

Veterans in Leadership: How Military Careers Can Shape Corporate Success

After graduating from the U.S. Military Academy and then spending six years in the Army as a helicopter pilot, Mark Clouse moved into the corporate world as an assistant brand manager at Kraft Foods. Instead of leading a company of 100 people during an overseas tour of duty, he would be working out of a cubicle as a junior member of a much smaller team. Rather than leading on behalf of his country, he would be promoting the Log Cabin Syrup consumer brand.

Yet despite the change in mission and scale, what remained the same for Clouse was the importance of the leadership skills and wisdom he had amassed over his tenure in the Army. And some 30 years later, it's experience Clouse still taps into as the chief executive officer for Campbell Soup.

"There are many paths to success, but there is no better schoolhouse for leadership than the military," Clouse said.

Clouse is one of more than a half-dozen CEOs and other C-suite leaders we interviewed about how their military careers had helped them develop into successful leaders in the corporate world. Their trajectories in many ways parallel the career experiences of Spencer Stuart's veterans community: the unique challenges of entering the workforce as a military veteran, the unique skills veterans can bring to businesses, and the unique leadership lessons of military life and leadership that top executives everywhere can apply.

In this article, based on these interviews with leaders — spanning the many branches of the U.S. military and a range of industries from retail and consumer goods to airlines and industrial — and our personal experiences, we look at the distinctive expertise and leadership acumen that military veterans can bring to the corporate workforce.

Interviewees

- » **Andy Callahan**, CEO, Hostess Brands
- » **Mark Clouse**, CEO, Campbell Soup
- » **Lance Devin**, CEO, Johnstone Supply
- » **Joe DePinto**, CEO, 7-Eleven
- » **Christine Dorfler**, CFO, National Football League
- » **Eileen Drake**, CEO, Aerojet Rocketdyne Holdings
- » **Greg Johnson**, CEO, McAfee
- » **Scott Kirby**, CEO, United Airlines
- » **Darren Rebelez**, CEO, Casey's General Stores
- » **Bill Sandbrook**, former CEO, U.S. Concrete

Understanding the transition from military to business

The shift to corporate life presents some unique challenges for veterans — an important consideration for organizations as they embrace military members. To get the value of veterans and their unique leadership capabilities starts with understanding and preparing for the ups and downs of the transition.

Most veterans, compared to their corporate peers straight from college, enter the civilian workforce at an older age and armed with a lifetime's worth of knowledge and experience about leading through high-pressure situations. Yet they often have a blank slate when it comes to corporate operations — especially compared to the military. Further, the shift to corporate life can bring a stark change in the clarity of mission that military leadership typically offers.

“You take off your uniform and you're surrounded by people working on a mission on a very different scale,” said Greg Johnson, whose corporate leadership roles have included CEO of McAfee, GM at Intuit, and CMO at Advance Auto Parts. Johnson spent 10 years in the Air Force, where his final job was negotiating massive appropriations bills in Congress. When he left the military, his first job was at Kraft Foods on the Jack's frozen pizza brand. “It took me a little while to get comfortable with a different sense of mission, sense of purpose, sense of pride and affiliation. Over time, I learned how to become much more customer focused, and found the significance in what I was doing and really became proud of the work I was doing and the products and brands I was managing.”

Clouse said he brought to the workforce a humility that had been honed as a second lieutenant in the Army, when he was leading teams that included warrant officers who had flown helicopters in Vietnam. Regardless of rank, he knew he could learn from them. In my first corporate job, “I accepted the fact that no matter how hard I worked, I couldn't learn everything as quickly as I wanted to,” Clouse said. “I had to display a ton of patience in the learning process and learn the different set of skills needed to be successful in this career.”



There are many paths to success, but there is no better schoolhouse for leadership than the military.”

MARK CLOUSE
CEO, CAMPBELL SOUP

The nature of work in the civilian world is also less rigorous than in military life. A corporate employee, for one, has a higher degree of freedom about leaving when they're not happy. Several interviews also pointed to a corporate ethos that is much less formal when it comes to less experienced employees interacting and collaborating with leaders.

"You have more independence in terms of presenting something up the chain and speaking up in meetings, and not having that rigid adherence to chain of command," said Christine Dorfler, chief financial officer for the National Football League, who served as a military intelligence officer in the U.S. Army after graduating from Villanova University, where she was in the ROTC program. "You have to learn to be comfortable speaking up in meetings where your boss is there and maybe even has a differing opinion, and learning that that can be okay and even welcome."

