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Point Paper

The Leadership Lighthouse Series
April 2008

“Enterprise Thinking”: Lessons from the Tooth for the Tail

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In 1943 psychologist and international grandmaster of chess Rubin Fine published *Ideas Behind the Chess Openings*. It was an historic work addressing an important problem in the chess world: many players memorize famous opening steps but relatively few players actually *understand the point* of each opening. Therefore, when facing opponents who zig when they are supposed to zag, the memorizers flounder.

The U.S. military faces a similar problem as its leaders aim for “enterprise thinking” and other transformative concepts. Some leaders memorize the moves – Six Sigma, “boards of directors,” “cross-functional teams,” and the like – but do not understand the ideas behind the moves, or when to use them. Symbol, then, is mistaken for reality, means are mistaken for ends, and process is mistaken for outcome.

Mistaking means for ends is common in large organizations, and the military is no exception. But here’s the odd thing about the military’s “enterprise thinking”: *military leaders developed and refined it long before their private-sector counterparts did*. After all, the essence of *enterprise* is nothing fancier than being clear about the ultimate result you’re trying to achieve and working across boundaries to achieve it. It’s like “thinking big,” but without the hubris.

Field Marshal “Monty” Montgomery was an “enterprise thinker” when he took command of Britain’s Eighth Army and defeated Gen. Erwin Rommel. That’s because he was clear about the desired result and then demanded that fighting units – including air forces – work across their own boundaries in an integrated and focused manner to achieve it. He put an end to separate groups fighting separate battles – a practice that had been steadily killing Eighth Army fighters and losing the North African campaign.

Today the United States’ new Maritime Strategy epitomizes enterprise thinking. It reaches boldly across boundaries to touch Navy, Marine Corps, Coast Guard, and even other countries’ navies, aiming for grand and global results. It might be the Navy’s best example of enterprise



thinking since 1922. That was when Cmdr. Kenneth Whiting took command of a ship, the very creation of which literally brought a sea change by crossing boundaries formerly thought uncrossable. That ship was USS Langley, the world's first aircraft carrier.

Any post-operational analysis inevitably includes the question, "How could we have worked together better?" That's because, in military action, the stakes are too high to tolerate parochialism.

So why does this old enterprise stuff feel so new to some military leaders?

Well, to be exact, our military leaders excel at enterprise thinking when it concerns *operational* effectiveness. Unfortunately, the same cannot be said of the *organizational* effectiveness. Many military leaders do not see the relationship between big, broad, results-based thinking in an operational environment and doing the same in an organizational environment. In these cases, lessons from the "tooth" have not made their way to the "tail."

In operational environments, the goals are fairly clear and consider the big picture. Accountability for achieving them is also clear. Collaboration, cooperation, and so on are merely among the means for achieving those clear accountabilities. There, the military is a shining example of "big picture" or "enterprise thinking" – not because such thinking is a good unto itself, but because it's needed for victory.

In organizational environments, however, the work of *indisputably* defining victory is hard, and therefore the work of assigning accountabilities is also hard. If a leader ducks that work, then he may not have the big picture view that drives cooperation and collaboration across boundaries to achieve greater good. Then, the vibrant cascade of interlocking achievements that comprises successful military operations can't happen.

So, are "enterprise" efforts for naught? No. As in chess, some leaders *do* understand the *ideas* behind the moves, and so they win. Their moves aren't merely memorized. But unlike chess players, military leaders have the advantage of turning to their own *operational roots*. Aiming for indisputable results, with clear accountabilities – and spirited work across boundaries for the greater good – are time-honored military virtues. Savvy leaders know how to turn these operational advantages into organizational ones, as well.

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