



FIRING UP THE FRONT LINE

For the many organizations that depend on their rank and file to move the goods and delight the customers, motivation is an ongoing battle. The key to victory may be held by the Marines, who use five unique practices to spark extraordinary energy and commitment. Businesses can, too.

BY JON R. KATZENBACH AND JASON A. SANTAMARIA

IF THERE IS ONE CHALLENGE that confounds the many organizations that depend on frontline workers, it is how to engender their emotional energy. That's understandable. Frontline employees are often unskilled and are paid little. Their work can be stubbornly unexciting. They flip burgers, clean hotel bathrooms, answer call-center phones, and unload cargo holds. Because their work is monotonous and their chances for advancement are limited, most frontline employees work for a regular paycheck and nothing more; they never emotionally connect with their employers, let alone care about the company's long-term performance. Yet their impact on the customer's experience—not to mention the company's profits—can be enormous.

It would be a mistake, however, to see frontline employees simply as liabilities to be contained. Many have the potential to contribute substantially to the organization. Marriott International, for instance, boasts of scores of employees and managers drawn from welfare rolls. At first, those workers fit the

stereotype of inexperienced, undisciplined newcomers. Now, however, many of them exhibit remarkable performance. This story of engaged, high-performing frontline workers, and others like it at companies as diverse as Toyota and Hill's Pet Nutrition, clearly show that managing the rank and file isn't just a challenge; it's an opportunity.

For the past three years, a team of analysts from McKinsey & Company and the Conference Board, a business research organization, has studied companies known to engage the emotional energy of frontline workers. From an original list of 50 possibilities, 30 companies were selected for close analysis. Some, such as the Home Depot, Southwest Airlines, and KFC, already were well known for their expertise in managing frontline employees. Others, such as Vail Ski and Snowboard School in Colorado and MACtel in Anchorage, Alaska, were less famous but still provided compelling examples of managerial programs, policies, and mechanisms that generated workforce enthusiasm—and results.

Halfway into the research project, it was suggested that the team add to its list an organization that had never crossed its radar screen: the U.S. Marine Corps. At first, our team dismissed the idea. What could the captains of war possibly teach the captains of industry about motivation? But after observing the Marines for three months and conducting close to 100 interviews, the team concluded that the Corps outperformed all other organizations when it came to engaging the hearts and minds of the front line. Our research showed that the Marines did so by using five managerial practices that—although rarely found in the for-profit world—are relevant and applicable to business.

Take training, for example. In a typical business organization, a frontline employee undergoes a brief introduction to company procedures and policies, usually conducted by instructors with little on-the-job experience. The new employee receives a manual that explains rules regarding vacation, maternity leave, and the like. If the company's leaders show up, it is in cameo appearances. In general, the new employee experiences no emotions during this process except anxiety or boredom.

Marine training could not be more different. First, it is long: 12 weeks. Very little of that time,

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however, is spent on building skills or communicating the Corps' procedures and policies. Instead, training is focused entirely on inculcating the organization's values—honor, courage, and commitment. And it is conducted by the organization's most experienced and talented people, who see the job as both an honor and a challenge.

In addition, the Marines fire up their front line through their unique approaches to developing leaders, managing teams, and handling underperforming members of the rank and file. Finally, the Marines create a high-energy front line by using discipline—but not as you see it in the typical business setting. The Marines use discipline not just to punish, but to spawn a culture of self-control and group-control that bolsters performance and raises pride.

There are, of course, limits to any analogy between the Corps and the corporation. The Marines hire many of their people from disadvantaged backgrounds, rely primarily on nonmonetary rewards, and have to keep their recruits for at least four years. Most businesses look for people from solid backgrounds, rely heavily on cash bonuses, and always have the option of firing poor performers.

Also, the Marines induct recruits into a closed, tightly controlled environment. The boot camps on Parris Island, South Carolina, and in San Diego are sealed off from the outside world and its distractions. Recruits are immersed in the Marine experience in a way that intensifies and accelerates the indoctrination process. Because companies send their troops home at night, they cannot enjoy the benefits of such a rarefied environment.

