THE TALENT WAR

HOW SPECIAL OPERATIONS AND GREAT ORGANIZATIONS WIN ON TALENT

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The original Horse Soldiers from 5th Special Forces Group

Source: Defense Visual Information Distribution Service / Maj. Melody Faulkenberry

INTRODUCTION

US Army Special Forces officer Perry Blackburn sat in the cold, dimly lit fuselage of an MH-47 Chinook. He had been tasked with a mission of strategic importance for our nation, and he was now midflight from Uzbekistan to Afghanistan. He was about to enter his first combat experience, and his mind was racing.

Perry's thoughts kept returning to his family and his wife, especially his wife's last words before he left: "Lead your men well."

Just weeks earlier, planes had flown into the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, launching the United States into its first war in more than a decade. The Global War on Terrorism would become the most significant combat action the US military had seen since the Vietnam War, nearly thirty years prior. And Perry and his troops—with the Fifth Special Forces Group (5th SFG), nicknamed "the Legion"—would be among the first US boots on the ground. A few brave men, all alone, unfamiliar with the terrain of Afghanistan and its people and outnumbered by enemy forces, would send a loud message to the world in the wake of one of our nation's largest tragedies.

The helicopter carried twelve of the best soldiers the United States Special Operations Command (USSOCOM) had to offer, thirty days of MREs (Meals, Ready to-Eat—bland but nutritional rations), and every piece of ammunition they could find. Major Perry Blackburn and his twelve Special Operations soldiers (called *operators* for short) had spent the last ninety-six hours in Uzbekistan, preparing for the insertion into Afghanistan to bring the fight to Al-Qaeda and the Taliban. They had been delaying the journey due to inclement weather, but they couldn't wait any longer. Though the flight would be difficult, they rebalanced the helicopter loads and took off.

Most pilots wouldn't even attempt the flight in those weather conditions, but the crew flying the MH-47 were part of the 160th Special Operations Aviation Regiment, known as "the Night Stalkers" or TF-160th. They were among the most skilled pilots in the world. If anyone could get Perry and his team safely to their drop point, it was these pilots.

Still, Perry kept close track of the helicopter's progress, planning what they would do if they were to crash here in the mountains. As his mind raced through strategy and tactics, he looked out over his operators. All of them were sleeping despite the helicopter's turbulence and the imminent combat operations. He wondered, not for the first time, *How did we manage to find these men?* These men of the US Army Special Forces (known colloquially as Green Berets) were selflessly willing to step into what the military refers to as a VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity, and ambiguity) environment. These men had been highly screened and assessed for their capability to endure and overcome the most complex challenges our nation faces. Every last one of them was an incredible soldier

Ryan became a good SEAL. Mike and Ryan both reported to SEAL Team 3, and they eventually deployed together to Ramadi, Iraq, where they fought in the Battle of Ramadi in 2006, one of the fiercest battles during the Global War on Terror. Ryan performed as an automatic weapons (machine gun) gunner during his days in Ramadi. After months of fierce fighting, Ryan was critically wounded during a major operation in south-central Ramadi, a contested area held by Al-Qaeda forces. He was shot in the face by a sniper while laying down machine gun fire to cover a squad of SEALS closing on the enemy.

Days after Ryan was wounded, doctors declared he would never recover his sight. Insult to injury, he also lost his sense of smell and taste, but it didn't slow him down. After his injury, Ryan displayed the same drive and resiliency he demonstrated during his days at BUD/S. He refused to quit or feel sorry for himself. Despite all the setbacks, he finished his bachelor's in business with a 4.0 GPA. He ascended the 14,411 feet of Mount Rainier, and he even shot and killed a trophy bull elk. All without his sight, smell, or taste.

Ryan underwent countless surgeries and rehabilitation in the years after Ramadi. In 2009, only a few weeks after he found out he and his wife, his high school sweetheart, would be having a baby, he aspirated and died during his twenty-second surgery for his injuries. He became what SEALS call the "last fatality of the Battle of Ramadi." He was the third SEAL from his task unit to die. Fellow soldier Marc Lee was the first, and the second was Michael Monsoor, who was awarded the Medal of Honor for jumping on a grenade to save two SEALS, one of which was Mike Sarraille.

It's hard for Mike to believe now that he ever doubted Ryan. He was always waiting for a time to apologize, and he found that time

while they were in Ramadi. After Mike apologized, Ryan said, "It's okay. Everyone's been misreading me all my life."

