

## What's So Special about Special Ops? by Andrew Sobel

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# What's So Special about Special Ops?

The U.S. military's elite training programs offer a model for the strategic deployment of human capital and for building effective teams.

by Andrew Sobel

**D**uring the fall of 2001, a small task force of U.S. military special operations forces arrived in Afghanistan. It was named Task Force Dagger, and its mission was to work with the Northern Alliance to overthrow the Taliban and uproot the terrorist training camps they were harboring. In just a few months, fewer than 200 Army Special Forces, Navy SEALs, and Air Force Special Tactics operators expelled nearly 100,000 entrenched Taliban and al Qaeda forces. It was an extraordinary success, and one that drew heavily on the multifaceted capabilities of special operations forces, who can build alliances with local fighters (all Army Special Forces must learn a second language, for example), infiltrate enemy lines, and bring to bear intense firepower in small, mobile units. Many Americans remember the now-iconic photograph, taken during that operation, of a U.S. special operator on horseback, holding the reins of his horse in one hand and a satellite phone in the other. In that picture, he is wearing long hair, a beard, and

traditional Afghani robes. It's a portrait of a modern-day, high-tech warrior equally at ease with Kevlar and leather, comfortable both launching a commando raid and helping local villagers improve their water supply.

The post-9/11 world has brought U.S. military special operations into the limelight as never before. For many observers, there is something inspiring and even mysterious about these highly trained teams of men (like all frontline U.S. combat troops, they are all male) who are motivated to achieve their mission at any cost. In business, we talk about being willing to “walk through walls” to achieve our goals, but special operations teams really do things like that.

So what's the secret? What's so special about special operations? Can business professionals learn something from them besides the obvious truisms about the importance of focus and discipline? In fact, the effectiveness of special operations forces is rooted in a carefully designed and comprehensive system of recruiting, training, infrastructure support, leadership, and organizational culture.



Can private-sector organizations emulate these techniques in the same consistent and integrated manner? They can, although we must acknowledge the significant differences between the private sector and the military. For example, in the military you make a long-term commitment (often four or six years in special operations) and cannot just quit because you find a better job. You have a legal requirement to follow the orders of your superior officers. Service members are also, explicitly or implicitly, willing to risk their lives to defend their country.

For the moment, however, let's set these differences aside and look at what we can learn from the key elements of this high-performance system. As we'll see, in fact, many special operations practices can be and have been adapted to the corporate world.

### **Elite Magnetism**

The term *special operations forces* (SOF for short) refers to a wide variety of specialized forces in all four of the armed services. The lessons that follow are based primarily on a study of three major groups of SOF: the Army Special Forces (also known as Green Berets), the Navy SEALs, and Air Force Special Tactics units. Their fame is disproportionate to their numbers: There are only about 15,000 special operations servicemen in a military of more than 2 million active-duty and reserve personnel.

Although their missions overlap quite a bit, each of these special operations groups receives slightly different training and has a slightly different focus. Army Special Forces are often used to help train indigenous forces, for example, whereas

Navy SEALs tend to be used more for direct action engagements. Air Force Special Tactics forces include Pararescuemen, a specialized group of search-and-rescue trauma paramedics, and combat controllers, who call in airstrikes from the field.

Special operations forces use an attraction strategy to get access to the best raw talent in the military. Their elite status is a magnetic draw for young men who want to prove themselves and be among the best. The average education level of special operations recruits is above that for conventional forces, and it is not uncommon to find individuals with advanced degrees from top colleges or managerial experience in a corporation. The exclusive branding of special operations draws many recruits at the front end, where a high percentage are turned down before even being given a chance in the selection program.

When it comes to recruitment, SOF units are not unlike highly desirable employers in their ability to attract the best. Their selectivity has another positive effect: It is well documented that the steeper the hurdle to get accepted into a group, the more loyalty and commitment you have to it once you're in. This certainly motivates the bankers at elite firms like Goldman Sachs, where the prospective status, pay, and influence that go along with being a partner propel them to work long hours and develop extraordinary loyalty to the organization if and when they do reach that elite inner circle.

