

ITSM Leadership Lessons from the 'Expert'

By [Corde Wagner](#)



As an IT leader, are you aware of the knowledge and lessons that come from one of the greatest leadership and process-driven organizations on the planet? You may be surprised to learn that this expert is none other than the U.S. Army!

Having spent a combined 23 years in the Army and US Army Reserves, I learned a bit about leading people, and I also learned that accepting changes is a part of life in the Army. Since leaving active duty nearly 30 years ago, I have been involved in corporate IT in many levels, gratefully being introduced to ITIL 5 years ago.

ITIL describes that leading organizational change is a necessary part of IT Service Management (ITSM) success, but the reality is that in most corporations it is not necessarily a “way of life.”

Is it possible that we in IT management can learn from what the Army has made a “part of life?” I think so, and here is why.

What it Takes to Lead Process Integration

For survival, the U.S Army must stay ahead of the innovation curve and does so by having great people dedicated to creating new or improving existing ways of doing things. CIOs and IT leadership do not have to look far or spend an entire year's executive consulting budget to find time-proven models for how to create solid, efficient and effective IT teams. The Army has been using private sector principles, improving upon them and/or inventing new leadership principles for decades.

For example, those leadership principles taught to me while in the Army in the 70s were pretty much the same management theory that was taught to me in college and corporate programs in the 90s. In my 23 years, and I am certain it is even better now, the Army leadership in the field used leadership, and advanced management and process concepts to effectively make, use and improve upon processes.

Generally speaking, the Army leads the way in how to lead, document and make procedures repeatable. The Army proved long ago that understanding a process and making Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) and repeatable processes for their personnel reduces errors and ultimately helps provide job satisfaction by simply knowing what to do and how to do it.

By building and/or clarifying processes and procedures, your IT and technology delivery can and will measurably improve. As we would want with an ITSM program in our corporation, the Army has a good amount of public domain metrics and data on efficiency, and as with ITSM if you can measure it you can manage it.

Basic Training for IT Leadership

The simple fact is that those of us in IT leadership should recognize the tangible gain in productivity, performance and reliability gain by training our teams and leaders.

As is often the case, corporate America expects people we hire to have already completed their formal education, and to not need additional training. In the Army, the opposite is the true, and everyone begins with foundational training, which

is better known as “basic training.” This essential orientation is much like ITIL Foundation, although obviously missing the stress and related motivation offered by the Army sergeants.

The challenge for the ITIL Foundation instructor is that private-sector students come to the classroom with many differing motivations and long-term goals for passing the ITIL Foundations certification. Like an Army Drill Sergeant, he or she must somehow help all students know why they are at the training class and help them to find the motivation to complete and pass the ITIL Foundation training.

But leadership starts before the classroom bell. The responsibility falls on the parent company to make sure its students are ready for ITIL, that they are clear on their “end goal,” and that they are properly motivated to learn (and pass their certification).

The Army learned that soldiers do better in their basic training if the recruiter helps prepare them prior to training. This same model holds true in private industry. A private organization can also make impressive strides toward its ITSM goals by providing ITIL orientation prior to Foundations training, thus making ITIL certification attainable, and helping certified team members to come back ready to assist in implementing ITIL and not just ask “How does it apply to me in my job?”

Like the leaders in the US Army, a company knows that the ITIL Foundations trained and certified person has a known level of knowledge and understanding; and they are prepared to take on the next challenge.

Are You Training Your Leaders?

It is my assertion that most companies do not have the same level of maturity and wisdom the Army model has, which is to ensure their people have leadership and soft-skill training to perform at the next level.

In the Army, all soldiers go on to Advanced Individual Training (AIT) after having completed their basic training. As an example, the computer specialist in the Army will be well trained in their AIT, not only on “technical” areas, but also on leadership and soft skills.

Sadly, an ITIL Foundation trained technician will return to his or her desktop role, or helpdesk, but without the benefit of more advanced training in Incident Management, Service Desk functions or Request Fulfillment. Yet, he is expected to meet and exceed the expectations of high-level knowledge that the basic ITIL Foundation course is by design not going to provide.