BUD/S attracts some of the highest-potential youth from across the nation, all highly intelligent, highly athletic, and highly motivated by the opportunity to prove themselves. Classes have included Ivy League graduates as well as NCAA and Olympic athletes. Classes have also included investment bankers and kids right out of high school who never played a sport in their life. Instructors have long since given up on predicting who will succeed and who won't because more often than not, they guess wrong. An elite athlete who can run farther and faster than everyone else has no greater chance of graduating than a former high school speech and debate member with "no quit" in him. The Special Operations assessment and selection processes destroy any previously held notions of what talent looks like.

The power of talent when you find it is undeniable, but talent may not look like what you think it will. Ryan didn't look the part of a SEAL. In the business world, he'd be the candidate with a resume that is immediately discarded. Fortunately, the Special Operations community has a talent mindset, and each branch's respective assessment and selection programs were built specifically to identify talent, not just people who *look* like talent. The instructors trusted the assessment and selection process, and they didn't eliminate Ryan from the training, giving him the chance to prove he had the attributes to succeed.

How many Ryan Jobs have you passed over for a job, simply because they didn't look like you thought they should? Talent will not and should not fit in a mold. You can't see talent on the surface; you need a hiring methodology, like BUD/S or the other Special

Operations schoolhouses, that reveals it. To create such a process, you must first reassess your definition of talent.

WHAT IS TALENT?

At the most basic level, talent equals high-potential candidates—the people most likely to become high performers. Talent is people like Ryan Job. It is the individual who never gives up, who performs in high-pressure situations, and who will win when others say it's impossible. Talent drives teams forward. *And talent wins.*

Talent comes in many shapes and sizes. In an ideal world, you will have high performers at every level of your organization, from top to bottom. At different levels, high performers require different strengths and skills. A talented salesperson is going to look different from a talented software engineer, who is going to look different from a talented marketing director. Even within a single role, there is no prototypical "perfect candidate." To assume so spells disaster for any organization. If you want talent, you have to get rid of your preconceived notions about what the right candidate looks like.

For many companies, the number one factor in a hiring decision is the candidate's industry experience and hard skills. Though this may appear to be a sound strategy, it is exactly how you mistakenly eliminate talented candidates. As we will discuss further in chapter 4, "Hire for Character; Train for Skill," the best way to identify a high-potential candidate is to look deeper at *character*.

If you dissect the attributes that make a high-performing Special Operations soldier effective, you will find that they are the same attributes that make high performers successful in any industry.

minute on. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat. And that concluded the first morning of training.

Over the next six months, the instructors push the students to their mental and physical limits, searching for those who have the drive, mental toughness, and resiliency to make it through to the end. During the infamous Hell Week, the students undergo five days and five nights of professionally led, scientifically orchestrated stress, with no more than two to three hours of sleep total. As the students are sent through one grueling physical activity after another, more and more students walk up and ring the all-too-iconic bell indicating a DOR ("drop on request") to quit BUD/S. By the end of Hell Week, of the 250 candidates who start the school, only thirty to forty will remain, with some classes seeing as few as ten finish the training.

Jonny was one of the few with enough drive, tenacity, and resiliency to make it through BUD/S and become a SEAL. Jonny and Mike completed BUD/S together and went on to serve together at SEAL Team 3 during the Battle of Ramadi (2006) and the Battle of Sadr City (2008). On his first combat deployment, while operating alongside Iraqi soldiers inside the enemy-held city of Ramadi, Jonny heroically ran into the street to pull a wounded Iraqi to safety and rendered medical aid to the soldier. He was awarded the Silver Star for his gallantry. During his second deployment, the Battle for Sadr City, he received the Navy and Marine Corps Commendation Medal with Valor.

Shortly after his second deployment, Jonny was selected for a Navy officer candidate program and attended the University of San Diego, graduating with a 3.98 GPA in mathematics. He then opted to join the Navy Medical Corps, earning a Doctor of Medicine from

Harvard Medical School. Years later, he applied to be an astronaut with NASA. Out of more than eighteen thousand applicants, he was one of twelve chosen to join NASA Astronaut Group 22.

By the age of thirty-four, Jonny Kim had become a combat-decorated Navy SEAL, doctor, and astronaut. Jonny is an incredible human being, but among SEALs, he is not an anomaly.

