

War in Ukraine

Some lessons for business leaders



Lance Gerrard-Wright

Head of Leadership and Performance, Armstrong Wolfe



General Sir Peter Wall

Director, Amicus



ARMSTRONG WOLFE™

Since Russian forces rolled uninvited across the Ukrainian border on 24th February 2022, the eyes of the world have been focussed on that significant area of East European geography.

The history of Ukraine has been a protracted saga of a country constantly in flux, struggling to establish its identity and subject to forces well beyond its control. This is but another chapter in its violent history. Most of us were surprised by the resolve, resilience and sheer determination with which the Russian invaders have been confronted. Leadership is at the absolute core of this phenomenal feat of arms that will surely take a prominent place in the history of conflict.

The subsequent stalling of the Russian campaign has also been the focus of much scrutiny. Below are some observations that seek to explore leadership lessons from the conflict, and which may have relevance to leaders in business.

Ukrainian success has been built on superior leadership at the strategic, operational and tactical levels – whereas the Russian operation has been built on the deceit of a ‘special military operation’ which allowed for no planning, preparations or rehearsal. Russian soldiers were on training manoeuvres when ordered ‘off the line of march’ into Ukraine on several axes – none of which were successful.

The hubris driving that series of strategic misjudgements on the Russian side was decisive: they weren’t nearly as good as they thought they were; neither were the Ukrainians the broken force their intelligence had anticipated. It has been a bungled operation from the start, based on Vladimir Putin’s poor understanding of both the Ukrainian psyche and the pitiful condition and morale of his own forces. Putin has failed in the spring and summer phases of this campaign and is now failing in his desperate autumn mobilisation effort.

Initially western support for Ukraine was tentative, probably very much as Putin had anticipated. Thanks to key western leaders like PM Johnson of UK, support has now become very cohesive. This has undoubtedly been helped by Ukrainian success, which has inspired western electorates to support the cause, and steel themselves for the privations of inflation and high energy prices. Success begets success, and that western military aid has been decisive.

President Zelensky is now revered for his courageous leadership, and his superb strategic communications. He has played the world stage superbly, delivering nuanced messages to different national audiences to appeal to their specific sentiments. Zelensky’s personal influence seems to run through everything the Ukrainians do; he seems omnipresent and very much in tune with his people.

In contrast, Putin has been hiding away in the Kremlin, embracing the Soviet style of warfare modelled by Stalin and controlling the disinformation campaign very tightly. His personal influence has proved corrosive to loyalty – more often eroding it, although he maintains a hard core of brainwashed supporters. He is spared the inconvenience of challenge.

There is very limited public access to accurate information, although this may be growing with increasing commentary from Russian journalists in exile, who have fled the regime. So far however, Putin’s public support seems to be holding up; how long he can sustain that is a key question. The lack of trust in his system is corrosive and ultimately it will surely sow the seeds of his downfall, which could be both dramatic and violent.

The Ukrainian campaign has been smart – and clearly directed, with resources well-matched to goals. The trust between higher commanders and tactical commanders seems to have been strong, and the Ukrainians have been sustained physically and morally by support from their western allies, albeit their appetite is insatiable and will never be fully met.

In contrast Russian operational art seems to have been completely lacking, and commanders have been set up for failure at every turn. They have, in the traditional Russian way of warfare promoted by Stalin, resorted to destroying anything they can't capture through mass artillery and air strikes. This is a familiar gambit for their current generation of commanders with experience of the conflicts in Chechnya and Syria – and is characterised by extreme brutality. (Their attacks on critical energy infrastructure prior to winter are tantamount to war crimes). This indiscriminate behaviour has also served to put Ukraine firmly on the moral high ground with the international community.

At the tactical level Russian forces have been constrained not only by the surprise of the operation but by poor training, poor equipment and lack of logistic and medical support. Commanders aren't trusted and their tactical freedom is negligible.

Junior commanders get little latitude which deprives them of the ability to learn. Motivation is very low and troops have often vanished into the countryside, abandoning their equipment along the way. Dozens of armoured vehicles and large stocks of ammunition were relinquished every day during the more fluid phases of the war. As a result the largest supplier of military equipment to Ukraine is Russia.

In contrast the Ukrainian success has relied upon plenty of initiative at the lower levels of command, much more akin to the western armies from whom they have been learning since 2014. (Operation Orbital was a UK operation that trained 20,000 Ukrainian officers and soldiers). This gives Ukraine a significant edge and makes them a learning organisation, and they are fast growing in capability as a result.

The benefits have been clear; from the very outset Ukrainian Armed Forces dispersed into small groupings to take on the Russian advances, and succeeded in disrupting them very significantly. Putin's major axis towards Kyiv was abandoned fairly early on; this "Main Effort" was under-planned and under-resourced and therefore failed miserably.

Ukrainians have since demonstrated the ability to coalesce small groups into larger tactical formations for the counter-offensive phases of their campaign. This adaptability has been essential to their success.

Morale has been a decisive factor – poorly-prepared, equipped and demotivated Russians who don't want to be there are no contest for Ukrainians who are fighting for national survival. There's no upside for Russian soldiers – they face the prospect of death or injury, and have very sparse medical support. They know this gives them little chance of survival if they are injured badly.



In contrast the Ukrainian Forces are highly adaptable, agile, and very determined. They are exhausted but still going forward. Some would say that defending home territory for survival creates decisive advantage – but it's worth remembering France in 1914 and 1940, or Russia in 1941... where the invaders initially prevailed decisively, albeit losing in the end.

The Ukrainian Armed Forces' achievement has been massive against the supposed might of the Red Army – and morale and motivation have been decisive factors, coupled with superior military skill at all levels.

As the winter looms – what can be expected? This will be a long and gruelling campaign for both sides. The tempo of operations will be more constrained – perhaps to the point of a temporary stalemate. A frozen conflict suits Putin: he can't win, so deferring a recognisable defeat is the best he can hope for. Will western support be sustainable once Ukrainian forces are no longer advancing? Will the negotiation route become more acceptable to Zelensky as the winter takes its toll on his civilian population? Probably not; but international military and political support will be vital to Ukrainian momentum in the next campaigning season.

The decisive factors for Ukrainian success have been, and will probably continue to be, the combination of western military aid and their superior strategic, operational, and tactical leadership.

Using the lessons from this campaign, what questions can businesses ask themselves to enhance performance and win?

- » How well do you understand the wider context and the specifics of your situation? Are your assumptions valid?
- » How well do you cascade your purpose and goals from the strategic, through the operational, to the tactical levels in your business?
- » Is yours an empowering or constraining leadership culture? Can your junior executives take advantage of a fluid and constantly evolving situation on the ground?
- » How adaptable is your business to emerging trends and changing situations?
- » How effectively are you communicating both internally and externally?



Contact

Lance Gerrard-Wright

Head of Leadership and Performance, Armstrong Wolfe

lance@armstrongwolfe.com

Maurice Evlyn-Buften

CEO, Armstrong Wolfe

maurice.evlyn-buften@armstrongwolfe.com



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