



## Military command, a model for civilian management?

military-Earth thinking notebook

Le Chef d'escadrons Éric MORGAND

Published on 18/07/2018

Histoire & stratégie

**Military command methods are increasingly attractive to civilian managers, who are uninspired by the distortion of social ties within the company. Two values seem to catch their attention: the permanent concern for the human factor and the role of the leader, capable of making decisions in an emergency and getting people to adhere to them. For the author, however, it seems impossible to transpose the principles of military command as they are based on a specific environment, arising from the violence and uncertainty of engagement.**

To talk about one's job as a soldier is to be subjected by one's interlocutors to a series of images of Épinal, halfway between the memories of national service of the elderly and the fantasies of the youngest [1]. 1] The army often appears to be a closed environment, with inexplicable morals, whose work rhythm is directly inspired by Solzhenitsyn's stories. The soldier is then assured of great success with his audience if he claims to be happy and to have bearable, even pleasant, working conditions. Indeed, the world of civilian work does not envisage that one can flourish in a visibly rigid system, while itself is undergoing a deep crisis.

The armed forces are increasingly inspiring the civilian world of work because they have managed to preserve and disseminate a base of unifying and effective values.

Civilian managers are on the look-out for military methods that make it possible to increase efficiency and strengthen social ties within the company, ties that are currently seriously strained. Among the values that make it possible to forge the famous military "esprit de corps" are concern for the human factor and its corollary, cohesion, and the role of the leader. However, not all military values can be adapted to the civilian world because they remain subject to a unique specificity, that of legally giving death to others.

**The civilian manager, in search of inspiration, no longer hesitates to use military methods.**

"Fight! Be strategists! Identify your competitive weapons! To be a good manager, you have to be a real warrior; this is the implicit message delivered by Laurence Parisot, president of the Medef during her 2008 summer university [2]. Civilian companies seem to be turning more and more to armies to find new working methods, whether in the field of commercial strategy [3] or management [4]. HEC students are thus taking part in "leadership and team spirit" courses at the Saint-Cyr special military school for future army officers [5]. 5] The objective of this course is to "make participants measure, on a theoretical level, the enigma that constitutes the problem of collective action and, on an empirical level, the multiple difficulties to be overcome in order to create team performance" [6]. 6] As Major Barth, director of internships at Saint-Cyr, explains, these students come to develop a "savoir être: learning how to adhere to discipline, managing a group and the flow of information that often creates uncertainty and stress" and learning the "values of solidarity, essential to combat, by putting the human being at the heart of everything". The aim of HEC professors is to instil in their students the proximity between management and command.

This closeness between the military and civilian world is also found among older executives, particularly business leaders who occasionally wear the uniform during their periods in the citizen reserve. In addition to a desire to participate in the defence of their country, they generally derive very concrete ideas to apply in their life as a manager. This experience enables them to improve their working methods by "giving clearer instructions" and "systematically finding out about [their] interlocutors".or the quality of human relations "by showing greater empathy for [their] employees, following confrontations with other cultures in operations" [7].

7] However, beyond the ideas that enable them to be more competitive, many managers and companies are looking for a solution to a human problem. Indeed, the civilian world of work has for many years been going through a serious crisis of labour relations within the company. These are deteriorating and leading to depressions and even suicides (France ranks 3rd for work-related depressions behind Ukraine and the United States [8]). Suffering at work today is characterized more by a psychological burden than by physical hardship. However, in the case of psychological violence, which is more difficult to detect for the worker and his entourage, the victim faces an unbearable burden and increasingly calls on medicine [9], even though stress at work is not recognised as an occupational disease [10]. 10] Yet the consequences of this stress are very real. In 2005, work stoppages affected 20% of the wage bill and represented 246 million days not worked [11]. 11] At the European level, 50 to 60% of lost working days are estimated to be stress-related, at an estimated cost of 20 billion euros[12]. 12] This stress is partly linked to workload, but also to the lack of relationships within companies. More and more employees claim to be victims of moral harassment. And as Marie Grenier-Pezé [13] reminds us, this reality is not disputed. According to a 2003 survey [14], about 16% of respondents feel harassed in their workplace. This passage to the judicial act is indicative of an increasingly formalistic society, but above all of a lack of dialogue within a company. The bond of trust between a manager and his employee is broken and involves intervention from outside the company.

