

Once More Unto the Breach

Executive Leadership Lessons from HBO's 'Band of Brothers'

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As the workplace continues to evolve, so does the concept of executive leadership: what does it mean to lead? And what are the potential consequences? One place to look for answers may seem counter-intuitive, the past.

In 2001, HBO released *Band of Brothers*, a 10-part miniseries created by Tom Hanks and Steven Spielberg. The show, drawing from the 1992 book by Stephen E. Ambrose, was based on the history of "Easy" Company, 2nd Battalion, 506th Parachute Infantry Regiment of the 101st Airborne Division -- from their training at a base in Georgia, through D-Day and the Battle of the Bulge, to the end of World War II in Europe. I have watched the series—and been inspired by it—many times. I find myself often drawn back to a two-and-a-half-minute clip from episode 7 of the series, "The Breaking Point."

Click to watch or search "Band of Brothers Spiers Takes Command" to find the clip:
<https://youtu.be/Ww2R3FHCjLk>

The context of the scene is straightforward: Easy Company is ordered to take the Belgian town of Foy, in the Bastogne region where the Battle of the Bulge occurred. Lt. Dike is charged with leading the assault. However, when faced with enemy resistance, Dike wilts, leaving his men stationary and exposed in a field of fire. Virtually every line spoken over the next 150 seconds of the scene frames answers to the questions posed above. What does it mean to lead? And what are the potential consequences?

"Sir, we are sitting ducks here!"

The scene opens with Sgt. Lipton imploring Lt. Dike (whose ring conspicuously signals the distinction in class and education of the officer from his non-commissioned and lower-ranked counterpart) to change tactics. Dike is paralyzed in the face of live action.

- **Lesson #1 – Don't mistake credentials for qualifications.** Ultimately, the organization's objectives will be met by the rank-and-file. While credentials can be predictive indicators, they do not replace true leadership.
- **Lesson #2 – Be willing to accept feedback from subordinates.** Lt. Dike is oblivious to his sergeant's words. Sometimes – not always, but sometimes – the best situational intelligence can come from those closest to the action. Be willing to hear it.
- **Lesson #3 – Don't confuse the wrong leader for the wrong mission.** This lesson is a bit more nuanced. Adversity or failure with a project does not necessarily mean the project is flawed or

ill-conceived. For Easy Company, the strategic objective of taking the town of Foy was sound; the mission was not at fault. Rather, Lt. Dike was not the right person for the job. Good leadership includes the capacity to discern between projects and personnel.

“We have to keep moving!”/“They’ve got to keep moving!”

The scene’s impact continues with the parallel conclusions offered by Sgt. Lipton (Dike’s direct report) and Capt. Winters (Dike’s superior officer), who unslings his own weapon, ready to personally assume leadership of the company.

- **Lesson #4 – Maintain the initiative.** Being proactive versus reactive is no new leadership tip. This is slightly different. Initiative is not just proactive, it suggests actively starting and moving on a situation. There is a creative element to initiative that should not be lost.

“Capt. Winters ... you do not go out there! You are the battalion commander, now get back here!”

Yet another leader is introduced into the scene. Col. Sink roars at Capt. Winters to remember his place and his role in the attack.

- **Lesson #5 – Know your role.** Simple as it sounds, it can be tempting for executives to forego their present leadership level to assume duties they can perform better or more efficiently than their subordinates. While a project or a mission may improve, perhaps even dramatically improve, with the leader’s direct influence, the operational cost to the organization is the loss of leadership at the level the executive abandoned to take on the project.
- **Lesson #6 – Don’t lose valuable leaders over failed missions.** The risk that Col. Sink correctly appreciated was that Capt. Winters was a good man and a great leader. He did not want to lose him to a thwarted assault, because Winters’ value to the operation was greater than the single mission at issue. Good leaders are too valuable to lose, even if organizational goals are not always met.

“Speirs! Get yourself over here. Get out there and relieve Dike and take that attack on in.”