The other element of culture shock is dealing with the expectations of others who may not immediately recognize the value of military experiences.

"It's all new and you really don't know the rules, and most people take for granted that you know common business norms," said Bill Sandbrook, an Army veteran who for almost nine years was president and CEO of U.S. Concrete.

All in all, though, the leaders we spoke with recognized the immense and unique value that U.S. military veterans bring to their workforces.

"I value the experience and the community, and their sense of diversity and inclusion," said Eileen Drake, a former U.S. Army aviator who is now CEO of Aerojet Rocketdyne. "They make great teammates and team leaders, because they are used to working with all sorts of different people."



I value [veterans'] experience and the community... They make great teammates and team leaders because they are used to working with all sorts of different people."

EILEEN DRAKE
CEO, AEROJET ROCKETDYNE

Leadership: Veterans' value in the workforce

Formative experiences in service, whether stateside or abroad, enabled the executives we interviewed to hone leadership skills that have served them well in the corporate world as they build teams, motivate employees and lead with confidence, humility and compassion.

The stories we heard in our interviews with military veteran leaders were unique in their details yet remarkably consistent in terms of the attributes of strong leadership: performance under pressure, strong team performance, a sense of mission and collaboration across levels within complex environments.

“Veterans come to the corporate world having already gained incredible experiences in teamwork, setting expectations, holding people accountable and providing resources to their teams,” said Joe DePinto, a West Point graduate who is now the CEO of 7-Eleven. “They lived it every day in the military, and the leadership piece is already solidified when they join civilian corporations.”



Veterans come to the corporate world having already gained incredible experiences in teamwork, setting expectations, holding people accountable and providing resources to their teams.”

JOE DEPINTO
CEO, 7-ELEVEN

For example, Andy Callahan, a Navy veteran who is now CEO of Hostess Brands, told us that he hangs on to one of his first lessons as a plebe at the U.S. Naval Academy: “Find your mail.” Back in the pre-internet days of daily mail delivery, he saw first-hand reading the stories from back home was a bonding moment and common experience for every person that transcended rank, a great equalizer in the military’s hierarchical world.

“Every organization needs a relatable equalizer that puts all the people on the same foundation and connects them as humans,” Callahan said. “I still ask, ‘What’s the common purpose that ties us all together? What’s our “mail”?’”

So, what are some of the key leadership traits veterans draw from their military experience? Interestingly, the leadership lessons executives draw on today have less to do with hard skills and more with what Spencer Stuart calls the [“below the surface”](#)

qualities of successful CEOs, including capacity — what they have the potential to do versus what they have already done — and character — how they are likely to respond when stretched beyond what they have done in the past.

Humility

The nature of military training and experience — “they break you down and then build you back up,” to quote one interviewee — provides the basis for compassionate leadership. From the start, military experience teaches you what you do and don’t know. Building from their training, service members learn to quickly balance confidence with a recognition that they can’t do it alone.

In the corporate world, that translates into an ability to learn and adapt quickly in high-pressure situations in dynamic, cross-functional environments. Amid significant complexity — for example, the need to bring together business units around new technology and other trends — leaders who can flex quickly are even more valuable. This is an ability that many veterans can bring to the table, yet it may not be immediately evident in their résumés, nor easily captured in job descriptions.

The NFL’s Dorfler recalled a mission in Bosnia where she, as a second lieutenant, was in charge of providing security for a highly sensitive operation. She leaned on fellow soldiers and subordinates who had been through similar operations before to help the entire operation succeed.

“In every new situation I’m put into, including most recently coming to the NFL, I’m confident that I can learn what I don’t know, I can develop a strong team around me and I can eventually get to a place where I’m adding value to the organization,” Dorfler said. “I think it’s that blend of confidence and humility, and I give a ton of credit to my military experience helping me develop that.”

Performance under pressure

With experience leading in high-stakes, uncertain environments, veterans entering the private workforce for the first time often demonstrate a level of calm under pressure that enables them to rise quickly and excel.



Management is about compliance. Leadership is about inspiring people with a vision. As a leader, you’re trying to create a sense of mission and camaraderie, which goes a very long way toward being successful.”

SCOTT KIRBY
CEO, UNITED AIRLINES

Scott Kirby, CEO of United Airlines and a graduate of the U.S. Air Force Academy, where he trained to be a pilot, said that a work ethic based on doing whatever it takes to get a job done permeates the soldier’s experience and is a part of who they are after they leave.

