

Command Change, Not Your People

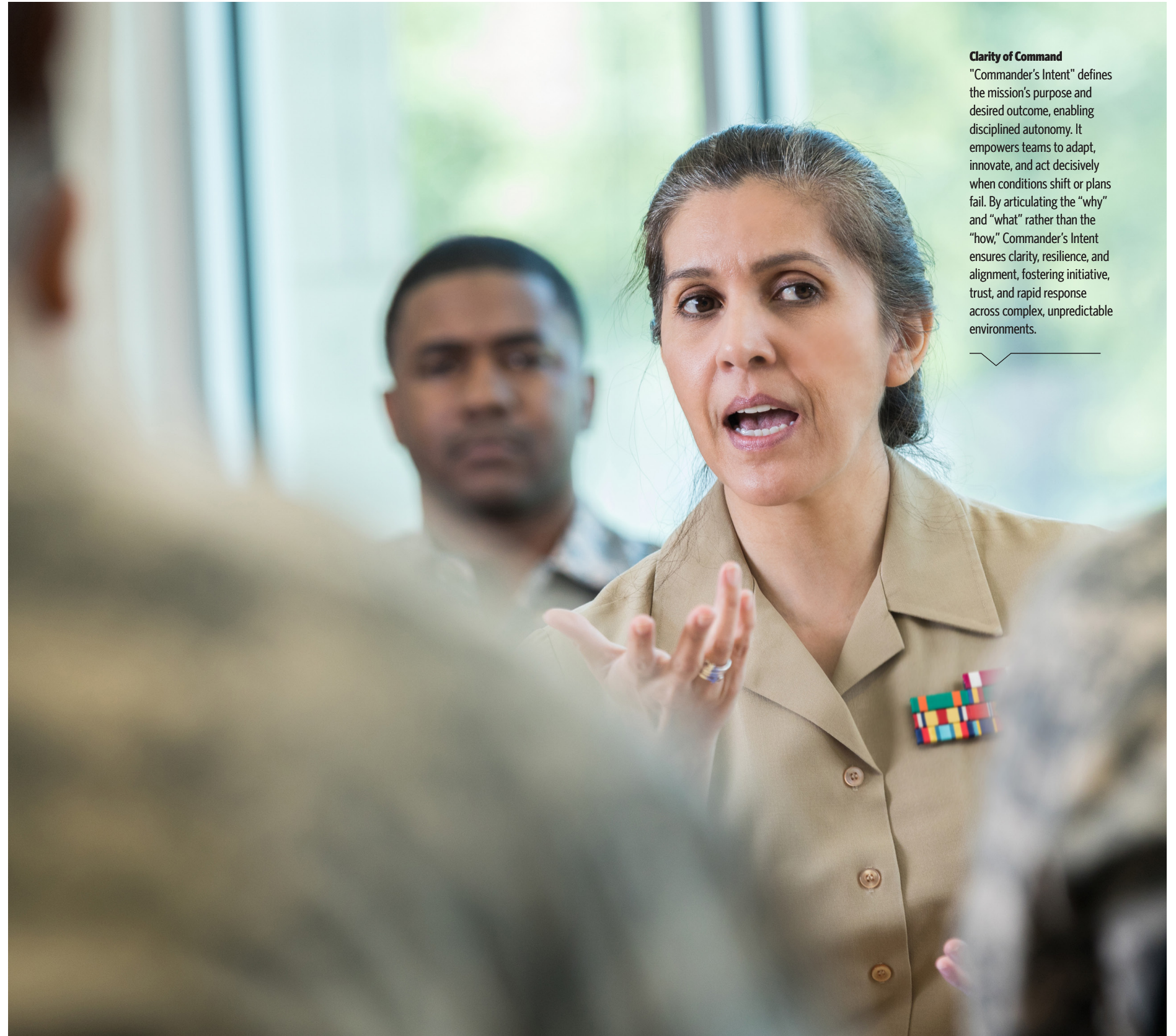
A CEO can bark orders like a general, but without a connection to purpose and meaning, they'll land flat. To lead like Ike, we must first master Commander's Intent.

