Team-Building Lessons From the British Army

There’s plenty all business owners can learn from the English military’s organization and execution.

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Entrepreneurship is a team sport. It is simply too complex to do on your own and expect to succeed. People who attempt to be “solopreneurs” find themselves juggling tasks as varied as sales, administration, IT and client-delivery. No earthly person could be excellent at all of these tasks, and often they become mediocre at all of them.

The greatest entrepreneurs know this all too well, and their primary goal is to enroll talented people onto their team. That’s why there is a plethora of quotes from the most famous entrepreneurs extolling the virtues of teams:

“By putting the employee first, the customer effectively comes first by default, and in the end, the shareholder comes first by default as well.” – Richard Branson

“None of us is as smart as all of us.” – Ken Blanchard

“No matter how brilliant your mind or strategy, if you’re playing a solo game, you’ll always lose out to a team.” – Reid Hoffman

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When it comes to managing teams and getting people to perform at their best, entrepreneurs can learn a lot from the British Army, which has almost 400 years of history to draw from and a

personnel system designed to scale up and scale back teams quickly. Here are some examples of how the British Army organizes its troops.

Scout Team: Typically a two-person team designed to make an assessment of an opportunity or a threat. These two people can be of equal rank or consist of a senior and junior member.

Fire Team: A four-person team addressing an urgent problem with short-term objectives. There is typically a corporal with three privates.

Section: An eight-person team carrying out day-to-day duties. This normally consists of a corporal and a lance corporal managing six privates.

Platoon: Normally three-to-five sections with commanding officers and platoon headquarters. A lieutenant and second lieutenant are typically in command and are supported by the section commanders.

Entrepreneurs can use a similar plan when scaling up their organizations. Here’s how the same team-building principles might apply to your business.

Founders: This could be two co-founders or a founder with one person supporting. The purpose is to identify an opportunity and prove a concept.

Small-Boutique: This team of four should focus on short-term objectives, such as a launch campaign or hitting a 90-day target.

Boutique: This eight-person team can establish a routine and generate a consistent stream of business. The founder and an assistant manager work together to organize smooth operations.

Performance Team: This team of 35-plus people consists of an executive team that oversees the operations of three-to-five

sub-teams. For example, an executive team of four might lead sub-teams that are each focused on different products or markets.

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Over the past 400 years, the British Army has faced every challenge imaginable and has had the opportunity to test various ways of organizing people into teams. It’s found team sizes and structures that work. The Army never sends one person on their own to do anything. Notably, there’s no solo missions going on, and this should be a lesson to entrepreneurs trying to do everything on their own. For normal day-to-day operations, the Army is built upon teams of eight people, or sections. This is worth noting for leaders who think they can single-handedly run big groups of people. When it comes to scaling up your team, you can learn a lot from people in uniform.

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