for years.

In October 1998, I ended my first career as an Army Signal Officer at Fort Hood, Texas, and began a new career in Southern California, hired to manage an international business component for a Fortune 500 company. I was literally terrified, because all I knew since my second year in college was the military way of life, and this was something completely different. I was responsible for managing the corporations Irrigation Controller Repair business, servicing primarily high-end golf courses through a worldwide network of distributors. I was one of three mid-level managers that reported to the After Market Services Director, who in turn reported to the Irrigation Division CEO. I managed approximately 20 full time personnel, 10 temporary hires, and worked in our own building on the company's campus. My mission when I was hired was to grow the business financially, increase repair productivity and efficiency, and cut down costs where able. I was directed to completely revamp our business model and be prepared to brief it to all of our distributors at an international convention in four months. If I was terrified going in, I was mortified shortly after arriving. Added to the immediate pressures to perform placed on me by my boss, I was confronted within the first few weeks with peers who did not appreciate my "hard charging" performance and my annoying habit of showing up to meetings early and prepared, and by employees who were literally avoiding me, waiting for me to explode into a drill-sergeant like rage, throwing trash cans, swearing profusely, and firing everyone I came into contact with (just like they had seen in the movies).

This situation caused me to completely re-examine my mental models of how an organization runs. My mental model of a Fortune 500 company was of a streamlined, tight knit, highly motivated organization that understood the importance of teamwork and communications both internally with employees and externally to the customer. Obviously you must have these things to be in the top 500 earning companies in America; in truth, motivation across the organization was weak, no one communicated well internally because everyone believed the other guy would steal their ideas, or if they spoke up they ran the risk of looking bad or worse accumulating additional work. The business I was hired to manage was a microcosm of all these issues, and was a tremendous leadership test and learning environment. The greatest thing I had going for me was my boss, an outstanding enabler who saw a great deal more ability in me than I saw myself and gave me great leeway to implement changes and conduct operations my way, while mentoring me and guiding me without fear of reprisal if I made a mistake. His leadership actually broke a paradigm I had developed during my military career that military leaders were generally superior to civilian leaders because they better understood what it took to motivate and support subordinates. He remains one of the best bosses I've had and a great leadership mentor.

I had to use influence in every aspect of the word in order to achieve what was required. FM 6-22, page 1-2, defines leadership as "the process of influencing people by providing purpose, direction, and motivation while operating to accomplish the mission and improving the organization." Providing direction to my employees was the least difficult, and today remains the least difficult part of influencing for me. I was able to develop a common sense business plan that would do all the things my boss was asking of me, but additionally it enhanced and simplified the processes for our employees and that made everyone happy. Being able to come up with a good direction that made sense to everyone and provided benefits to those involved was the catalyst for establishing a common purpose and the motivation to work together as a team and as individuals.

Proving competency is the critical first step – it opens all the other doors, a great lesson that I had learned in the military and was really driven home through this crucible experience. Clearly I wasn't the most competent business leader – I had just begun, and I still had a tremendous amount to learn, but I was able to establish my competence as a leader by providing a clear picture of where we needed to go, why we needed to go there, and how we were going to do it. While developing that direction, I took input from all directions, something my employees had not experienced in the past, thus beginning the buy-in process and enhancing their motivation to accept the changes that were coming with less apprehension and a sense of ownership in the future of the business they had been working in for years.

Another valuable lesson from this experience is that it can be beneficial and even a fun aspect of leadership to break paradigms that exist in organizations that resist change and resent new ideas that the “old guard” failed to identify. As an organizational leader, I know I must encourage fresh ideas by identifying those with vision and buffering them from those who are less flexible and will fight anything that might rock the boat. I lived this experience while with this company, constantly dealing with attempts to undermine my progress and squash initiative – all things that would likely have been accomplished had I not had the outstanding leadership I spoke of earlier. My boss provided me a buffer from the nay-sayer's; he always knew what I was doing and why because we had a great open line of communications (another critical piece to the leadership puzzle), and he was ready and willing to support me because he understood where we needed to go and my plan to get us there. Remembering this now is fascinating, as undoubtedly that experience has heavily influenced my leadership style coming back into the Army as I did in 2002. Find the good ones and encourage them to break paradigms, support them and develop an environment where challenging the norms is not a punishable offense, and eventually sway even the greatest resistance to change for the better in ways that will benefit the organization and its personnel.

The crucible experience of departing the Army and joining corporate America provided me with a rucksack full of leadership lessons that I have been able to apply to my re-established career as an Army officer, and provided me great insight into some of the challenges I will face again as an organizational level leader. I have the tools and experience to be a competent and influential leader at the organizational level; successful application of those tools and experience will require constant attention and reflection as I proceed, persistently attempting to shape future leaders and organizations.