Frustrated, Capt. Winters storms back to the relative safety of the treeline. Col. Sink is trying to comfort and calm his trusted captain. Winters would have none of it. The mission was ongoing, he had men exposed in the field, and he needed a solution of operational leadership. He calls for another lieutenant, Speirs, to assume command of the Foy assault.

- **Lesson #7 -- Don’t lose sight of the mission amidst the praise of your superiors.** Col. Sink was undoubtedly well-intentioned, but Capt. Winters understood the stakes of the mission, and he was unwilling to leave Easy Company without competent leadership in the field. To high-value

executives, getting the job done is more important than being reminded of how high-value they are.

- **Lesson #8 -- Be present.** This one is intuitive. Lt. Speirs was ready, willing, and available when presented with his leadership opportunity.

“I’m taking over.”

Lt. Speirs makes his way through the enemy fire and smoke to directly enter the mission. He immediately goes to Lt. Dike to announce his appearance and role.

- **Lesson #9 – Do things in order.** Lt. Speirs did not start shooting the enemy. He did not assemble or redeploy Easy Company. He found and relieved Dike as his first act in the operation. This was consistent with his orders from Capt. Winters and critical to the ultimate success of the mission.
- **Lesson #10 – Clearly communicate expectations.** Clear channels of communication are the lifeblood of an organization. Here, Lt. Speirs was timely, clear, concise and unequivocal. He set the expectations for himself, for Lt. Dike, and for Easy Company regarding the mission with three spoken words. The rest of the scene demonstrates the effect of that clarity.

“What do we got?”

If Lt. Speirs’ first act in the battle of Foy was to relieve Dike and reset mission expectations, his second act was equally important. He requested a status report from Sgt. Lipton to understand both available resources and obstacles in real-time.

- **Lesson #11 – Assess the situation before acting.** The view of the battle from the haystack was different from the view from the treeline where the commanding officers watched. Lt. Speirs needed intelligence from inside the operation, as opposed to outside observations. Critical decision-making deserves (and requires) accurate and timely situational assessment.

“Alright, I want mortars and grenade launchers on that building ‘til it’s gone.”

The chief threat to the assault was a suspected enemy sniper in the building with the “caved-in roof.” With distance and hindsight, Lt. Speirs’ decision to apply pressure to that threat seems so obvious as to be unremarkable. The fact that it was not so obvious to the men during the battle is telling.

- **Lesson #12 – Apply resources to address the biggest obstacle.** Not only was Lt. Speirs decisive in identifying and addressing the obstacle, he was also clear in bringing to bear additional resources that had not been previously used. With these powerful and appropriate resources applied, the obstacle was quickly overcome and eliminated.

“When it’s gone, I want First to go straight in, forget going around.”

Sgt. Lipton had explained to Lt. Speirs that First Platoon had tried an end-around but were stretched out and pinned down by the enemy sniper. Having determined how to address the sniper, the lieutenant next redeployed Easy Company to reengage the assault.

- **Lesson #13 – Don't be afraid to pivot from the original plan to salvage the mission.** Identifying, meeting and overcoming adversity often requires willingness to change.

“Everybody else, follow me!”

With the decisions made, it is time now to act. Key to that action ultimately being successful is Lt. Speirs' leadership. He expects Easy Company to follow him into battle. He expects both to participate in and directly influence the outcome of the battle. Sgt. Lipton's face in response to new orders immediately communicates the renewed confidence the soldiers have in their new leadership and in the mission itself.

- **Lesson #14 – Leaders lead.** Executive leadership may not require leaping through explosions or dodging bullets, but in this scene, Lt. Speirs demonstrated leadership that translates. Beyond filling a leadership vacuum in a failing mission and driving subsequent operational success, Lt. Speirs' words and actions also inspired the loyalty and confidence of Easy Company. The soldiers were willing to assume new risks and extend their contributions to the mission because they now had a leader they believed in.

Two and a half minutes. The entire scene lasts two and a half minutes, and the leadership points captured here are set out in probably half that time. My hope is that the fair use of this two and a half minutes from a 20-year-old TV miniseries gives you a fresh look at some timeless lessons on leadership.

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