By Nathan Owen Rosenberg & Will Parish

Every CEO knows the scene: the strategy is clear in your head, but, as it communicated and put into action, the strategy fractures into competing interpretations. At times, you want to pound the table and shout orders, just to cut through the noise. Inside your head, a tiny voice whispers, "If only I could issue orders, like the military."

It is a seductive image: Rigor, precision, victory! But the fantasy collapses the moment you inspect it. The culture of the military is one of discipline, chain of command, and hierarchical authority in a context of life-and-death. Every member has taken an oath to follow orders.

In the business world, the most important asset of any



Clarity of Command

"Commander's Intent" defines the mission's purpose and desired outcome, enabling disciplined autonomy. It empowers teams to adapt, innovate, and act decisively when conditions shift or plans fail. By articulating the "why" and "what" rather than the "how," Commander's Intent ensures clarity, resilience, and alignment, fostering initiative, trust, and rapid response across complex, unpredictable environments.



corporation goes home at night, and the executives pray that they come back the next morning. To get the daily work of the company done well, takes more influencing than controlling. And while executives love military analogies almost as much as sports analogies—while high stakes—business is not life-and-death.

This is not to say that business leaders should ignore the lessons of the armed forces, far from it. The military has developed leadership systems in the most volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous conditions imaginable—environments that Fortune 500 executives now recognize all too well. But the insight that transfers from the battlefield to the boardroom is not about obedience. It is about clarity. It is about creating a unifying thread of purpose so resilient that it holds even when communication fails, circumstances shift, and plans go awry. That thread is known in military doctrine as “Commander’s Intent,” and it may be the single most useful leadership principle for executives trying to win at the speed of change.

Clarity of Mission: Precision Without Rigidity

Commander’s Intent is deceptively simple. Instead of issuing detailed instructions, a commander articulates three things: (1) the purpose of the mission, (2) the method by which the team is expected to operate in broad terms, and (3) the desired end state. Once this intent is understood, subordinates are free to adapt tactics to meet reality on the ground.

The idea emerged from the battlefield. Radios fail and orders garble. The fog of war obscures facts. What allows a unit to keep moving, even in chaos, is not a checklist—it is shared understanding. If



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soldiers understand what the commander is trying to accomplish and why, they can adapt when the situation changes.

As U.S. Marine Corps doctrine puts it, intent allows subordinates “to exercise judgment and initiative—in a way that is consistent with the commander’s aims—when unforeseen opportunities arise or the original plan no longer fits.”

The parallel for business is apt. Markets turn, competitors strike, supply chains snap. The strategy you carefully drafted in January rarely survives intact through December. But if your people understand the purpose behind the strategy and the end state you are driving toward, they can adjust in stride. They can act without waiting for approval. They can make decisions at the edge of the organization that remain aligned with your vision. That is clarity without rigidity. That is velocity.

The Strategy-Execution Gap: Why Good Plans Fail

It is tempting to believe that once a strategy is set, execution will follow. The evidence suggests otherwise. Across industries, the gap between intent and impact is staggering.

The Chartered Management Institute, a professional body in the United Kingdom, found that only 26% of managers believe their organizations communicate strategy effectively, and fewer than 30% of employees say they understand what is expected of them.

Moreover, the Society for Human Resource Management uncovered similar patterns: 51% of employees reported they did not understand how their daily work contributed to the organization’s goals. *The Harvard Business Review* has gone further, documenting that just one in ten employees

feels genuine accountability for results—a chilling signal that strategies may be beautifully written yet fatally disconnected from execution.

These are not abstract failures. They are the silent killers of competitiveness. When strategy is misunderstood, employees waste energy on conflicting priorities. When accountability is diffuse, initiative tends to evaporate. When only a handful of executives truly grasp the company’s direction, the rest of the organization moves slowly, if at all. In an economy where consumer preferences shift overnight and supply shocks reverberate globally, delay is indistinguishable from defeat.