This is similar to sending a soldier who completes basic training directly to his or her duty station (or worse yet, battle!), but being completely unprepared to perform to the next level without high levels of supervision, on-the-job training (OJT) and other specific training. Team members and leaders who attend ITIL intermediate training receive the advanced understanding and key soft skills that take ITIL from good to great.

Unlike the Army which has a professional Non-Commissioned Officer (NCO) Corp of highly trained leaders, who all were required to complete advanced technical and leadership training, my experience also has shown me that many (if not most) Service Desk, IT Operations and Server Operations leads and others in IT service groups, have not had the leadership training to help them to lead as well as manage.

They are not given the leadership tools they need, and in many cases they are not given the incredibly valuable ITIL Foundation and Intermediate training themselves. I am confident that it is not their fault, nor a lack of interest in learning or improving on their part. I believe it comes from the corporate mindset that training is what their employees got in college and the emphasis on training for excellence in service management or other “soft skills” is not valued like an MCSE or CCIE course might be.

In corporations, or in the Army, formal ITIL Service Management training is invaluable. I hope my point about not sending a soldier into a difficult situation, can be seen as a similar requirement that IT organizations worldwide should not let their technician or service desk analyst face difficult service situations without the essential foundation that ITIL training provides.

Although it may not resonate for you now, the same requirement for advanced training should hold true for your leaders or advanced team members, which is what the ITIL v3 Intermediate courses can provide.

Models for Leading Process

Following are a few examples of how the Army and ITSM can partner for how to deliver, as well as develop, great processes.

- As a junior leader in the Army, I knew there was a process or an SOP for just about everything we did. If there was not an SOP, someone was tasked and trained to make one, and guess what, it often was me doing that. Is the same true for your IT organization? Can your leaders identify what goes into a process and create the process and an auditable document to support that new process? The ITIL can help with that.
- When your primary web site or manufacturing network goes down during the day, usually your IT team proves to be great in the ensuing firefight (like good soldiers are), but do they have documented processes for identifying why the outage occurred? Does your organization have a way to review what worked and what can be improved in its effort to restore the impacted service?

Thankfully, ITSM provides the framework for all of these, and interesting enough so does the Army. As a leader in the Army we used an After Action Review (AAR) process to review what occurred during an exercise, and then use the lessons learned to improve how to perform whatever the exercise was geared to accomplish. You can find a Post Implementation Review in the Service Transition process in ITIL v3.

- You should have well-defined processes for protecting your production environments through ITIL Change Management processes that guide change requirements and approval of a change. This too is a model the Army established long ago, whereby any change to systems or services must have a well established release, training and certification process prior to implementation. It could be a tank or a battle field simulation application, but change management is never-the-less a fact of life in the Army.

Summary

As the theme by now should be clear, training and awareness programs with ITIL will absolutely reap huge dividends for those organizations where the leaders (CIOs, IT Directors, Managers, Generals, Sergeants Majors, and others) all want and expect excellence, AND they are willing to provide the training, support, organizational change leadership and ultimately to be a part of the success for their people as well as the organization.

It is the life cycle of not only service, but people success. The Army has many years of proven success at what they do. The ITIL has many years of proven success at what it does. Hmm, it sounds to me like the Army and Corporate IT can learn a lot from each other through the common bond of... ITIL.

About Corde Wagner: Corde retired as a Command Sergeant Major (CSM) from the US Army reserves in 1996. He is a graduate of the US Army Sergeants Major Academy, Army Ranger School, Airborne School, Infantry BNOC, Drill Sergeant Academy and was selected as the US Army Reserves Drill Sergeant of the Year in 1983. Corde started his IT career as a computer operator and worked his way up to IT Operations Manager; won 3 consecutive corporate training excellence awards while with Digital Equipment Corporation Education Services, and is now leading the ITSM implementation for a DOE program. Corde has the ITIL v2 Service Manager and ITIL v3 Foundations Bridge certifications.