

Marine Management

"Firing Up the Front Line" by Jon R. Katzenbach and Jason A. Santamaria, in *Harvard Business Review* (May–June 1999), 60 Harvard Way, Boston, Mass. 02163.

Listen up, you CEOs! For many organizations, competitive advantage depends upon the performance of the unskilled, low-wage workers on the frontlines—all those people who flip burgers, clean hotel rooms, and unload baggage from cargo holds. How can managers keep these folks in vital but often monotonous jobs motivated? Here's how: take a page from the U.S. Marines!

A team of analysts from McKinsey & Company and the Conference Board—including Katzenbach, author of *Teams at the Top* (1997), and Santamaria, a business analyst (and former marine)—looked at 30 companies with a reputation for engaging the "emotional energy" of the rank and file, and at the marines. Although some of the firms, such as Southwest Airlines and Home Depot, excelled in this area, the analysts found that the Marine Corps outperformed them all.

While recognizing the obvious differences between the Corps and the corporation, the authors identify five marine managerial practices that many corporations would do well to emulate:

- Instead of the brief, rather perfunctory introduction to company values that most firms give to new employees, the marines make a huge investment in inculcating their "core values of honor, courage, and commitment," assigning some of their best people to be recruiters and drill instructors, and intensely focusing on the values throughout recruitment and training.

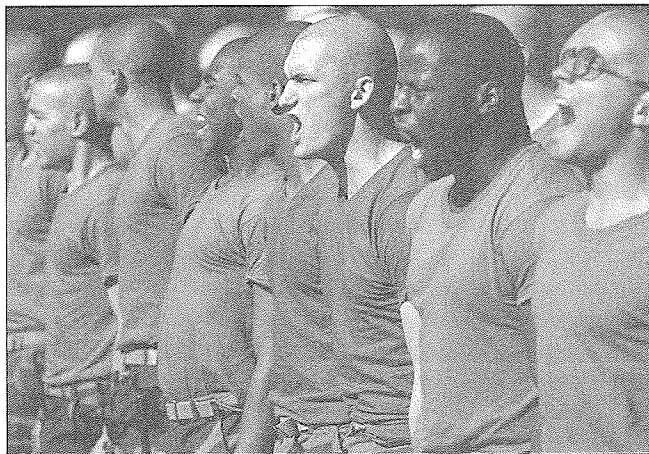
- Most businesses identify potential leaders among their frontline employees and write off the rest as followers, the authors say. The marines don't make that distinction, instead training every frontline person to lead. This "has a powerful impact on morale."

- Genuine teams are rare in the business world, where most work is done by groups led by one individual,

Katzenbach and Santamaria assert. "A real team, by contrast, draws its motivation more from its mission and goals than from its leader. Members work together as peers and hold one another accountable for the group's performance and results." The marines recognize the difference. They use both teams and "single-leader work groups"—and make clear what is expected of members. In the long run, "clarity creates trust."

- "Most business managers resist devoting time and talent" to the people in the "bottom half" of their organization, assuming that they will either function adequately or leave. The marines "find the time to attend to poor and mediocre performers, even if it means personal sacrifice." This approach makes sense, say the authors, especially in a booming economy, with labor in short supply.

- The marines encourage self-discipline as a way of building pride, "demanding that everyone on the front line act with honor, courage, and commitment." Some businesses do the same, with remarkable results, say the authors. "Southwest Airlines turns its planes around in less than half the time needed by many of its competitors." Wanting their airline to be the best, employees scramble to beat the clock. "Sometimes crew members actually help baggage handlers, and vice versa—something unheard of at other airlines." *Semper fi!*



The Marines train every one of these recruits to be a leader.