“‘No excuses,’ even when you had a perfectly good explanation of why something happened, was drilled into us constantly,” Kirby recalled. “That philosophy, the idea that whining about your situation doesn’t help, is probably the most important thing I learned at the Air Force Academy. All in all, I learned discipline in a way that I never would have gotten anywhere else.”

For Darren Rebelez, the CEO of Casey’s General Stores, who graduated from the U.S. Military Academy, that ability to adjust in the face of uncertainty guided him during the COVID-19 pandemic, which began when he was just seven months into his job. Rebelez and his leadership team recognized quickly that an anxious workforce — 95 percent of whom worked in a physical store — needed assurance from a steady hand.

“In the military, you learn resiliency, for sure,” Rebelez said. “That, along with toughness, mission focus, work ethic, teamwork, a can-do attitude, decisiveness. Those are all things that I think fit really well in any sort of leadership role.”

A team-first mentality

Military experience fosters a sense of team unity that is critical to achieving goals — similar to what Callahan noted in terms of “find your mail.” Whatever your role or rank in the military, at the end of the day there is a common goal that everyone rallies behind, and a trust to fight for your teammate to achieve it together.

Bill Sandbrook spent most of his 20s leading units in the Army’s Armored Branch and later the Corps of Engineers, and the team mentality was a key element of his leadership. He followed the ethos, “take care of your soldiers at all costs, and put them above yourself.”



In the military, you learn resiliency, for sure... along with toughness, mission focus, work ethic, teamwork, a can-do attitude, decisiveness. Those are all things that I think fit really well in any sort of leadership role.”

DARREN REBELEZ
CEO, CASEY'S GENERAL STORES

“This has served me well in all of the civilian positions I’ve been in,” Sandbrook said. “My goal was always to put everybody ahead of myself, for whatever it is. I would take care of my people, and I learned that 100 percent from the military. For so many CEOs, it’s all about them — I’ll be very honest about this. But to me, it’s all about your people.”

It’s a lesson many former military officers have brought to their private-sector jobs.

“When I work with former military men and women, the first thing that jumps out at me is just their ability to work as a team, to break down barriers that may exist on paper,” the NFL’s Dorfler said. “They’ll say, ‘Let’s hold hands, let’s lock arms, and let’s figure out a way to get this mission done.’”

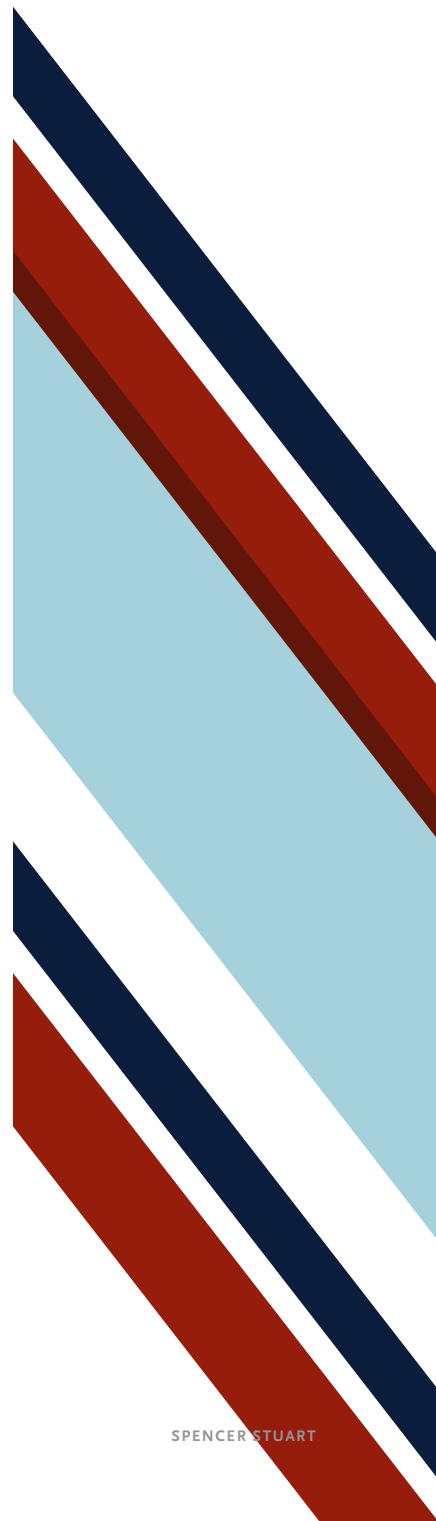
A sense of mission and purpose

Understanding a mission’s power to inspire individuals and unify teams was a common theme among the veterans we spoke with. While the corporate world offers different stakes than the life-or-death assignments that arise in the military, the value of rallying everyone around a mission and common purpose is a key lesson of military service.