Some might argue that the biggest difference is that businesses have customers, and the Marines don't; the job of the Marines is to defeat an enemy or keep the peace in war-torn areas such as Haiti or Beirut. But the Marines do have important constituents who are very like customers and shareholders: the citizens of the United States and their elected representatives. As the only nonessential part of the armed forces, the Marine Corps—with a budget of \$10 billion—must prove its worth every day. But even more important, the front lines of the Marines and the front lines of business strive for precisely the same critical objectives: speed, responsiveness, and flexibility.

Mission, Values, Pride

The Marines follow what we have come to call the "mission, values, and pride" (MVP) path to an emotionally engaged, high-performing workforce. (There is, of course, more than one way to energize frontline employees. For a summary of the paths

One Destination, Five Roads

Not every organization engenders emotional energy in the same way. Our research found that there are five distinct managerial paths that result in committed, high-performing frontline workers. The chart summarizes the characteristics of each path and cites notable examples.

	Emotional energy is generated by:	Frontline employees commit themselves to the organization because:	Organizations that follow this path:
The Mission, Values, and Pride Path	mutual trust, collective pride, and self-discipline	They are proud of its aspirations, accomplishments, and legacy; they share its values.	U.S. Marine Corps, 3M, New York City Ballet
The Process and Metrics Path	transparent performance measures and standards; clear tracking of results	They know what each person is expected to do, how performance is measured, and why it matters.	Johnson Controls, Hill's Pet Nutrition, Toyota
The Entrepreneurial Spirit Path	personal freedom, the opportunity for high earnings, and few rules about behavior; people choose their work activities and take significant personal risks	They are in control of their own destinies; they savor the high-risk, high-reward work environment.	Hambrecht & Quist, BMC Software, Vail Ski and Snowboard School
The Individual Achievement Path	intense respect for individual achievement in an environment with limited emphasis on personal risk and reward	They are recognized mostly for the quality of their individual performance.	FirstUSA, McKinsey & Company, Perot Systems
The Reward and Celebration Path	recognition and celebration of organizational accomplishments	They have fun and enjoy the supportive and highly interactive environment.	Mary Kay, Tupperware

that our research identified, see the insert "One Destination, Five Roads.") The leaders of MVP organizations engage the emotional energy of the front line by building collective pride and mutual trust. To foster collective pride, they often emphasize the company's noble purpose or rich legacy. At KFC headquarters in St. Louis, Missouri, a frequently traveled hallway called the Walk of Leaders is home to mounds of memorabilia commemorating great moments in the company's history, such

as the opening of the company's first store and the introduction of new menu items. MVP leaders also generate collective pride by articulating and demonstrating strong shared values. Employees who accept those values develop a powerful sense of "one for all and all for one."

MVP leaders create energy through mutual trust in myriad ways. One way is making sure relationships are nonhierarchical, that work teams share ideas, information, and responsibility for failure or

success. Mutual trust is also a result of managers and employees keeping promises. Several years ago, the Home Depot hired a former homemaker to work in an outlet's millwork department—a job that required expertise and technical knowledge. Her managers promised that she would receive all the training required to make her a success if she promised to commit to meeting the needs of the department's customers—demanding contractors who

The Marines follow what we call the “mission, values, and pride” path to a high-performing workforce.

were prone to frequent and unpleasant displays of impatience. Both the management and the employee kept their ends of the bargain. The story has become legendary among Home Depot employees. It resonates with them because it reflects the organization's energizing commitment to bonds of honesty between executives and the front line.

Every MVP organization follows this path somewhat differently. While the New York City Ballet emphasizes its rich history—the legacy of George Balanchine's and Lincoln Kirstein's relentless pursuit of perfection—to motivate new dancers, Hewlett-Packard—with the famed HP Way—makes shared values its focus. But underlying the varying techniques are the following five practices, each described with recommendations for companies that might seek to embark on the MVP path to win their own competitive battles.

Practice One: Overinvest at the outset in inculcating core values. When new people come on board, most companies make a point of communicating the organization's values. Some distribute wallet cards or wall plaques; others require employees to attend a speech or view an interactive video. In any case, most new hires get little more than a brief introduction to company values before they are expected to demonstrate them on the job.

