



Mandatory physical training starts at 5:50 a.m. All "boots" and facilitators participate at a level appropriate to individual physical condition. Running, walking, basketball, or other group activity follows stretching.

How does a training company shake up its leadership style? It marches its managers off to boot camp.



# A Boot to the System

By Jim Ronan

*When General Physics decided to improve the leadership abilities of its managers, it insisted on a program that would deliver lasting, ongoing change. After looking at external options, GP's leaders built the program themselves. This is what happened.*

**T**hree years ago, senior leaders at General Physics determined that the company's managers needed development, especially those in middle and upper levels. George Gehringer, director of professional development, says that the company was struggling on all leadership fronts. "We were ineffective at communicating, establishing goals, empowering others, and managing performance."

But how could that be? GP, with global headquarters in Elkridge, Maryland, is a prominent training and workforce development company that serves several *Fortune* 100 clients. The company was successful, with dedicated employees doing good work, but there was an undercurrent of anxiety regarding management style. Craig Killough, a member of GP's senior management team and a graduate of the United States Naval Academy, encouraged GP's president to consider a leadership boot camp. The SMT asked Gehringer to develop and implement the idea.

GP had access to a wealth of leadership development materials and expertise through an acquisition made in 1998. The acquired company was a supplier of soft-skills training to large manufacturing firms, and among the materials was a five-day management development training program that included the DiSC (personality inventory) instrument, a 360-degree assessment tool.

In its original format, the program had proved successful at a major automotive manufacturer, where it was offered to mid- and upper-level managers. It provided opportunity for interaction and hands-on activities, but for GP's unique needs it had to be intensified. GP cut the program to two days and placed a greater emphasis on leadership. Now called Leadership Tools and Techniques, the program became a viable, competency-based leadership development program, but it lacked punch. It needed a dramatic delivery platform.

### Sergeant Death takes the stage

The official announcement of the new leadership program was made with dramatic flair at a business meeting attended by GP's directors and other top-level staff. Gehringer was expected to present a briefing on corporate professional development initiatives. Instead, dressed in battle fatigues, drill sergeant's hat, boots, and sunglasses, he took the stage and delivered an unexpected wake-up call. As Sergeant



**LEADERSHIP  
BOOT CAMP**

Sergeant Death announces to managers the intention to end the ways of the past. The skull-and-crossbones logo, which appears on uniforms, training materials, and such, is a constant reminder to all participants of this concept.





Death, he snarled and snorted his way through a detailed description of GP's new leadership boot camp. His closing comment was, "If you don't know the difference between leadership and management, then you aren't leading your staff." The logo chosen for the boot camp was a skull and crossbones. "We needed an endpoint at which we could say the ways of the past are dead and from this point forward, we're going to do the things that an effective leader does," says Gehringer.

Some among the audience thought his approach was too harsh, but most jumped to their feet and applauded the presentation and the boot camp program. Gehringer and his alter ego had surmounted a critical barrier—buy-in among the troops.

### Marching orders

Before the leadership boot camp could happen, GP needed a clear, objective assessment of its current leadership behaviors. Being a training company, GP is used to assessing other organizations to determine their training needs, deliver the training, and measure the results. This time, its analysis would be self-analysis. GP had to scrutinize leadership at all levels, from all angles, and it was a humbling experience.

The senior management team developed a climate survey to address six leadership competencies and 59 associ-

ated behaviors within the organization. After several drafts, the team delivered the survey to IT, where it was reconfigured in an online format. GP translated the survey, language and culture, to meet the needs of its overseas offices. The process resulted in an instrument that could effectively evaluate leadership on a global scale.

The next step in GP's leadership assessment was the implementation of a 360-degree evaluation for each employee. GP built the 360-degree evaluation phase for a precise fit, ensuring a consistent flow of competencies and behaviors among the global climate survey, the 360-degree evaluations, and the materials taught in Leadership Tools and Techniques. Thus, the competencies measured in both the global climate survey and the individual 360-degree evaluations were the same:

- managing change
- leadership
- motivation
- managing conflict, performance, and empowerment.

