
Rapid reaction force for success

The West needs a wartime response to today's challenges, argues Chris Donnelly

'War puts nations to the test. Just as mummies fall to pieces the moment they are exposed to the air, so war pronounces its sentence of death on those social institutions which have become ossified.'

It is more than 150 years since Karl Marx wrote these words. Much of his thinking has been discredited since then, but his understanding of the revolutionizing impact of war on society has been proved correct. His understanding was based on the appreciation that the most important feature of war, particularly large-scale and protracted war, was that it was usually accompanied by more rapid and profound social, economic and technological change than was the case in peacetime. It was this drastic change that overtook the ability of institutions to adapt and stay fit for purpose and brought about their collapse.

If war is change then to all intents and purposes the world is at war. We are living through a period of change more widespread, rapid and profound than we have ever experienced outside a world war. Moreover, this change has been sustained over a longer time than any world war of the past two centuries, and it is still increasing.

But because this is not a shooting war like the Second World War, western countries have not adopted a wartime mentality to cope with the instability which drastic change brings. We are now trying to cope in a wartime situation with a peacetime mentality, peacetime institutions and peacetime procedures shaped by the past 70 years of living in a stable, secure, rules-based environment. The speed of global change has outpaced all our national and international institutions. They have been unable to react and adapt fast enough to remain fit for purpose.

There is a good example in the British education system, which knows how many IT specialists are needed but doesn't provide them, instead producing 30,000 graduates in media studies a year for only 500 jobs. Problems like this are often recognized, but the system resists change due to vested interests and inertia: with peacetime mentalities, it does not matter enough.

This inability to adapt institutions because they have become so strong and inflexible is paralysing our social, economic and political system. It applies in government even more than it applies in the corporate boardroom. It even applies in armies which are always preparing to fight the last war, and fail, and fail again. Profes-

sor Leon Megginson, interpreting Darwin in societal terms (and in a quotation often attributed to Darwin himself), put it most succinctly: 'It is not the strongest of the species that survives ... It is the one that is most adaptable to change.'

Now, we should be learning from our failures, but we are not, because today we only record lessons, we don't learn from them and amend our procedures as we should. Institutional resistance to change is just too strong; performance management, with its corrosive ideology of self over team spirit, too entrenched.

So, what qualities and characteristics are needed to select people for leadership today in government departments, big companies and other institutions? In each case, the qualities are not a straight choice between clear alternatives, not exclusively one thing or the other. Rather, think of a cursor on a line between two related qualities, and moving the cursor along the line so that it is closer to the wartime position than to the peacetime.

The first quality requires a changed balance between training and education. In peacetime, we can maximize on training, because we have slow development. In a period of slow change, experience counts. So we ask for proof of everything. Evidence-based policy is what we think we need. Best practice is revered. All these have a value, but all are based only on the study of the past.

Today, the cursor needs to move along the line away from training, towards education. Education differs from training in that it prepares people by enabling them to distil principles to guide their actions, so that they can use an understanding of things to deal with the unexpected.

The second quality concerns management. In times of slow change we can *manage* everything. We can give in to the desire to *control* everything. But at times of rapid change, we cannot do that. We need to move the cursor along the line away from management towards leadership. Of course, we will always need management, but the meaning most organizations give to management today in reality is 'administration'. To deal with a situation of rapid change what is required is leadership. Leadership understands that in a period of tumultuous change you cannot *control*, you have to *command*. To command means to trust and to delegate, because there is never time to check up on everything.

The third quality is risk. In peacetime we



become risk-averse. Everything has to be failsafe. But in times of war – or in times of rapid change – we need a system that encourages us to take risks; that allows us to make mistakes and learn from them. We have to create an environment for staff where it is safe to fail and try again. This means we must move the cursor along the line away from ‘error and trial’ towards ‘trial and error’.

The fourth quality is effectiveness. Peacetime forces us to be *efficient*. It forces us to plan long term, to tie everything up for a long time so we have no reserves. But in wartime that’s a disaster, because it means we are no longer flexible and cannot respond to a surprise or when things take a bad turn. It’s the same in business and government during today’s rapid change. In an environment of rapid change we must have a clearly articulated, long-term vision and clear objective. Guided by that strategic understanding, we have to be able to think and act very short term indeed. Strategy is not ‘having a big, detailed plan’. Strategy is being able to adapt and react, to take advantage of a situation.

All that means is that institutions in wartime/periods of rapid change *must* operate differently from how they do in peace time if they are to survive or flourish.

The hierarchical structure of an organization in peacetime is very different from in wartime. In war, you look for the people who can do things best, whatever their age or rank. Then you listen to what they say.

The institutions of the West have been slow to adapt. Not so a lot of the West’s competitors. Countries like Russia and China – and sub-state actors like Al Qaeda or Islamic State – have learned more rapidly how to cope with today’s instability, complexity and rapid change. They are presenting us now not with a crisis which will pass, but with a strategic challenge, which we are not matching up to because we are trying to deal with it tactically. These countries and organizations want to set up their own alternative world system to rival ours. We are today in a constant competition with these and all other actors in the global ecosystem, be they nation states, sub-state groups or big corporations. Our success in this competition will only be guaranteed if we learn to cope with change as they have. Change is war.

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