By contrast, the Marines' entire recruiting and training period is devoted to ensuring that new recruits comprehend the institution's core values of honor, courage, and commitment. The first time a potential recruit encounters the Corps' values is during his “cultivation interview” on a high school campus or in a Marines storefront. While most companies use headhunters and human resources people to ferret out potential workers, the Marines assign the job to the best of their experienced

sergeants and midcareer officers, individuals having what can only be described as a missionary zeal about the Marines' values. Such fervor is an important screening device. Individuals who come back for a second interview have taken a step toward accepting the values of the MVP path.

At boot camp, the emphasis on values intensifies, as our research team discovered firsthand. The Marines treated our visiting group like new recruits when we arrived on Parris Island, ordering us off the bus and instructing us to place our feet precisely onto yellow footprints painted on the pavement. Our team leader, McKinsey principal Brad Berkson, who has never served in the military, quickly found himself barking “Yes, sir!” and “No, sir!” to the shouted questions of the drill instructor. We were led into a small room, where a sergeant delivered a speech on the importance of integrity. Following that stern but impassioned speech, would-be Marines are handed their official records—completed during the recruiting process—and asked to check them for accuracy. Have they honestly described any history of substance abuse? Have they reported every run-in with the law? The recruits are told, “If you did it, we will find it. So don't start your career here with a lie.” Over the next hour or more, recruits file to the front of the room and come clean, showing they are ready to embrace the values of honor, courage, and commitment—perhaps for the first time in their lives.

Unlike other branches of the armed forces, the Marines do not promise technical training in fields such as electronics or aviation. Instead, days are filled with physically and emotionally stressful exercises designed to encourage mutual accountability. If a recruit fails to complete a 15-mile endurance hike, his comrades must carry his rifle and 60-pound rucksack for the rest of the hike. If someone errs during a close-order-drill movement, the entire unit must repeat the movement until it is flawless. In every training event, strong performers are expected to help their less proficient comrades.

As with its recruiters, the Corps assigns its very best to be boot-camp drill instructors. Only the top 25% of enlisted noncommissioned officers are even considered for DI assignment. Of that group, only 80% make it through the rigorous Drill Instructors School. The assignment is seen as an honor and a career enhancement: given the relative scarcity of promotions in the post-Cold War era, a three-year tour as a DI often determines whether an enlisted Marine's career will reach 20 years. The result is that the screening, selection, training, and shaping

of those on the front line rests in the hands of the highest-performing leaders.

Through the intense focus on values, Marine recruitment and training build a sense of belonging to a noble cause. Indeed, training culminates in a 54-hour continuous field exercise called the Crucible, in which recruits struggle through a series of grueling challenges—including combat assaults through mud pits and under machine-gun fire—with little sleep or food. Throughout the ordeal, trainers constantly cite the heroic acts of Medal of Honor winners, thereby personalizing each recruit's concept of what it means to be a Marine. That identification with the organization—the recruits' pride in the Corps, in themselves, and in their units—sustains a high level of energy and loyalty to the organization for a long time after Marines leave boot camp.

While the Marine Corps' investment in inculcating values may seem extreme to outsiders, its practices can be translated for the business context. For some companies, emulating the Marines on this front might require only a shift of emphasis during initial training. Instead of covering values as an add-on topic at the end of orientation, trainers within business could bring them to center stage early on. At Marriott, for example, a week-long examination of company values culminates with new employees role playing in realistic scenarios that require them to apply the company's values when making tough decisions.

Businesses also might assign training to their most experienced and talented managers and increase the length of training programs from a matter of hours to days or even weeks. Those steps will carry costs, of course. But think of them as investments that will have large dividends. One outstanding role model might influence 40 or 50 new hires, whose commitment and focus could save the company millions of dollars in the long run.

Finally, to bolster collective pride in their frontline employees, companies can continue to focus on values after training ends. Southwest Airlines posts hundreds of documents and photos highlighting the company's accomplishments in the lobby of its headquarters building. Marriott prominently displays letters from customers praising superior service. A company need not have a Guadalcanal in its past to celebrate itself. The victories of the business battlefield are plenty to draw upon.

