



# Update

## A Lesson in Innovation from the Military

by Michael Enright

It's common wisdom that successful businesses today must embrace innovation to enable long-term success. Whereas in the past, defining, developing, and managing a business or product strategy was enough to create success, in today's highly competitive, dynamic, globalized business world, effective leaders must embrace the constant evaluation of new opportunities and innovations. Executives who fail to address potential innovative opportunities for their businesses, products, and services are likely to find themselves under attack from those who master and deploy the innovative potential first.

When planning, communicating, and implementing innovations for your company, it's useful to have a metaphor that can quickly lay out broad concepts relevant to the challenges you're confronting. In considering the issues that IT organizations face, one such helpful comparison is that of IT and R&D to the US Army and Marine Corps. An Army-like organization likely has the skills and capabilities to deliver products and services efficiently to its customers but may not have an environment in which innovation can naturally occur. A Marine-like R&D organization, on the other hand, is probably structured to successfully enable innovation but may be challenged to make sure that the innovations are implemented by the operational part of the organization, that is,

the "Army side"; in fact, the R&D Marines may not be sure that the rest of the organization is following the R&D team's direction at all.

For the sake of this discussion, putting aside otherwise relevant moral and geopolitical issues inherent in any nation's use of its military, the US has clearly developed a complex and largely successful organizational model for its armed forces. These forces are capable of assembling successful combinations to handle the various small and large, as well as simple and massively complex, missions with which they are challenged. The US Army can deliver a massive force anywhere in the world, fight and win battles, secure and occupy territory, and support the force with all its supply needs until it is relieved. To do this, the Army can create and sustain a complex logistical supply network stretching from the front lines back to suppliers and supply depots in the US. And the Army is required to have this capability for two major, simultaneous wars. It's an incredibly complex challenge and a remarkable capability that is critical to US security and foreign policy. This capability, and the culture and processes required to deliver this capability, map closely to those of a traditional IT organization.

The Marines are renowned for their ability to deliver an incredible punch quickly and flexibly

anywhere in the world. When the US needs to work quickly, to “take the beach” and then drive rapidly forward, to adjust to rapidly changing situations, and to leverage ground, air, and sea forces powerfully and flexibly, the Marines are frequently called in to serve at the “tip of the spear.” They have a structure and an organizational ethos that stress nimbleness, flexibility, speed, and effectiveness. In fact, US Marines are used in other situations in which flexibility and adaptability are at a premium. Consider who guards US embassies around the world: it is Marine guards, small units responsible for quick and flexible action in what can be complex and unpredictable situations. These capabilities, and the culture and requirements to deliver them, map closely to those of an innovative startup or R&D technology team.

## TECH MARINES

It’s fairly obvious that the inherent structure of the Marines model is aligned with enabling innovation. You hire, lead, manage, and empower innovative thinkers who tend to value independence and flexibility, who focus on the power of creating something new rather than on the challenge of delivering products and services efficiently today. These individuals’ character, work process, and general inclination tend not to emphasize otherwise important practical business issues such as operational scalability, manufacturability, and supportability. They’re “Tech Marines,” and they became Tech Marines to focus on the action and creativity rather than on the process and structure.

But in today’s complex world, in both civilian and military spheres, everything is interconnected. Your Tech Marine’s innovations won’t deliver value unless they can be manufactured, installed, scaled, and maintained by an operational organization. In the same way, the Marines need the Army to

follow them, consolidate and secure territory, and occupy the area to enable longer-term post-battle political and military success. To support this, today’s Marines avoid damaging key civilian infrastructure targets such as pipelines, bridges, and electrical systems, even if it makes fighting more challenging. They do so to enable greater success with the ultimate goal of the mission: to win the battle, yes, but then to win the war. If you run a Marine-like organization, you, like the Marine General, must ensure that your team is successful both at winning its battles (by creating innovative new products and services) and at meeting the longer-term corporate goals, in that these innovations must be turned into profitable products, produced and supported efficiently, and add value for your customers. You and your team must know that you won’t be successful if you create disconnected products that don’t add value when they’re “thrown over the wall,” just as today’s Marines must consider future infrastructure needs when fighting today’s battles.

