
Military perspectives of organizations

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Introduction

In the study of organizations, metaphors have often proved useful for gaining original insights (Alvesson, 1993; Hunt and Menon, 1995; Tsoukas, 1991). As perhaps the oldest and most popular organizational metaphor, the military perspective has left an indelible mark on the structure and function of business practice and theory. As a result, the parallels which can easily be observed between business and military operations are numerous and persistent. While contemporary business practice and thought have evolved away from their heritage of traditional military design, however, organizational militarism, or the "exaltation of military virtues and ideals" (*Webster's*, 1980), has experienced an impressive renaissance.

Although Asian businessmen have traditionally studied classic works on military strategy in order to gain competitive insights, this practice is now gaining popularity among US and European managers. As a result, books on military strategy regularly acquire status as "bestsellers", and are often found on lists of required reading in the classes of top business schools.

The reasons for the managerial class' recent infatuation with organizational militarism are potentially ambiguous, however. Perhaps it is because of the fact that the military metaphor romanticizes business as a heroic endeavour which unfolds on a landscape of valiant and desperate combat, a setting in which a unique set of moral principles and values can be easily justified.

While analytic or descriptive studies have occasionally employed the military metaphor in order to draw parallels between military and corporate organization, most of the recent promoters of corporate militarism assume a predominantly normative stance. That is, popular writers use the military metaphor in order to advocate explicitly the adoption of either battlefield strategies and tactics or the personality attributes of noted military leaders. The purpose of this paper is to examine these recommendations in order to gain a better understanding of the reasons for their popularity and their potential effects on organizational culture.

Alternative applications of the military metaphor

In general, books and articles which assume a position of organizational militarism approach the metaphor from either of two primary perspectives. The first of these perspectives employs a predominantly strategic or external focus, and is used by those attempting to draw parallels between warfare and business strategies. Works employing this strategic perspective can be further

broken down into general translations of classic military strategy treatises (Clausewitz, 1976; Griffith, 1971; Musashi, 1974; Sawyer, 1994; United States Marine Corps, 1994) and texts or articles which attempt to simplify and apply the basic propositions of these classic works to modern organizational theory and strategy (Chen, 1994; Hunt and Menon, 1995; Kotler and Singh, 1981; Michaelson, 1987; Ries and Trout, 1986).

A second but more recently popular utilization of the military metaphor in the study of business, however, attempts to make direct or oblique comparisons between the internal or organizational characteristics of corporate and military organization. This focus presumes to yield insights into either structural (e.g. Jay, 1994), or more commonly, leadership (e.g. Cohen, 1990; Murphy and Snell, 1993; Roberts, 1987) attributes within corporations. Typically, these books and articles purport to analyse the leadership techniques and characteristics of romanticized generals and warriors, in an attempt to demonstrate how these characteristics can be mastered by the reader. The results are popularized resurrections of the “leadership” or “trait” school of organizational theory, combined with the inspirational messages of “self-help” paperbacks.

The manager as general

While other management fads have generally rendered plausible benefits or potential solutions for corporations and their constituents, organizational militarism’s appeal is less explicit. Although books employing this device are often written at levels which are only slightly removed from silly, these banalities have detracted little from (or, perhaps contributed to) their phenomenal popularity. The major reason for this popularity, however, can ultimately be identified as the transcendental promise embraced within these books. Simply stated, these books offer the opportunity for managers to self-metamorphose into leaders of potential heroic stature by studying a concise list of revealed parameters of thought and behaviour. In other words, books engaging the military metaphor affirm the simple attainability of leadership skills, and provide the corollary assurance that greatness and achievement are readily available to those discerning enough to purchase the manual and master these skills.

These promises are reinforced through vivid imagery and inspirational stories about individuals (both historic and contemporary) who turned adversity into accomplishment. One such book, for example, entices the reader in the opening pages with observations such as: “The history of American achievement is the saga of ordinary individuals performing acts of heroic leadership, individuals who recognized and seized great challenges and turned them into extraordinary opportunities” (Murphy and Snell, 1993, p. xxiii). These authors then market the book as a tool for recognizing and seizing these challenges: “The answer lies in learning the craft of heroic leadership... a craft that a person can learn and practice like any other” (Murphy and Snell, 1993, p. xxvii).

Often, the determinants of leadership success “revealed” by the author are little more than conjecture or aphorisms which the author attempts to legitimize through association with a heroic, gallant or powerful figure. This is typically accomplished by creating an illusion in which the author’s words are fictitiously attributed to the hero. Murphy and Snell (1993), for example, offer the 13 secrets of “heroic leadership” loosely imputed to, or revealed by the actions of, Chief Sitting Bull. Similarly, Roberts (1987) creates out of his own imagination a generally ludicrous account of the “leadership secrets” of Attila the Hun, including the 17 “essential qualities” of leadership.