Soldiers, in general, are already a unique breed, but Special Operations soldiers are their own species. Special Operations Forces (SOF) willingly take on the work that no one else can do, partly out of a sense of duty and partly because they love a great challenge. Time after time, they face the seemingly impossible and win anyway. They consistently push themselves past physical and mental limitations, overcoming all odds to accomplish the mission. They simply refuse to quit. Quitting is not part of their DNA.

When it comes to winning, no one does it better or more consistently than US Special Operations. Their success comes down to their people and a widely held belief:

Talent + Leadership = Victory

Special Operations Forces recognize that people are the most critical determinant of success, and as such, they have poured time, energy, and resources into cultivating and honing their assessment and selection of talent. There is no process equal to Special Operations assessment and selection. A deeper look at SOF talent acquisition practices can help your organization better select and develop talent that will achieve greatness. It starts by understanding the fundamental talent mindset that drives Special Operations.

industry-specific experience, but he was one of those people who performed time and time again. Whatever you put in front of him, he would find a way through it, over it, or around it. He was relentless and adaptable.

Despite Chris's strengths, he'd been passed over by many companies. Most never even called him in for an interview, sending his application straight to the resume black hole because of his lack of industry experience. When he did make it to the interview phase, everybody loved him. He was articulate and had a great attitude. No one doubted his ability, but they saw him as a risk because he didn't have the experience or an already built list of industry contacts.

Daniel ultimately chose Jeremy over Chris. Two weeks later, he called Mike and George and told them, "We made a huge mistake." He explained that Jeremy had no humility and was not receptive to direction. None of the people working with him—not his leaders, peers, or team members—felt he was a team player. Jeremy was what is known as "high performance, low trust" in the Special Operations community.

Chris had the character, and Jeremy had the skills. With Chris's learning ability, he would have been able to pick up the needed technical skills for the role within a matter of months, if not weeks. In contrast, it would be nearly impossible to teach Jeremy the needed team-ability and humility, even with years of work.

Daniel and his team didn't want to fire Jeremy because it would look like a bad hire (which it was) and draw unwanted attention from their senior leaders. So Jeremy stayed in his role for a year. In that time, attrition among his team skyrocketed, and sales went down. He brought far more damage than value. His department

was unrecognizable as what it had been, both in terms of the team and the culture. The company finally fired Jeremy, but it's unclear how long it will take for them to fully recover from that bad hire.

Meanwhile, Chris was offered a position as a senior consultant at a management consulting firm. In less than a year, he became a successful project manager, building out his own team and driving exceptional results.

Daniel had made a very costly mistake. But it was a mistake he would learn from. Factoring in the costs of hiring, onboarding, and exiting Jeremy, Daniel's company had wasted thousands of dollars, to say nothing of the lost opportunity cost associated with *not* hiring Chris as well as the immeasurable cost of the toxic culture Jeremy created. By the time Daniel finally replaced Jeremy, the company had spent an entire year without needed leadership in a key department. That meant twelve months operating below their full potential—twelve months of lowered output, twelve months of reduced revenue, twelve months behind their competition.

Daniel's mistake was the same one that countless companies make every day: he'd hired based on a resume, hiring for industry experience, not character. Character is infinitely more important in hiring decisions than skill or industry experience because while you can train skill, you can't train character. That bears repeating: *you can train skill, but you can't train character*. If you only change one thing about your talent acquisition process, it should be hiring for character and training for skill. Stop hiring based on resumes. Stop hiring based on university degrees. Stop hiring based on industry experience. Instead, start hiring character. Start hiring *talent*.

Mike likes to joke that he's allergic to people who aren't humble. People without humility simply do not do well in Special Operations, or *any* team, because they prioritize themselves. In contrast, individuals with high humility recognize that they are simply one member of a larger, more important team, regardless of whatever their title is. As such, they tend to be selfless, putting the needs of the organization and others above themselves.

Someone with high humility also understands that, no matter how talented they are, victory is never guaranteed. Humility gives a person the ability to look in the mirror and do a brutal self-assessment. It prevents them from becoming complacent. Humility can counter what military leaders refer to as the "disease of victory." Throughout the history of warfare, there have been examples of military units beating their opponents multiple times in a row, growing more arrogant and more complacent with each victory. Overconfident, they charge into battle again, certain of victory, only to lose. With humility, an individual understands that just because they're successful once, twice, or even a dozen times in a row doesn't mean they own the keys to success.