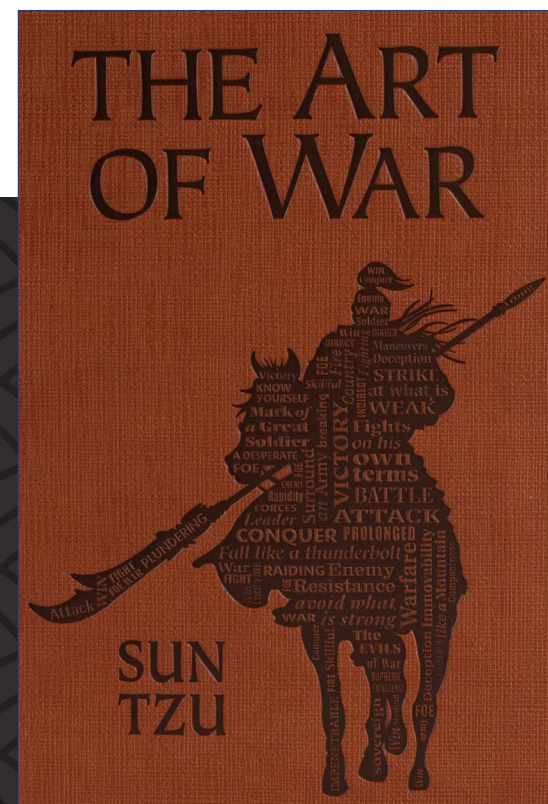
The problem is not that strategies are poorly conceived. It is because they are poorly cascaded. They are presented at off-sites, published in slide decks, and then smothered under layers of meetings and memos. The signal weakens as it travels downward. What began as a bold ambition ends as a confused activity.

Commander’s Intent offers an antidote. It demands that leaders distill strategy to its essence—the why, the what, and the boundaries—and ensure that everyone, from the C-suite to the frontline, can state it in the same way. Without that clarity, no amount of incentives, dashboards, or reviews will create alignment. With it, the organization can move as a single unit.

Reframing Commander’s Intent for Business

It is essential to stress what the Commander’s Intent is not. It is not a slogan, nor a laminated card with values printed in your brand’s font. It is not a quarterly objective that vanishes when the fiscal year turns. It is a living narrative of purpose, method, and end state that accompanies the strategy into the complexities of daily execution.

Reframed for business, intent looks like this: Leaders articulate the mission in plain language. They define what success will look like and by what measures it will be judged. They specify constraints, including what not to do. And then they empower



Required Reading: Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*

Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* has survived 2,500 years not because it teaches tactics, but because it teaches clarity. He warned that "strategy without tactics is the slowest route to victory; tactics without strategy is the noise before defeat." For executives, the lesson is timeless: plans fail, markets shift, but leaders who define purpose and align their teams around a shared end state move more quickly and adapt more effectively. Reading *The Art of War* is less about warfare than about cultivating the discipline of clarity—an advantage that never goes out of date.



Battle-Tested Strategies

Military leadership thrives in volatile, uncertain environments by fostering clarity and purpose—not obedience—offering Fortune 500 executives lessons in resilience, alignment, and adaptability amid shifting conditions.

teams to decide, improvise, and act within those parameters. This reframing requires trust. Military commanders understand that intent works only if subordinates are trained, competent, and committed. Corporate leaders must embrace the same principle. Micromanagement is the enemy of intent; if executives continue to second-guess every decision, the organization freezes. But if executives trust their people with autonomy, and if those people understand the intent, the organization accelerates. It

also requires discipline.

Autonomy without alignment creates chaos. The genius of the approach is that it marries freedom with focus. People are free to act—but only within the frame of the agreed mission and end state.

In an era when employees crave meaning in their work, intent also provides emotional resonance. It connects individual tasks to a larger purpose. It answers the question “Why does this matter?” without requiring a town hall or a memo. And it ensures that when circumstances shift, the

answer remains unchanged.

The Four Steps to Command Velocity

At Insigniam, we describe organizational transformation through a sequence of four moves: *Reveal*, *Unhook*, *Invent*, and *Implement*. Each move is about more than process; it is about shifting the culture of leadership from control to commitment. Commander’s Intent sharpens each move, embedding clarity where it matters most

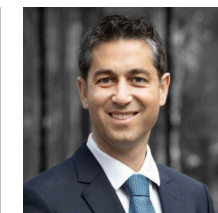
The first move, *Reveal*, is about surfacing the hidden assumptions and unspoken commitments that silently govern behavior. Every company has them: the belief that

risk must be minimized at all costs, the assumption that certain approvals are sacred, the habit of delaying decisions until consensus is reached. These assumptions form a fog as dense as any battlefield mist. By articulating intent clearly, leaders cut through the fog. They reveal what truly matters and what does not.