GP would address all of the competencies in the boot camp training.

Finally, participants—or "boots" as they would soon be called—were identified, and officers were picked to co-facilitate the instruction with trainers who had already delivered this program. The selected officers went through a brief train-the-trainer course in anticipation of their im-

Teamwork is a consistent theme during Outward Bound activities, promoting the Boot Camp mantra, "Leadership and teamwork drive our performance."



portant new roles. The decision to have officers was based on a couple reasons: One, it would lend credence to the materials, giving the perception that they came from the boss. Executives would now have to walk the talk. Two, they'd also have to learn the stuff.

Invitations were sent to prospective boots in the form of military orders, and the 360-degree evaluations were distributed. Evaluations would have input from several sources: the individual, the individual's supervisor, two colleagues, and two direct reports.

### Life in the trenches

Having been in business for 34 years, GP determined that a certain level of shock would be needed to get employees to wake up, pay attention, and understand the tools and techniques. Key GP staff had extensive military backgrounds. Gehringer, now known as Sergeant Death and the mission's project manager, had graduated from West Point and had served combat duty in Vietnam. Craig Killough, senior VP, is a former U.S. Navy nuclear submarine senior officer. "Many people don't understand what boot camp is," says Killough. "The boot camp concept follows a very specific methodology designed to bring positive change in a short time. It's a sophisticated approach to human performance that works well when you're trying to get large groups in step in a hurry."

**A**lthough boots wouldn't be peeling potatoes and enduring forced marches, key elements of the boot camp methodology were put to use at GP's leadership boot camp. Boots would remain at the camp overnight, away from business activities, and from sun up to sun down perform mental and physical activities, as well as numerous teamwork exercises. And as with any new recruit, GP's boots would wear uniforms and eat all meals together. "In many ways, boot camp is designed to be a shock, a trauma," says Gehringer. "Without that, you really can't change perspectives, attitudes, the culture, or the motivational perspectives. You tire folks out, you break down their resistance, and you use repetitive actions, verbal and nonverbal, to reinforce learning objectives."

With the academic aspects of the program in place, the project team decided that the boot camp needed an interactive, hands-on component. The issue of bringing in an outside consultant to the boot camp was a sensitive one. Many people in the organization wanted to keep it a private event, free from the prying eyes of outsiders. Non-GP staff would need to impress a skeptical audience. As it turned out, Outward Bound has a regional office close to GP. Gehringer contacted Craig Imler, the head of that office, and determined that Outward Bound was up to the



"Who are we?" GP!  
"What do we do?" Lead!  
"Why?" Pride!"



job. The two discussed the core competencies of the mission and together determined a package of interactive exercises to be used throughout the boot camp. Outward Bound would take control of groups periodically during the day and would “own” the participants during the evening.

A typical day of leadership boot camp would start at 5:30 a.m. and end well after 11 p.m. The intensive schedule supports a complete focus on the mission and brings about an “immersion-conversion.” A boot’s day would be a demanding one:

- 5:30 a.m. Wake-up call
- 5:50 a.m. Physical exercise
- 7:30 a.m. Breakfast
- 8:00 a.m. Classroom Leadership Tools and Techniques training begins
- 5:15 p.m. Classroom training ends
- 6:00 p.m. Dinner
- 6:45 p.m. Theme presentation
- 8:30 p.m. Outward Bound exercises
- 10:00 p.m. Socializing and entertainment

The schedule was packed with activities, the program was ready to go. But Gehringer determined that as the program went on, the early mornings, long days, and late nights would start to have an effect on participants. Addi-

tional motivation would be needed. After a long search, he found the right man, Doug Jones, a motivational speaker. After reviewing videotapes of Jones speaking, Gehringer called him. “I just liked the hell out of him,” he says. “Doug is a good man, he has a great depth of spirituality and great integrity—the kinds of things I thought were critical to boot camp.”