### **Total Training**

The training that SOF personnel go through is a key to their success in real missions. Their training is in-depth, realistic, and repetitive, and

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it is run by the most experienced SOF operators — not classroom-schooled educators. This type of training puts true meaning into the overused term *total immersion*. If you add up the different phases of training that SOF candidates must go through, including specialized courses (such as high-altitude free-fall parachuting) and advanced training in their units, it may take two or three years at minimum to produce a fully developed SOF operator.

Five important aspects of SOF training reveal why it's so effective, and also why much of the one-off, classroom-based training conducted by private-sector companies is of limited value.

**1. Winnowing.** SOF training is designed to eliminate all but the most determined and qualified individuals. A hundred highly motivated, intelligent, and experienced men might start the Navy SEALs eight-week Phase I course, for example, and usually only about 20 or 25 successfully pass just that first phase — a ratio that is also typical for the other services' special forces selection programs. If during a test you do 59 pushups instead of 60, you may get a second chance, but if you fall short again, you're sent back to a conventional unit. That is a vital point: The Navy doesn't stigmatize these men or kick them out, but rather deploys them in other areas and tries to commend them and make them feel good about just trying out to be a SEAL. In corporations, there is often no "Plan B" when someone drops out of a program or fails to make a promotion, and a disappointment or setback may very well mean the employee leaves the company altogether.

Many trainees are eliminated

during the initial selection phase, but others continue to be dropped during later training phases — there's a continual process of culling. This winnowing process can be seen as never-ending. Colonel Wesley Rehorn, a veteran Army Special Forces leader who heads the U.S. Joint Forces Special Operations Command, comments that "the system is very intolerant of mistakes, even for someone who is 20 years into his career. I may accept an error of commission, but rarely an error of omission."

**2. Deliberate practice.** A second characteristic of the training is that it embodies the concept of deliberate practice. Deliberate practice entails isolating the specific elements of performance that will enable you to excel at an activity, repeating them over and over again, and getting objective feedback. A great deal of research supports the notion that intensive, deliberate

operation went flawlessly, and although the U.S. prisoners had been moved before the raid, news of the attempt spread throughout POW camps in North Vietnam; many captured servicemen later said that it gave them the will to survive.

Is doing 170 rehearsals of a major sales presentation to a client a reasonable expectation for a corporation? No, but how about just one rehearsal? That would be above the norm for most managers. Walmart Stores Inc. showed how powerful this type of preparedness can be when Hurricane Katrina hit the Gulf Coast of the United States in 2005. The U.S. Federal Emergency Management Agency was woefully unprepared for the disaster. Walmart filled the gap in supplying aid to many Louisiana communities because of the exceptional preparedness of its emergency management department and emergency operations center, which had repeatedly

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practice — not innate talent — is the secret of exceptional performance. An Army Special Forces weapons specialist, for example, must master nearly 50 different weapons systems during 65 days of intensive training.

In 1970, Army Special Forces launched a daring commando raid on the Son Tay prisoner of war camp near Hanoi. To prepare for the mission, they conducted 170 full dress rehearsals at a mock-up of the prison camp in Florida. The

rehearsal for similar contingencies and put in place a series of procedures and protocols for responding to a natural disaster.

**3. Realism.** Special forces training is characterized by extreme realism. Medics will treat "injured" soldiers who have pumps squirting "arterial blood" and sport Hollywood-quality makeup. For a simulated mission, men may be kept awake for two or three nights in a row and subjected to lifelike explosions and bullet fire. The final exer-

cise to earn the Army's Green Beret lasts a full two weeks and involves more than 1,000 personnel.

Some corporations use computer-based business simulations or lengthy case-study scenarios to teach executives — putting them in charge of a fictitious company for three days, for example — but it is not a widespread practice.

