

12 Leadership Lessons from Special Operations

By Jeff Boss; December 24, 2014

After spending 13 years as a Navy SEAL, I learned a couple things about leadership from my own mistakes and others'; about what to do, what not to do, and how to squeeze out another ounce of value when you think you're tapped. Since no December blog post is complete without a full year-in-review theme, below are 12 leadership lessons I gleaned from the SEALs and what they mean for today's business leader:

1. You exist to serve your teammates. Customers, shareholders, the public—they're all important, but without a team to productize, market and distribute the business, there would be no business. Foster the right team to deliver value daily and the brand builds itself. Anything less and, well, you just build a "different" brand.

2. There are fundamentals for everything. The Prussian military strategist Karl von Clausewitz once said, "everything in war is easy, but the easy things are difficult." All the theories, five step workshops, and "how to" books about leadership, emotional intelligence and improvement make implementation sound easy, but they're not. Instead, leading is both an art and a science. Practicing leadership fundamentals such as active listening, humility, and suspending judgment are daily tasks that necessitate continual renewal, for nobody cares how humble you were yesterday if today you're anything but. If business is the ongoing war, then leadership fundamentals is the daily battle.

3. Lead from the front. As a leader, it is critical to get out in front of the pack so your people see you, whether you're socially inclined to do so or not. Be that role. Be the leader that people crave and seek guidance and direction from. Leading is about leaving your comfort zone and entering the "white space" where uncertainty exists and leaving a trail of value creation behind you.

4. Run into the fray. Leaders face difficulty head on. They demonstrate—through personal example—how do deal with conflict because they know that disagreements and other painstaking issues must be resolved at once to mitigate second hand conversations or rumors from spinning out of control. Be direct, be transparent and watch others mimic your style. Nobody likes a weasel, but everybody acknowledges the truth.

5. Failure is a mindset. To accept failure is to accept a situation or event as an end-state, as a point where there is nothing else to learn, gain or lose. Instead, trying looking for the "next state;" the next step towards a solution by considering would-be "failures" as opportunities to grow and improve.

6. Move! When bullets are flying overhead, any decision to move elsewhere is the right decision. Analysis paralysis pervades many cultures because numbers offer feedback, accountability and a means to quantify the impact upon the bottom line. However, urgencies and crises arise, and waiting for the moons to align around a certain dilemma just won't happen. There comes a time when a leader must assume risk, go with the flow, and adapt on the fly.

7. Don't ever let anyone disrespect you. Rank or not, nothing gives anybody the right to belittle someone else. If/when this happens, nip the issue in the bud right then and there by speaking up and letting that person know where you stand. If you don't stand for something, the perception will be that you fall for anything.

8. Lead with humility. There's nothing worse than arrogance. If somebody tries to play the "one up" game with you (by "one upping" your last statement of achievement), call them out on it. Ask, "are you one upping me?" That will do one of two things: Stop them dead in their tracks, or cause them to admit.

9. Complacency kills. People are often at their best during a crisis. James Allen, author of *As A Man Thinketh*, once said, "Circumstance does not make the man, it reveals him." If/when you feel like complacency is setting into your routine, don't be afraid to interject a little chaos. Doing so keeps peoples' creative minds flowing and constantly looking for solutions, rather than reverting to old ways of tackling new problems.

10. Know personalities. I'm a firm believer that people want to do well (well, most people). They want to perform well. They want to succeed. Understand the different personalities that comprise your team and tailor your leadership style as a coach/mentor when necessary.

11. Unlearn, learn, re-learn. Always. Constant and never ending improvement goes hand in hand with humility—realizing that you don't have all the answers and that the best ones are born out of a diversity of thought.

12. Leadership is fundamental. Practice the fundamentals daily.

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