

Comparative Lessons in Military Command and Business Management

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Comparative Lessons in Military Command and Business Management

Der vorliegende Artikel beschäftigt sich mit der Führung militärischer Verbände im Einsatz, von Armeen in Friedenszeiten und von Unternehmen. Nach einigen generellen Gedanken zur Führung wird ein Beschreibungsmodell der Führung vorgestellt. Es unterscheidet verschiedene Elemente und bildet die Basis für die strukturierte Beschreibung der Führungstätigkeiten in einem sozio-technischen System. Auf dieser Grundlage werden anschliessend die Führung von militärischen Verbänden im Einsatz und von Unternehmen charakterisiert. Darauf werden die Interdependenzen von militärischer Führung und Unternehmensführung aufgezeigt. Der Artikel schliesst mit einigen Gedanken zur Führung von Armeen in Friedenszeiten und zu den Beiträgen, welche die Betriebswirtschaftslehre dazu leisten kann. Ausnahmsweise publizieren wir den Artikel in der englischen Originalsprache.

Be

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1 Introduction

The success, sometimes even the survival, of armies and businesses depends essentially on the quality of their command or management. This observation is not a new one, it came into existence from Sun Tzu (1998), which is over 2500 years and is still valid for the different socio-technical systems of today. What is new, however, is the speed at which the environment is changing and thus the increase in challenges that leaders face.

This paper will first describe and compare command in military and management in business. It will then examine the interrelationships between the developments of command in military and of management in business and deduce implications for the command of armies in peacetime.



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2 Understanding command and management

Command and management are widely understood as the role of steering of open socio-technical systems (e.g. Steinmann & Schreyögg, 2002, p. 7). This definition of command and management is a formal one. As it will be shown in sections 3 and 4, commanding military units and managing businesses are, from the context and content point of view, very different.

Behind the definition of command and management is a cybernetic understanding of the two tasks. Figure 1 shows command/management in the cybernetic circle.

To be successful as commander or manager, two kinds of competencies should be possessed. A commander/manager must have on the one hand strong analytical competencies. On the other hand he must be a leader who is able to motivate the subordinates and to create trust in the decisions taken. As Figure 2 shows, these two kinds of competencies are not enough. Furthermore, a successful commander/manager needs mental strength.

Of course the relative importance of the different kind of competencies is not the same for a military commander and a business manager. The decisions in war with life and death consequences require a military commander to have strong mental force and outstanding leadership competencies. In business management, the focus lies on the analytical competencies. To understand the competitive situation and to design market approach and internal processes in an optimal way are crucial for the success of a company.

3 A framework for describing command and management

3.1 Overview of the framework

The task of command or management has two aspects:

- A commander/manager is required to monitor both the system under responsibility and its environment. If significant discrepancies between the current situation and the target situation are found, he must analyze the situation in depth and define measures to be taken to eliminate or reduce them. These activities can be referred to as decision-making or creation of action. Both in the military and the economic sphere, standard procedures and decision-making routines are generally used to analyze situations and identify appropriate measures.
- But the decision alone will not solve the difficulties. Actions must be applied to shift the socio-technical system onto the desired path. In nearly all cases the leader responsible for the socio-technical system is not in a position to implement such measures alone. Others, sometimes many people, must become involved in order to implement the decisions or execute the actions. This is based on three pillars. The most important is the personal influence of the leader on subordinates, which is called leadership. In addition, subordinates may receive rewards. Finally, the execution of action can be achieved through the use of tools. These three elements – personal leadership, rewards and tools – combine and interact. Contradictions between them will be recognized by the staff, whether consciously or unconsciously, and will produce negative synergies. But if these three are finely

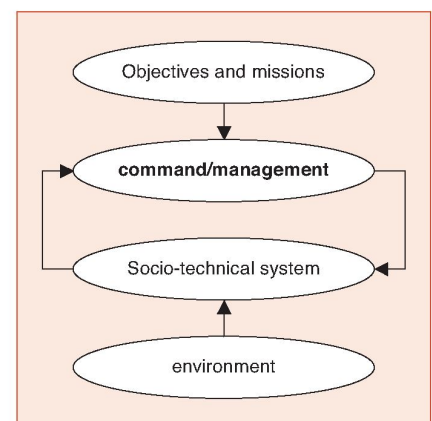


Figure 1: Command/management in the cybernetic circle.

attuned to each other, they will reinforce each other and produce the desired results (Kühn & Grünig, 1991, p. 226 ff.).

