

WAGE WAR AT WORK

Former Royal Marine Chris Paton has built his consultancy business around war games. He believes business leaders have much to learn from the military...

WORDS ANNIE MAKOFF-CLARK

Chris Paton worked in a war zone for three years, which he says is probably enough for anybody. A Royal Marine for 18 years, he served in Northern Ireland, Kosovo, Georgia and Afghanistan. Now he applies his military skills in business.

It all started when he read an article in the *Harvard Business Review* about complex business problems. It caused such a reaction in him that he changed careers.

"The crux of the article was that some business problems are so complex that you just can't plan for them, so you just have to crash into them instead," he recalls. "It made me so angry. I responded and said: 'This is nonsense. This is how you do it.'"

He ended up writing an article on how to plan for such problems. Suddenly, he had lots of business leaders contacting him for advice, "asking me to speak at conferences and do consultancy work for them. That's how it started".

Through his company, Quirk Solutions, Paton has transformed the business strategy of hundreds of

companies, including saving a doomed £2.6m project for one firm. His methods all date back to his Royal Marine training.

This means war-gaming

"It's essentially a pressure test known as war-gaming, which is used all the time in the military," Paton explains. "War-gaming is used to identify where things might go wrong and it picks out preventable mistakes. It offers a 360-degree reality check."

In the military, the planning team (blue) are set up against a smaller team (red), who act as opponents to test a particular strategy. This allows everyone to be open and honest about every conceivable problem or risk.

Paton's Quirk Solutions isn't the only company to offer war-gaming for businesses, but it's the only one that has based its entire business model around it. The firm also has the advantage of having an experienced military brain at its head.

According to Paton, business war-gaming is often focused on outdated, US-military-style techniques that look purely at

competitors and fail to regard anything else.

"[The competition] is just 5% of the problem," Paton insists. "The other 95% is what actually causes plans to fail. How are suppliers going to react? How are the marketing teams going to communicate the idea? How will the development and operations teams keep up?"

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Paton's approach is to take into account every conceivable stakeholder who could affect, or be affected by, a business plan, merger or acquisition, or new product launch.

Essentially, it's a reversal of military war-gaming: the blue team – those wanting to test the plan or strategy – is the smallest team, while the red team – representing internal and external stakeholders, clients, and marketing and operations departments, to name a few





– is the largest. Their job, says Paton, is to challenge each and every detail.

“We can’t afford to make mistakes in the military because of the obvious consequences,” says Paton. “It’s the same in business. I get fed up with people saying: ‘Mistakes may be a life or death situation in the military, but not in business.’ Actually, they are. If a business fails, people’s jobs go too. People struggle.”

Critical wounds

Paton acknowledges that criticism is an uncomfortable concept for businesses initially: being open to it creates vulnerability, especially in leaders, and leaders often don’t like to seem vulnerable. But,

says Paton, this vulnerability is what the military really prizes.

“There’s a real discomfort about discussing potential failure in business,” he says. “Everyone has to be super positive: operations teams, marketing, finance, development – everyone. They invest so much in reputation equity that they tend to fall into optimism bias. But leaders need to be vulnerable; they need to be willing to expose the gaps in their plan in front of others.”

According to Paton, this is where accountants come in. They can act as the red team and give businesses the reality check they need, which can prevent expensive mistakes. As detail-orientated people,

they can bring a deep level of scrutiny into planning, whether they sit in-house or within an accounting firm. It’s about having the confidence to speak up in a room full of people who are “furiously agreeing” out of politeness.

“War-gaming shows us that you don’t have to stay within your remit,” Paton explains. “When you’re in conflict, just because you’re an engineer or a medic, it doesn’t mean you should stay silent if you’ve spotted something wrong. Everyone has a right to raise issues.”

Chris Paton will be speaking at the AAT Annual Conference. For information and tickets, visit aatconference.co.uk

War-gaming is useful but, if you find yourselves camouflaged in a forest with guns, you’ve gone too far