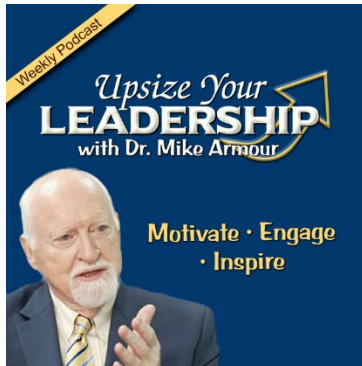


# Executive Leadership: Maneuver Warfare in a Suit

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In modern business, you don't win by being the biggest. You win by being the fastest. You win by out-maneuvering the competition before they even realize that the game has changed.

And if that sounds more like a battlefield than a boardroom... that's because it is.

Today, we're exploring why leading an agile company is the closest thing to conducting maneuver warfare — and what that means for every executive who wants to win in a world defined by speed, disruption, and uncertainty.

I'm building the entire podcast around a leadership analogy that is as bold as it is right on target. And "on target" is a good phrase to describe it, because the analogy is a military one.

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For years, business leaders and C-Suite executives have borrowed language from sports, strategy, and psychology to describe what they do. But the leaders who consistently outperform the market — the ones who build organizations that move with speed, clarity, and precision — those leaders operate from a different playbook.

They lead like commanders conducting maneuver warfare. If the term "maneuver warfare" is unfamiliar to you, let me explain it briefly.

Traditional warfare was positional. The key to winning was to position oneself advantageously in the face of the enemy. This meant securing the high ground, if possible so that you had a broader vision of the enemy's formations and movements and the enemy had to expend energy charging up hill to attack you.

If you were in a defensive posture, positional warfare meant placing your troops behind high walls. It meant putting moats or other daunting obstacles between yourself and any attacker. It meant amassing an inventory of supplies that would allow you to withstand a lengthy siege.

Going on offense meant outflanking the enemy. Attacking with overwhelming force. Splitting enemy positions. Encircling an opposing military. Blockading the enemy's key waterways. In short, putting the enemy in a disadvantageous position.

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Maneuver warfare more nearly resembles the way that native American tribes fought on the plains of the West. They used small raiding parties that were fast and highly mobile. They relied on covert movements. They appeared rapidly and just as rapidly disappeared. They offset what was often numerical superiority and fire power on the part of their opposing force by outmaneuvering it and striking where their adversary was most vulnerable.

The primary reason that the out-gunned and out-manned Ukrainians have fought the Russians to a draw at present is because Russia still relies on positional warfare, while Ukraine has perfected the art of maneuver warfare, especially through their pioneering advances in the use of drones.

Returning to our topic, the winners in today's business climate will most often be led by men and women who apply lessons from maneuver warfare to the way that they run their company.

Not because business is war — it isn't. But because the principles of maneuver warfare map almost perfectly onto the realities of modern business competition. That competition plays out against a backdrop of:

- rapid change
- incomplete information
- distributed teams
- asymmetric threats
- and the need for quick, decisive action

So today, we're breaking down the five core principles of maneuver warfare and translating them directly into the leadership behaviors that create agile, unstoppable companies.

### **Principle Number 1 – Tempo**

In maneuver warfare, tempo is everything. The goal is simple: operate faster than the enemy can think, and certainly faster than it can react.

Now translate that to business.

Agile companies don't win because they're perfect. They win because they move – and move quickly.

They go into production before cautious souls think it wise. They recalibrate constantly. They change direction on a dime. They adjust on the fly.

Tempo is not chaos. Tempo is disciplined speed – the kind that comes from clarity, alignment, and trust.

If your organization moves slowly, it's not so much because the market is complicated. It's because internally the organization is not fully convinced that agility separates winners from losers.

**Principle Number 2 – Decentralized Command**

In maneuver warfare, commanders don't micromanage every squad. They state their intent. They define boundaries within which everyone is to operate. Then, they push tactical decision-making authority as far to the edge of the operation as possible.

Why? Because the people closest to the action have the best information.

In business, this is the difference between a company that reacts and a company that anticipates.

When frontline teams can make decisions without waiting for executive approval, you unlock:

- speed
- ownership
- creativity
- and resilience

Executives who cling to control put their foot on the brake. Executives who distribute control keep their foot on the accelerator.

Your job as a leader is not to be the smartest person in the room. Your job is to fill more rooms with smart, empowered people.

**Principle Number 3 – Exploiting Gaps**

Maneuver warfare is not about attacking strength. It's about exploiting weakness.

In maneuver warfare, you look for gaps — psychological, structural, operational — and you move through them before the enemy can react.

Agile companies do the same.

They find underserved customers. They spot outdated assumptions. They identify slow-moving competitors in their space. They take note of emerging technologies before they hit the mainstream of their industry.

They don't compete head-to-head. They out-maneuver the competition.

And the leaders who excel at this aren't necessarily the most visionary. They're the most observant.

They see what others overlook by way of openings and opportunity.

**Principle Number 4 – Minimized Friction**

Every military commander knows friction — the unexpected problems that derail even the best plans. That's one reason that special forces train so often and so hard. They are the tip of the spear in maneuver warfare. As such, they must strike decisively when the moment is right and exit the scene with lightning speed if necessary. Training and war-gaming help them identify any points of friction that could add even seconds to critical mission requirements.

In business, friction is:

- bureaucracy
- unclear priorities
- conflicting policies
- slow approvals
- cultural drag
- meetings that discuss, but never decide

Agile leaders treat friction as the enemy.

They remove obstacles. They simplify processes. They create clarity. They eliminate the drag that slows teams down.

Speed isn't just about acceleration. It's about removing drag.

### **Principle Number 5 – Commander's Intent**

In maneuver warfare, the commander's intent is the north star. It tells every unit what matters most when plans inevitably break down.

Because plans always break down.

As a career naval intelligence officer, I spent many hours war-gaming various scenarios that we might face around the globe. For military planners, the rule of thumb is that you must be prepared to start revising your plan within the first ten minutes of contact with the enemy. By then, something unexpected has already occurred, and you must adapt accordingly.

Planning is important. But in the heat of battle, improvisation within the plan determines success.

In business, the same principle applies.

When our teams understand exactly where we are going and the "why" behind that destination, they can improvise the "how." When they understand the mission, they can adapt their tactics.

Clarity of direction and purpose create freedom to act independently. Freedom to act creates speed. Speed creates competitive advantage.

This is the leadership chain reaction that separates agile companies from rigid ones.

Leading an agile company isn't about managing tasks. It's about orchestrating movement.

One person has described it as maneuver warfare in a suit.

And the leaders who thrive in this environment aren't the ones who control the most — they're the ones who enable the most.

So, if you want your organization to move faster, adapt quicker, and out-manuever the competition, start thinking less like a manager ... and more like a commander who excels at maneuver warfare. Consistently follow these principles:

- Maintain tempo
- Decentralize command
- Exploit gaps in the competition's performance
- Minimize friction, whatever its form
- Consistently act in accordance with the commander's intent

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*Dr. Mike Armour is the founder and president of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at [www.LeaderPerfect.com](http://www.LeaderPerfect.com).*

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