Figure 3 summarizes the framework for describing command and management presented in this section.

As figure 3 shows, command and management are both understood as broad tasks. Leadership is one element of command and management. From a practical point of view, it is a very important element.

3.2 Decision-making procedures to support the creation of action

Decisions are achieved to a considerable extent by means of decision-making procedures. In armies standardized procedures for assessing situations and making decisions have been common for millennia. Currently, management science has developed a large number of methods of analysis and of decision-making.

Decision-making procedures are rules used for procuring information, processing that information and assessing it. Each procedure is appropriate for the solving of a particular category of problems (Grünig & Kühn, 2005, p. 44).

Both in military and business, decision-making procedures vary a great deal. Two criteria may be used to classify them (Grünig & Kühn, 2005, p. 45 ff.):

- The procedures can first be classified according to the range of problems that they can be applied to. For example, the systematic decision-making procedure used by the Swiss Army can be applied to a wide variety of problem situations (Swiss Army, 2004, p. 19 ff.). In contrast, a procedure for calculating the value of an investment can only be used in the context of assessing specific projects.
- In addition, methods differ according to the conditions for their use and the quality of solution they offer. The military problem-solving procedure is a heuristic approach which leads to only a satisfactory solution and not the optimal choice. In contrast, the investment calculation can only be used under restricted conditions. However, if the required conditions are met, it produces the optimal solution.

3.3 Leadership, reward system and tools to support the execution of action

Leadership brings together the totality of the personal influence of the superior on

Analytical and intellectual competencies	Mental strength	Leadership competencies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Scanning the environment ▪ Analyzing situations ▪ Evaluating options ▪ Elaborating orders, plans, etc. ▪ Monitoring actions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Supporting pressure ▪ Taking decisions ▪ Adapting to unexpected situations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Creating trust in the decision taken ▪ Being an example ▪ Inspiring and motivating ▪ Caring for subordinates ▪ Communicating effectively ▪ Forcing actions

Figure 2: Competencies of a commander/manager.

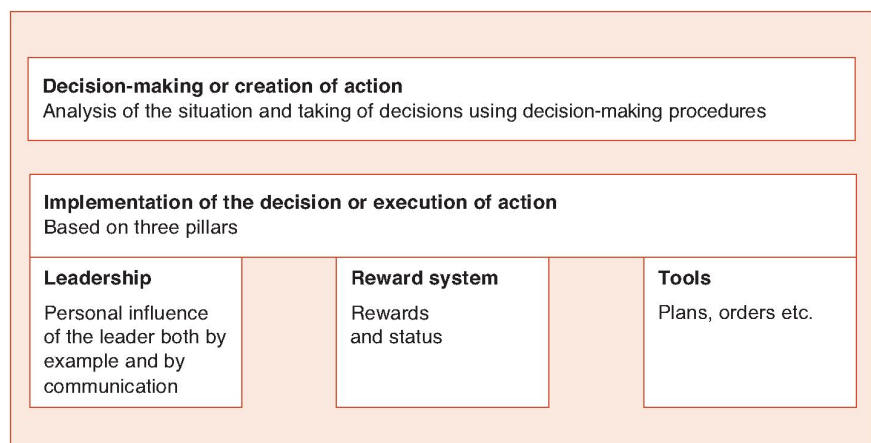


Figure 3: Framework for describing command and management.

subordinates. This comprises verbal and non-verbal elements. The latter include the behavior of the superior. This is important because as a rule subordinates will adapt their behavior to those of the superior. Verbal elements include both ad hoc utterances and more explicitly planned communication. While meetings and workshops may take place with the entire team of subordinates, there will also be explicitly planned bilateral conversations with single subordinates. Conversations of this kind will take place, for example, in a management by objectives framework, in order to agree on objectives and to monitor how these objectives have been reached.

