



Captain Akhilesh Saxena (extreme left) at Kargil, before the capture of Black Rock from the Pakistani intruders

Lessons from Kargil

Captain Akhilesh Saxena, veteran of an infamous and bloody war, reckons that what he learned on the battlefield is relevant to the corporate world he now inhabits

Captain Akhilesh Saxena is a natural leader whose skills in leadership, teamwork and strategic planning have been honed to perfection in the toughest of all arenas — the battlefields of war. And he has been able to use these skills to successfully transition to the corporate sector and his current job as general manager for business excellence and global processes at Tata Communications.

A veteran of the Kargil war, Akhilesh Saxena grew up in Uttar Pradesh in north India, following his father, a state services officer, and his homemaker mother across the Hindi heartland of India. 'Service' and

'patriotism' were more than just words in the Saxena household, one of the factors that led the young Akhilesh to joining the army, just months after enrolling at the Delhi College of Engineering.

Then came a time that the captain will never forget. The Kargil war broke out in June 1999, weeks after he got married. In fact, his wedding coincided with his posting at Kashmir, virtually on the eve of being moved to Kargil. The confrontation set amidst the mountain peaks required extreme skills — in combat, strategy, leadership and planning. "We led by action, not words," recalls the captain, who fought with 2nd Rajputana Rifles, "and by staying in the front ranks in the offensive to capture the Kargil peaks — Tololing, 'The Hump', Black Rock and Tiger Hill."

One incident that he recounts is about 2nd Rajputana Rifles taking Tololing, a battle which has gone down in history as the most decisive of the Kargil war. The plan was that once the company took the peak, supplies would be sent immediately. However, weather and enemy fire from surrounding ▸▸



Leading the civilian life in New Delhi

peaks prevented the supply chain from being established for more than two days. “We were hungry and becoming progressively weaker in the minus-20 degree temperatures. We had no food but there was a Pakistani army field kitchen nearby, with an exposed stretch of more than 100 metres. We decided that it would be better to die under fire than starve to death and two of us undertook to make the attempt... fortunately, successfully!”

NEW HORIZONS

After the war, bullet injuries suffered in action forced him to work at the army headquarters in Delhi instead of the battlefield. Capt Saxena pondered his future, debating whether to opt for the security of a job or join a management course. At the time he had heard that the Tata group was the first corporate house to provide help to Kargil widows and *jawans* (soldiers) impacted by that war. Through a fellow officer he met Satish Pradhan, head of Group HR at Tata Sons, who offered him a job with Tata but also advised him to take the educational route to build his competencies.

The young battle-toughened soldier joined a full-time MBA course at Delhi University’s Faculty of Management Studies (FMS) and graduated top of his class in 2004, subsequently joining first an IT and then a telecom company.



In uniform, on the eve of the Kargil war

When the opportunity came up at Tata Communications in 2008, he felt he “had come home. The Tatas have the same approach that I was imbued with — to do everything with passion and commitment — the ethics I learnt from my parents and in the army”.

BATTLEFIELDS OF THE MARKET

Today he has discovered that the lessons learnt in the army are of vast use in corporate management. “Analysing and improving business processes is not unlike the strategic planning required in a battle,” he says. “It’s very important to be familiar with the

environment in which one is operating, as much in military operations as in business — understanding obstacles, opportunities, planning for eventualities and contingencies. The environment of a battleground is like the market environment for a corporate entity; the enemy in a war is not unlike the competitor in business. Rock outcrops present obstacles but also offer shelter from enemy fire. There are mines along the way as well as chance factors.”

In his current job, handling the business excellence initiative at Tata Communications, Capt Saxena applies many lessons from his army experience. “Processes are very important to improve the predictability of outcomes, to provide economies of scale. We need to constantly balance the need for process maturity and the need to remain flexible,” he says. “There’s a framework within which we function, but there must be discretionary flexibility within that,” he comments. If the framework at Kargil was set by the need to control crucial mountain peaks that would keep the Srinagar-Leh road open to Indian troops, the framework at the telecom company is set by the enhanced telecom operations map (eTOM), the global telecom process framework.

If compliance to regulatory stipulations are important in business, absolute adherence to rules are critical to survival in battle. Corporate governance has its counterpart in the army ethic of service and camaraderie; and both are grounded in good citizenship and serving the nation. “It’s based on principles of human dignity,” says Capt Saxena, “but implementation on the ground depends on the example of leadership.”

LEADERSHIP ACTIONS

Leaders in the armed forces live and work alongside the *jawans* in every action, especially in the field. “Generally, officers are placed in the centre of a troop for better communication and organisation, but in crucial actions, especially suicide missions as at Kargil, officers are placed in front,” he says. There’s pragmatism in this as it serves as a

motivational tool, but the underlying ethic is that sacrifices cannot be expected from *jawans* that officers are not prepared to make.

“Every little thing counts in functioning as a team, as one entity,” says Capt Saxena, “especially in the effectiveness of leadership. Leaders must be seen to lead; they must also identify themselves with the rest of the troops — or, in a corporate organisation, the team. At Kargil, for example, all of us tied the *kesariya* (saffron bandana) around our foreheads, as that is a tradition with the 2nd Rajputana Rifles before going into battle. In the army we have a slogan — ‘Know your man!’ In the corporate world, we can translate this into — ‘Know your team’. It’s equally important. There’s a lot of emphasis on understanding every individual’s whole persona, and not just see him as an artillery man, a soldier, a manager or just another employee!”

WHEN EXAMPLES COUNT

Capt Saxena adds that one of the principal points with the army is leading by example and having synchronicity in action. “In capturing a peak or any post, we ‘fire and move’, so that some troops fire at the enemy while others move forward. Without harmonisation in such coordinated activities, many lives can be — and are — lost, people wounded severely and materials mislaid. There’s a valuable lesson in this for civilian and corporate life.”

And just as communication is an imperative in army life — “lives depend on this” — so it is in corporate life, not just from an operations perspective but in building trust and binding the team together, be they officers and *jawans* or managers and team members, he says.

Today Akhilesh Saxena considers that one of the biggest achievements of his life is his success in bringing together the many strands of his life — his learnings from his family, his experience in the Indian Army and his stint in the corporate sector: “Having done all that, I have a sense that I can do well in anything! No one can take that faith from me.” □

— Suchita Vemuri