The most serious manifestation of workplace ill-being is undoubtedly suicide. The

Economic and Social Council has revealed that there is an average of one suicide per day directly related to work-related stress[15]. These suicides are directly linked to the world of work and the lack of solidarity between employees [16]. The disappearance of the rules of "living together" and cohesion lead to this disintegration of the work cell. In comparison, the armed forces are more spared by this scourge, the suicide rate being 20% lower among military personnel than among civilian employees[17]. If, as Durkheim stated in his work "Suicide"(1897), the suicide rate can only be understood through a global analysis of society, it is logical that civilian managers think that their company is doing badly and that it is necessary to find suitable remedies[18], particularly in the military world, which is less affected by this scourge. And as Marc Galan notes, "the armed forces remain an institution that carries meaning and values that deserve to be shared. And even if the concept of military specificity retains all its relevance with regard to the hardening of current commitments, it is becoming clear that managers and business leaders today must face challenges of the same dimensions. The spirit of enterprise could therefore find an adaptable template in the esprit de corps" [19].

### **The army, a foundation of values carried by the leader and the group**

The military conveys certain values that may appeal to the civilian work world. They are not inherently unique to the military, but have become so because of the continuous differentiation between military and civilian. One has retained them, the other has gradually abandoned them. Two main features dominate labour relations within the armed forces: concern for the human factor and the role of the leader. These are the values that the civilian world of work seeks most [20]. Despite the constant development of technology within the army, combined with a reduction in size [21], and no doubt also because of this, man has always been at the centre of the military leader's concerns. Isn't the first act of a leader's life to designate the people who will accompany him? Has human resource management not been the path set for the brightest officers for many years? Far from the old-fashioned image of the military leader paying little heed to the lives of his men or to their constraints, management places the man at the centre of its reflections. Aware of the need to preserve a counted potential, they train, coach, educate and develop it.

Above and beyond the individual, the army's main principle has been to enhance the value of the group and strengthen the cohesion of its teams by instilling a simple but effective principle: the individual must step aside in favour of the group and devote his or her efforts to its progress. But this is only possible if the individual is valued through the group's results, if success is shared by all. This is one of the major lessons learned by HEC students during their internship at Saint-Cyr: cohesion and consideration for the subordinate are aimed at achieving a whole that is greater than the sum of its parts. And the leader can only be a good leader if he is followed by a close-knit team, whether in a management or command context [22]. Cohesion manifests itself in different ways, some of which are unexpected. Dress, for example, is not only a straitjacket, but also a social equalizer and above all a mark of recognition. The most prestigious units are also those that are most proud of their uniform and take extreme care of it. As an integral part of the uniform, the ranks, names and insignia of units worn by the individual allow for clear identification. In the civilian enterprise, an employee passing through a department that is not his own will be an illustrious stranger whose name or position no one knows[23]. In the military, he will have a name, a place in the hierarchy (rank) and in the organization (unit), a level of responsibility (rank).

Because of his decision-making process, in which the order received is not questionable, with the exception of the, fortunately very rare, criterion of illegality [24], the chief has a central role. Since any action is subordinated to the success of the mission, he is led to make a series of quick decisions without the "guard rail of the unions". The military chief in operations is capable of mastering complex, unpredictable and destabilizing situations, but above all of deciding in uncertainty [25]. This specificity is of great interest to civilian managers. Marc Galan acknowledges that the "intellectual stance adopted by the military enables them to associate and give meaning to notions and principles that are today a source of confusion in the business world because they are considered difficult to reconcile: Thus, obedience and cohesion do not inhibit, but can sublimate the sense of initiative and individual responsibility; the modularity of structures does not jeopardize, but on the contrary can strengthen the solidity and durability of the organization. Finally, the importance given to operational means and procedures does not relegate, but rather highlights the importance of the human factor" [26].

The military commander is also a trainer and guide who transmits to his subordinates know-how and, above all, interpersonal skills. The classic capacities of the civilian manager must therefore be enriched and consolidated by indispensable skills and qualities well known to the military: not only does the chief command, direct, coordinate, control and plan, but he must also know how to motivate, educate, mobilise and assert his values through daily behaviour[27].