Practice Two: Prepare every person to lead, including frontline supervisors. Most businesses separate their frontline employees into two camps: fol-

lowers and potential leaders. The followers are written off or given superficial attention; they receive no training to develop their abilities. The group of potential leaders is usually small, because most companies use the standard business-leadership template to identify individuals who might move up. The template includes a slim list of predictable attributes—thinks strategically, delegates, sets and meets demanding targets—even though most executives know from experience that effective leadership styles are many and varied.

The Marines don't distinguish between followers and potential leaders; they believe every member of the Corps must be able to lead. Consider the exigencies of battle. The 19-year-old lance corporal who suddenly finds himself facing an angry mob on the streets of Haiti must know when and how to use force. Indeed, the nature of war dictates that Marines must be trained to do more than just take orders. In a flash of gunfire, any Marine may find that he's the person responsible for giving orders. That is why every enlisted Marine learns how to run a fire team—the basic four-person unit of Marine operations—and every officer learns how to run a 40-member rifle platoon.

The policy of training every frontline person to lead has a powerful impact on morale. The organization's belief that everyone can and must be a leader creates enormous collective pride and builds mutual trust. Each Marine knows he can rely on his comrades to take charge, just as he can be relied on. With the two building blocks of the MVP path—

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pride and trust—firmly in place, energy and commitment naturally follow.

Enlisted Marines are introduced to the fundamentals of leadership at boot camp, where drill instructors serve as 24-hour-a-day role models. The instructors' goal at this stage is not to teach young recruits how to take charge but to demonstrate the qualities that characterize effective leaders in action: morality, courage, initiative, and respect for others. Drill instructors embody the highest standards of Marine behavior. They rise at 4:30 A.M., at least a half-hour before the recruits in their command;

Learning While Leading

In 1997, I was appointed the commanding officer of a frontline combat unit that comprised 125 Marines. The assignment, normally reserved for a senior captain, carried tremendous responsibility for a 26-year-old lieutenant with just two years of active duty. Fortunately, I was paired with First Sergeant Ian V. Smith, an enlisted professional and combat veteran with 22 years of experience. I learned more about leadership from First Sergeant Smith during the four months we worked together than I had from any other Marine, officer or enlisted, in the previous two years.

The learning process began the day after our partnership was formed. My overly ambitious plan to issue gas masks and have the Marines clean weapons in the same afternoon caused the members of the group to miss dinner. Morale suffered. The next day, First Sergeant Smith offered me his frank assessment of what went wrong, beginning with the words, "Sir, your plan failed because you did not consult the experienced leaders of this unit. We have conducted this drill countless times before." From then on, I relied heavily on his advice.

First Sergeant Smith also taught me the importance of developing others. He often placed his busy schedule on hold to teach young enlisted Marines about the Corps' history and traditions as well as its leadership

principles and values. The dividends of his efforts were almost immediately apparent: his students soon began to exercise greater initiative and assume more responsibility for daily tasks.

Finally, First Sergeant Smith taught me a lesson I will always carry with me: that leaders inspire people by demonstrating a genuine concern for their welfare. Whenever a Marine faced a personal emergency, First Sergeant Smith focused his undivided attention on the problem until it was resolved. If Marines were temporarily transferred to other units, he periodically visited them to ensure that their needs were being met. Every time one of the Marines completed technical school or a leadership course, he attended the graduation ceremony and shared in the accomplishment. His efforts built an intense loyalty to the unit and inspired every one of its members to achieve higher levels of performance.

I have not yet been afforded the leadership responsibility in the business world that I had in the Marine Corps. But I know that when the time comes to run a team or even an organization, I will be guided by the insights gained in my short but immensely powerful partnership with First Sergeant Smith.

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during endurance hikes, when recruits are allowed to sit for a ten-minute break, they remain standing with their heavy packs on; and their appearance is at all times flawless, as is their composure.

