



N.C.I. Solutions Limited

# How a Military Commander Would Fix Poor Business Results

By Michael Lobraico

*-The following is based on one of Michael Lobraico's clients, Monisha Singh. All of the names and telling details have been changed to preserve client privacy.*

**A**fter finally seeing some positive annual growth since she and her brother took over the reins of her father's financial planning firm six years ago, Monisha noticed the company losing ground again.

When she called me in to go over the problem with her six months ago, she told me, "If we keep going on this way, our profits are going to shrivel up. We'll have to lay off support staff, and if I do that, my top advisors are going to leave." She could see things unravelling fast.

When I asked her what happened, she explained that for the past three months she had been preoccupied with going to conferences and trade shows as part of a recruitment push. Her brother, Sam, was out of town a lot as well, looking for expansion opportunities in other regions. "We had a good year last year. Sam and I wanted to build on that momentum. We thought we could afford to let the business run itself while we focussed on growth." She shook her head. "Big mistake."

"Why do you say that?"

"Last week, I finally found some down time and started looking into things. Cueville, our primary market area, is a disaster. Our new sales in large and mid-sized companies there have plummeted. Hardly any group benefits or executive benefits. And those are our core service offerings."

"What happened?"

**“Traditionally, military commanders led by assigning tasks, but after using this method and suffering a devastating loss to Napoleon in 1806, the Prussians rethought their approach and developed what military experts now call mission command, or commander's intent.”**

"Our benefits specialists started running into resistance, so they began focussing on different target markets. Tara, our group person spent basically all of her time working with smaller companies. And Mark, our executive benefits person started focussing on companies in the outlying regions. They're both telling me they expect to hit their sales targets for the year, but they don't see what I see."

"And what's that?"

"That if we lose our dominance in Cueville, there'll be a domino effect. Cueville's the economic powerhouse of this whole area. The head offices are here. If we don't have solid relationships here, once the inevitable consolidation happens with the smaller companies and the outlying regions, we're going to lose out."

"Where did the resistance come from?" I asked. "Why did your specialists start going elsewhere?"

"The major reason is that another firm started targeting Cueville in a major way. They began to leverage existing business. In some cases, where they had the group business in a company where we were working with the executives, they would make a cross-selling play and take over our executive benefits. They're basically using the strategy I wanted to use—to secure multiple service offerings with each of our clients That helps lock down the client. You can offer discounts that way, and service efficiencies.

It's a win-win. That's my vision for Cueville. But my people weren't doing that."

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Monisha shook her head again. “I don’t want to have to do it, but I’m going to have to forgo the recruitment push and micro-manage my people. That’s the only way to save Cueville.”

Everything Monisha said led logically to her conclusion, but her solution wouldn’t solve the real problem, and it wasn’t a recipe for growth.

“If you don’t recruit,” I said, “you won’t achieve the vision you have for your firm.”

“I know. It’s a catch-22. I was hoping you could work with someone in my support staff to train them on a recruitment strategy, while I focus on managing.”

“I think you’re right that management is the solution,” I said, “but not in the way you see it.”

“How so?”

“When you hired Tara what had you asked her to do?”

“To focus on group sales in Cueville.”

“As far as I can tell, she was doing her job.”

“But as soon as things got harder with the larger companies, she took the easy route to focus on the smaller players.”

“That’s one way of looking at it, but another is to see that she was making a smart move, as far as she could see things. Why not go for the easy jobs? She’ll hit her sales target this year. I’d say she was doing the job you asked of her.”

“But we’re losing Cueville because she targeted the wrong prospects.”

“I know you understand the cost of losing Cueville, but did you ever communicate that to Tara and Mark, and the rest of your team?”

“It should be obvious.”

“To you. It’s your job as manager to see the larger picture, to have a strategy and a plan, but it’s also your job to communicate that strategy.”

“So if I’d communicated better, we wouldn’t have this problem?”

“It’s more than that, Monisha. In the military, there’s something called commander’s intent, which has proven to be an effective means of accomplishing military goals. Traditionally, military commanders led by assigning tasks, but after using this method and suffering a devastating loss to Napoleon in 1806, the Prussians rethought their approach and developed what military experts now call mission command, or commander’s intent.

“Let me give you an example. Let’s say, you’re in command of a squad and give them orders to mine a field. The squad does that, but then finds itself under attack from the enemy, which has crossed over through a nearby forest. What you realize after the fact is that your intent was to prevent the enemy from crossing the line. But you didn’t communicate that to your soldiers, who did exactly what they were told.

Let’s say, instead, that you had given your soldiers the mission of preventing the enemy from crossing the line. Mining the field might have been the first tactic, but once they spotted the enemy in the forests, they could have changed tactics and mined the forest, without defying a specific order to mine the field. By giving your soldiers the commander’s intent, you give them the flexibility to respond to changing circumstances.

“In your case, the mission you should have assigned Tara and Mark was to ensure dominance in Cueville. That’s different from assigning them the task of selling benefits, which is exactly what they did. They were working independently to accomplish their individual tasks. But if they had been working as a team to achieve a mission, you would have seen them work cooperatively to adapt and change tactics. Tara and Mark are both capable people, and I have no doubt that, if you had employed commander’s intent, you would have returned from your recruiting push and seen a different, more positive result.

“Using commander’s intent doesn’t mean you don’t manage anymore. You still need to provide the necessary guidance and training. For example, you probably would have needed to train Tara and Mark on how to implement a cross-selling strategy. The main difference between assigning tasks and using commander’s intent is that you are giving your team freedom to act, which means you don’t need to micro-manage. So, you should still be able to focus on recruiting, while you manage your team’s mission to reclaim Cueville.”

Monisha was encouraged to learn of a solution that gave her the ability to still realize her firm’s vision. Over the next few weeks, I helped her integrate commander’s intent into her management practices. One positive result was Tara’s and Mark’s and the rest of the team’s enthusiasm. Everyone now felt empowered in a way they hadn’t before and they were all eager to work at a more strategic level. By the time the next quarter’s results were in, Monisha saw that she had forestalled the competition’s inroad and re-established the foothold she needed in Cueville to power the company’s future growth.

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**Michael Lobraico is the founder of NCI Solutions, a company specializing in helping family businesses maximize their potential. For further information, visit his Web site at [www.nci-solutions.com](http://www.nci-solutions.com).**

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