



The Principles of Winning Operations

Why are high performing teams and elite organizations successful persistently? Because they have a bold, shared vision, a clear and simple strategy to achieve the vision, and their talented people know they are valued, empowered, and trusted. In short, they are inspired to exceed expectations. There must be more, right? What other characteristics and capabilities make them successful repeatedly? They focus their efforts precisely and accurately across three lines of effort simultaneously:

- **Strategic** — the big picture, the long view, the end result desired; the bold vision the team will achieve together
- **Operational** — the gritty, often unglamorous, and difficult work necessary to integrate all functions and leaders across the organization seamlessly so the team moves forward together in harmony, achieving unity of effort
- **Tactical** — delivering unmatched excellence to your customers, those whom you serve, and improving the quality of your internal processes daily

Whether you have been an operator for many years or are just getting started in your new profession, congratulations! The *Principles of Winning Operations*, honed over decades of successful military operations with elite teams in high-risk environments, when applied with resolve, consistency, and discipline reinforce the positive impact each one of us can have on a winning team.

“If I had something important to tell you, I would have already told you.” *Joe Polanin, 2002*

The First Principle is Communication. Great operators ask themselves these questions persistently, and communicate with their teammates openly.

- What critical information do I know? Who else on my team needs to know?
- Have I told them? How did they respond?
- What do we need to do now?

This individual and collective commitment to transparency and caring reinforces mutual respect, builds trust, and forms a lasting culture of open, honest, and candid collaboration on high performing teams. When you care about your people, and you care about your mission, you want to communicate with them. You want to listen, learn, and lead.

“Character is fate.” *Heraclitus*

The Second Principle is Honor. Some know this as integrity. Others call it character, honesty, or an ethical code. For great operators, it is in their DNA. Their actions are forged in honor. They do what’s right because it’s right. They do the right thing even when no one is looking. They possess the moral courage to admit their own mistakes and they ensure their teammates thrive in an environment where they can also share their failures freely without fear.



“The only problem I can’t help you solve is the one I don’t know about.” *Joe Polanin, 2004*

The Third Principle is Support. Just like a family, teams of great operators back each other up. Our support is unconditional. The foundation of mutual support is respect, and mutual respect breeds trust. With trust, we place our very lives in our teammates’ hands just as they do in ours. We are there for each other all day, every day, without question or hesitation. This is mission essential. There are too many variables beyond our control for anyone to handle alone. No matter how senior, seasoned, or experienced we are, we all make well-intentioned mistakes. We value, respect, and trust our teammates’ insight and intuition especially when they point out our errors.

“Uncomfortable is the new comfortable.” *Joe Polanin, 2021*

The Fourth Principle is Curiosity. Chaos, uncertainty, and stress are with us always. They make us stronger. Within these arenas, great operators thrive. We can’t change these conditions. But we can adjust our attitude. Keep calm and carry on is our ethos. We value grit and resilience. We don’t make hasty assumptions, especially during a crisis. We rely on facts. If the information we receive doesn’t make sense, we ask questions. If a process isn’t working, then we ask why not, and we fix it together as a team. If we need to deviate from an established procedure or policy, we understand the prudent risk that may be necessary, and we take that risk together. We must be experts in our profession. We are lifelong learners, and we strive to be the best in our tradecraft.

“Demonstrate that you care.” *Joe Polanin, 2008*

The Fifth Principle is Caring. Just like a family, selfless teams of great operators demonstrate that they care for one another, and those whom they serve. Writing about this or talking about it is not enough. You must demonstrate caring through your actions, every day. Genuine caring and compassion are inherited in great operators’ DNA, forged within their core values, navigated by their moral compass, and demonstrated over years of action together in serving others. Empathy is an outcome of caring. Great operators have the courage to place the needs of their teammates before their own and, in so doing display empathy. This makes the team stronger, more resilient, and capable of overcoming any obstacle together. We respect the seriousness of our duties, responsibilities, and obligations. Empathy allows us to forge unbreakable bonds of trust during the toughest operations and most challenging crises.

Founders, CEOs, Presidents, Partners, Innovators, Disruptors, and Future Leaders:

Remember, operational leadership is the gritty, often unglamorous, and difficult work necessary to integrate all functions and leaders across the organization who move forward together in harmony, achieving unity of effort. It synthesizes your strategy with your tactics. Great operators do this, every day because it’s who they are. Great operators lead with conviction and serve with honor.