For college graduates who join the Marines, formal leadership training begins almost right away at Officer Candidates School in Quantico, Virginia. Marines who will soon lead platoons—basically as frontline supervisors—spend ten weeks learning the practical and theoretical components of running an organization, from logistics to motivation. This stands in stark contrast to the standard operating procedure in business, where the vast majority of newly minted supervisors receive limited, cookie-cutter instruction in what it means to be a leader. The Marines believe that the energy of those in the front lines is largely driven by the energy of frontline supervisors, so they make leadership development a priority.

To that end, OCS trainers seek to identify and hone each officer's unique approach to leadership. Contrary to the stereotype of the inflexible command-and-control style, the Marine Corps recog-

nizes and cultivates several styles of effective leadership, such as assertive, collaborative, insightful, and supportive. To determine which approach best fits each individual, trainers put officer candidates through a series of exercises that simulate battlefield conditions. For instance, candidates in groups of four or five must decide how to rescue a wounded Marine (a 250-pound dummy) from the far side of a moat, beyond a mock-up of a burned-out bridge, without getting wet or touching certain off-limits areas. The team has no designated leader and nothing to work with except three five-foot boards. The problem is technically solvable (though rarely in the time allowed), but the instructors are mostly interested in the leadership capabilities and shortfalls each member demonstrates.

As the students' leadership capabilities begin to emerge, the candidates are counseled and advised by experienced observers, usually captains. These observers, who spend up to 16 hours a day with the officer candidates, are trained to look for various leadership attributes, advise the students of their strengths and weaknesses, and coach them on how

to make the most of their leadership potential. The process is anything but standardized.

The Marine Corps also develops leadership skills among its frontline supervisors by routinely establishing what we call "leadership partnerships" in the Fleet Marine Force. Each platoon is run by two individuals: the higher-ranking officer, a young lieutenant with one to three years' experience, is paired with a seasoned staff sergeant or gunnery sergeant with 12 to 18 years' experience. The experience and maturity of the sergeant complement the tactical education and fresh ideas of the lieutenant. The two learn from each other and jointly solve tactical challenges and problems about people. The learning is stimulating and energizing for both, as well as for those in their command. Each leader has more time to attend to the training and professional growth of the platoon's 40 or more members than if he were the sole officer in charge. That kind of personal attention is another force for building the energy and commitment of the rank and file. (For a firsthand account of such a partnership, see the insert "Learning While Leading.")

Most business executives would see a leadership partnership as wasteful, but the positive effects of the combination—in terms of performance—usually make up for any additional costs. Moreover, the arrangement accelerates the development of younger leaders, which adds to the leadership capacity and performance capabilities of the enterprise as a whole. Such intangibles may well prove priceless in the long term.

To emulate the Corps' leadership development initiative, business executives would first need to shake off their old attitudes. They would need to embrace the notion that a great many frontline workers can lead and thus should be trained to do so. Executives would need to support the idea that every frontline supervisor deserves extensive leadership training with an approach that makes the most of the supervisor's individual leadership style. These are major attitude adjustments—probably more than most businesspeople are willing to accept all at once. Too often, managers assume that "leadership" is an intrinsic quality that somehow emerges on its own. That's why training frontline leaders is frequently left to mentors. Changing this approach is far from easy, and like many humbling attitude adjustments in life, the payoff is best appreciated in hindsight.

A less jarring way for executives to introduce this change is to create informal leadership partnerships. Newly appointed managers could be as-

signed, ad hoc, to work with more experienced veterans in the running of a division or a department. This might mean that both members of the duo would do less managing and more hands-on work, but it would expand capabilities, and in time would change minds about leadership development.

Practice Three: Distinguish between teams and single-leader work groups. One of the most common—and damaging—occurrences in business is executives putting together single-leader work groups and calling them teams. Usually the practice is unintentional; most executives don't know the difference between the two arrangements. But such a mistake confuses and demotivates people and undermines the performance of small groups. Take the case of the CEO of an energy company that was midway through a major turnaround. The CEO thought of his five direct reports as a team and often encouraged them to join him in mapping out new strategies for the company. But the truth is that he was using the executives only to bolster his preconceived views. On key issues, he invariably resorted to one-on-one discussions and then made decisions that his "team" approved but did not jointly influence. The five executives saw through the situation and soon grew frustrated and resentful, while the CEO remained convinced that he was nourishing a cohesive team. Calling a group a team doesn't make it one.