As a quick caveat, humility is not the same thing as low self-confidence. Ego and pride are both useful, as they can drive people to do amazing things. There must be a balance of ego and humility. When someone's ego begins telling them that they know everything and cannot learn from anyone, the scale is tipping toward arrogance, making them a danger to themselves and the organization. Similarly, if someone always caves to others and does not trust their own expertise, the scale is tipped to low self-confidence, not true humility.

Retired SEAL Master Chief Jason Tuschen specifies that you want to search for "confident humility," which is when "a person realizes that they make mistakes and have weaknesses that they struggle to overcome, but they're confident that they can plow through it, either through teamwork or through grit and perseverance." One of the benefits of confident humility, he says, is that people are "confident and humble enough to ask for help when they know they are struggling."

In our experience, those with humility accomplish more than those without it, both because they understand that they always have more to learn and because they are willing to ask for help.

INTEGRITY

Someone with integrity understands what is legal and what is right and aligns their actions and words with both. *Integrity is not optional.*

High performance without integrity is dangerous and will backfire eventually, like it did with Enron and Wells Fargo. In *The War for Talent*, Enron was held up as an example of good talent acquisition and talent development practices. The same month the book was published, October 2001, the Enron scandal came to light. Through unethical practices, the company had hidden billions of dollars of debt. The seemingly high-performing company filed for bankruptcy and never recovered, ruining the lives of thousands and severely impacting the energy sector and US economy.

Several years ago, Wells Fargo was involved in a staggering fraud scandal involving the creation of millions of fake checking and savings accounts without customers' consent. After the fraud came

Plus, your departments should be working together, so they should be hiring together too. Homogenous hiring teams encourage the creation of silos at work, where each department functions as its own entity, without connecting to the larger team. Some of the most successful companies—like Amazon, for instance—specifically involve A-players from other departments in the hiring process to help eliminate silo bias.

MISTAKE #3: THERE IS NO TRAINING

The skills of talent assessment and selection are not innate. In the military, there are a multitude of procedures and processes to put someone in an instructor role. There are courses and instructors for the instructors. There is *training*.

In the corporate world, George has been deeply disappointed by the lack of training and enforcement of procedures related to talent acquisition. The hiring process typically varies widely from hiring manager to hiring manager, resulting in inconsistent talent in the organization. Interviewers often ask irrelevant questions or, worse, questions that could result in litigation. They sometimes give a candidate top scores simply because they like or know the candidate, or they mistakenly hire a candidate with the wrong set of strengths, like a highly detail-oriented person for a role that requires creative, free-form thinking.

If you want your hiring team to hire the best talent, you need to set them up for success. That means training them. Putting an untrained hiring team in front of a candidate is like putting an untrained person behind a gun. It won't end well. Don't assume

people know how to interview for talent. Even if they've been trained at a previous organization, nobody should interview until they've been through *your* interviewing training. You also can't assume that your hiring team will pick up a talent mindset by osmosis. Training is a far more effective way for you to instill a talent mindset. If you train your hiring team how to effectively interview and assess for *talent*, they are more likely to identify talented candidates.

This is also your opportunity to assess whether the members of your hiring team have the maturity and capacity to be charged with selecting your next generation of employees and leaders. Not all SEALs or Green Berets initially assigned to assessment and selection complete the training to become a BUD/S or Q Course instructor. It is a privilege and honor to become a gatekeeper into your community, much like the title hiring manager.

Part of training is communicating what the company needs in the new hire. The hiring team needs to be on the same page as upper-level leadership when it comes to succession planning, and they should work in partnership with HR to ensure they are in sync with the organization's overall talent strategy. They also need to have a forward-focused view of the organization. Don Robertson says, "The person doing the selection has to be cognizant of the types of things that the company's going to be facing in the future." The hiring team needs this awareness so that they can hire not for what the company needs today but what it will need three, five, or ten years down the line.

Some companies do offer training in interviewing and hiring, but it is often optional or limited to the basics. In the military, SOF

the world learned from that experiment. Prior to World War I, almost no companies were screening applicants using intelligence or personality assessment tests. Today, it is common for companies to use assessment tests in the hiring process.

Some of the most common tests used today are Hogan Assessments, like Leader Basis and Candidate Comparison. These tests are designed to be *pre-hire* assessments. In addition to providing information about a candidate's organizational fit, potential strengths, potential concerns, and innate ability to be a leader, these tests also give interview tips, including sample questions and areas to further probe.

