

Going Commando

Bill Fournet
The Persimmon Group

September 2011

Abstract

What does it mean to go commando? Not in the truest sense of the phrase, but how about —going commando by following precedents set by one of the most notably innovative teams in the United States military: the Special Forces? Through their use of Unconventional Warfare, the Special Forces utilize stealthy tactics to achieve the ultimate victory. In the same way, successful project teams can employ the same skills used by Special Forces to achieve their goals. By leaning on the core competencies of adaptability, agility, flexibility, versatility, and discipline and applying Special Forces techniques to project management, a project team will be capable of not only developing and motivating others, but also ultimately improving project success.

Introduction

In October 2001, 14 Special Forces operators landed in northern Afghanistan with a simple mission: Develop a Northern Alliance amongst the tribes and defeat the Taliban in that region. In capturing Mazar-i-Sharif, Doug Stanton in his book, *Horse Soldiers*, says the soldiers —accomplished in two months what Pentagon planners had said would take two years. In all, about 350 Special Forces soldiers, 100 CIA officers, and 15,000 Afghan troops succeeded where the British in the nineteenth century, and the Soviets in the 1980s, had failed (2005). An army of 50,000-60,000 Taliban was defeated. In 3 months, these 14 men, along with the 3,000 tribal fighters they helped organize, defeated and captured more than 30,000 Taliban. This result, considering the imbalance in manpower between these two forces, was incredible. Even more incredible is how they accomplished the mission. The Taliban army had in its arsenal tanks, armored personnel carriers, artillery, and heavy weapons. The Northern Alliance had horses and rifles dating back to World Wars I and II. The most colorful example of why the Special Forces team achieved success:

A wave of [Northern Alliance] horsemen climbed the back side of the first hill, crested it, and rode down it, quickly picking up speed...Mortars started dropping around the horsemen, sending up fountains of red dirt. Rocket-propelled grenades whizzed upward as the Taliban tried timing their impact with the arrival of the Afghans on the crest of each hill... [Northern Alliance tribal leader] Dostum kicked his horse and broke into a gallop. [Special Forces members] Nelson and Jones followed, with three CIA officers behind...As he rode, Nelson saw men topple in their saddles, punched by rifle fire. He heard the pop and whine of rounds passing by his head. He got on the radio and called back to Michael...*Drop the bombs now,* he said. He wanted to time the strike so the bombs hit before the horsemen arrived...Nelson looked up just as the Taliban line exploded...Nelson saw the Taliban line breaking in places...The [Northern Alliance] descended on the Taliban line with a roar. Nelson gazed in awe...They had won. (Stanton, 2005).

Stanton's book provides the account of how these Special Forces team members adapted to the situation, leveraging the strength of U.S. assets to support the local fighter, while brokering tenuous alliances between three tribal leaders who warred amongst themselves prior to fighting the Taliban. Every hour saw change. Every change required adjustment. Yet, the result was achieved fully and dramatically. How many project managers and teams confront constant change, warring executives, cultural diversity, and technological gaps within the organization? Do those project teams achieve results fully and dramatically?

Over the past decade, technological advances in telecommunication, applications, and the internet have enabled an explosive global expansion of economies. A small manufacturing firm in rural Oklahoma may employ 50 people, but provide more than \$10 million in sales to China, India, Germany, and Mexico. The internet economy enables near-instantaneous transactions to occur across the world. What took days or weeks to travel between markets now happens in hours. The speed of change continues to increase exponentially.

As if the technology and global expansion's effects on how fast change impacts organizations weren't enough, in the United States there is a massive shift in the workforce and its characteristics. The younger generations seek to work in teams and run from detailed procedures that are not continuously improved. They are innovative, technologically adept, and developing new organic networks that are globalizing and virtualizing the workplace.

So how are these impacting project teams? Why is this any different now than 20 years ago? Typically, the U.S. military guides corporate America in its thought leadership in innovative operational techniques and leadership practices. Much of what the military develops and demonstrates seeps into corporate practices years later. (Cohen, 2006). Ten years ago, the U.S. military began moving towards a light, more expert force comprised of special operations units—Green Berets (Army), SEALs (Navy), and Delta Force (multi-branch)—that enables a small team to establish itself in an indigent community and develop a military force while stabilizing the population. Special Forces units are considered the —scalpell of the military, while often traditional regular army forces are considered the “baseball bat” (Crandall, 2007).