Real teams are rare. Most work in business is done by single-leader work groups, which rely entirely on their leaders for purpose, goals, motivation, and assignments; each member is accountable solely to the leader. Single-leader work groups have

To emulate the Marines, executives would need to embrace the idea that many frontline workers can lead.

an important place in organizational life. They are fast and efficient, and they can be a great help when individual tasks are more important than collective work and when the leader really does know best how to get things done.

A real team, by contrast, draws its motivation more from its mission and goals than from its leader. Members work together as peers and hold one another accountable for the group's performance and results. In a real team, no individual member can win or lose; only the group can succeed or fail.

Teams and Work Groups: It Pays to Know the Difference

Managers tend to label every working group in an organization a "team," whether it's a roomful of customer service operators or a string of assemblers on a manufacturing line. But employees quickly lose motivation and commitment when they're assigned to a team that turns out to be a single-leader work group. If executives want to spark energy and commitment on the front lines, they must know how a team differs from a single-leader work group, and when to create one or the other.

	TEAM	SINGLE-LEADER WORK GROUP
Run by:	the members of the team best-suited to lead the tasks at hand; the leadership role shifts among the members	one person, usually the senior member, who is formally designated to lead
Goals and agenda set by:	the group, based on dialogue about purpose; constructive conflict and integration predominate	the formal leader, often in consultation with a sponsoring executive; conflict with group members is avoided, and the leader integrates
Performance evaluated by:	the members of the group, as well as the leader and sponsor	the leader and the sponsor
Work style determined by:	the members	the leader's preference
Success defined by:	the members' aspirations	the leader's aspirations
Most appropriate business context:	a complex challenge that requires people with various skill sets working together much of the time	a challenge in which time is of the essence and the leader already knows best how to proceed; the leader is the primary integrator
Speed and efficiency:	low until the group has learned to function as a team; afterward, however, the team is as fast as a single-leader group	higher than that of teams initially, as the members need no time to develop commitment or to learn to work as a team
Primary end-products:	largely collective, requiring several team members to work together to produce results	largely individual and can be accomplished best by each person working on his or her own
Accountability characterized by:	"We hold one another mutually accountable for achieving the goals and performance of the team."	"The leader holds us individually accountable for our output."

Given the amount of ink devoted to extolling teams in the past decade, many executives are loath to put people together in anything but. That's why the cleaning employees and their supervisor at your hotel are a "customer service team," and the clerks and store manager at your supermarket are a "check-out efficiency team." These are really single-leader work groups, or, worse, they are single-leader work groups in which flagging morale and participation on the part of the group have caused the leader to back off from the supervisory role. The result of these "compromise units" is typically anger and inertia. Trust and confidence are bolstered when people know what is expected of them and their colleagues. And when goals and responsibilities are clear, they can be exceeded—another energy booster.

The Marines are masters at distinguishing between single-leader work groups and teams, partly because the Corps maintains a culture of extreme clarity—you can't be vague about battle directives. Another reason is that the Marines explicitly teach people the differences between roles. At infantry school, after boot camp, each Marine rotates through all the positions in a fire team—leader, machine-gunner, assistant machine-gunner, and rifleman—and learns when and how to shift the leadership role. By the time the team is ready for active duty, each member can fill every position. Most important, the highly cohesive group has learned when and how to function as a real team and when to rely on a single leader.

For businesses to adopt the practice of distinguishing between teams and single-leader work groups, executives would first need to understand the differences between the two. (For a summary of these distinctions, see the insert "Teams and Work Groups: It Pays to Know the Difference.") Furthermore, executives would need to bring this knowledge to bear in managing the front line. That requires discipline on the part of the executives. People generally like to be assigned to teams; they are less enamored of being assigned to something called a "single-leader work group." But in the long run, clarity creates trust.

Practice Four: Attend to the bottom half. Businesses, in general, are relentless about leveraging their leaders' time. That's why frontline managers are usually trained to focus their attention on the people who have the greatest potential to advance. An assumption is built into most evaluation systems that people in the lower half will function adequately or leave.

