

5 Lessons the Special Forces Taught Me about Business

By Michael I. Kaplan



Last month I had the pleasure of speaking at a [Wounded Warrior Project workshop on business and entrepreneurship](#) in Tampa, Florida. During our question and answer session a young veteran made a statement that I found incredibly interesting and served as the inspiration for this article.

The gentleman – a US Army veteran who served as a sniper instructor and team leader – prefaced his question about resume writing with the following statement: *“I was an infantry team leader and a sniper instructor, which doesn’t have any real value in the corporate world. So, I wanted to know if you could tell me how ...?”*

Stop right there. I vehemently disagree.

Veterans entering the civilian workforce have to understand that their resumes should actually reflect much more than hard skills

and transferable skills; they have to reflect and promote the benefits of life experiences that will prove to be “mission critical” to prospective employers. Further, those benefits need to be communicated to prospective employers effectively.

More importantly, it’s **our** responsibility as military veterans to educate Corporate America to this fact as well. Not sometime in the future, but **now**.

My message to civilian employers and aspiring veteran job-seekers is rather straightforward. While you may not immediately see a direct correlation between military training and the job in question, be advised that those experiences have created a mindset that’s directly relevant to succeeding in any business environment.

Consider the 5 following lessons that prove this fact to be true.

1. Planning is essential, but contingency plans are critical.

In the military we rely on the Operation Order to guide our missions, hoping that the intelligence data our mission is based on is accurate and timely. We plan, we train and we prepare to execute the mission flawlessly. We’re inserted into the area of operation and beginning our movement to the target when our team leader suddenly exclaims, *“WAIT ... there’s not supposed to be a river here.”*

When veterans come face-to-face with Murphy’s Law, they can adapt and overcome. They have contingency plans that allow them to think and react quickly. They didn’t get this ability from reading a book.

2. 360-degree awareness gets the team home safely.

The ability to be completely aware in hostile and non-permissive environments saves lives in combat situations. There’s no room

for “I should have seen that coming” when it comes to explosive devices or rifle barrels protruding from windows in buildings.

Veterans with this experience have command over their business environment. They walk into offices and immediately scan the walls for informative plaques, and guide introductory conversations after noticing a lapel pin or a class ring on the hand they shook. They seal deals and get the team back successfully.

3. Wait for the best shot, not the perfect shot.

In sniper school we’re trained to patiently wait for our shot, unaffected by our environment. When the target presents itself, we act: range it, dope it, scope it and pull the trigger. We’d like a perfect shot, but we know that if we hold the scope on target too long muscle fatigue sets in and our scope begins a figure-8 wobble. When that happens, we missed our opportunity.

Veterans in the civilian workforce hope for a perfect outcome, but they're not afraid to execute when ready and make course corrections along the way if needed. They don't suffer from "paralysis by analysis," and they certainly don't succumb to "deer in the headlights" syndrome. They're doers and fivers.

4. Know when to advance, stand down and retreat.

In our modern age of special operations warfare, small teams of highly specialized personnel with a high degree of autonomy are tasked with successfully executing tactical operations with the hope of having a strategic impact. We've been trained to exercise good judgment: we know when it's right to execute, and we know there are times when the situation requires us to quietly stand down and retreat unnoticed.

Veterans in the civilian workforce don't let pride and ego override this reality. When a meeting is going badly they know how to gracefully end the conversation and exit with dignity. When contract negotiations stall, they have the judgment to know when to maneuver to a successful conclusion and when to stand down for

another opportunity. They didn't obtain this critical life skill in a classroom.

5. Individuals are strong, but teams are powerful.

Special Operations personnel are the most well-trained and highly lethal individuals on this planet. We also know that despite our strengths we have to sleep, and in a hostile environment that would be impossible were it not for the other members of the team remaining awake and alert. When we execute our missions, we're as focused on the safety of the team members to our right and left as we are on the mission in front of us. As a cohesive team, the effectiveness of our combined individual skills increases exponentially.

Veterans in the civilian workforce live by the mantra "first my mission, then my men, then myself" and know the powerful capabilities of a cohesive team. They derive satisfaction from their individual accomplishments but realize their potential increases exponentially as a unit. They despise self-absorb, back-stabbing sycophants. If you've never heard the term "Blue Falcon," I encourage you to look it up now.

In summary, if I handed you my resume you'd never see these skills listed ... but they're there. You may not believe Special Forces training is relevant to the sales job you advertised ... but it is. The next time a military veteran applies for a position with your company, look beyond the resume and the rifle.

What you'll discover about our military veterans and their professional capabilities will pleasantly surprise you.

About the Author

Michael Kaplan is the founder and CEO of Phase 2 Advantage, a consulting company that provides entrepreneurship and business management training for military and academic organizations. His most recent book, *The Prior-Service Entrepreneur: Providing Military Veterans with the Competitive Skills to Start a Successful Business* has earned a 5-star rating on Amazon and is currently used as a course textbook in numerous business and entrepreneurship training programs throughout the United States.