

Learning from the Marines



By Stan Pohmer

It's often said management skills can be taught, but leadership skills are ingrained at birth. But Marine officers are trained in both. What can we glean from their training and expertise as we face the challenges of 2010?

Though 2009 will not go into the annals of history as being an outstanding year in terms of sales or profit for our industry, we lived to see another day and are now ready to take on the challenges of 2010 — which will be daunting, as consumer spending will still be tight.

A question for you: Did you manage your way through the 2009 crises, or did you lead your way through them? Many of you don't really care which course you took as long as you survived, but there's a distinct difference in the methods you could have used to deal with the terrible hand you were dealt. And the path you took could have a distinct bearing on where you and your company end up when these crises are behind us and consumers start spending more freely again.

development of management skills and the application of management theory; there aren't too many courses taught on leadership!

I disagree; I think both leadership and management can be learned and taught.

You've heard it before: "When things get tough, call in the Marines!" Is this because they are the dumbest branch of our military services and too stupid to realize that they are being put at the greatest risk? That the chances for survival are remote, and they have little chance of success? To the contrary! They are called upon because they are the best prepared, both from a leadership and a situational awareness management and execution standpoint with the best odds of success! Marine Corps officers are taught to be leaders because it's recognized that operational execution is only a part (albeit an important one) of being successful. In fact, the training and application of leadership and management skills received in the USMC are prime reasons why ex-Marine officers are among the most sought after and successful business leaders.

There are 10 leadership principles that are taught in the USMC that make sense for business leaders:

- Know yourself and seek improvement
- Be technically and tactically proficient
- Know your Marines and look out for their welfare
- Keep your Marines informed
- Set the example
- Ensure the task is understood, supervised and completed
- Train your Marines as a team
- Make sound and timely decisions
- Develop a sense of responsibility among your subordinates
- Employ your command in accordance with its capabilities

The USMC also tries to instill leadership traits in their officers, qualities of thought and action that, if ingrained in daily activities, allow them to earn the respect, confidence and loyal cooperation of others they work with, both subordinates and superiors. Here are the leadership traits:

- Justice
- Judgment
- Dependability
- Initiative
- Tact
- Enthusiasm

There's a lot to learn from Marines' leadership and management training and practices, things that you can adopt and use in your personal and professional development.

Some time ago, I read that great managers look inward, inside the company and the individuals in it. They focus on operational execution and the differences in style, goals, needs and motivations of their employees, guiding each person toward the right ways to convert their unique talents into performance. Great leaders, on the other hand, look outward. They look out at the competition, out at the future, out at alternative routes forward. They focus on broad patterns, finding connections and cracks, and then press home their advantage where the resistance is weakest. They must be visionaries, strategic thinkers and activators.

Chances are you unconsciously employed a combination of both leadership and managerial skills in 2009, with more emphasis on managing the situation at hand. But as you look forward to positioning your company to take advantage of the renewed growth potential to come, leadership will be more critical.

It's been said that you either were a born leader or not, and leadership skills can't be taught. (But management can.) And this is reinforced in all of the business schools. Most of them focus on the

- Bearing
- Unselfishness
- Courage
- Knowledge
- Loyalty
- Endurance
- Integrity
- Decisiveness