The Marines do not have that luxury, because the graduates of boot camp cannot be replaced for four

years unless they violate the Uniform Code of Military Justice with serious offenses such as stealing or drug use. Moreover, a Marine unit in battle is only as strong as its weakest link. A poor performer puts lives in danger. The Marines simply cannot afford to let the bottom half languish.

Like executives in the corporate world, leaders in the Marine Corps have little time to spare, but they find the time to attend to poor and mediocre performers, even if it means personal sacrifice. Consider the case of Colonel Al Davis, who made it a point to get to know every member of each class of 300 officer candidates while serving as commanding officer of OCS from 1995 to 1997. Colonel Davis regularly participated in physical exercises with the officer candidates, and whenever a student came up for "disenrollment review," he made it his goal to find a way to help rather than dismiss. Colonel Davis personally made every final decision to expel or reassign, based on a thorough discussion involving all the officers who had worked with each student.

Colonel Davis's commitment to every last Marine is not unique. Drill instructors, despite their legendary toughness, refuse to give up on any recruit. Incoming Marines are told, "You may give up on yourself more than once during the next 12 weeks, but we will never give up on you." In one interview with a member of the research team, a drill instructor said he and his colleagues see each new recruit as a psychological puzzle to be solved. He noted, "We use every tool we can—whatever works."

The impact of this principle is powerful. Personal attention means that floundering Marines are caught before they hit bottom. That approach reinforces the individual's sense of belonging and builds an intense loyalty to the organization. Loyalty and a sense of belonging are components of the mutual trust that is critical to the MVP path. The Marines' approach also prevents any individual from feeling that he's bound to fail. The effect is more pride, both personal and collective.

Most business managers resist devoting time and talent to the bottom half. They believe it's easier and cheaper to replace any underperformers than to rejuvenate them. Perhaps that was once true, but in places where the economy is booming, labor is in short supply. Many companies that once seemed to have an unlimited number of applicants for low-level positions are now struggling to keep every job filled. For that reason alone, salvaging underperformers makes sense. Then add the positive energy the practice engenders, and the Marines' approach seems purely logical.

Devoting more time and attention to the bottom half does not necessarily have to cost a lot. Some-

times all it requires is creative hiring of frontline supervisors—recruiting people with experience in counseling or teaching, for instance. Some insurance companies, notably State Farm, have been successful in hiring former high school teachers as supervising agents, and A. L. Williams, now Primerica Financial Services, has hired former high school football coaches. These agents have skills in teaching and firsthand knowledge of how to keep talented but undisciplined young people on track. As an alternative to hiring experienced teachers, companies can train supervisors to work with the bottom half. Many companies already teach managers team-

It takes very little to get frontline employees to set and beat their own standards for performance.

building and communication skills. There is no reason not to expand that repertoire.

Companies also might invest in training and development programs focused on employees who are at risk of falling through the cracks. Marriott has a six-week program specifically designed for frontline workers who are former welfare recipients or who were hired from the ranks of the homeless. Launched in 1991, the Pathways to Independence program offers instruction in life skills, such as opening a bank account and using public transportation, in addition to work skills, such as cleaning a hotel room efficiently. Pathways instructors also advise participants on work etiquette—why it is important to show up on time and be well groomed (teachers suggest, for instance, that participants trim facial hair and shed most jewelry). The training pays off in retention rates. In the Washington, D.C., area, the percentage of new employees remaining on the job longer than one year was higher among Pathways graduates than among comparable workers who hadn't had training—75% versus less than 65%.

Companies also can increase the likelihood that frontline supervisors will attend to underperformers simply by evaluating the supervisors on that dimension of their jobs. GE does this by routinely surveying frontline employees on job satisfaction and holding supervisors accountable for the results. Because underperformers are typically unhappy at work, such surveys essentially prevent managers from writing them off. At GE, it is well known that "the numbers no longer protect," that managers

cannot achieve their financial goals at the expense of their people.

