

New Leadership For A New War

By Brent Filson

Military analysts call this "asymmetrical" war (as if war has a terrible symmetry); and we know that it will be as different from conventional war as three-dimensional, blindfolded chess is from conventional chess. But one thing is certain, leadership lies at the heart of achieving victory. You only have to look to history to understand that when people needed to accomplish great things, whether in war or peace, great leaders have had to rise to the occasion.

Because asymmetrical war is a new kind of war, a war that is more about waging peace on many different levels than waging actual war itself, a war/peace in which accountants, logisticians, diplomats, economic experts will also be the front-line troops, it calls for a new kind of leadership — asymmetrical leadership.

Just as asymmetrical war is fluid, multi-dimensional, and global, asymmetrical leadership must be too. But we don't have to create asymmetrical leadership from scratch. To some extent, it's already being developed and, in limited ways, modeled in a few forward-thinking American businesses. What does business leadership have to do with waging asymmetrical war? During the past 15 or 20 years, many businesses have had to compete in asymmetrical markets, markets that are global, multi-faceted and swiftly changing. To succeed in these markets, the leaders of these businesses have had to discard old leadership methods and practices and put into action new ones. In short, they've had to develop asymmetric leadership.

To understand such leadership, first, let's look at the basic concept of leadership itself. The word "leadership" itself comes from old Norse root meaning "to make go." But leaders often stumble when trying to understand who makes what go? Generally, the conventional view of leadership has been one of an order-giving process. Many leaders believe that they must "make" people go by ordering them to do things. Order-leadership in business has its roots in the beginnings of the Industrial Revolution. "Order" comes from a Latin root meaning to arrange threads in a weaving woof. The captains of the Revolution dealt with the relatively uneducated country people who flocked to their factories by ordering them where, how, and when to work. The most efficient and effective production methods resulted from workers being "ordered" or ranked like threads in the woof of production lines. Refined and empowered by the Victorian commercial culture, with its patriarchal power structure and strong links to Prussian military organization, the culture of the order-giver leader reached its zenith in the United States after World War II.

During the post-war years, many U.S. businesses were like ocean liners plowing through relatively calm seas, their leaders, like liner captains and mates, running things by getting orders from superiors, giving orders to subordinates and making sure that those orders were carried out.

But roughly since the mid-1980s, with competition increasing dramatically on a global scale, business leaders have come to need skills not akin to ocean liner piloting but white-water canoeing. Order leadership founders where lines of authority are blurring, the volume and velocity of information proliferating, markets rapidly changing, and alliance and coalition building multiplying. This is where asymmetrical leadership comes in. Asymmetrical leadership is to traditional leadership as white water canoeing is to ocean liner piloting.

Here are a few characteristics of asymmetrical leadership.

Asymmetrical leadership is motivational: Businesses that engage in asymmetrical leadership find that motivation is a critical factor in achieving success. After all, since leaders do nothing more important than get results and since they can't get results all by themselves, they need the people they lead to get results. In markets where speed, innovation, change acceleration, and global reach are important, motivated people get far more results than people who are simply responding to orders. And if our nation's leaders expect to meet the challenges of asymmetrical warfare, they must come to grips with the motivational aspects of asymmetrical leadership. In fact, if asymmetric leadership isn't motivational, it's simply running around in the dark.

But leaders often misunderstand motivation simply because the English language fails to describe how it takes place. English construes motivation as an active verb — as something one person does to another person. The truth is that leaders can't motivate anybody to do anything. Leaders communicate — the people whom they lead motivate. They motivate themselves. Only they can motivate themselves. In asymmetrical leadership, the motivators and the motivatees are the same people.

To engage in asymmetrical leadership, leaders must recognize that they are motivating people only when they, the leaders, create an environment in which those people are actively motivating themselves. Motivation is the people's choice, not the leader's choice. It's the people's free choice. If that principle is not driving leadership activities, people are not engaged in asymmetrical leadership.

For instance, a critical battlefield of the war are the streets of the Islamic world where hatred of America seems to be rampant. As long as masses of people hate America, as long as they continue to see the American government as the actual terrorist, our nation cannot bring this war to a just conclusion. Clearly, this isn't a command-and-control issue. People cannot be ordered to stop hating. We have to employ asymmetrical leadership. We have to motivate them — in other words, we must set up, through a variety of means, the environment in which they motivate themselves to become our allies, in which they make the choice to work along side us as full partners in concluding the war. It will take a long, superhuman, multifaceted endeavor, an endeavor that cannot succeed without our employing asymmetrical leadership.

Asymmetrical leadership is action-based: Businesses faced with rapid, global change have come to understand that motivation isn't what people think or feel but what they physically do. A key aspect of how asymmetrical leadership views motivation lies in the first two letters of that word. Those letters — "mo" — are also found in the words "motion,"

"momentum," "motor," "mobile," etc. The words denote action — physical action. To engage in asymmetrical leadership, leaders must constantly be challenging others to take specific physical action across all the dimensions that leads to results.

Our motivating people who hate us to ultimately become our partners in peace will entail not our simply paying lip-service to such a partnership. We must undertake concrete actions that will begin to establish the motivational environment. Asymmetrical leadership demands that we and "they" ultimately take action together to redress the many social, political, and military wrongs that breed hatred.

Asymmetrical leadership is results-driven: Businesses have discovered that in order to succeed in asymmetrical markets, their leaders and employees must have a passion to achieve results. After all, people who simply take action are useless to a business. Only those people who get results are useful.

This seems like a simple enough dictum; any leader will say that they have a passion to get results. But I have found out that what most leaders have a passion for, whether they know it or not, is engaging in the tradition, linear, captain-to-mate-to-crew leadership — either because they know no other way of leading or because they are more comfortable being engaged in such leadership. For such leadership has a materially different focus than asymmetrical leadership. Traditional leadership focuses on the activities that get results; whereas asymmetrical leadership focuses on the results that get the activities. When you are leading organizations in asymmetrical markets, you must not be wedded to activities but instead to results and only to those activities that achieve those results. This means that if activities are not getting results, you change them or eliminate them and institute new activities. In organizations run by traditional leadership, changing activities means changing the status quo, a vastly difficult job.

For instance, to get results in asymmetrical markets, many businesses have had to eliminate those traditional activities that achieve results and engage in new, innovative ways. They had to break up their linear lines of reporting. They've had to reduce the tiers of leadership, they've had to downsize their staffs and decentralize their functions, they've had to institute just-in-time inventory systems, they've had to cultivate the capability of quickly formulating and disbanding results-focused teams — all with one aim in mind: to get more results, faster results, and "more, faster" on a continual basis. In short, they have had to become masters of asymmetrical leadership.

America's new war demands new leadership. We don't have to invent this leadership. It already exists. With the emergence of new, global markets, a corresponding new vision of leadership has been emerging with some businesses. Asymmetrical leadership is being developed and applied in the crucible of global business competition. It is the very kind of leadership that can and must be applied to all the multi-faceted endeavors of asymmetrical war.

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