The events and operations of the past ten years in Afghanistan and Iraq have validated why Special Forces techniques are the best approach going forward—and much of the military's training of regular army units have adjusted to include those techniques. Similarly, this shift is occurring in companies due the globalization, technological, and workforce transformation that have developed over the past decade. And now this transformation is impacting project teams (Howe, 2006).

Based on research of Special Forces techniques, histories, and training approaches, as well as experience from leading and consulting project teams for more than two decades, I have identified five core principles by which project teams should consider the application of Special Forces techniques:

- Adaptability
- Agility
- Flexibility
- Versatility
- Discipline

Competencies

One of the key elements Special Forces are notable for is

their core duty of Unconventional Warfare, which is regarded as their —quintessential competency (Smith, 2006). The alternative capabilities call for unique training, highly tactical and communicative skills, and self-sufficiency unlike any other. As in project management, they are called to achieve specific, well-defined results. Their agility and adaptability will circumvent the ability of conventional forces. The hard, yet generalized skills Special Forces are trained in distinguish them from the regular army because of their unconventional core competencies. Competencies of the team include the capacity to work alone or part of a larger force, as well as organize operations in isolated areas and dangerous places for long time periods with little direction or assistance (—Special Operations, 2010). They are unique not only in their use of force, but also because they are highly trained in the language and culture of the area they are called into. That regional expertise is the base point for much of their success as a team. They understand that the ones they are fighting are not filled with conventional power either; so they must be organized, trained, and equipped to handle the most agile, flexible situation.

Selecting the right people for the Special Forces cannot be emphasized enough. In their Assessment and Selection process, it's quickly understood that —Your Mind is Your Best Weapon (—Special Forces, n.d.). They stress that physical fitness alone will not get you through their selection process. The importance they place on tactical skills, leadership, and motivation throughout the entire course shows that the stamina required of members in the Special Forces cannot be compared to that of the regular army. The special teams will be called upon when it's dangerous or not feasible for anyone else to do the job. They are required to work in small, autonomous groups while remaining adaptable to ever-changing conditions. This —hardiness, a term created by Dr. Suzanne Kobasa, describes the need for individuals who are committed, controlled and unafraid to face challenge (as cited in Barton, 2008).

How does that apply to project management? The same characteristics recruited for the Special Forces are needed and required out of successful project management teams. Project management teams of the past have often taken the approach of coming into an issue and trying to fix it with a conventional solution, whatever it may be. That's similar to how the regular army works. They are trained to be so regimented in their thoughts and actions that very different situations are often handled the same way. Project teams also often pursue defined, structured lines of command and methodology. The processes may be rote and procedural, with the goal to be to create conformity through consistency.

Yet, over the past decade, new approaches to project management, such as agile methodologies—seek consistency in project results through means other than conformity, procedures, and conventional command hierarchies. We find project management moving into a new century filled with unknowns, project teams must be agile to be successful. They must possess a broad and unique range of capabilities that exceed the routine training and tools of conventional project teams.

In the current Global War on Terrorism, Special Forces team members increasingly find themselves in quickly changing circumstances. They know it is critical for success that they are able to adapt quickly to these changing environments. The five primary principles outlined previously are key techniques that should be applied to both the Special Forces and project management. Exhibit 1 goes into further detail about characteristics that apply to those techniques. To fully understand the value of these principles, it's valuable to understand what they truly mean. According to Webster's dictionary, their definitions hold similar traits, but each is distinguishable.

- **Adaptability:** A modification according to changing circumstances.
- **Agility:** Marked by ready ability to move with quick easy grace, or having a quick resourceful character.
- **Flexibility:** Yielding to influence, or characterized by a ready capability to adapt to new, different, or changing requirement.
- **Versatility:** Changing or fluctuating readily.
- **Discipline:** Training that corrects, moulds, or perfects the moral character (Merriam-Webster Online Dictionary, n.d.).