Practice Five: Use discipline to build pride. Many organizations regard discipline as a necessary evil: a tool to keep order, but the enemy of empowerment. Discipline is seen as a top-down method of control and punishment. Supervisors fire people who are habitually late or dock the pay of workers who violate the dress code. No one expects such measures to engender energy or build commitment.

The Marines respect discipline as control and punishment, but they also see it as an opportunity to build pride. The Marines have rules, and plenty of them. You obey those rules or you're out. But the Marines put equal emphasis on self-discipline and group-discipline. They ask every member of the front line to be his own toughest boss and to be a strict enforcer for his comrades. Such a dynamic could backfire in other circumstances—for instance, if the underlying values of the institution were corrupt. But in their approach to discipline, the Marines are demanding that everyone on the front line act with honor, courage, and commitment. When people do so—on their own and as a group—enormous energy is unleashed.

The fact is, many Marine recruits begin their careers with a vast repertoire of sloppy behaviors that include foul language, poor work habits, and disrespectful treatment of others. In that sense, they are not unlike the people many companies try (unsuccessfully) to screen out. And so the first few miles of a recruit's journey toward greater discipline look and sound a lot like what happens in business—lots of harsh repercussions for breaking the rules.

Within the first month, however, the relentless crush of discipline is well on its way to molding a positive self-image in most recruits. They discover what they are capable of when they apply themselves. Then they discover that they can accomplish more than they ever thought possible. Next they learn that group-discipline means nobody will be left behind in battle. Before boot camp is over, recruits come to see that discipline does not exist just for discipline's sake; it ensures a widespread commitment to mission, values, and comrades.

Like the Marines, every MVP company studied by our research team encourages self-discipline in order to build pride. The results are remarkable. Southwest Airlines turns its planes around in less than half the time needed by many of its competitors. The main reasons are employee self-discipline and the group-discipline practiced by its work groups. Employees undertake their tasks with fer-

vor, not out of fear of punishment, but out of a desire to make their airline the best. It is common to see baggage handlers, flight attendants, and pilots scrambling to beat the clock and encouraging others to do the same. Sometimes crew members actually help baggage handlers, and vice versa—something unheard of at other airlines.

Similarly, Marriott's housekeepers drive themselves—and one another—to get rooms clean in less than 24 minutes; bellmen hustle to get guests checked in and to their rooms with no delays or complaints. These behaviors are strongly encouraged by Marriott executives. But to talk to these employees is to know that they are driven by self-discipline and group-discipline—an ardent desire to follow the rules in order to make themselves and the organization proud.


It takes very little to harness the positive power of discipline, to get frontline employees to set and beat their own high standards for performance. It starts with an executive decision never to be content with enterprise-imposed, top-down discipline, and a commitment to encouraging self-discipline and group-discipline. One simple method is to call attention to workers who demonstrate self-discipline: feature them in a company newsletter, honor them with conspicuous awards. Such actions build pride and serve as an invaluable example for others.

Another powerful means to induce self-discipline and peer-enforced discipline is to display shortfalls, particularly those that are apparent to customers. The self-discipline and peer-enforced

discipline we observed at Marriott were due in no small measure to the company's practice of posting all guest complaints for employees to see.

From the Battlefield to the Boardroom

No executive of an organization that depends on its rank and file can afford to ignore the example set by the Marines. A skeptic might argue that the Marines have an incomparable advantage: a long history of a fired-up front line. Their emotional energy is genetic, so to speak. But the Marines have had setbacks along the way. The Vietnam War deeply eroded the Corps' values and esprit. Indeed, it nearly broke them. The great tragedy of the 1983 terrorist bombing of a Marine barracks in Beirut, which killed 241 Marines, sailors, and soldiers, also took an enormous toll on the Corps' emotional energy. The Marines had to rebuild their shared values and collective pride nearly from scratch. They were as new to the MVP path as any start-up.

But what is perhaps most persuasive about the Marines' approach to energizing the front lines is that the five underlying managerial practices can be found in nonmilitary organizations today. Rarely, however, are those practices pursued with the dedication, rigor, and relentless determination necessary to convert ordinary workers into an extraordinary work force. The Corps does that, and the corporation can, too. 

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"I have to cut it short. There are people waiting to use the phone."

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