“Management is about compliance. Leadership is about inspiring people with a vision,” said United’s Scott Kirby. “As a leader, you’re trying to create a sense of mission and camaraderie, which goes a very long way toward being successful.”

Lance Devin, CEO of Johnstone Supply, a wholesale distributor of HVAC equipment, graduated from the U.S. Air Force Academy and spent nine years as a flight examiner and instructor pilot before entering the corporate workforce as a pilot for United Airlines. He noted that making tough decisions in tough situations is an elemental part of military life. Information is limited and the stakes are high — sometimes quite literally life-and-death — and yet you are charged with making the choices tied to values and the best interests of your team.

“I’ve made a lot of really tough decisions in the last 30 years, but I had no problem owning those,” said Devin. “I think that’s something that is unique to military folks. It breeds trust, which allows people to follow you through really tough decisions.”



Tapping into veterans' unique skills

The skills and attributes of veterans in the corporate workplace are undoubtedly valuable. To tap into that potential, though, employers must set them up for success from the moment they walk in the door.

At 7-Eleven, for example, attracting and retaining talent with a military background is actively led by senior leadership. The company's chief of staff, its executive leaders in merchandising and strategic planning and the chief information officer all have a military background. Meanwhile, an outreach group now has more than 500 members. "It's been a deliberate process for us," DePinto said. "We are going out of our way to advance the impact it has at 7-Eleven."

Below we look at some ways leaders and organizations can tap into veterans' unique skills and background while also supporting the veteran workforce:

- » **Understand the leadership value that military experience brings to the table.** [Spencer Stuart research on executive success](#) points to the critical importance of understanding candidates' potential for successful leadership as much as their past experiences. And Spencer Stuart's "below the surface" leadership characteristics such as an individual's capacity and character — patterns of behavior, traits and style preferences — have proven to be more important predictors of success when conditions are more dynamic and unpredictable. This certainly rings true for finding talent with a military background. While their hard skills may be impressive — for example, they may have more extensive than normal backgrounds in data analysis or project management — it's the soft skills where they may truly stand out, particularly from a view of finding future leaders. With a better understanding of military experience, companies can hire more effectively with an eye toward a veteran's long-term leadership potential.
- » **Tap into veterans recruitment and development programs.** Many of the executives we spoke with gained entry in the corporate world in the 1990s thanks to specific corporate programs at places like PepsiCo, GE and Kraft Foods that recruited veterans. Other independent programs, such as [DoD SkillBridge](#), [Hire Heroes USA](#) and [the U.S. Army's Partnership for Your Success \(PaYS\)](#), also help identify potential candidates and connect service members with real-world job opportunities. Further, as seen in the career paths of many of our interviewees, once a veteran is brought inside a company, development programs specifically designed for veterans can help ease the transition and help them convert their skills into valuable leadership capabilities.



I've made a lot of really tough decisions in the last 30 years, but I had no problem owning those. I think that's something that is unique to military folks. It breeds trust, which allows people to follow you through really tough decisions."