### Under fire

With Outward Bound and Jones onboard, the boot camp was off to a good start. During the initial program, the senior officers stepped away from the regular activities for a half day for their own program, while directors went through the standard boot camp training. Officers were pulled out of their meeting to co-present materials to the directors.

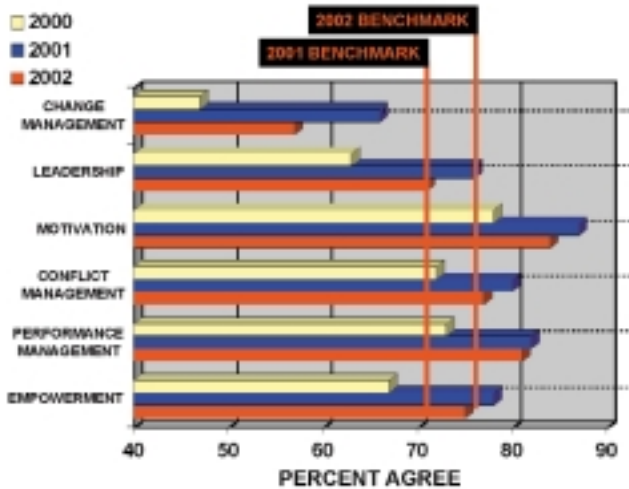
The directors’ training was going well, but issues relating to the climate survey emerged: The boots complained that those issues had to be addressed directly with the officers. The staff called a timeout, went back to the senior management team, and asked that all of the officers join the boots in their training sessions. The officers had felt that the boot training covered issues they were already familiar with and saw their role as teachers more than students. Sparks flew, but it was decided, finally, that the officers needed the training, too. In addition, the directors had identified important issues that



Doug Jones’s inspiring presentation was just what the boots needed after a long day of training.



## CORPORATE RESULTS 2002



# Aftershocks

This chart depicts the comparative results among three corporate climate surveys from 2000 to 2002. Figures are listed in terms of percent agreement with regard to the six competencies and the 59 associated behaviors. Benchmark identifies the targeted percent agreement for that particular survey. For example, GP had hoped to achieve at least 70 percent agreement across each of the competencies for 2001. From 2000 to 2001, all categories increased from as little as 8 percent to as high as 18 percent.

The events in 2001 require more discussion. Previous to 9/11, there had been three boot camps, each showing improvement in the climate survey. But in the months following that tragic day, the climate survey showed that under the strain of the struggling economy, leadership had slipped back to the old ways of doing business. There was good news, though. The numbers were still above the initial climate survey, and they proved what most people already knew: The training had performed well under great pressure.

Nearly every category decreased from as little as 1 percent to as much as 14 percent, but the significance lies in the fact that the “percent agree” between 2000 and 2003 was still positive—from 5 percent to 11 percent. What can be inferred is that in spite of 9/11, a weakened economy, and layoffs, better, more effective, leadership behaviors remained.

they wanted to discuss. The SMT decided to have breakout sessions.

The boots, now joined by the officers, were arbitrarily placed into three groups. The first task for each group was to identify the top three issues affecting corporate human performance. The groups then came back and briefed the senior management team, which designated one issue to each of the groups. The groups resolved issues using a deliberate problem-solving methodology. After a three-hour, closed-door session, each group then briefed the senior management team on an action plan to address its assigned issue. Those issues and action plans would be designated as formal objectives in the corporate strategic plan.

## Rallying the troops

By mid-week, the kinks had been worked out of the program; progress was being made. Some people were actually looking forward to the 5 a.m. wake-up call for physical training, but the long days had taken their toll. People needed a little boost. Jones had done his homework on GP. He was privy to the climate survey, and he’d interviewed senior management, interacted with rank and file, and attended some of the classes and breakout sessions. Gehringer was thrilled with Jones’s presentation: “Doug’s theme was dynamic leadership, and he knocked their socks off. He brought everything together—the climate survey, the leadership competencies, and the inability of leadership to put those competencies into practice. He also put an optimistic, exciting spin on everything. When Doug had completed his presentation, people leapt to their feet with newfound energy.” More than two hours of physical, hands-on exercises with Outward Bound put that energy to best use, and then everyone was marched (literally) down to the entertainment area to celebrate.