Applications

Applying Special Forces techniques to project management can yield real success for organizations, but the path to implementing them can be difficult. Many organizations experienced dramatic philosophical and operational changes as they migrated from waterfall project management methods to more agile approaches. For project managers, the move to agile bred concerns of how to manage scope creep and the risk of light documentation. But many of these project managers have made the shift, recognizing that the techniques they applied—risk management, status management, communications—were the same, but the required time to use them changed. Agile approaches place more emphasis

on trust, team member expertise, competencies (strong, qualified resources), and team dynamics (how well does the team work) than waterfall methods that emphasis procedures, decision gates, and universal rules. Yet, agility is where the global economy is headed, and the 18 to 24 month projects are being broken into smaller efforts in order to deliver value earlier, because the needs will have changed in 18 months.

There are a number of applications in how Special Forces techniques can improve project delivery success, but there are two that are fundamental and often missed by organizations. The first deals with how project teams integrate with and consider the culture in which they operate. The second focuses on the project team itself, and how it operates daily, as well as how it invests and plans for replacement of its personnel without impacting the project.

Cultural vs. Model Awareness

Successful projects can learn much from the Special Forces' approaches to local, indigent populations in the combat or operational areas. Unlike conventional forces that are often used in combat to deliver all the necessary force to win a battle over their military foe, Special Forces teams are dropped into areas to develop, train, and motivate the populace to fight the foe. This is a stark difference, as conventional forces are commanded by their internal leadership, while Special Forces operations often are led by local, tribal, or national leaders that have no direct accountability to the United States or the Special Forces team. Special Forces team members serve as trusted advisors, but how they develop into that role involves deep knowledge of the culture, adaptability to its needs, and demonstration of shared pain and help instead of —telling them what to do.

In Afghanistan and Vietnam—two wars where special forces teams established long-term outposts with allied tribes with great success—there were two events that often solidified trust between the U.S. and local forces faster than traditional means of providing money, weapons, technology, and coercion. One of those events was Special Forces team members fighting side-by-side with the local fighters, where the perception was that the U.S. forces were just there to train or to use locals to fight on their behalf. The second of these events was when the Special Forces team members, trained as medics, treated and saved the native population's lives. From combat wounds to delivering babies to treating illness, the focus of helping the people they are working with enables them to quickly become part of the society.

The training and initiative required by Special Forces team members to prepare for the roles of combat fight, trainer, social and political advisor, doctor, and technology innovator, far exceeds the training and intention of the conventional force soldiers. Fluency in the language and cultural customs adds an additional layer of complexity. Yet, the nature of conflict over the past decade repeatedly demonstrates why the Special Forces approach to culture is quickly becoming the norm for conventional forces too. As a recent example, former U.S. Central Command commander General David Petraeus recently required the book *Three Cups of Tea* by Craig Mortenson to be read by all U.S. Army officers deploying to Afghanistan (Ricks, 2009).

Prior to the recent and noticeable shift in the use, training, and leadership in conventional forces towards the Special Forces techniques, those conventional forces failed in their cultural awareness and trust-building with local populations. Following Vietnam, the U.S. participated in no long-term conflicts with large numbers of military personnel until the Afghanistan and Iraqi conflicts of the past decade (McRaven, 1996). Most combat troops, organized in structured, hierarchical divisions (i.e. divisions, brigades, regiment, battalions, etc.) are trained to deliver force as quickly and with as few casualties as possible. In the early years of Afghanistan, this conventional force model's application into a tribal, ethnically diverse, decentralized (borderline anarchical) society failed. One example that illustrates this point was during the search for Taliban and al-Qaeda fights in Afghan villages: The Special Forces teams understood the role the village elder served, and respected the customs related to the role. This included his ownership of a weapon (typically an ancient World War I or II rifle). Afghan villagers trusted the U.S. Special Forces operators, noting that —the men in the Toyota trucks were okay! (referring to transportation used by U.S. SpecOps teams). Yet, conventional forces were also sent to search these villages, and without their cultural awareness and training in local customs, they reverted to what they knew—a model of force. They often disrespected the elder, kicking in the doors of homes and confiscated the elder's weapon. This action eroded the weeks of trust in United States military and developed concern as to its ultimate role in Afghanistan (MacPherson, 2005).

