

The Long Reach of MILITARY EXPERIENCE

How It Influences My Management Career

After serving in Desert Shield and Desert Storm in the early 1990s and attaining the rank of captain with the 38th Engineer Company in Karlsruhe, Germany, I decided it was time to return to civilian life. I received my discharge papers, packed my duffle bags, and headed to Frankfurt Airport. I was proud of my national service, but the army for me was always no more than a great place to start, and it was time to begin a new career.

When I returned to my home state of Illinois in the spring of 1992, I—like many returning soldiers—really had no idea what I was going to do beyond applying for graduate school. Although my higher education would be paid for through the Illinois Veteran Grant Program, I had no idea what I wanted to study. I had no career objective.

My Introduction

I could have continued with my undergrad choices of engineering or architecture, but they were no longer my passion. That is when one of my most important mentors at the time, my late father Carmen Vinezeano, recognized my indecision and took the opportunity to introduce me to city management. I really had no idea there was such a profession.

My father had a strong relationship with

the then city manager of Rolling Meadows, Illinois, Robert Beezat, who took me under his wing and into his office and allowed me to intern (at no cost to the city, of course). It was during this brief internship that I learned about the local government management profession and, more important, which graduate degree I would pursue—a master's of public administration. Beezat remains one of my most trusted professional mentors to this day.

A quick note about unpaid internships here. Although there is much being written these days about the legality of unpaid internships, I am an advocate of offering such opportunities—at no cost to taxpayers—early in a person's career if it leads to bigger and better things like a real world education and potential job prospects. If anything, it helps to build your résumé, especially if you don't have prior experience in local government. In my case, it was an unpaid internship that led me to my first employer who met me at an Illinois City/County Management Association event just months before I graduated.

Training and Experience Are Key

Now, after 14 years in the profession, I am able to share how my experiences and activities have influenced, changed, or impacted my career. Although I could discuss many of the unorthodox ways that I chose to improve





By Steve Vinezeano

TAKEAWAYS

- › Military experience can provide courage to take on projects outside a person's comfort zone.
- › Veterans understand the rigors of tight schedules and limited resources.
- › An internship offered early in a person's career can lead to bigger and better things like a real world education and potential job prospects.

professionally over the years, I'll note just a few here. I honed my public speaking skills by attending The Second City Training Center in Chicago. I also stayed environmentally progressive by passing the Leadership in Energy and Environment Design exam and being active with the U.S. Green Building Council in Chicago.

It is my military training and experience, however, that I would like to present here, especially because of the increasing number of high-quality veterans and officers leaving military service who may want to consider a local government management career and the managers who may want to hire them.

The U.S. Department of Labor lists these 10 reasons to hire a veteran:

1. Accelerated learning curve.
2. Leadership.
3. Teamwork.
4. Diversity and inclusion in action.
5. Efficient performance under pressure.
6. Respect for procedures.
7. Technology and globalization.
8. Integrity.
9. Conscious of health and safety standards.

10. Triumph over adversity.

I will expand on a few of these attributes and explain how they affected my own management career.

Accelerated learning curve. Veterans have the proven ability to learn new skills and concepts. All soldiers know what it is like to be thrown into a new situation and be expected to do their best to succeed. It starts with basic training, continues with your military occupational specialty training, and then your first duty assignment.

My first duty assignment as the leader of the 2nd platoon of the 38th Engineer Company not only was in another country, but it was two days before a major briefing to the battalion commander for a battlefield exercise. Sleeping on a cot next to my desk for my first two nights in Germany, preparing for what was later a successful briefing, taught me early on that I was expected to learn new skills and concepts quickly and to apply them effectively.

To this day, I take pride in my ability to accept any project, study it, and complete it successfully. Before the floods

of 2008 in Illinois, for example, I knew very little about stormwater; but when the mayor asked me to be the head staff member on a commission to investigate and report on stormwater in the village, I provided a technically accurate stormwater report that was later praised by stormwater engineering firms.

The fact that an in-house staff member could tackle this project enhanced the village's productivity. I credit my military experience for giving me the courage to take on projects outside my comfort zone.

Leadership. Veterans understand the practical ways to manage behaviors for results. One of the biggest misconceptions about military leadership is that it is based on the ability to just bark an order to get something done. That couldn't be further from the truth, unless you are that unlucky officer who wakes up in your tent next to a live hand grenade.

Leaders from the military learn to lead by example and to gain respect through competency, inspiration, and compassion for their soldiers. Military leaders encourage their subordinates to be active in the decision-making process. Military leaders are taught that being a good leader is also being a good and active follower.

Over the years, I've worked with four public managers as an assistant manager, and in each case I made it clear through my actions that I was accountable, dependable, and loyal.

But I also made a point of being an active follower. I did this by never approaching them with a problem that I hadn't already thoroughly worked through. More important than anything for me is knowing that the managers I worked with should expect me to approach them if I question an issue, but they should always be able to count on me to accept a right and proper command decision, own it, and carry it out to the best of my abilities. Military leadership is about being an active leader and an active follower.

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Efficient performance under pressure. Veterans understand the rigors of tight schedules and limited resources, and they know the critical importance of staying with a task until it is done right. Soldiers leaving military service today, because of the likelihood that they served under fire in Iraq or Afghanistan, understand performance under pressure.

I find it difficult to explain here, in a few words, the pressures felt by a soldier or officer when given a short timeline, few resources, and a mission that is important far beyond the service member's unit. When soldiers are put in these situations, they truly do have the greater good in mind. Sure, they think about their families, squad members, and themselves; but through training and commitment, they willingly put their lives on the line for their country. Now, that truly is pressure to perform.

Let's ratchet that pressure down a few hundred turns to pressure situations that local government managers

may find themselves involved with on a normal day. To this day, the manager I currently work with thinks that one of my crowning achievements was the successful planning and execution of a community event in less than two weeks' time, with limited funding, in cooperation with a local business that is extremely important to the community's economy.

This local business was bringing in 150 personnel from around the country to participate in a community improvement project that needed to be sustainable in nature; however, there was no project, no location for the project, no plans, and no time. The project turned out to be what is now referred to as the Niles Community Rain Garden, which remains a bright spot in the community's list of sustainable successes.

It has earned international recognition and has been supported during the past two years with more than \$23,000 in donations from the community. Again,

I credit my military experience for being able to hunker down and do my best with the resources I was given.

What I believe is important for young veterans to know, and those people who might hire them, is that they too possess these and other attributes gained from their military service that could make them great candidates for a service career in local government management.

So, my recommendation to a veteran reading this article is this: after you take time to acclimate to civilian life, research the profession at websites like ilcma.org or icma.org, and reach out to the local government manager (or assistant manager) in your community. If you like what you see, take that college money you earned and head off to earn your MPA. **PM**



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