

# How CEOs Can Create Insurgent Organizations



Damian McKinney

(<https://chiefexecutive.net/author/damianmckinney1/>)

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in·sur·gent  
/in 'səɹj(ə)nt/  
noun  
plural noun: insurgents  
definition: a rebel or revolutionary.  
synonyms: rebel, revolutionary, revolutionist, mutineer, agitator, subversive...

Not exactly the description that pops to mind when you imagine a desirable new hire for your organization. But I'm not talking about insurgents who will turn against their own. I'm talking about people who will think outside of the box, push the envelope, and create extraordinary business outcomes. So, if you prefer to stick with an organization of conformists you needn't read on.

Jimmy Allen, Senior Partner at Bain and author of *Founder's Mentality*, has famously brought "insurgent brands" into focus. His approach is a solid one and should be leveraged by companies in early to mid-growth stages. However, I believe that the value of insurgency isn't limited to brands, and that it needs to start with the creation of insurgent employees and teams. The challenge is that as organizations grow, they lose their rebellious spirit and that becomes echoed in new hires.

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The lever on the fulcrum is shorter than it has ever been, and everything is against you. A realist would say it can't be done. But there are organizations that are able to create environments where the impossible can be done.

To be clear, this is not about being a rebel or maverick for the sake of it. I'm not advocating extreme, cowboy-type approaches. Insurgent organizations are very clear on the rules – legal and ethical – of engagement. They will not cross them. They may get close, and examine them, but they will not cross those lines.

An insurgent organization is made up of a group of individuals comprising teams that share the mindset that the mission must be delivered. These individuals must have an inner core comprised of the absolute belief in the purpose of what they are doing and apply an unemotional approach focused on facts and insights. It's about finding another way to make it work. It is also about creating a culture of intense comradery and trust where a clear code exists. They all work together, shoulder to shoulder, in an environment of unconditional trust to constantly look for the answer, find the leverage point, and apply it. When organizations encourage this kind of creative and collaborative problem solving, it leads to revolutionary ideas and strategies.

Consider the Special Forces. They routinely operate in an environment where a small group must deliver disproportionately, every time; night, after night, after night. In these environments, a small group of individuals can achieve as much as 100 normal people in conventional circumstances.

As a Royal Marine Commando and a CEO, I have learned that while this is common in the military, most civilian business people are not wired to operate in this way. We live in a society that is largely conformist and while capable, most people are programmed. You can't just say "Welcome, you are now part of an insurgent team and you are going to operate differently." So how does one apply military lessons to create an insurgent way of operating a business? How do you as the CEO or senior leader cultivate these people and build these teams? Here is what I found to work:

**1. Committing to "The Cause".** First, as CEO you have to own it and make a conscious decision that this is how you want to run the organization. To keep yourself honest, present it to your EXCOM team and the members of your board at your next meeting. Be clear about why you must launch a revolution to achieve your ambitious vision and realize the organization's "Cause/Purpose." This will ensure you are held accountable and that there is no turning back.

**2. Recruiting, better described as "Selection".** Select highly capable people who have the mindset to accomplish the task at hand. You must be honest with new hires. I recall a Royal Marine Commando reflecting that he was told "If you like sitting in a puddle on a wet and cold day, totally committed to the mission and your commando team, then you are the guy to join us." Hires must know that there may be wet and messy days ahead as the revolution unfolds.

**3. Insurgent training.** You must provide an experiential training phase to teach people how to shift their mindset to perform in this way, AND to totally rely on each other. We used to refer to this as "Commando Spirit". Only through real and challenging experiences, contingency planning, and rehearsal will your people be able to operate as an insurgent team and consistently deliver under challenging circumstances.

**4. Operational planning and confidence.** Go and do it. Regular check-ins and debriefs build muscle and confidence. Ensure an atmosphere of positive paranoia, with mission success being binary – success or failure. You have been selected, trained and now you are empowered to complete the mission at hand. You should witness an excitement in taking on the impossible challenge, which is not what normal people do, but then again you are not hiring teams of normal people. If

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there is an appropriate primary fear, it should be a fear of failing the mission, closely followed by failing the team. You know you have the right person if they exhibit both.

**5. Being prepared to take big risks.** As part of encouraging this culture you also need to mitigate risks and deal with failures. You don't want to reward failures, but you must create a culture where your team knows that you'd rather see them put it all on the line and fail than take a safe, conventional path to accidental success. When you are operating behind enemy lines, you are going to have to throw the conventional rules out the window.

To the naysayers, I say that I know this can be done effectively, even in very large organizations. My largest most well-known example is Walmart; when CEO Bill Simon hired my firm to apply a military-based *Mission Planning* approach to help them change the overpriced pharmacy model. The outcome was Walmart's ground-breaking \$4 generic prescription drug program "saving people money to help them live better." This new initiative was accomplished through a series of insurgent actions:

- Truly committing to a "cause", which was centered on reducing the cost of access to medical prescription drugs. The net saving was \$200 per month for the average retired individual;
- Selecting and training teams to think beyond their traditional job responsibilities, of simply operating a pharmacy in a store;
- Aligning the professional services organization and driving execution at pace in support of this initiative – the whole project from inception to full countrywide rollout was achieved in only four months; and
- Developing and executing a technology supported operational model that would drive regional, and ultimately national, roll-out of this major initiative.

One of the largest global organizations applied insurgency to start a revolution, which changed the face of the industry and delivered significant value to all the stakeholders. What is holding your organization back?



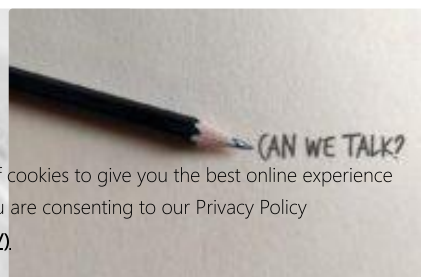
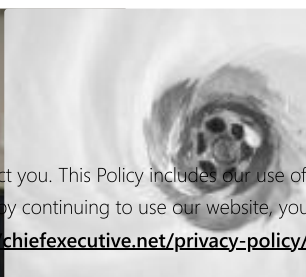
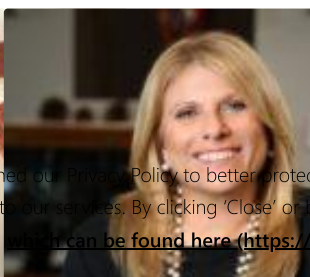
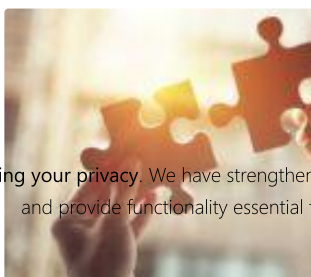
(<https://chiefexecutive.net/author/damianmckinney1/>)

#### Damian McKinney

(<https://chiefexecutive.net/author/damianmckinney1/>)  
Damian McKinney is the CEO of McKinney Rogers. He had an 18-year global career with the UK Royal Marine Commandos . In 1999, he founded the company McKinney Rogers to fulfill his passion for tackling "real operational challenges" under severe pressure to deliver the mission every time.

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