



FROM FLAG TO TRAINEE: HOW TO TRANSFORM SENIOR MILITARY PERSONNEL INTO BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT PROFESSIONALS

by Bill Scheessele, CEO MBDⁱ

Hiring retired senior military personnel for BD positions is a common practice in the Government Services industry. No matter how rational the custom, of having retired senior officers calling on their former subordinates now running government agencies or departments may seem, this scenario actually produces three troubling contradictions; one each from the individual, the corporation and the marketplace.

From our three decades of experience, we've found that there is no more misunderstood professional role than that of Business Development. This is abundantly true within the general population. Unfortunately, this misunderstanding also extends to retired flag officers and other retired senior military personnel entering the ranks of BD. Business Development is misconstrued by many of these individuals and often perceived as largely a meet/greet/golf/dinner networking activity, rather than the skilled profession that it is requiring a high level of business thinking, an extensive understanding of people and effective process execution.

This misconception doesn't end upon hiring. When senior military personnel take on this new role in BD for private industry, as inappropriate and paradoxical as it may seem, the most appropriate term to describe them as they embark on their second careers, is that of trainees. Yet, many retired senior military are thrust into the BD role with little or no actual training or instruction in Business Development. These new hires lack an understanding of the corporate culture, strategic vision, markets, potential opportunities, or capture and proposal processes. During their former careers, flag and other senior military officers were the most highly trained and professionally educated group. Now they find themselves thrust into private sector roles with little or no preparation for their new positions.

One retired flag officer, who survived this challenge, shared that he became a mentor to peers who were in this position, assisting them with the rigors of producing

business cases and PowerPoint presentations; tasks previously handled by staff in their former careers. This particular up-and-coming BD professional planned ahead and even invested time in an advanced business degree before military retirement, which prepared him with valuable business thinking and skills. At most, 25% of his peers did likewise. Not everyone in this position can count on having a colleague willing to mentor them in their new BD role and teach them the ropes from their experience.

Some fortunate individuals may be formally "partnered" with seasoned BD professionals who will teach them the tenets of BD. It is best to bear in mind that teaching is not really part of their job and that, while good in theory, partnering can sometimes evolve into a tension-driven relationship between the aggressive, strategic visionary, "out of the box" thinking BD professional as teacher and the "toe the line", order-driven, former senior military officer now in the position of student/trainee.

From the corporate standpoint, leadership is looking for a return on their investment when they hire retired senior military for BD positions. Indeed, this group may be successful in opening doors with desired agency appointments and meetings, but without prior training in how to develop business, they are at a loss as to what to say after saying hello in order to further a long term business relationship. Without a BD process driving their behavior, the sought after relationship goes nowhere. Scenarios like this often result in unnecessary turnover and the "6 jobs in 6 years" syndrome. Individuals once successful in their military careers now confront the opposite experience, resulting in frequent and disruptive job changes.

Clearly, a 'disconnect' exists between the mission-oriented military perspective and the business objective of revenue growth. On one side, you have an individual with a desire to continue their public service experience,

using their knowledge and expertise to achieve something worthwhile to benefit private industry. In the other corner is the uncompromising, “sell, be sold or be gone” corporate philosophy, driven by quarterly revenue projections.

In the Government Services marketplace, there must be a way for retired senior military personnel to realize their potential through embracing the BD role and for corporations to benefit by employing these highly educated, mission driven, results oriented, individuals,

Given the true complexity of the BD role, it makes sense for corporations to invest in the professional development of their new hires to both protect and grow these assets. This means sharing the strategic vision, mission and goals of the company early in the relationship as part of a corporate culture orientation. Ideally, this introduction should be followed by professional education in the BD role, with an emphasis on both internal and external collaborative/teaming characteristics of Business Development.

Most important is educating newly hired senior military personnel in the mission/purpose aspects of

Business Development. For decades, these individuals did not consider their military experience merely a job. They are mission oriented. Too often the mission component of BD is not well understood or embraced by an organization and therefore not well communicated. The purpose of professionals in Business Development is to help customers solve unique problems with the right service application or appropriate product solution. We know this to be true from our years of experience: If you focus first and foremost on this purpose, long-term trust relationships will be developed and an environment created in which the goal of winning contracts can and will occur.

The best BD folks get this. They consistently risk asking the right questions to bring up the real issues in an attempt to understand problems from the customer’s perspective. Retired senior military personnel are well prepared in risk-taking, building trust relationships and taking responsibility to drive problems to solutions. If you can harness and apply this exceptionally strong background and experience, along with providing education in Professional Business Development, these *trainees* can and will become valued members of your BD team.

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