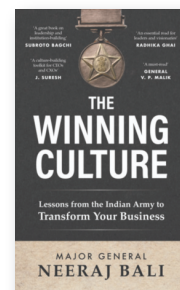


# *The Winning Culture: Lessons from the Indian Army to transform your business*

by Major General Neeraj Bali (Ret'd)

*Pan Macmillan India: New Delhi, India; 2023; 302 pp.; ISBN 978-93-0000-00-0 (paperback); RRP \$7*



The theme song of this thoughtful book by an army and corporate veteran is this: culture is the life force that plays the most critical role in the success or failure of organisations. Culture is the prime mover of our collective behaviour. It is the engine that drives human beings, rewarding them with a sense of identity they unremittingly seek.

The author has leveraged a four-decade uniformed experience to build a bridge between the robust culture of the Indian Army and the lessons that can be transported to bolster the culture of companies in the business world.

The author argues that we can learn from seven of the most critical attributes of the Indian Army's culture. It is not his case that any business organisation should replicate the Army's culture in toto—instead, the book points to some universal and deep-seated attributes that any business can profitably imbibe.

There is no theory in the contents. Through interviews and research, the narrative recounts several inspirational – even stirring – case studies of extraordinary acts by 'ordinary' rank-and-file teams. It is thus a book about what each of us does because that defines the culture, not the actions of a few gladiators.

In a chapter drawn from Peter Drucker's pronouncement, titled Strategy for Breakfast, it is emphasised that even the most meticulously crafted strategies will not succeed unless the organisation's culture is aligned. When a company draws up a strategy, it must paint the details on the canvas of the prevailing culture. Culture can be the defining element, and it can elevate the team's performance to such levels that even the feebleness of the original game plan may not matter. The conclusion is that culture and strategy should have breakfast together.

The curiously titled 'Why Are Officers Dying' examines the unique army phenomenon of officers leading from the front and by example. It argues that when leaders in an organisation are prepared to lead by example, the rank and file feel motivated and safe to raise their game. Mere words will not cut. Of course, to lead by example is optional – only if one is happy to embrace mediocrity and refuse to rise above transactional behaviour.

Another chapter examines the army's cultural propensity to deal with uncertainties and ambiguities. In 'The Fog That Hangs Forever', we learn how the army's culture of leadership, implicit adherence to processes

and order, and training help it deal with situations after the first shots are fired and plans are reduced to mere outlines.

Motivated teams do not evolve in a vacuum, says the chapter on teamwork. Unless the organisation's leadership creates a culture where every individual counts and each member has clarity on their more significant role and contribution, team spirit will be non-existent. Only organisations where cooperation, coordination and exchange of information are consistently rewarded will be rewarded with a strong team culture, concludes the chapter 'The Strength of the Chain'.

In 'Take Two Risks and See Me Tomorrow', there are lessons from a culture willing to seek, withstand, and embrace calculated risks. The ability to make sense of chaos and take risks when warranted are invaluable in a competitive world, and there is an excellent deal for the business world to learn from the army's culture)

There is another idea where the corporate world is arguably missing a trick – in weaving the families into its fabric. In a chapter called 'It Isn't Just about the Brotherhood', the author explains how the Army draws inestimable strength from this unique phenomenon. There are several stories of wives of army men who volunteered to join the army after losing their husbands while in service.

Each chapter's stories seamlessly lead to conceptual and specific lessons for business companies. I would go so far as to argue that many of the learnings can be classified as 'life lessons'. The author's post-superannuation experience as a CEO of two companies has given him a perspective that colours each takeaway with relevance and contemporariness.

The final chapter, 'How to Transform Corporate Culture', is a primer for leaders on systematically fashioning any company's culture for the next level of performance and success. Buttressed with studies from the corporate world, it points to a nine-step 'process' that may lead to cultural change.

The book's narration is accomplished, compelling and engaging. It is a book that elevates the dry bones of the subject of organisation by fleshing it with human experience and extraordinary stories. It is scholarly but wears that cloak lightly. It is a book on management, leadership, and dexterous penmanship.

**Joe Matthews**