27] Finally, the military leader is capable of making decisions in an emergency, when faced with complex situations. Future managers in training at Saint-Cyr define the chef's decision-making spirit as "the ability to keep a cool head in an emergency and under stress. Moreover, it is better for a leader to make a decision, even an imperfect one, than no decision at all" [28]. This skill is also appreciated and sought after by the civilian employer when recruiting a former military executive. As a former officer who left the uniform to work for Renault explains, "in the army, in times of crisis, it is above all a question of command. You have to be very directive. At Renault, it's always a crisis, a less severe crisis, but a perpetual crisis" [29]. 29] Nevertheless, to be inspired by a model is not to adopt it. On the other hand, certain specificities of the military status, which contribute to the affirmation of the values mentioned above, are not transposable to the civilian environment.

### **The limits of the model: why management and command will remain different concepts?**

The status of military personnel[30] is out of the ordinary because it is not governed by the Labour Code and implies a certain number of exceptional requirements, including discipline, availability, neutrality[31], loyalty and a spirit of sacrifice that can go as far as the supreme sacrifice[32]. 32] Neutrality prohibits, for example, a soldier from belonging to a trade union. The suppression of trade unions in the civilian world is simply unthinkable. Yet the absence of trade unions within the armed forces has led to the development of mechanisms for consultation. Although trade union membership is prohibited for military personnel, there are nonetheless visibly effective consultation bodies, since commitments have not decreased and the army is not suffering a haemorrhage of personnel. Among these, the main military consultative body is the Conseil supérieur de la fonction militaire (CSFM). Its role is to promote dialogue within the armed forces, particularly through consultation. Deriving from the status of the military, it makes it possible to transmit grievances from the "base" to the minister, then to deal with them and

propose solutions. It can also put forward themes itself and must develop those envisaged by the Minister. The paradoxical consequence of this effective system is that it facilitates dialogue between superiors and subordinates and helps to ensure that the human factor is taken into account. Since recourse to strike action (and thus the breakdown of dialogue) is prohibited, each party must take the other's arguments into account and exchange [33].

As far as management is concerned, the "recipe" of command is not necessarily applicable en bloc within a civilian company. The military chief will be able to rely on the indisputable character of order to devote his energy to making it apply, whereas the civilian manager will have to convince [34] (even if the military chief does not exempt himself from being pedagogical, especially when he has to send his subordinates into combat). Indeed, military values are based on certain factors that are difficult to control by a person outside the institution, such as the community of language or the common training base [35]. 35] However, the directive nature of the command contributes to the cohesion and aura of the leader, who must be totally exemplary in the application of an order that he himself has imposed.

However, the characteristic of military action that fundamentally differentiates military leaders and civilian managers is the possibility of death. As the holder of a recognized right to violence, the military commander has the power to endanger the lives of his men and the adversary. This specificity may seem artificial to the one who focuses only on the process of reasoning (the purpose and the result, however, change). There would thus exist "a profound community of nature between management and command, war and death imposing on the latter, in reality, only a higher requirement of fidelity to the essence of authority" [36]. It is indeed true that the method of reasoning can easily be assimilated and used by civilian managers, without consideration for the finality. Nevertheless, the choice of the leader, his spirit of decision, remains profoundly linked to the violence of the environment in which he evolves. General Fievet thus underlines that "if there is a common core between military and corporate approaches, there are still great differences. When the military fights, they destroy, whereas this is not the purpose of business. It is therefore necessary to qualify: the approaches are of the same nature, but they do not pursue the same objectives" [37].

37] The Army can breathe new dynamism into labour relations within the business world, which is currently in crisis. Certain values that the military world has been able to preserve, such as the role of the leader or the value of the human factor, are today beacons for the civilian manager; but military command will not replace civilian management because the environment is fundamentally different.

Nevertheless, the military culture shows that one of the primary conditions for the establishment of a fruitful relationship between the chief and his staff is proximity. This cannot be achieved without a common base of reference, independent of the level of responsibility. This is why it seems essential to strengthen the corporate culture for all and employee loyalty, as a prerequisite for rebuilding the social bond within the company.

1] "Des méthodes de management militaire chez Abercrombie", Marie Bartnik, Le Figaro, 26/03/2012.