The second move, *Unhook*, liberates the organization from the processes and habits that drain momentum. Bureaucracy thrives in the absence of clarity. People invent approvals and duplicate reviews because they are unsure of direction. Commander’s Intent dismantles the excuses. When the purpose and end state are explicit, many of the hooks that restrain action lose their legitimacy. Teams can stop justifying delay and start moving.

The third move, *Invent*, invites the organization to generate future-back solutions. Too often, innovation is stifled by the fear of straying from leadership’s intent. But when intent is precisely articulated, the boundaries are clear, and within those boundaries, creativity flourishes. Teams can propose bold ideas knowing they remain aligned with the mission. Autonomy becomes the fuel for invention.

The fourth move, *Implement*, is where discipline meets speed. Implementation is not about chaotic bursts of action; it is about deliberate rhythms of execution guided by intent. Weekly commitments replace vague ambitions. After-action reviews become opportunities to learn and adapt, not rituals of blame. Leaders measure progress not only in quarterly earnings but in the cycle time from signal to decision. Intent ensures that implementation is not a scattershot of activity but a coordinated march toward a defined end state. Taken together, the four moves transform organizations from cautious bureaucracies into agile enterprises. They replace the illusion of control with the reality of alignment. And they enable companies to win not by



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Will Parish is a consultant with Insigniam and a graduate of the U.S. Naval Academy and the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School, where he earned a Master of Arts in National Security Studies. He spent more than a decade in strategic roles with the U.S. Navy and the U.S. Department of State, including service as Director of the Office of Defense Cooperation at the U.S. Embassy in Mexico City, Deputy Director for Strategy and Plans for U.S. Naval Forces Southern Command, and as a Naval Flight Officer aboard aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf. His decorations include the Defense Meritorious Service Medal, the Air Medal, and other commendations.



A Commander's Challenge to CEOs

The challenge for CEOs is not to copy the military; rather, it is to adapt the principles that make military units effective in conditions of extreme volatility. The question is not whether your people will obey orders; it is whether they understand your intent so clearly that they can act without orders.

Imagine testing your top 100 leaders. Ask each to write, on a single page, the mission of the company, the definition of success, the key boundaries, and the time horizon. Would the answers align? Or would they diverge into a tangle of priorities, metrics, and buzzwords? If you cannot count on alignment at the top, you cannot expect it anywhere else.

The future of leadership lies in reducing that divergence to zero. In the next decade, companies that master clarity will outpace those that cling to control. They will measure their organizational latency—the time it takes to respond to a change in strategy—not in quarters but in days. They will deploy teams that can improvise responsibly because they know the why and the what, even when the how changes hourly.

This is not fantasy. It is already visible in organizations that have embraced intent-driven leadership. They move faster, adapt quicker, and retain talent longer. Their employees report higher engagement because they understand the significance of their work. Their customers notice the difference in responsiveness. Their investors

