

Leadership Barometer 170 In the Trenches **Robert T. Whipple, MBA CPTD**



Military historians know that the view from “in the trenches” is far different from the master strategy war room. This article will contrast the two views of a proposed activity and offer some advice for organization leaders. The result is a better chance for a successful venture.

In the trenches is not fun

The trench is a long hole in the ground constructed to protect soldiers. The entire body is protected from the bullets flying above. Living and working in a trench is incredibly frustrating.

First of all, life in a trench is not pleasant at all. The atmosphere is wet and cold all the time. You often have to stand knee-deep in mud. Mobility is severely limited. Communication with the rest of the company becomes more difficult. You only interface visually with a few of your compatriots.

Meals are the bare minimum and usually not hot. You have a very difficult time obtaining the raw materials to do your job (bullets).

If you stick your head out of the trench in order to assess what is happening, you stand a good chance of having it blown off. You may end up dead in the mud like your buddy next to you.

Contrast with the War Room

In the war room, the generals are plotting the next phase of the battle. The room is warm and well-lit. The generals eat hot food off clean plates. They can even enjoy a cocktail or two.

They spend their time talking about the strategy of battle. Often they will focus attention on maps of the area with small models of tanks and artillery. They push these pieces around the map with long sticks like in a chess game. In more recent times the maps are on computer screens with the battle materials in simulations. It is not a bad life at all in the War Room. The generals are also financially compensated better than the troops.

Now let's take this contrast and describe the situation for an organization. There are many parallels to discuss.

Organizational trenches

The shop floor is the trench for workers in a company. It is noisy and often smelly and dirty as the product gets mass-produced on huge machines. One advantage organizations have over the military trenches is that you rarely get your feet wet. However, the atmosphere can hardly be described as pleasant.

You may not get your head shot off, but you might have an encounter with a part of the process that goes out of control. It can actually be dangerous in certain circumstances.

In a non-production environment, you may be working from home with no one in your trench except you.

Leaders mostly stay in the War Room

The leaders usually remain in the offices and conference rooms. Conditions are much more favorable. They can sit and drink coffee while listening to presentations about how they will overtake the competition. They spend their time strategizing about the next product introduction.

Leaders often make substantially more money than workers while enjoying the perks of their position.

Really good leaders break this cycle

Great leaders spend significant time out of the office and conference room. They actually get down in the trench with the workers in order to experience what they are doing. This habit gives excellent leaders more empathy for the workers, and they respond by being more engaged.

Conclusion

Don't be a general in the War Room. Take the time to be out on the production floor with your workers. You will find things go a lot better when you do.

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