- 2] "At MEDEF, command and management, same fight", David Servenay, [site Rue 89](#), 26/08/2008.
- [3] Course at AUDENCIA on "The art of war of Sun Tzu and the management strategy of the company", 2004, 2nd year.
- [4] Florent Leroy, "4] Military strategy and strategic management of companies" (Economica)
- 5] Wall Street Journal, excerpt from the Focus Défense of 18/04/2012.
- 6] "Le commandement militaire, inspiration du management", article by Nicolas Barbier, Baudouin de Torcy and Isabelle Fetet, in Les Echos, 15/05/2008.
- 7] "Chefs d'entreprise et réservistes de l'Armée", Julien van der Feer, in Chef d'entreprise Magazine, 01/06/2009.
- 8] Christophe Dejours and Florence Bègue, in "Suicide and work, what to do?" (Presses Universitaires de France), 2011.
- [9] Vincent de Gaulejac, in "La société malade de la gestion" (Le Seuil), 2009.
- 10] The national interprofessional agreement on stress at work signed on 2 July 2008 by all employers' and employees' trade unions transposed into French law the European framework agreement on stress at work of 8 October 2004. It remains a reference framework, with no mandatory application in the professional branches. Ministry of Labour, Employment and Health; [www.travailler-mieux.gouv.fr](http://www.travailler-mieux.gouv.fr).
- 11] "Suicide is the second leading cause of death among French soldiers", Jean Guisnel, Le Point.fr website, 07/09/2010.
- [12] «Psychosocial risks at work: a European issue», EGIP, January 2010.
- 13] "Contrainte par corps: le harcèlement moral", Marie Grenier-Pezé, in Harcèlement et violence, les maux du travail, dossier de la Revue Travail, Genre et Sociétés, La revue du Mage, May 2001.
- 14] SUMER survey, INRS website.
- 15] "Suicides at work: open letter to Xavier Bertrand", Jean-Claude Delgènes, L'Express website, 15/04/2011
- 16] Ibid 7
- 17] Study by the Institut de veille sanitaire covering the period 2002 - 2007, published in the Weekly Epidemiological Bulletin, November 2009.
- 18] "Quand le stress dans l'entreprise atteint des niveaux préoccupants, on ne peut l'ignorer", Carlos Ghosn, suite aux suicides au technocentre de Guyancourt, Le Monde, 15/02/2008.
- 19] "Valeurs et méthodes de l'institution militaire appliquées au management", Marc Galan, in Les Echos, 22/02/2011.
- 20] "The Army and employment", Christian Chevalier, Pacajob blog, 17/09/2007
- 21] "White Paper on Defence and National Security", 17/06/2008.
- 22] Ibid. 5
- 23] Some companies have nevertheless adopted this system, notably Auchan, where each employee wears a badge indicating his or her first name, responsibility and sector of activity within the store.
- 24] General Disciplinary Regulations, 2002.
- [25] «Deciding in uncertainty», General Vincent Desportes (Economica), 2004.
- 26] "Valeurs et méthodes de l'institution militaire appliquées au management", Marc Galan, in Les Echos, 22/02/2011.

27] Ibid 16

28] Ibid 5

29] "Un ancien militaire manager chez Renault", Corentine Gasquet, in Le journal du net, 23/11/2005

30] Law 2005-270 of 24/03/2005 on the renewal of the general status of military personnel.

31] "A gendarme suspended because of his involvement in associations", Laurent Borredon, Le Monde.fr website, 19/04/2012.

32] Article L4111-1 of the Code of Defense.

33] Obviously, this dialogue does not call into question absolute obedience in the accomplishment of a mission.

34] Ibid. 5

35] "Quelles limites à l'application de méthodes militaires au monde économique", Battalion Chief Marc Espitalier, cnestephane.org.

36] "Management and military culture", Commander François-Xavier Polderman, 2008.

[37] Management and command seminar, École de Paris du management, 27/09/1994.

Squadron Leader MORGAND served in the first part of his career in the 1st/11th<sup>cuirassiers</sup> regiment and 1st/2nd chasseurs regiment<sup>before becoming</sup> a tactical instructor at the Bourges military schools. After a mission with the Supreme Headquarters of the Allied Forces in Europe (SHAPE), he attended the Higher Staff Course within the 125th promotion.

---

<b>Title :</b>	le Chef d'escadrons Éric MORGAND
<b>Author (s) :</b>	le Chef d'escadrons Éric MORGAND
<b>Release date</b>	12/02/2021

---