Thus, the success imagery of a heroic leader is merely co-opted as the illusory source of an author’s questionable wisdom, much as a product is often advertised as the preference, discovery, or brainchild of a celebrity endorser who probably has no experience with the item. The precious secrets revealed in the book, of course, are thus no more responsible for the achievements of Attila, Sitting Bull, etc. than a particular brand of clothing can be cited as the explanation for Arnold Palmer’s success at golf.

As yet, of course, none of this addresses the issue of why anyone would aspire to be like Attila the Hun. Perhaps the simple reason is because he was feared, respected and always got what he wanted. A more complex reason is that he ruled an empire with unchallenged authority. From this perspective, the improbable popularity of organizational militarism may be viewed as resulting from the fact that it allows managers to transcend their day-to-day existence as simple executors of strategies, and envision themselves as all-powerful key figures in the overall success or failure of the organization. The psychological attraction of the military metaphor, then, lies in its direct appeal to the “uncrowned leader” (Cohen, 1990, p. 85) which resides in the heart and imagination of every middle-level manager frustrated by the tedious climb up the career ladder.

While venerating the wisdom and universal applicability of the insights attributed (often delusively) to Sun Tzu, Attila, Sitting Bull, etc. these books equate managers to all-knowing and all-powerful rulers, generals, chieftains and premiers, while relegating workers to the role of subjects, soldiers and peasants. The military metaphor thus spawns a unique reality where managers are heroically potent commanders and where the latent skills of lowborn employees can only be harnessed through decisive, loyalty-building leadership.

It is this fantasy which is largely responsible for the sales of many millions of books which employ organizational militarism. Since the modest totality of actual “generals” or CEOs in true corporate leadership positions significantly restricts the market potential at this level, these books’ inordinate popularity can only be explained by their tremendous appeal at the vast tiers of middle-management. By enabling the managerial and bureaucratic mediocrity to engage in a flight of fancy into the realm of leadership, these books provide businessmen a range of daydream opportunities corollary to those bestowed on bored housewives by supermarket romance novels.

This aggrandizing function is complemented and magnified through the diminishment of subordinates' contributions and abilities via a perspective which combines "Theory X" assumptions of employee doltishness with "Theory Y" assumptions of inherent loyalty and motivation. The result is the military rendition of Frederick Taylor's "high-priced" but "mentally sluggish" "Schmidt" (Taylor, 1911, p. 46) who was assumed to be incapable of independent thought and therefore commanded to let his superiors think for him. These "Theory M" (for military) employees are simple peasants or soldiers, and as Chen (1994, p. 44) reminds us in the translated words of General Qi Ji-guang, "Although soldiers are not very smart, they are most easily moved". While their abilities are innately limited, their motivation and loyalty must thus be cultivated through the craft of skillful leadership. Under these assumptions of organizational militarism, only officers and generals can be responsible for thinking and decision making, while simple soldiers or workers must be trained to obey without thinking. In this way, the military metaphor endorses (or perhaps originates) the total separation of thinking from doing in the corporate hierarchy. Further, this perspective requires that workers be viewed as both interchangeable and expendable.

The manager as lord

Some variations of the military metaphor also employ feudalistic imagery which suggests that businesses can be appropriately conceptualized as fiefdoms (e.g. Jay, 1994). Like other versions of organizational militarism, the feudalistic perspective allows a symbolic return to a condition where the leader's power is absolute and unlimited. In addition to this concept of domination, however, feudalistic militarism replaces mercenary leadership with the higher autonomy of ownership. In other words, this form of organizational militarism, with its language of "rulers" and "subjects", allows the frustrated manager/mercenary, or vassal, to project himself mentally into full membership of the land- (business-) owning class of barons or lords. In this way, simple managers can also be further seduced into internalizing the goals and mindsets of actual business owners.

Conversely, Roberts' (1987) approach is to distinguish between the powerful, disciplined warrior/leader and the lazy, cowardly, or inept "princes" who inherit their positions. This approach is probably quite appealing to frustrated middle-level managers who may wish to attribute their immobility to nepotistic reward structures.

Discipline and fear

Organizational militarism emphasizes absolute discipline and loyalty among subordinate soldiers (workers). It is the responsibility of the leader to engender levels of loyalty and obedience in his "subjects" which are unconditional. The deliberate structuring of the military/corporate hierarchy so that each soldier or employee receives orders from only one superior was specifically developed in order to complement and allow for this absolute obedience.

