



The soldier in the defence business

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Tackling the subject of the military in the defence industry is not an easy task, as there are many different ways to go about it and different keys to reading it. Beyond the shared base of values that mark their military past, what do the young captain have in common after his time in command at the very beginning of a real professional life and the "four stars" in the twilight of his own? What's similar between the lieutenant-colonel who is a STAT34 specialist in his field and the outgoing corps chief who wants to bounce back on another managerial experience? So many objectives, so many different backgrounds, which make it necessary to limit the subject at the risk of trying to draw reductive generalities or a Prévert-style list of singular experiences.

I will therefore limit the subject to my personal experience, that of a general officer, whose career is clearly behind him and whose life span is limited within the company that hosts him. The latter is above all looking for a profile that opens up its network, but also for experience and skills that will bring quickly quantifiable added value to the company's activities.

The time of the starred military adviser, restricted to serving coffee to the CEO's guests at trade fairs and an external sign of standing for the company is an image of Épinal that must be definitively forgotten, if it ever existed! Indeed, a large defence company is above all an industrial company, whose objective is to produce goods for the armament sector. In order to be sustainable, it must make a profit, which means satisfying and developing its customers, with a constant concern for innovation. To achieve this, it relies on financial, technical and, above all, human resources, which must contribute to the creation of wealth in the right proportion to the investment made by the company. Recruiting a general officer therefore meets a need. Beyond learning codes and language, where acronyms and English cohabit, - which requires a period of adaptation - the "young" person hired must understand and master a new world, to find his place in it, to give his full potential and ultimately meet the expectations of his employers.

How can the qualities of the general officer be expressed in this particular world? Are they all transposable? On the other hand, are there not some who are not available to meet certain challenges? These are the questions to which I will try to provide some answers.

I have chosen as a common thread to analyse through the prism of the defence company the qualities of the general officer, as exposed on the website of the General Officers Office. The website of the Bureau of General Officers describes him as "a decision-maker, a manager, a leader of men, a communicator, an expert and a man of values".

Two qualities seem to me to be little used, given the limited experience of the company that he has, limiting the spectrum of responsibilities entrusted to him. I have observed that there is even a certain reluctance to let an ex-general decide... Decision-making, the core activity of the serving general officer, is therefore somewhat limited, which is not without creating a sense of frustration. While the General Officer will be recognized as having real HR capabilities, he or she will also be a "modest" manager in relation to the commands and responsibilities being exercised.

Particularly aware during his or her active career of the challenges of communication and often put into situations, a General Officer will, on the other hand, be willingly engaged by a defence company in a wide variety of communication actions. His intrinsic qualities as a communicator will be a perfect match for the reference that his first career represents with the media and journalists, often specialised. This well-used quality is also a good match for that of an expert. The detailed knowledge of the institution, its needs and its decision-making circuits, enhanced by the possession of an up-to-date network³⁵, contributes to making the general officer a recognised expert in the "military thing" in the broadest sense. An almost absolute reference, he is often questioned and consulted by the entire company hierarchy and by a wide range of professions: from salesmen to engineers; for the French market as well as the export market...

The company is a world where the exercise of human relations is a difficult art and where a sense of compromise reigns. It is also an extremely favourable environment for the general officer to put into practice his qualities as a leader of men. Here again, they are perfectly adaptable and highly valued by the members of his own teams, as well as by other employees. In this field, he will know better than anyone else how to listen, analyse and convince.

Finally, the general officer is indisputably perceived as a man of values in the company, whereas the general environment of the company's activities is increasingly marked by the notions of "compliance"³⁶ and "transparency". Acting ethically, he embodies exemplarity and intellectual honesty. In particular, he will know how to find the right position between the government client and the manufacturer.

However, in the description of the BOG, there is one quality that I feel is lacking in my opinion and which has undoubtedly served me better than any other: the ability to adapt. This quality is however well cultivated throughout an officer's career. Alternating between troop and staff times, between garrison and OPEX life, between "technical" and command

periods, the General Officer never stops adapting throughout his career. The transition into civilian life and a fortiori into a defence company is undoubtedly the ultimate ratio of the need to adapt. I think that we are well prepared for this, while being aware that the primary reason for failures to convert to a defence company (because there are some) is precisely linked to a problem of adaptation. The path to success can be winding and often requires putting a handkerchief on one's ego while seriously questioning oneself!

The qualities of the general officer are thus recognized and usable, admittedly to varying degrees, as long as the latter takes the trouble to continue to maintain them. Benefiting from a favourable a priori, he is a listened expert of the military, which is a reference on the managerial and especially moral level. He must know how to remain humble and understand that the logics of his former institution are not always the same as those of the defence company: a general officer is not the head of a company painted in khaki! There is no equal relationship between a civilian and a military decision-maker.

To integrate these fundamental differences while keeping a certain distance, to know one's limits while exploiting to the maximum all the added value he can bring; so many simple rules that allow the general officer to fully realize himself on a personal and professional level. I will conclude this short and very personal analysis by highlighting the dual loyalty to which the general officer working in a defence company must adhere. His intrinsic qualities must indeed enable him without difficulty to be loyal both to the institution that made him what he is, but also loyal to the company that now supports him.

[34] Army Technical Section.

[35] Which limits the efficient life span of the general officer in His functions, so much the spectre of the "has been" awaits him very quickly!

[36] Can be understood as compliance with the rules.

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