

FROM COMBAT TO CORPORATE...ESSENTIAL TRAITS FOR TRANSITIONING TO THE CIVILIAN WORKFORCE



Each year, [over 200,000 service members transition](#) from the military to civilian life. I am one of them. After an 11-year career in the United States Army, I joined BMC in 2020. There are a plethora of nonprofit military veteran transition programs in the U.S., including the U.S. Department of Labor's [Transition Assistance Program \(TAP\)](#) that provides veterans with resources, education, and training for themselves and their spouses in preparation for the jump to civilian life.

The transition is...challenging (understatement of the year). Not only are you changing careers, but a way of life that you've been indoctrinated into since basic training. And by the time you're making that move, you might be retraining yourself after decades of working—and living—a certain way. This was certainly my own experience.

A primary concern for most transitioning veterans is, "What is my next form of income?" Or "Should I return to school and use the [G.I. Bill](#) to pay for a degree?" Others struggle with finding and fine-tuning their personal brand. "Who am I truly, and what are the skills I bring to the corporate or start-up table?" are just some of the questions we ask ourselves.

Transition programs encourage veterans to include "analytical, program and project management, negotiating, problem solving, decisive, mission-oriented, driven, cross-functional collaborator, etc." as skills on our resumes and LinkedIn accounts, and sometimes they just cut to the chase and tell us to include that we "get the job done."

Although these are very valuable skills, and mostly true of veterans, there are three other soft skills that I have found equally helpful in my transition to the civilian workforce: civility, resilience, and leadership.

Civility

To ensure that we each have a wholesome and collaborative workplace experience, we should treat everyone with respect and work together as a team united behind common goals to achieve our overall mission. If we cannot treat each other with civility, how do we treat our customers, partners, and prospects? Our attitudes towards each other reverberate in our everyday dealings with those external stakeholders.

Aspects of civility from my military experience include things like getting saluted every day by enlisted and non-commissioned officers, accompanied by a greeting. We didn't always know each other, but we always greeted each other (especially if we were within six meters of each other). Emails always started with a greeting, "Hello Sir/Ma'am/Sergeant," and ended with, "Very Respectfully" or "Best Regards." We asked each other how we were doing, regardless of what we were all going through that day.

Starting meetings with, "We realize there are a few gaps in your program, what can we do to support you to ensure that x project meets its deadlines?" versus "You owe us XYZ" or "That's not our job" sets the tone and shows teammates and stakeholders we're rowing in the same direction. And during my military career, we displayed that [understanding through civility](#).

Cross-cultural business expert [Sharon Schweitzer](#) has a few tips on exuding civility:

1. Do unto others as they would like you to do.
2. Understand cultural conditioning. Small slights can be disrespectful, which can build into resentment over time.
3. Show up with intention: During virtual meetings, pay attention, pre-read materials sent, and avoid distractions. During in-person meetings, validate presenters by closing your device or laptop and putting away smart devices.
4. Cast-off the clique by using your social skills to expand beyond your usual circle, and take initiative to develop a potential new professional relationship with someone who has valuable insight.

And for those who only see green at work, a [Harvard Business Review case study](#) found that "there is a strong statistical link between the employee well-being reported on Glassdoor and customer satisfaction among a large sample of some of the largest companies today. A happier workforce is clearly associated with companies' ability to deliver better customer satisfaction—particularly in industries with the closest contact between workers and customers, including retail, tourism, restaurants, health care, and financial services." As a veteran, I work to bring civility to the table in my own interactions, and I encourage my colleagues to do the same.

Resilience

According to a joint study between RAND Health and the RAND National Defense Research Institute, [psychological resilience](#) is "the process of coping with or overcoming exposure to adversity or stress." We also talked about this topic in an earlier blog [here](#).

Psychological resilience matters most in an agile environment. [Resilient employees](#) see difficulty as challenges, rather than earth-shattering events. And failures and mistakes are lessons that help one grow versus being "the end."

Time spent in the military is obviously challenging. Service members execute dangerous training, spend a ridiculous amount of time away from family and normalcy (late nights at work; days, weeks, and sometimes years apart; missed holidays, birthdays, and even births), and we accept many risks knowing that we are defending our nation and others in the world that need the support.

We see our comrades and soldiers undergo the worst trauma in their lives. And while the stakes are nowhere near as high in a conference room, resilience in any setting can protect us all from mental health conditions like depression and anxiety.

We can [improve resilience](#) by doing the following:

1. Getting connected and building strong, positive relationships.
2. Making every day meaningful.
3. Learning from experience.
4. Remaining hopeful.
5. Being proactive.

I've found that the resilience I had during my service has also been useful for acclimating to my own "new normal" of working in the corporate world.

Leadership

The world has been experiencing rapid transformation for a while, even before COVID-19 lit a fire. In 2012, I led a platoon of 43 young military police officers in combat while serving in Afghanistan. Early on in our deployment, we were [attacked](#) by an Afghan National Army partner, who killed two of my soldiers and wounded the morale of those of us who survived. It was an extreme event we did not anticipate, but everyone stepped up as a leader. That combined leadership enabled us to continue to live with, train, and engage enemy forces alongside our Afghan partners, despite an attempt to degrade Afghan-American relations and trust.

In the corporate world, leadership drives change so companies can meet the challenges associated with globalization, technological evolutions, international economic integration, and domestic market maturation. Leadership will get us through this.

In his book [Leading Change](#), John P. Kotter states that "management makes a system work. It helps you do what you know how to do. Leadership builds systems or transforms old ones." Although leadership in the military looks different on the civilian side, fundamentally a leader is transformative. And leadership tied to civility and resilience is the very best combination of those skills.

Leadership and management are not exclusive—everyone can and should take the opportunity to be a leader, regardless of the job title. Whether we're in the military or working in the corporate world, if we want to continue to be the best strategic partners, we all must embody leadership within our realms of influence, supported by our civility towards one another and the resilience we owe ourselves and can instill in others.

Paying it forward

BMC supports veterans through a range of corporate and BMC Cares employee-engagement initiatives. Richard M. Jones, the [incoming chair of the Office of Veteran and Military Affairs \(OVMA\) at Syracuse University](#) says it best, "Our nation spends billions of dollars each year recruiting and then

training our young men and women in uniform. We need to be as equally purposeful as they transition out of uniform and into the civilian workforce."

BMC does this through its [partnership](#) with the [BreakLine](#) organization, which helps U.S. veterans and their spouses transition to the civilian workforce—and it's how I found my way to BMC. As we mark this [Veterans Day](#), we hope you'll join us in our support for the [USO](#) and its [annual salute to military chefs](#) and [Christmas toy drive](#); and by volunteering—our employees volunteer their time to [Hire Heroes USA](#), [Wreaths Across America](#), and [Combined Arms](#) through BMC Cares.