The second pillar to support the command management includes all the various rewards the subordinate receives in return for the assumed work. The most prominent of these are the various financial rewards. But benefits such as housing, car and insurance may also be part of reward systems. A wider understanding of symbolic rewards would also include job title and position as well as size and furnishings of a subordinate's facility.

The third pillar to implement decisions are the tools. Both armies and companies

require a large number of such tools. They can be classified according to their temporal scope or according to their content. The first criterion leads to the categories of long-term, medium-term and short-term tools. The second distinguishes plans, organizational instruments and HRM concepts.

4 Commanding armies in action

«Military action is important to the nation. It is the ground of death and life, the path of survival and destruction» (Sun Tzu, 1998, S. 59). It is not possible to describe shorter and more precisely the overall context of an army in action.

Command of a military unit in action takes place in conditions of great psychological stress for both commander and subordinates, of uncertainty about the enemy's intentions and resources and, for some of the time at least, of intense pressure on time. In view of these contextual characteristics command of military units rests on only a few but, for the success decisive elements.

The first of these decisive elements is an in-depth analysis of the situation by

the commander and the supporting staff. «Use ... assessments for comparison, to find out what the conditions are. That is to say, which political leadership has the way? Which general has ability? Who has the better climate and terrain? Whose discipline is effective? Whose troops are the stronger? Whose officers and soldiers are the better trained? Whose system of rewards and punishments is clearer? This is how you can know who will win» (Sun Tzu, 1998, p. 64).

Based on the analysis of the situation, the commander has to decide how to engage his troops. This decision must take into account the important elements of the situation. According to the Dao of War, the decision should at the same time mislead and surprise the enemy. An army should operate in an unexpected way (The Dao of War).

Analysis of the situation and decision-making by commander and supporting staff are typically based on simple heuristic methods. Most armies impose a method of this kind and train their officers in it throughout their military service (e.g. Swiss Army, 2004, p. 19 ff.).

In the execution of the decision, only few tools are used. Simple and clear orders, whether general rules of engagement or specific operational plans, are the most important. There will also be orders or guidelines for intelligence services, logistics and so on.

A war can only be won if commanders succeed in convincing continuously troops of the necessity for action and of the value of the approach chosen. For this reason the leadership of the commander is of greater importance for the successful execution of the decision than tools. Leadership means first of all being an example and taking care of the subordinates.

The recent American experience in asymmetric warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq showed the need of adaptability. An army can only be successful, if it is a quickly learning organization (Vandergriff, 2006).

5 Managing business

Although changes in the economy are occurring faster now than a few decades ago, companies usually have sufficient time to analyse problems in detail and

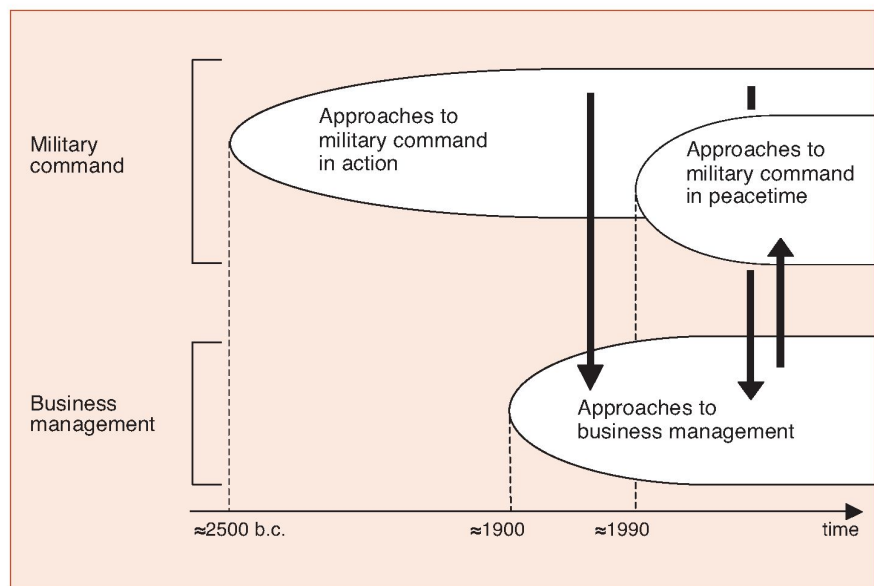


Figure 4: Interdependencies in military command and business management.

make a comprehensive comparison of different possible courses of action. In addition to using heuristic methods which are quite similar to those used by armies, companies make use of numerous forms of quantitative procedures of analysis, planning and decision-making. Here are some examples of the wide range of methods available:

- Cluster analyses to identify customer segments within markets
- Dynamic investment calculations, like net present value or internal rate of return, to determine optimal investment projects
- Network planning techniques like the critical path method used to deal with complex projects
- Linear programming to optimize production programmes
- Gantt charts to simultaneously plan realization of orders and the capacity utilization.