**4. Constant feedback.** A key feature of SOF training is constant and relentless feedback about performance. Nearly every exercise — from tying knots while holding your breath underwater to building a camouflaged shelter — is graded by experienced instructors, and most exercises have an “after action” review that bluntly analyzes what went well and what could have been improved. At regular intervals, instructors rank the men in their training units according to performance, and often ask each team member to rank everyone in his unit. They might very well confront a trainee and ask, “Why do you think your team members ranked you dead last?”

**5. Physical and mental stress.** Hell Week, or some variation of it, is a feature of most SOF training programs. Navy SEAL trainees, for example, are forced to function over a span of 100 hours while being allowed a total of five hours of sleep. These experiences have a purpose: They simulate actual combat conditions, they expand the trainees' comfort zone, and they provide a benchmark experience that makes subsequent hardships more manageable. They also create a powerful (albeit painful) shared experience that is an indelible part of the culture of special operations.

Some companies create such shared experiences early on in their

employees' tenure, and it is a very effective technique. General Electric Company's leadership development center at Crotonville, for example, is a legendary hotbed of intense learning experiences that form part of the shared culture of many GE employees. And Japanese companies

SOF operator described it this way: “If you are not all perfectly in step as you walk, the log starts to sway from side to side and go out of control. You master the log together, as a team, or you just fall apart.”

For special operations forces, teamwork is ultimately a matter of

## Most exercises have an “after action” review that analyzes what could have been improved.

have traditionally put new recruits through multi-month training and indoctrination programs. These experiences don't approach the brutality of Hell Week, but they often require late nights or weekends spent with colleagues working to solve common problems.

### Hanging Together

Business organizations talk endlessly about the importance of teamwork, but in special operations, teamwork is truly rooted in the culture. Training instructors take a black-and-white approach: If the team does well, everyone is rewarded; if a single individual commits an infraction, the entire team is punished. During SOF qualification programs, many activities are designed to promote teamwork; these might include carrying large logs together or doing “buddy breathing” underwater, in which four men must share a single snorkel to get their oxygen. The log-carrying exercise, in which a team of 10 or 12 trainees must carry around a 1,000-pound log for several hours each day — including to and from meals — looks like pure punishment but is actually a powerful team-building activity. One recently graduated

life and death. Slogans such as “never leave a man behind,” “never give up,” and “that others may live” permeate the SOF culture. In the private sector, the stakes are never this high and never will be. The real problem is that corporate leaders say they want a teamwork culture, but don't actually make the investments and changes needed to develop one.

Most special operations forces report directly to the U.S. Military Special Operations Command in Tampa, Fla., which is run by a four-star general. In the field, SOF teams sometimes report through local, conventional force commanders, but within the parameters of their mission, they have a great deal of independence and flexibility, and are thus able to rapidly make decisions and adjust to conditions on the ground without interference or second-guessing.

Although many corporations talk about empowerment in their annual reports, excessive rules and heavy supervisory oversight too often belie the very notion of employee autonomy. There are nonetheless some standout examples, such as Nordstrom and Four Seasons, where staff are authorized to take whatever steps are needed to

please a customer or rectify a mistake without getting approval from a supervisor.

In SOF, being able to pull your weight and having a depth of combat experience are more important than rank. To this end, officers and enlisted men go through the special forces qualification programs together, not separately as in other parts of the military. Trained operators usually do not spend a lot of time saluting and saying “sir.” Their

of missions under their belt, and when these individuals speak, everyone listens.

In this respect, the difference between military SOF and a private corporation is stark. Business leaders tend to promote the most experienced field staff out of the field and into management — for example, a great saleswoman may become a district sales manager and a Six Sigma expert may be promoted to operations VP. This is done, in part,

a summary of the most important goals to which corporate leaders might aspire.

### 1. Creating recruiting gravity.

One of the secrets of special operations is their ability to attract large numbers of recruits at the front end of the system. How many businesses have a similarly elite image with prospective employees? I believe that with some effort, both large and small organizations can create a highly desirable “employment brand.” Google, Apple, Procter & Gamble, and some others have already achieved this, as have smaller organizations like Teach for America, which attracts disproportionately large numbers of highly qualified undergraduate and graduate students.

