



How to fight for a deal

SIMON BUZZA examines how we can use military methods to achieve better results at the negotiating table

The Royal Marines Commandos are a fine combat force by any measure, but what, you may ask, can we learn about negotiation from these elite troops? In fact, there are some key lessons we can take from these tough fighting troops, if we apply them in the right way.

To begin with, we need to view companies as competing on a 'commercial battlefield', with insufficient time, resources and information, and facing determined opponents in a fierce win/lose battle. These companies have to plan and execute commercial operations, defeat the competition and lead their teams using all the tactics and strategies available to them. Any failure is potentially catastrophic. Although it is livings - not lives - at risk in business negotiations, the combat can still be ferocious.

Like many military operations, commercial battles can be long and arduous, but all can turn on key defining moments. Such moments can have an impact on the final result far in excess of their individual perceived significance. Such a tactical situation with strategic implications was the mortar attack on Sarajevo in 1994 - a relatively small action, but it caused a sequence of events

that changed the course of history in the Balkans. Military leaders are well aware of these critical defining moments and plan continuously to deal with them. In the commercial world, negotiations with key suppliers and customers can be similarly defining moments - if they are mishandled, the implications are enormous.

A Global 500 company recently commented at a conference run by the International Association for Contract and Commercial Management (IACCM), "If only we could pick up all the money we are spilling in negotiation. It is a huge number, definitely in the tens if not hundreds of millions".

There are five simple lessons that translate from the Royal Marines' approach into the commercial world and will lead to winning more at the negotiating table:

Lesson 1 – Be clear on the mission

The Marines invest considerable time and thought into 'clarity about the mission' through a detailed process known as Mission Analysis. The purpose of the mission and its role within the overall strategy is thoroughly understood. Put simply, if you don't where you are going,



how on earth will you get there? This type of clarity helps the commander to decide how he will achieve his mission. In the same way, in negotiations, the purpose and objectives are key drivers that should shape the whole negotiation strategy. They need to be defined, analysed and thoroughly understood in order to determine not just the ultimate defined goal but also implied goals along the way, and the boundaries within which the negotiators can operate.

Lesson 2 – Plan and prepare

The second key area is in ‘planning, preparation and rehearsals’ before undertaking the operation itself. Royal Marines’ training is demanding, and continuous. A high level of operational readiness is maintained so that soldiers are always prepared for the unexpected – they work hard to ensure that they are always ‘fit to fight’. Now, look at your own business. Do you train your negotiators and are they always ‘fit to negotiate’?

Military operations are not planned on the back of a cigarette packet. A full process of planning and preparation is undertaken – it is called ‘battle procedure’. It is a process and, as such, it is repeatable. But such planning and preparation is often neglected or curtailed during commercial negotiations in favour of other priorities – surely a little shortsighted when the penalties for a poor result can be huge? The implementation of a repeatable negotiating process is a fundamental requirement for repeated success in negotiations.

Lesson 3 – Understand your battlefield

Thirdly, let us look at ‘intelligence preparation of the battlefield’. This process allows a commander to utilise all available intelligence to calculate an opponent’s likely courses of action during an impending operation. It requires a careful study of their forces, capabilities, tactics and *modus operandi* before deciding what the likely course

of action will be. The ancient Chinese military general Sun Tzu said “know your enemy and know yourself”. This understanding is so fundamental to the preparation of the plan of action that no plans are made without it.

So how well do you understand the organisation on the other side of the negotiating table? Greater understanding leads to opportunities not only by identifying their weaknesses but also through a better understanding of their objectives and potential courses of action. Without this analysis, assumptions will probably be wrong and will be likely to result in equally flawed plans.

Lesson 4 – Lead from the front

All Royal Marines share the same grounding, much of it undertaken shoulder to shoulder regardless of rank, incorporating hard training in harsh environments. Leaders are rigorously selected and tested in the full glare of all ranks; they either rise to the challenge or fail – there is no middle ground. Those who achieve the requisite standard do so in the knowledge that they are the leaders of exceptional men – respect is hard-earned and entirely mutual. Leaders are expected to step up to the mark when the going gets tough. And so it is with negotiating – leaders are expected to step forward and take responsibility. When the going gets tough do you take responsibility for ensuring your team is well prepared, that negotiation planning is properly done and, most importantly, are you supportive during the difficult negotiations themselves?



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Lesson 5 – Stay positive

Courage, determination and cheerfulness in adversity are the hallmarks of commando soldiers. Few tasks are impossible, but some are harder to achieve than others. Theirs is a highly positive approach, backed up by a winning spirit. This in turn generates self-confidence and confidence

in the ability of others. This positive approach and winning spirit can be a very significant ‘force multiplier’ – we all know how uplifting it can be when the optimist enters the fray – and equally, how destructive it can be when the pessimist speaks up. In negotiation, relative power may well be a feature of the mind, a perception rather than reality. So, try to take a positive, optimistic approach even when the chips are down – the other side will start to believe in you too and it can turn to your advantage.

So you see what we can learn about negotiation from this professional fighting force. And perhaps that word ‘professional’ points to the biggest lesson of all. We could all be more professional but this requires the investment of time and resources in being ‘fit to negotiate’, and possibly some significant behavioural changes. The rewards can be the difference between winning or losing.

Could the Marines do your job at the negotiating table? Probably not. But they could probably teach you a lot about winning against the odds.

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