In the military organization, obedience and loyalty are generally created through fear. Morgan (1986), for example, identifies Frederick the Great as an ideological primogenitor of modern organizational configuration and leadership, while noting that Frederick strove to create an environment in which men were taught to fear their own officers more than the enemy. In the militaristic perspective, this fear is created by swift and unmerciful punishment for even minor disobedience.

In Roberts' (1987, p. xv) words, "[subordinate chieftain's] loyalty was assured out of fear for their lives, awe of Attila's superior logic and greed at the prospect of more bountiful booty than could be obtained by other means". This fear resulted from Attila's immediate execution of "chieftains who rebelled against him" (p. 11). Both Griffith's (1971) and Sawyer's (1994) biographies of Sun Tzu and translations of *The Art of War* contain a number of stories which eventuate in the decapitation of subordinates, often in a simple pedagogical effort to drive home the necessity of absolute obedience and loyalty. A particularly interesting story in Griffith's volume concerns a confederate of Sun Tzu by the name of Wu Ch'i, who murdered his own wife simply to prove his loyalty to the prince and further his own ambitions.

Although beheadings are considerably less frequent in contemporary business practice, the concept of an "iron rule" which fosters unfailing loyalty and respect from subordinates retains an intuitive appeal for many corporate climbers. "Good leadership doesn't seem to have much to do with participation in management... or good working conditions or superior pay. You don't have to be a 'nice guy'" (Cohen, 1990, p. 13).

From the vantage of organizational militarism, severe discipline is seen as having only positive effects. Rather than depressing the spirits of the soldiers/workers, for example, extreme discipline is typically posited as the direct cause of high levels of morale (Michaelson, 1987; Roberts, 1987). In this way, harsh discipline is euphemistically interpreted as a "reverse incentive" (Chen, 1994, p. 48). Through this tempering of harsh discipline, subordinates eventually come to refer to the leader as "the respected one" (Griffith, 1971, p. 65).

Maschismo through militarization

Although beyond the scope of this paper, a thorough critique of the military metaphor from the feminist perspective might reveal the deliberate or inadvertent masculinizing of the management discipline conveyed by this perspective. This masculinizing effect has conceivably contributed to the vast popularity of the military metaphor among male managers by appealing to the masculine ego and by perpetuating the idea that men are instinctively more suited to leadership or business strategy roles owing to their analytical or combative personalities. Virtually every popular rendition of organizational militarism employs exclusively male voices and perspectives, and often there is an appeal to the uncivilized male id. What real male could not admire a hero such as Attila, for example, who, according to Roberts (1987), ate raw meat,

intimidated all other men (whether ally or enemy) and had more than 300 wives?

The parallels between militarism, business, and athletics or sport are equally as obvious and readily embraced in the language and behaviour of male participants. The discipline, systematization, and proficiency endowed by athletic training have long been viewed as critical to the indoctrination and seasoning of future military and business leaders. In the words of General Douglas MacArthur: "On the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds, that on other fields, will bear the fruits of victory" (cited from Cohen, 1990, p. 101). Owing to the fact that women tend to have less experience in organized sports, these parallels tend to exclude women further from accepting and being accepted by their corporate peers. Finally, an interesting perspective is contributed by a book which acknowledges the effect of militaristic thought in the business world by distinguishing between two types of employees: those who think and act in the manner of "warriors" (more typically men), and those (often women) who think and act like "villagers" (Kearney and White, 1994).

The situational ethics implied by militarism

Interorganizational ethics

In the words of Clausewitz (cited in Griffith, 1971, p. v): "To introduce into the philosophy of war a principle of moderation would be an absurdity – war is an act of violence pushed to its utmost bounds". Additionally, Sun Tzu asserted that war was based predominately on deception (Chen, 1994; Griffith, 1971). Under these assumptions, it becomes difficult to establish clear ethical principles of behaviour. Warfare represents a situation in which humans clearly operate outside the bounds of any system of ethics, and organizational militarism thus tends to indulge an "anything goes" perspective of behaviour.

Popular books written in the militaristic perspective have difficulty concealing this ethical vacuum. In portraying Attila and the Huns as the ideal human prototypes for effective leadership, for example, Roberts (1987, p. 30) imagines that "they rejected secular or religious doctrines and practices that made man subordinate to abstract concepts of a philosophical, political, or social nature". Clearly, the implication is that effective leaders can never allow ethical or social complexities to encumber their pursuit of personal conquest. This "win at any cost" attitude thus necessarily and conveniently voids any pre-existing ethical principles.