### 2. Reinventing training.

Companies in the United States spend more than US\$100 billion on training each year. Much of it is little more than a one-time classroom experience punctuated by PowerPoint presentations. At the same time, it is well established that the skill improvement and behavioral changes that would truly affect on-the-job performance require a sustained program of interventions consistent with the concept of deliberate practice. Corporate training needs to become more realistic and sustained.

### 3. Developing an all-for-one culture.

The notion of teamwork too often means helping others as long as it's easy and convenient to do so. In researching my recent book, *All for One: 10 Strategies for Building Trusted Client Partnerships* (Wiley, 2009), I identified three specific factors that help create a true teamwork culture. First, leaders have to model the collaborative values and behaviors that they seek

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respect for one another is rooted more in the recognition of capabilities than in titles. Most special forces operators are what could be called “deep generalists.” They usually have a core specialty — such as weapons, communications, or medicine — but everyone on a six- or 12-man team knows something about everyone else's expertise, and it's the job of each specialist to conduct ongoing training for his teammates. Collaboration is enhanced by this shared vocabulary and body of SOF operating practices.

The selection and training practices help ensure that SOF operators are smart, independent, and highly motivated. But they can also be high-strung and thrill-seeking. What, one might ask, keeps them from getting out of control or exceeding their authority? The answer is that direct leadership of SOF is exercised by highly experienced noncommissioned officers who have dozens, if not hundreds,

because managers expect it: Advancement in the organization is measured by titles, offices, and having more responsibility over other people. The two-tiered command structure in the military — consisting of noncommissioned officers (sergeants) and commissioned officers (lieutenants through generals) means that individuals with vast operational experience can be kept in the field, close to the action — and this is where they want to be.

### What Business Can Learn

As noted above, the differences between the civilian and military environments mean that some aspects of the SOF's high-performance system cannot be reproduced in the private sector. Yet what executive wouldn't want to field similarly motivated, flexible, and skilled teams in his or her own company? This article has explored a number of important lessons business can learn from the experience of special forces. Here is

to instill in employees, and communicate them relentlessly. Second, the organizational systems and processes — such as assessment and reward and information management — must support and reinforce teamwork. And third, in global organizations, Web 2.0 applications and collaboration technologies need to be leveraged to facilitate teamwork across boundaries. A sense of shared purpose underpins all these efforts. Business leaders cannot always invoke a purpose as weighty as fighting for one's country, but they can always be sharper and clearer about what their mission represents, besides earning a return for shareholders — a goal that, in itself, rarely motivates employees.

In SOF, finally, selfish behavior will get you kicked out, whereas in private-sector organizations it may very well be tolerated as long as the individual is perceived as making money for the company. Punishing the wrong behavior is just as important as rewarding the right behavior — studies have shown that when executives publicly reprimand freeloaders, greater organizational collaboration will result. Business leaders must get much tougher about doing this.

**4. Creating your own special operations teams.** An opportunity undoubtedly exists to increase the use of small, powerful teams that are focused on specific, high-value tasks — not unlike the 12-person Operational Detachments Alpha of the Army Green Berets or the six-person Navy SEAL teams deployed on critical missions. These SOF teams, as we have seen, are made up of individuals who possess deep operational experience — people who in conventional units would be leading large numbers of men and women.

These experienced individuals are empowered to make rapid decisions and use a variety of tactics in order to achieve their missions, and they often remain together as a unit for several years or more. Some engineering, manufacturing, and high-technology companies use a similar team concept for product development programs (for example, Apple's development of the iPod), but there is no reason it could not be applied to more general management issues, such as strategy, customer relationships, marketing, and human resources.

The secret of special operations forces is, in essence, the strategic development of human capital. If companies want to leverage these lessons, they must commit to longer-term investments in their people than is often the norm today. The high-performance system that SOF represents thrives because of a multiyear investment strategy by military commanders and their civilian overseers; it would surely founder if it were subject to the start/stop approach, hazy measures, and lack of accountability characteristic of many corporate programs. +

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