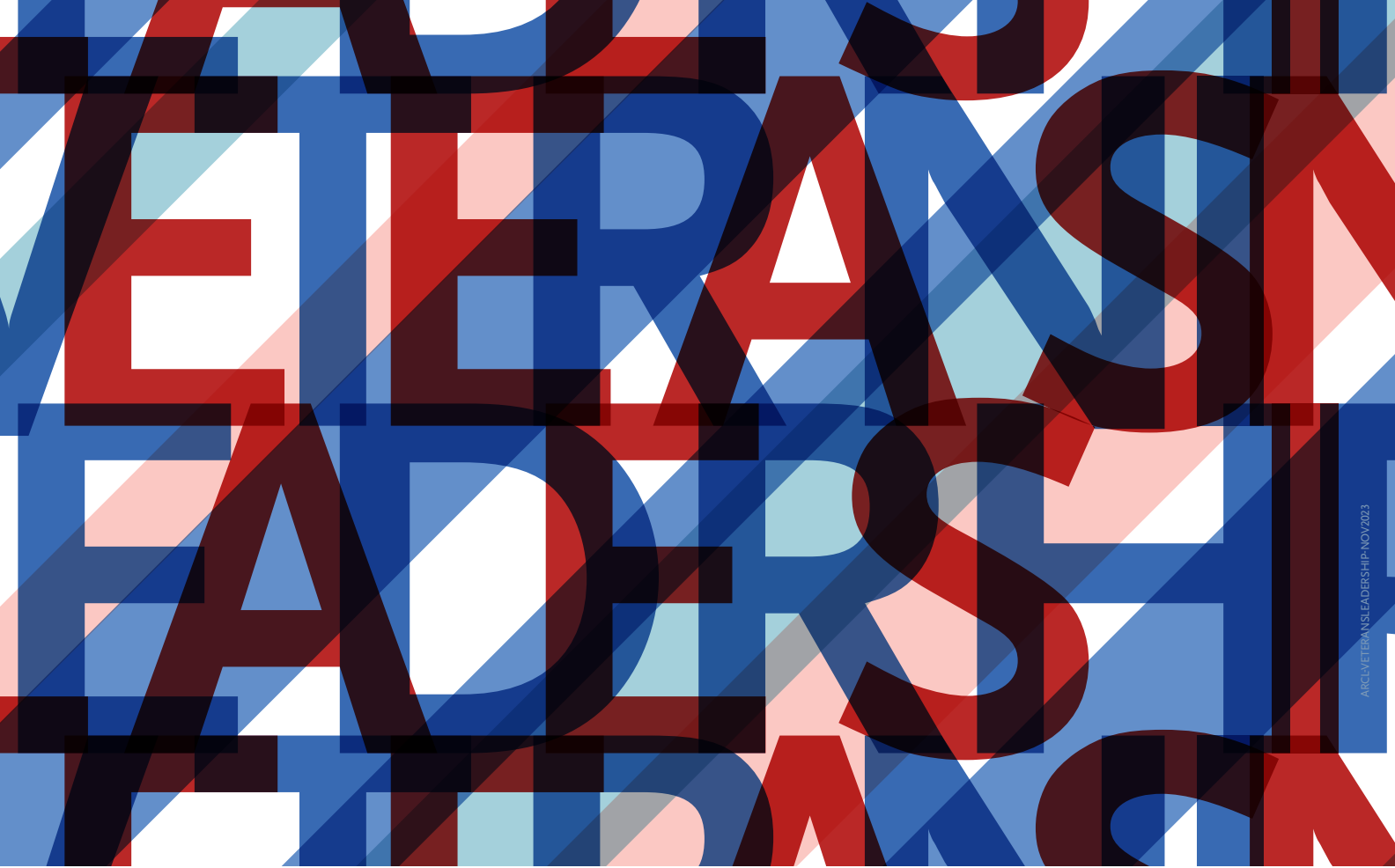
LANCE DEVIN
CEO, JOHNSTONE SUPPLY

- » **Build community within your organization.** Veterans within a company can help recruit strong potential candidates who are leaving the military, whether that's informally or in partnership with recruiting and talent teams. As mentors for veterans new to the corporate workforce, they can support the transition to the corporate world. Our own experiences as veterans in the workplace echoed those we heard about in our interviews: The camaraderie among veterans remains an important element of military life, even after leaving the active service.



Military veterans have proven themselves to be crucial contributors to the corporate world — the key for organizations is recognizing their immense value. By attracting and retaining veterans to their teams, they may find tremendous untapped leadership potential.





About Spencer Stuart

At Spencer Stuart, we know that leadership has never mattered more. We are trusted by organizations around the world to help them make the senior-level leadership decisions that have a lasting impact on their enterprises, on their stakeholders and the world around them. Through our executive search, board and leadership advisory services, we help build and enhance high-performing teams for select clients ranging from major multinationals to emerging companies to nonprofit institutions.

Privately held since 1956, we focus on delivering knowledge, insight and results through the collaborative efforts of a team of experts — now spanning more than 70 offices, over 30 countries and more than 50 practice specialties. Boards and leaders consistently turn to Spencer Stuart to help address their evolving leadership needs in areas such as senior-level executive search, board recruitment, board effectiveness, succession planning, in-depth senior management assessment, employee engagement and many other facets of culture and organizational effectiveness, particularly in the context of the changing stakeholder expectations of business today. For more information on Spencer Stuart, please visit www.spencerstuart.com.

Contributors

Jeff Hyler (Houston)
Brett Clark-Bolt (Seattle)
Greg Welch (Chicago)
Nathan Gustafson (Boston)
Ellice Johnson (Houston)
Ashley Miller (Atlanta)
Alison Yang (Washington, D.C.)
Paul Yang (Washington, D.C.)