Intraorganizational ethics

From the warrior perspective, rivalry, subterfuge and struggle are not only features of battle with the enemy, but constitute a part of the dog-eat-dog life within the organization as well (Griffith, 1971; Kearney and White, 1994). This intraorganizational conflict suggests that the distinction between peer rivalry and externally-directed warfare is often blurry. Moreover, obedience to one's superiors is an ethics-freeing obligation. A soldier or a worker is not allowed to question a superior simply because of an ethical uncertainty but must blindly

accept commands (Griffith, 1971). All issues of morality or ethics are thus decided by the leader, and subordinates are effectively sheltered from any burden of conscience.

Yet if organizational issues of an ethical nature are resolved simply through the decisions of the leader, one would expect that the values and morals of the leader should be of paramount concern in any programme or text designed to instil leadership ideals. Unfortunately, these publications offer somewhat bizarre guidance in this area. While soldiers or workers are expected to be unconditionally loyal and obedient from the militarism perspective, leaders are typically portrayed as possessing unflinching (and, of course, heroic) ethical endowments. Where historical reality does not support this illusion, authors of “pop” organizational militarism freely modify it. (Since the “leadership secrets” are typically pure fabrication, potential inaccuracies regarding these leaders’ lives would seem a trivial point). In Roberts’ (1987) account of Attila’s rise to power, for example, the leadership opportunity arose as the consequence of his brother Bleda’s untimely death in a “hunting accident”. More diligent historians however, agree that Attila seized power by murdering his brother.

Roberts (1987, p. xv) also proposes that “Attila might today be characterized as an entrepreneur, diplomat, social reformer, statesman, civilizer, brilliant field marshal and host of some terrific parties”. This would seem a romantic portrayal indeed of a person who by most accounts pillaged, burned and raped purely for his own gain. Attila was, above all else, a plunderer. He did not engage in war to defend a nation or any other cause, but rather for the sole purpose of taking things to which he had no rightful claim. This “model” leader directed his men to slay thousands merely in order to seize their property and women. Further, in Roberts’ (1987, p. 76) romanticism of the Huns, looting is rationalized or at least euphemized as part of the Hun’s “postbattle etiquette”.

Finally, organizational militarism rejects the notion of compassion towards subordinates or concern for their unique interests. While any general values his soldiers to the extent that they collectively contribute to the overall force of his army, it is clear that individual human life or welfare is of little value in the militaristic perspective. Since soldiers (workers) are interchangeable and easily trainable, the loss of any particular person is of little consequence. Thus most, if not all, workers are viewed as “expendable”, to use Sun Tzu’s term (Griffith, 1971). As Chu (1994, p. 13) asserts, “A general who is so full of human compassion that he is reluctant to order soldiers to their death is of no use to his country”. In other words, leaders must possess a “black heart” and a ruthless, indifferent attitude in order to maintain effectiveness (Clausewitz, 1976). At the same time, this ruthlessness must be combined with a virtuous image, so that people will not believe the leader to be capable of such malevolence (Chu, 1994).

Is militarism metaphor or blueprint?

Finally, it remains unclear as to whether traditional business systems and methods are actually largely derived from military experience and thinking, or whether these parallels have simply been invented or embellished in order to

construct a romantic metaphor which can be marketed to frustrated middle-level managers. If business practices are actually derivative of and inseparable from military practices, then business organization and culture represent a system of Spenglerian “historical pseudomorphosis”, in which the older military ideas so dominate the economic environment that the business culture fails to develop its own unique expression or self-consciousness. One must then ask how such a pseudomorphic culture may serve as an archetype for analysis and replication without reference to the military prototype. If, on the other hand, contemporary business is conducted in a way which is only metaphorically similar to military practice, then organizational militarism is limited in its utility as a foundation for strategic and managerial development.

Conclusions

It is a peculiar paradox that while businesses are rapidly becoming cognizant of the shortcomings of the hierarchical, inflexible, overspecialized, dictatorial and disciplinarian features which form the hallmarks of militaristic organizational design, middle-level workers are increasingly manifesting an insatiable demand for metaphors and idols which embrace and lionize these same attributes.

While there may be certain benefits which can be derived by conceptualizing management and business strategy using a military model, the seductive appeal of this metaphor tends to displace or exclude alternative perspectives with crippling efficiency. If Chu (1994, p. 280) is truly correct in suggesting that “the principles that guided the ancient military leaders are interchangeable with those that guide today’s political or business leaders”, then perhaps many of the problems which perplex these contemporary leaders are of their own design.

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