The term “militaristic” has a bad connotation for leadership, implying position power, control, authoritarianism, and blind obedience. In reality, these characteristics have little to do with today’s high-performing U.S. military. Developing leadership is the central theme of present military training and career development, and the approaches used can be enlightening and useful to any organization.

Military Training = Leadership Training
The most important thing to understand is that every member of the military is trained to be a leader and is expected to be one. This is serious: no leadership, no career. Remember, the military doesn’t hire managers in mid-career for operational jobs. It develops them from entry level up. Beginning in basic training, leadership is rotated among peers—sometimes by assignment and sometimes by team selection. Everyone is expected to lead and follow as the team and situation require. Naturally, some individuals are more skilled, but everyone must acquire and demonstrate leadership competence. This type of situational training continues throughout a military career—in training, drills, and even field assignments. For example, leadership is frequently rotated (or senior officials are removed from active roles) in training exercises to ensure the unit knows how to shift leadership and adapt. The result is knowledge and experience with leadership skills embedded throughout the organization, and every formal leader knows that there’s a very sophisticated workforce evaluating his or her leadership.

Developing a workforce of leaders has many benefits. First, there’s respect and understanding for leadership positions and their responsibilities. Everyone knows the demands associated with leadership and the relative relief associated with spending time as a follower. Second, leaders get continuous and sophisticated advice and assistance from their subordinates about their leadership efforts. This may be surprising to those unfamiliar with the military, but a continuous upward flow of feedback exists in military organizations and is highly valued. The given assumption is that everyone wants the team, unit, or workgroup to be successful and wants the leader to have all the information to make the necessary decisions. Third, because the workforce has considerable leadership experience, they understand that some decisions a leader makes will be wrong or suboptimal. They know how to support a leader at those times and help him or her make the best of the situation, move forward, and recover. Informal leadership can support formal leadership skillfully and usually seamlessly whenever necessary.

Several other institutional practices maintain the focus on leadership throughout someone’s career. First, military evaluations place as much emphasis on leadership skills as they do on all other professional skills. Leadership skills are always discussed as a separate and specific topic in the evaluation process. Second, all promotions in the military are made from within. Training leaders is a necessity, and the military has an “up or out” policy where failure to be promoted at certain times means you must leave the organi-
zation. Third, the military culture creates an ethos where acts of extraordinary bravery are considered part of the job. Though this could lead to dysfunctional “macho” behavior, the military also has embraced the need for ethical thinking at all levels within its culture. Even Marine basic training recognizes that a new Marine is likely to be placed in a highly stressful and emotional situation, individually or in a very small group, with substantial weapons at his or her disposal. The Marine’s choices could damage the foreign policy and reputation of the nation on the world stage.

**Transferrable Skills**

How can this short explanation of the military’s leadership be useful to the management accountant? Developing leadership skills within an organization is a sustainable competitive advantage. A workforce that knows how to lead demands better leaders and will make an average leader good and a good leader better. Deep leadership in an organization will provide a safety net for leadership mistakes. The action required to start this process is to create a variety of leadership opportunities within your workforce. It’s important to mix position-power-based leadership assignments with personal-power (team accepted/self-selected) leadership assignments. This allows the workforce to experience and learn from a variety of leadership forms. A second lesson is to make the discussion of leadership skills an explicit topic for formal and informal feedback. As the leader of the workgroup, you have to start this discussion from the top down. Depending on the situation, you may need to establish performance standards for leaders. In the beginning stages, this may be small, mechanical things, such as creating agendas for meetings, leading off presentations, and writing up team members for good performance. But from humble beginnings and small steps, a leadership culture grows. Why do you think the military makes one person stand in front of the formation from the very first day of boot camp?

Conferring leadership on someone is always perceived as a demonstration of a level of confidence, even when the person would prefer not to have the responsibility or challenge. Accepting a leadership position is often seen as a win/lose proposition, and that often makes people nervous. The military’s approach—where leadership is treated as a skill that requires continuous development and practice—helps overcome this issue. All skills require practice, and even masters at any skill have off days or challenging experiences. Developing a leadership culture requires the acceptance of failures as long as it’s clear that growth and learning have occurred. Leadership requires practice, and practice will include both successes and failures. A leadership culture values learning and commitment and demonstrates commitment as part of a long-term investment.

**IMA’s Leadership Culture**

IMA® has developed a quality training development program through its Leadership Academy and provides members the opportunity to practice and experiment with leadership skills through volunteer leadership positions in chapters, in councils, and on global committees. The real value from such training, however, is to give you the knowledge and experience to bring leadership skills into your workplace to create a sustainable advantage and a higher-performing organization. For more information, please visit the Leadership Academy website at [www.imanet.org/programs_events/leadership_academy.aspx](http://www.imanet.org/programs_events/leadership_academy.aspx).

The IMA® Leadership Academy provides leadership opportunities for all members. From leadership assessment to leadership courses offered in person as well as through WebEx to participation opportunities in mentoring, be it reverse or traditional, the IMA Leadership Academy can help you meet your leadership goals and improve your leadership skills. For more information, please visit the Leadership Academy website at [www.imanet.org/programs_events/leadership_academy.aspx](http://www.imanet.org/programs_events/leadership_academy.aspx).

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