Many project teams fail to understand the culture in which they work—especially contracted project teams (vendor-client engagements). The reliance of methodologies can bleed into the development of a model. Models by themselves are not bad, as they can

provide frameworks to leverage past successes or lessons. However, when models are applied without first establishing cultural awareness, then the team does not know whether or not it will achieve the desired outcome. It may become the —door kicker! instead of the —trust builder!. Project teams should pursue an onboarding process of team members that requires job shadowing and embedding of its personnel for a few days in the customer or end user's environment. Through observation and interaction, these —days in the life! of someone the project will affect builds trust, goodwill, and a deeper understanding of their requirements and context. Additionally, project managers must remind their team members that several clients may have the same need or objectives in which the project is to fulfill, but how the project delivers those objectives may be different by client based on their culture.

Succession Handling

Traditional project teams are often seen as large scaled divisions that progress in linear fashions with a great deal of resources and structure (Special Forces, n.d.). If you only heard that description, you could easily think it was being applied it to the regular army: The large military group that is composed of a large amount of preparation, scheduling and procedure. However, what happens to that group when the unexpected occurs and you lose a team member along the way? In the conventional army, a massive impact can be made in the team depending on who steps in the void. The team is so regimented to work a certain way that a single individual can throw it off balance. It is the same way when looking at traditional project management teams. Team members are often so compartmentalized that they don't know how to react to a change in role relationships. To begin straying from this sense of structure to a more fluid and organic model means to become more human-centric, or to have a higher consideration for the human aspect of roles (Cohen, 2006).

In the Special Forces, the broad band of expertise they hold is beyond what the regular army is capable of due to their ability to shift as their role shifts. Referred to as America's Swiss Army Knife (Special Operations, 2010), members of the Special Forces must be prepared to act as commanding officer one moment and medic the next. Comparatively in project management, it's important to move towards a more human-centric way of thought. Often times when dealing with project teams, we see people as resources—merely a body filling a role. A developer is looked to develop, an engineer to apply scientific knowledge to develop a technical solution and

so forth. However, what about those roles that are not as easily defined on paper? What about the developer who is a great communicator, or the engineer with great leadership skills? Those abilities haven't always been looked on in the past as being important to a specific role in a project team (Blaber, 2008).

Project teams, just as in Special Forces, are built around trust. You must trust your teammate to not only fill their assigned role, but also hold allegiance to the team as a whole. The —all for one and one for all— mindset is vital to accomplish the task at hand. When a team loses one of its members, a link in the chain is broken. Finding a member to fill that link that not only has the necessary skills to fill the role, but also carries character qualities that mesh with the rest of the team is vital. Teams are built around personalities and trust. For example, you have an outstanding project team working for you. They are built on great leaders, question-askers, and self-starters. Seeing that they are such a great team together, you decide to break them up and make them individual leaders of other teams, hoping you will get the same result. Unfortunately, what made that first team so outstanding was not necessarily the individuals, but how they worked as a single unit. When you look at teams for the human beings that make them up, you will often find a much better result than if you only looked at the technical roles that need to be filled.

Conclusion

Project management requires leadership. As organizations direct their project teams to deliver results more rapidly, project managers must analyze how best to lead their teams to achieving those results. The U.S. military experienced the same drivers over the past decade, and recognized that its Special Forces units best accomplished their results. The techniques developed and used by U.S. Special Forces can be applied to project teams to build on the five basic principles of Adaptability, Agility, Flexibility, Versatility, and Discipline.

Bill Fournet is the President and CEO for The Persimmon Group. He provides business strategy, educational development, and information technology consulting to clients in various industry verticals, including energy, financial services, aerospace, telecommunications, government and human resources, among others. . He is a sought after speaker and educator and balances this demand with continuing to be a leadership and management practitioner.

The Persimmon Group is a management consulting firm that works with organizations, in both the public and private sector that want a tailored approach to business growth and improvement opportunities. Since 2004, TPG's experienced consultants have provided a wide range of expertise in many industries and in numerous areas including business strategy, project management, information technology, and leadership development, among others.