

Slaughterhouse Rules

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One doesn't have to spend much time in NDHQ these days to become battered, bruised and gored by herds of sacred cows fighting to gain access to feed troughs. Sacred cows are those hidden underlying assumptions, those unquestioned rules or systems, those pre-digested arguments used to stifle real debate, and those ways of behaving that prevent us from fundamentally changing our organizational culture.

In the Canadian Forces predictability can literally mean death to our subordinates and ourselves. The great challenge for all military and naval leaders is reconciling the apparent dichotomy of being predictable to our subordinates, and unpredictable to our enemies. Over the last several decades we have allowed ourselves to become an armed force of predictable, domesticated "professionals." If we truly mean to transform however we must root out the sacred cows and herd them into the nearest slaughterhouse. But what are our sacred cows?

- We spend so much time putting out fires that we execute fire drills flawlessly, but have become weak at developing and implementing grand strategy.
- We take, and order others to take, tremendous physical risks, but stand mute at the thought of challenging a policy from headquarters.
- We force people to water down ideas to avoid conflict, and then wonder why our organizations lack passion.
- We spend millions of dollars attracting potential new members, and then spend millions of dollars screening them out with an elaborate selection process.
- We create kilometres of spreadsheets analysing precisely how we spend our budgets, but often spend no time analysing how to make our subordinates happier.
- We reward obedience to a supervisor over loyalty to our Canadian Forces.
- We spend millions of dollars establishing and running bureaucratic redress of grievance and alternate dispute resolution systems rather than addressing the leadership flaws that feed the need.
- We entice new recruits with signing bonuses, and reward loyalty with a minimum annual raise.
- We treat equipment with more care than the people who operate it for us.
- We perpetuate systemic discrimination against one component of our "total force," and then complain about a lack of commitment from the victims.
- Computer viruses are an emergency, but diseased morale is status quo.
- We concentrate on the easy measurement of educating managers, instead of the challenging goal of developing leaders.
- We demand fresh options, but spend more time looking at someone's rank than evaluating their ideas.
- We focus so much on gaining and exercising command that we often forget to lead.

In order to transform our Canadian Forces we must examine every aspect of every process we have forced upon ourselves. If we fail to re-create ourselves, we risk being nothing but a footnote on the pages of history.

Looking back to what is the greatest organizational transformation in history we see that the story of the Magna Carta is not the history of a document, but the history of an argument. The barons who wrote the Magna Carta had in mind only the stabilization of their rights and privileges, and limiting those of the king, but the charter has taken on an enduring legacy in popular history. The Magna Carta embarked Britons, and eventually Western civilization, on a bold new adventure.

The dramatic restructuring of our organization is embarking our Canadian Forces on a bold new adventure. Reorganization, however, does not result in transformation unless it is rooted in an equally dramatic change in organizational culture. The Magna Carta is enduring because after its creation it was forged by leaders and honed by public will. Do the Canadian Forces have the leaders and the will to make our new change charter a magna carta? Time will tell. The more demanding and pertinent questions are: What part will you play in shaping the future? Which sacred cow will you help slay?

The current quest for massive reorganization is only a first step towards writing the history of our magna carta - our argument to the future - and is a sign that some still retain a vestigial, feral nature. It is a healthy sign that some of us are unwilling to domesticate ourselves through intellectual bondage. And it is a healthy sign that some of us are unsatisfied with the spatial limitations of a bureaucratic feedlot.

As you fight your way through the herds of sacred cows seek out others who share this feral nature, so that together we can lead our Canadian Forces to a feast on some bloody big steaks.