

FINANCIAL POST

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10 things that propelled Ancient Rome to greatness that can help your business

[Brad Cherniak](#) | April 14, 2014 7:00 AM ET



FILIPPO MONTEFORTE/AFP/Getty Images The Romans were tireless and ruthless trainers, planners and organizers.

What can today's small to medium-sized businesses learn from the great armies of Ancient Rome? More than you might think.

The results achieved by this civilization and its army speak for themselves. Powered by its army, Rome grew from a few nomadic clans around northern Italy in the 8th century BC to the greatest military and economic empire in world history in current-dollar terms.

And similar to SMBs journey, the Roman army regularly ran up against armies much larger and better resourced than theirs, often by large multiples. So what specifically can businesses take from the ancient Roman army?

Here are 10 guiding principles that served the armies well and can help your business:

1. Supreme confidence The Roman Army took in information voraciously, but took no input on their core mission and beliefs.

As a small business owner, if your confidence can be shaken with respect to what you are trying to accomplish, you have probably already lost.

2. Losing is literally not an option The armies of Rome had no conception of accepting a loss in battle — they just hadn't won yet. At the Battle of Cannae in 216 BC, the Romans lost roughly 10% of their male population in a matter of hours — one of the gravest battle losses in history — but persevered under new generalship to turn the tide against Hannibal and win the war against the Carthaginians.

Business owners need to accept and embrace that victory is neither easy, nor a foregone conclusion.

3. Smarter than everyone else, and still outworked them by orders of magnitude The Romans were tireless and ruthless trainers, planners and organizers. The word "decimation" comes from the Roman practice of eliminating (a euphemism) randomly one in 10 men of an underperforming or undisciplined army.

A bit extreme, but the notion of unsqueamishly demanding top performance from your team is the modern lesson.

4. Discipline, focus and discretion Roman leaders were often respected, but always feared. Romans never tried to win popularity contests, nor did they crave the attention, admiration or support of others.

This is a lesson for new paradigm CEOs who risk getting distracted and losing focus — or worse, confusing their brand or even mission — in being too open or social. Too much openness and collaboration in executing your business strategy can leave you without a sustainable competitive advantage.

5. Aggressively adaptive The Romans were keen observers of others' battlefield innovations. They quickly adopted key elements, but made their versions even better than those they copied. Rome became a naval

power by copying Greek/Carthaginian ship designs, then adding the corvus, their innovation that allowed them to deploy land battle tactics on the high seas.

Business owners must drop the not invented here mentality, as many have, and find ways to shorten their path to market by using tools and technology already out there. The absolute focus should be on the end result — the customer's experience — rather than the product.

6. Continuously adaptive The armies never stopped the process or sat on a lead, even a big one.

This is particularly important for SMBs, as technology continually shortens product lifecycles, and indeed what it means to have a lead.

7. Fearless in the face of an unexpected challenge The bigger the hurdle, the harder the Romans jumped. As an army commander, Caesar built the largest bridge in history in days from materials at hand so his army could cross the Rhine River to take the fight to the Gauls in the Gallic Wars. Anyone else would have turned back and tried something easier or more conventional.

For businesses, the message is “so what if it has never been done before?” Sometimes audacity is rewarded, and is the only path to success despite the risks.

8. Committed to innovation, even when painful The Romans committed great resources to the process of innovation — in strategy, logistical supply chain and infrastructure, and troop development and armaments. Even when they didn't actually have the resources, they found a way.

Similarly, companies need to dig and cut to support their top priorities, sometimes brutally, when cash is not plentiful.

9. Internally competitive The biggest motivator to a Roman general was the glory and rewards it brought — better than your rivals and predecessors. Often the biggest threat was other Roman commanders. Far from distracting or disabling the Romans, it empowered them.

The same holds true for great companies. Despite the cheery atmosphere and the office toys, truly innovative companies will foster the competition of ideas and the efforts to marshal the resources to execute them.

10. Positive feedback loop Each of the above principles supported and strengthened the others. There were few unproductive contradictions in Roman thought and action.

As a business owner, this applies to everything from determining your mission, to deciding on the breadth and depth of products and services you offer. Inconsistencies will impede your progress in building value, and needlessly consume resources.

The ancient Roman army was likely the most effective organization in human history. So, if you are going to model your business after anything, it would be a great choice in any market conditions and business space.

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