Lock-Step Leadership

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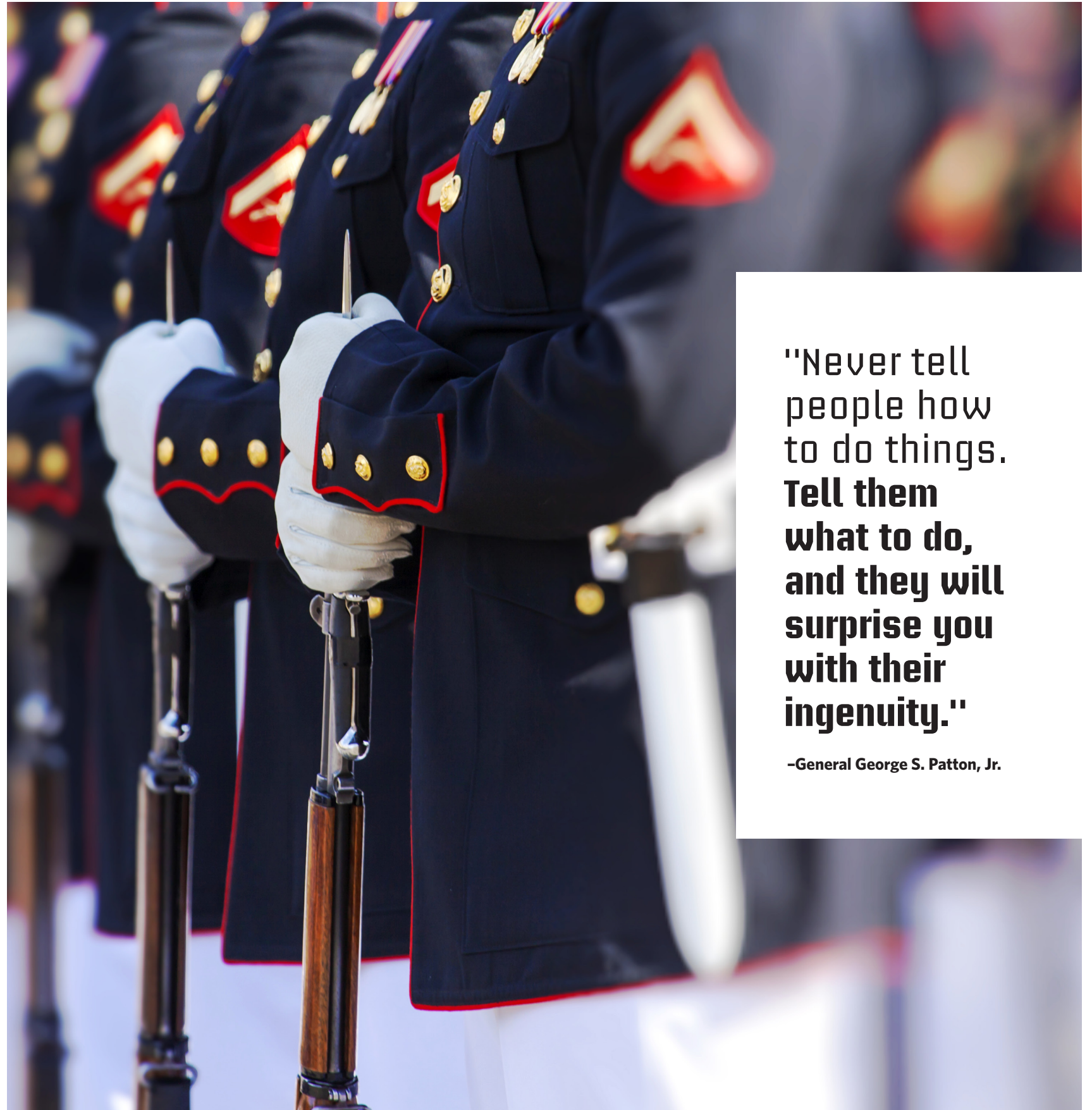
reward the consistency of performance. For CEOs across the Fortune 500, the invitation is clear. Stop trying to command people and start commanding clarity. Replace the brittle comfort of detailed orders with the resilient strength of shared intent. Trust your teams with autonomy, but hold them accountable to purpose and end state. Build rhythms of execution that reinforce alignment, not control.

The companies that survive the next wave of disruption will not be those with the thickest binders of plans. They will be those who can adjust at speed without losing coherence. They will be those who move as one, even when the fog closes in around them. They will be those whose leaders mastered the art of Commander's.

Intend to Win at the Speed of Change

Real success does not come from marching your company like a platoon. It comes from leading like a commander: clear in purpose, precise in desired outcomes, and generous with autonomy.

The age of rigid planning is over. The future belongs to organizations that can translate strategy into intent, cascade it with fidelity, and empower their people to act. The executives who accept this challenge will discover that clarity is the ultimate competitive advantage. They will not just react to change. They will command it. And in doing so, they will win—not by control, but by commitment. **IQ**



"Never tell people how to do things. Tell them what to do, and they will surprise you with their ingenuity."

—General George S. Patton, Jr.