



ST4Y READY WORKFORCE INTELLIGENCE · FOUNDER NOTES

What 28 Years in the Air Force Taught Me About Leading Civilian Teams

Civilian leaders ask me what "military leadership" actually transfers to corporate. The short list isn't what most people guess — and almost none of it is about discipline.

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I get asked some version of this question every week: "What does military leadership actually transfer to a civilian company?"

The honest answer surprises people. It is not discipline. It is not "barking orders." It is not even the chain of command. Civilian companies have plenty of all three — they just call them KPIs, culture decks, and org charts.

After 28 years in the United States Air Force, retiring as a Chief Master Sergeant, here are the four things that actually transfer — and the one thing that does not.

1. BRIEFINGS ARE NOT STATUS UPDATES

In the military, a briefing has a purpose: a decision must be made or a mission must launch. Every minute is measured.

Most corporate meetings have neither. They are status theater. The fix isn't shorter meetings — it is naming the decision required at the top of the agenda. If no decision is required, send a doc.

2. THE CHAIN OF COMMAND EXISTS TO PROTECT THE MISSION, NOT THE SENIOR PERSON

I have watched executives wield org-chart authority to silence dissent. That is not leadership — it is fragility wearing a suit.

In the military, the most senior person in the room is often the one most explicitly asking for the junior person's read on the situation. Because the junior person is the one closest to the work. Borrow that habit. It builds bench faster than any leadership program.

3. DEVELOP YOUR PEOPLE IN PUBLIC

In the Air Force, when someone got promoted, we made it a ceremony. Public. Specific. Named.

In corporate America, we mostly send a Slack message. Then we wonder why our high-potentials feel invisible.

You don't need a parade. You need a moment — a stand-up, a team email, a named announcement — that tells the room what this person grew into. The cost is five minutes. The payback is loyalty.

4. THE LEADER EATS LAST

Cliché — and still the most underrated rule in business. When budgets are tight, the leader's compensation moves first. When the team works late, the leader is the last one to leave. When credit is given, the leader gives it. When blame lands, the leader catches it.

Almost every executive I coach knows this. Almost none of them practice it consistently. The ones who do build teams that would run through walls for them.

THE ONE THING THAT DOES NOT TRANSFER

Pace. The military runs at a pace civilian leaders rarely sustain — but only because the mission demands it. Trying to import "military pace" into a software company is how you burn out a great team and lose your best people inside 18 months.

Match your pace to your mission. Borrow the discipline, not the tempo.

SO WHAT?

The leaders I work with — owners, executives, senior managers — are not under-skilled. They are under-developed. They were promoted because they were great at the job they had, not the job they got.

Your bench is built by deliberately developing the people in it. Not by hiring "experienced leaders" who will eventually need the same development anyway.

If you want a printable 1-page worksheet for the next 90 days of that work, grab the 90-Day Bench Plan on the homepage. If you want help running it, book a 30-minute strategy call.

You don't need a hero. You need a system.

TAKE THE NEXT STEP

Bring one live decision — a promotion, a reorganization, a bench gap — to a strategy call and we will map the standard for that specific seat. st4yready.com/book · info@st4yreadyconsulting.com