This list of examples could be much longer, but the issue here is not techniques.

Moreover, management in business differs from command of military units not only in the decision-making, but also in execution of action. The reward system and the tools are much more important for businesses than for armies.

Tools are vital for managing companies. The list which follows sets out the most important types of tools, with examples of each category:

- Plans: corporate strategies, business strategies, business plans, financial plans, budgets, project plans etc.
- Organisational tools: process mapping, process descriptions, organigrams, job descriptions, etc.
- HRM tools: salary systems, management development concepts, management by objectives concepts, qualification forms etc.

Although formal tools are essential for the management of a company, it often happens that too many different tools are used. When this occurs the different tools may not always be adequately adjusted to each other and there may even be contradictions between them. What is more, if there are too many different documents to act on, those receiving them may lose the motivation to study and implement each one. It is especially important for large companies to reduce the numbers of documents in circulation. They need to confine themselves to the minimum which is absolutely required.

HRM tools serve as a basis for defining rewards. For top management rewards typically take the form of a rewards package combining various different individual elements which are carefully adjusted to each other. To reward individual achievements and allow participation in company success modern financial products like options are sometimes used.

The relatively greater importance of tools and reward system in managing businesses than in commanding army

units does not mean that leadership is not important in business. The fast changes in the business environment do in contrary create an increasing importance of leadership.

6 Interdependencies in the development of military command and business management

Methods of planning military action have existed for a very long time indeed. 'The Art of War' by Sun Tzu (1998) is written more than 2500 years ago. Many later publications on this topic have also gained a worldwide readership. Military analysis and decision-making methods, together with game theory, formed the basis of decision-making approaches for business. In many heuristic decision-making procedures as well as in strategy development procedures, elements of earlier military decision-making methods can easily be identified (e.g. Grünig & Kühn, 2005; Grünig & Kühn, 2008). Besides, the first theories about leadership were developed in military. Still today successful approaches are often built up and applied in armies.

Business management is a relatively young science, which was only born as an independent discipline after the Second World War. In addition to military methods for analysing situations and making decisions, its parent disciplines were principally economics, psychology and sociology. Although initially focussed on the administration of for profit businesses, the new science rapidly expanded its sphere of influence to include non-profit organizations, public enterprises, collective households, public administration

and even armies. Here however, the contribution is mainly to the command of the army as an organization in times of peace.

Figure 4 shows these interdependencies in the military command and business management.

Based on Figure 4, we look in the next section of the paper at the military command in peacetime.

7 Commanding armies in peacetime

In peacetime too, armies often carry out smaller-scale actions, typically with smaller units. This might include anti-terror operations and peace keeping missions. Often the military are also involved in disaster relief. Furthermore there are regular exercises in which armies rehearse battle situations. Top commanders are involved in these types of activity.

However, the principal of the top commanders' task is not the command of units in actions or the lead of exercises, but the management of the army as an organization. This requires the commanders to produce plans, make investment decisions, carry out human resources related tasks, negotiate for financial support from political authorities, etc. These examples show how different peacetime command of the army as an organization is from command of a unit in action, and how much more closely it resembles the management of a company.

As a result, armies need to concern themselves with business approaches and integrate them. This is of particular im-

portance for the development of senior staff officers. In times of peace, the higher an officer rises in rank, the more his tasks will tend to shift from the purely command to management concerns.

8 Final remarks

In the future, there can be a fruitful exchange between military command and business management. New approaches of decision-making and leadership in military can on the one hand help to manage businesses more effectively. The modern business administration offers on the other hand many approaches and tools for more effective performance of armies in peacetime. ■

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