Picking the right assessment test isn't easy. It's best to do your research or get advice from a trained professional, or you might end up buying a sales pitch instead of a useful assessment test. To get the most out of an assessment test, you must be thoughtful in choosing which one you use, as discussed in chapter 6, "Know Thyself."

For bulk-hiring of some lower-level roles, assessment tests can be a cost-effective way to screen out those candidates least likely to succeed, similar to the minimum-requirements gate. This method can work well, but only when properly designed by qualified industrial-organizational psychologists. While this method has a clear ROI, if you try to do this yourself, you could easily end up eliminating qualified candidates, not to mention risking being on the wrong end of a legal battle.

For more senior roles, especially leadership positions, assessment tests should be a source of additional information, not a screening tool. It's similar to how Special Operations used multiple types of information or intelligence, a practice termed "layering

intelligence," during the Global War on Terrorism. They used multiple forms of intelligence, such as signals intelligence (SIGINT), which primarily involved the interception of signals, imagery intelligence (IMINT), intel gathering from satellite and aerial photography, and human intelligence (HUMINT) from the local populaces. HUMINT is often unreliable and hinges on the reliability of the source, which is subject to human bias and can sometimes be distorted due to outright lying. Nevertheless, it was valuable intel when used in conjunction with SIGINT or IMINT, as it could corroborate information and give broader context. Any source of information alone would have been insufficient; *multiple* were needed.

In the same way, assessment tests can provide valuable information, but they only reveal *part* of the picture. For this reason, use these tools in context. For your senior roles, these tests are best used to substantiate and validate your subjective assessments of talent in interviews and observation, not make your hiring decisions for you.

One company we worked with at EF Overwatch used an aptitude, motivation, and personality assessment to weed out candidates. Our veterans, despite being high performers, were all scoring very low on the test and thus being eliminated from the hiring process. Curious, Mike took the test for himself. His score? Just 57 percent—a failing grade.

Now, obviously, we're a little biased when it comes to Mike, but the man is a decorated Navy SEAL, finished number one out of almost every military school he attended, was a 2017 *Poets & Quants* National MBA to Watch, and has proven his worth as a leader in some of the most complex and chaotic environments in the world

Willink and Leif Babin.) With just one chapter dedicated to this topic, we will not be providing an exhaustive explanation of how to build an effective training and leadership development program. Rather, we will focus on the *why*, highlighting the dire need to invest in and develop your people.

You can have the most effective talent acquisition program in the world, but if you don't properly develop your talent, ***your company will most likely still fail.***

Far too often, a company will hire a talented candidate whose performance ends up being lackluster. The company chalks it up to a bad hire, fires that person, and starts over again—a costly assumption. There are many reasons someone might not be performing as you expect, and only one of them is a bad hire. Chances are if a talented individual is not performing to standard, it's not their fault; *it's yours*.

There are few off-the-shelf hires that you can onboard and plug into a position with little to no guidance, but the "plug-and-play" mentality is all too common. In reality, once you hire a talented individual, your job has only just begun. People with raw talent have the *potential* to be high performers. It is up to you to give them the resources and feedback to grow into their potential.

From entry-level to C-suite, all members of your team require development to sustain and continually enhance their performance. Talent development cannot be a one-time onboarding procedure; it must be continuous.

This is one of the keys to SOF's success. Some people imagine that after an operator graduates from the initial assessment, selection, and training schoolhouses, like BUD/S or the Q Course, they have completed their training. This couldn't be further from the truth. Whether you spend six years in the SOF community or thirty-five, one thing is certain: the training never stops, no matter what level you serve at.

Mike spent 240 months in the military to reach retirement; 195 were spent training for the 45 months he spent in combat. Over 80 percent of his career was spent training for the 20 percent he spent in combat. From his first day in boot camp until late in his career at a highly specialized and highly selective SEAL Team, he trained every day—from elaborate training scenarios staged with Hollywood-style explosives, to walking the historic battlefield of Gettysburg to learn from past military leaders, to continual assessment and standardized tests.

Though all hires require training, you should pay extra attention to those who show leadership potential. As General Boykin explains, "[The SOF community] goes to great lengths to identify who the future leaders are, the ones that are going to sustain the organization, and we pour into them in a different way than we pour into the other people."

Part of the purpose of training is to teach team members the hard and soft skills necessary to perform in their role, but training is also how you create future leaders, just as Jocko helped build Mike into a leader. Within your training, leadership development should be a top priority because leadership determines success.