Gehringer is convinced that most great leaders are people driven by faith and spirit. He added a ritual to heighten the awareness of the power of spirit, whether based on faith in God or faith in other people. On the opening day, everyone was told to join hands and participate in a prayer. It wasn’t an option. Together, they asked blessings on the boot camp and for openness. Some participants were taken aback at first, but in the end, there were no complaints about bringing prayer that emphasized spirituality rather than religion into the event.

## Esprit de corps

The graduation ceremony came on a Saturday. It followed a half day of training called Leadership Bytes, a series of short but memorable exercises designed for a tired crowd. The ceremony included the announcement of four honor graduates, people who had shown an exceptional level of enthusiasm and, more important, a high level of support for others. Everyone was awarded three books and a diploma featuring the skull and crossbones.

GP's president then spoke, reminding the participants that he and the troops back at GP expected to see a change in leadership behavior. They were to be servant-leaders, not dictators. He reminded them that they were expected to be better at all of the competencies, and that they would be receiving another 360-degree evaluation to measure the improvement.

**K**illough gave the final words. His speech, a potent mix of inspiration and introspection, forced participants to assess themselves and decide right then and there whether they were going to participate as leaders or sit on the sidelines. Leadership, he asserted, isn't a spectator sport. "It takes heart and passion. Most of all, those whom you lead must know you care!" He emphasized that leadership requires courage and conscientious decision making.

GP, Killough says, in its decision to make leadership and culture change a priority, had experienced a defining moment. The company had demonstrated its commitment by investing in the boot camp experience and by making each participant a part of the process. Now, it was up to the participants to make a decision: Would the boot camp be a defining moment for each one of them?

## The spoils of success

The boot camp hit its mark. People who'd gone into it with indifference became advocates for its success. Evidence was seen throughout the company: Diplomas were hung proudly, dog tags were made into key fobs, and the training materials were displayed on people's desks and bookshelves. Critically, managers, now leaders, were speaking a new language.

GP's president asked that a follow-up climate survey be issued just six months following the initial boot camp.

The survey produced empirical evidence that leaders had begun to do what they'd been taught, and that employees in the trenches had noticed. The results were dramatic, showing a 17 to 25 percent improvement across all of the competencies.

GP's president then went to each office, worldwide, to deliver the climate survey results. He carefully explained the measures being taken to address employee concerns, and he solicited their feedback. There appeared to be more muscle behind the concept, the findings, and the new way of doing business. The chairman of the board approved funding for leadership boot camps to be held every six months.

Gehring points to GP's president as a key to the success of the boot camp. "If there's a person to point to, to show who really made it happen, it was our president," he says. "As the head of the company, he decided what was right and decided to change his own behavior consistent with that." Leadership had emerged as GP's core competency, and the senior management team was redesignated "the senior leadership team."

## Moving forward

To ensure a consistent leadership philosophy across GP, leadership boot camp is now a requirement for everyone seeking promotion to a supervisory position. Everyone manages change, manages performance, and resolves conflict the same way. No longer will each new manager need to learn leadership through the costly practice of trial and error.

To keep the spirit of boot camp alive, GP maintains a Website containing training materials, pictures from past boot camps, letters from participants, and current articles about leadership and relevant topics. One note, sent to recognize the GP Cadre, the staff who organized and delivered the boot camp, sums up the thoughts of many participants. It reads in part: "[I would like to recognize] them for the profound impact they have had on our most precious resource, our people. They say what we do in life echoes in eternity...for their efforts echoing in eternity through the history of GP, I say, well done!"

Anecdotal evidence like that, combined with the hard numbers on the climate surveys, shows, without question, that the GP leadership boot camp has made a major, lasting difference at General Physics. TD

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