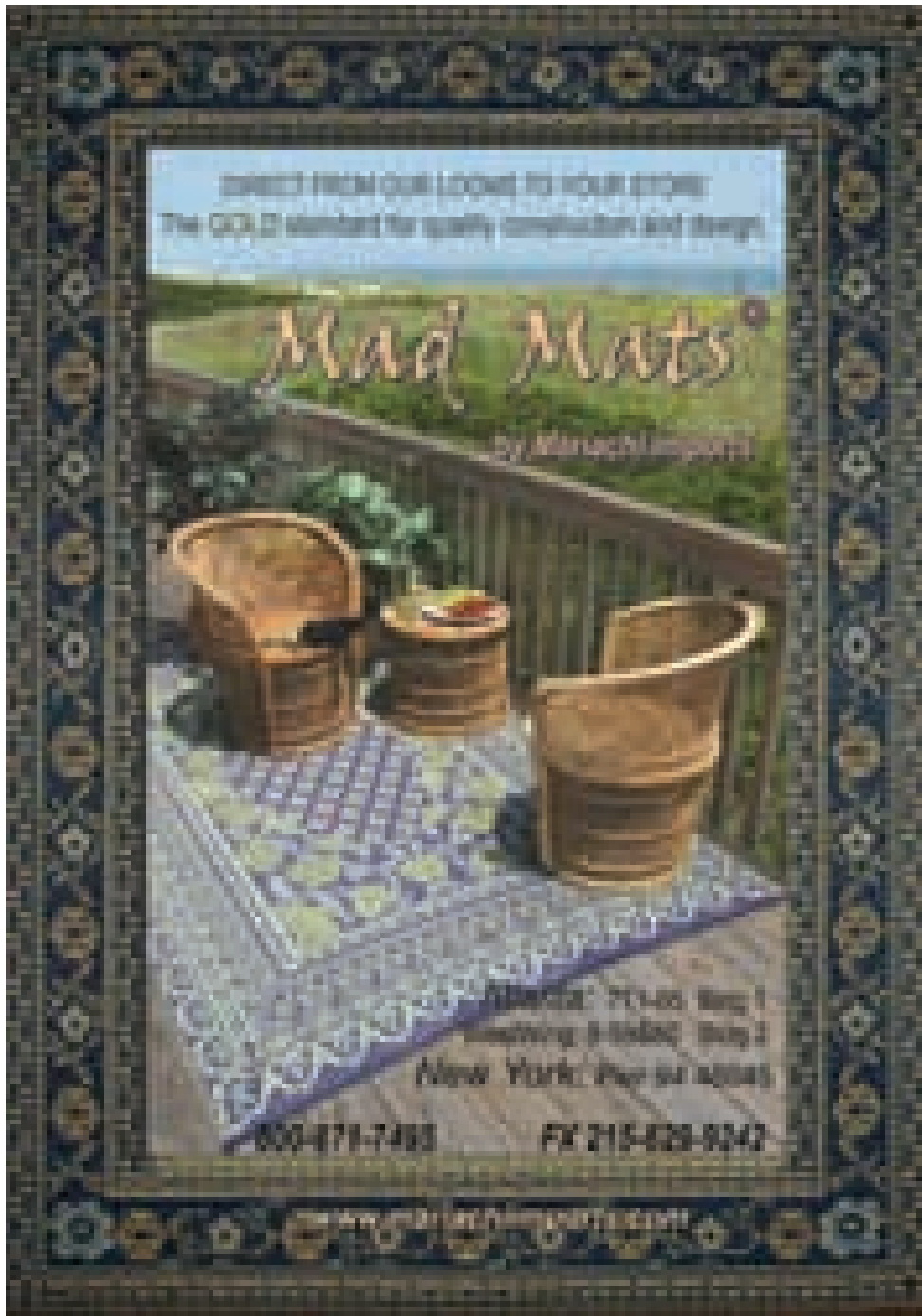
Here are two links that take you to the USMC documents that not only explain their interpretation of these leadership principles and traits, but also give examples of how to implement and personally improve in them.

Leadership Principles: <http://bit.ly/USMC-leadership>

ly/USMC-leadership

Leadership Traits: <http://bit.ly/USMC-leadershiptraits>

The stories about the rigorous training that Marines go through are legendary. The goal of this intense training, however, is not to make life miserable for the indi-



Reading Between the Lines

Leadership is important, but managing the situation you're presented is also critical, and the USMC training doesn't stop with leadership. The Marines aren't running a business, per se, but they have to react to situations not always of their own creation and adapt their responses situationally, much like you do in your company. Author David H. Freedman recognized the management strengths of Marine officers and studied them in depth. His research culminated with *Corps Business: the 30 Management Principles of the USMC*, and many of the principles in this book have direct application to any business. Here are some of my favorites:

- *Aim for the 70 percent solution...* You'll never have all of the parts and pieces figured out, so assess as much of the situation as possible, then be decisive; you can always adapt as you execute.
- *Organize to the Rule of Three...* Prioritize. It's difficult to maintain focus and execute well on more than three things at a time.
- *Build authority on demand into the hierarchy...* Maintain the management pyramid, but empower at the lowest levels.
- *Distribute competence...* Educate and train. Cross train in job responsibilities to give you flexibility and improved effectiveness.
- *Keep plans simple and flexible...* The more complex the plan is, the more rigid and married to the plan you become, and it's difficult to adjust when you need to.

viduals; it allows them to practice their leadership and management skills so these learned behaviors are instinctive. They are prepared and can adapt to the changing environment.

I'm not suggesting that you turn your business into a Marine boot camp or manage your teams like raw recruits, but you can't argue with the achievements and successes of the Marine Corps, and much of that is the result of their principles and training. Semper Fi...

Stan Pohmer is president of Pohmer Consulting Group in Minnetonka, Minn. He can be reached at spohmer@pohmer-consulting.com or (952) 545-7943.