In addition, the Marines on the battlefield don’t want to fight a battle and then have the Army bypass the area when occupying the territory. They need to know that the battles they’re fighting align with the strategic and tactical goals of the campaign. So in addition to ensuring that the Marine soldiers keep the battlefield hospitable for future occupation, the Marine General must make sure that the battle itself is supported by, and will be followed up by, the rest of the organization. To lead without followers is a trap that neither a Marine General nor an R&D leader can find himself in. The whole organization, including the leader of the operational IT organization, as well as any other customers or users who will have to change their business processes to adopt the innovation, must support your team’s efforts.

In sum, if you manage the Tech Marines, the following are important steps to take:

- Create and enable an empowered Marine-like culture that encourages innovation and risk taking.
- Be certain that your team owns the responsibility for ensuring that its innovations are connected with the operational entities that produce or operate the new product or service.
- Ensure that your lead is followed. Don’t be caught fighting an irrelevant battle while the rest of the organization marches off in another direction.

## THE ARMY SIDE

What if you lead an Army-like organization? Perhaps your biggest challenge is that the skills and behaviors that make your organization successful in its core mission are not necessarily the same skills and behaviors that enable the creative environment necessary for innovation. Innovation requires risk, empowerment, and change — traits that are valued but usually carefully controlled and managed in the traditional IT environment. What did the Army do when faced with the need to have a Marine-like capability? It created the Delta Force and the Rangers, elite special units that are part of the Army but that have different training, structures, rules, and missions. You may well need to do the same, but be careful and attentive to the cultural, organizational, and process issues inherent in a hybrid operational and R&D organization.

Forming an elite R&D team inside an existing IT organization is tricky. You must consider the following questions:

- Will this be a formal organization or an ad hoc project team? And will it persist once the immediate project is complete?

- Does the current team include the right people with the right experiences and work style to successfully create innovative products? Or do you have to hire from outside to get the skills and culture right?
- If outsiders are brought in, how can you ensure that they and their work are accepted by the main organization?
- Can individuals from the main organization transfer to the innovative team and then back again? Or is the model to find the best innovators and keep them working with the R&D team and in an innovative capacity?
- How can you balance the natural and inevitable strains that develop between the main organization and the innovative team (i.e., the innovators' new occasionally disruptive changes affect the operators)? And what about the tension created by both groups wanting to lead but at times needing to follow?
- Will the innovators be perceived as "the elite" by the mainstream IT organization? And how will you ensure a culture that prevents cross-organizational rivalries and that guarantees mutual respect and understanding between the teams?
- Will the IT organization follow the lead created by the innovators?
- Will the innovators respectfully own the challenge of ensuring that their work can be implemented by the operational teams?
- Given the culture, products, and kinds of innovative oppor-

tunities, will the company be more successful in setting up an innovative capability within an existing IT "Army" organization (e.g., the Army Rangers model), or is success more likely if an independent unit is set up (e.g., the Tech Marines model)?

Clearly, the answers to these questions are unique to your organization and culture, your team members, and, of course, your products and services.

### CONCLUSION

Whether you lead the Army Rangers or the Tech Marines, you must challenge your innovators to own the responsibility of ensuring that the products, services, and innovations they develop account for eventual use in production and customer environments. Innovations created in a vacuum, without regard for how they'll be produced and delivered, do not deliver meaningful value to your organization; and it's the innovator's job (in conjunction with the operator) to prevent this. If there's a gap between prototype and product, the team that owns the creation of the prototype also owns the successful integration of the prototype into an operating entity. Always lead where others follow, stay in close and open dialogue with your organizational peers and CEO, and ensure that formal cross-organizational goals and objectives are in place that encourage support for your innovative work.

Of course, the Army-Marine metaphor doesn't fit all situations and issues, but it can be a powerful model when evaluating and communicating important structural, cultural, and process issues

that are vital to ensuring that the new innovative products and services can be incubated, proven, and delivered efficiently to your customers.

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