

Discover Buried Treasure in Your Organization

By Michael Lee Stallard, Carolyn Dewing-Hommes and Jason Pankau

The ideas and insights held by people in the lowest ranks of organizations are rarely tapped by leaders. This knowledge is like buried treasure: potentially of great value yet it rarely surfaces on its own. Wise leaders, like treasure hunters, actively search for it.

One of the most remarkable examples of this practice is the account of the Chicago cab driver who played a key role in liberating France from the Nazi's during World War II. The story is recounted by Stephen Ambrose in his book *Citizen Soldiers*.

In June of 1944, after American soldiers landed on the beaches of Normandy on D-Day and moved about ten miles inland, they approached the Normandy countryside the French refer to as the *Brocage*. This part of France consisted of plots of land that farmers separated with hedgerows rather than fences. The hedgerows were made of two to three feet of packed soil at their base and topped off with several feet of brush and vines. When the Sherman tanks

Knowledge, like buried treasure, rarely surfaces on its own. Great leaders learn to seek it.

attempted to go over the top of the hedgerows the front of the tank popped up, exposing its thin underbelly to Nazi anti-tank fire. As it turns out, Allied military planners had spent so much time planning for the D-Day landings that they hadn't fully considered the problems troops might encounter in hedgerow country. The Sherman tanks' vulnerability caught everyone by surprise.

At first, the Americans tried blasting the hedgerows open so the Sherman tanks could then progress through the holes created by the explosions. Unfortunately, the explosions only served to give the Nazis advance warning of where the tanks were going. Nearly a month after D-Day, the Allies were falling behind schedule primarily because of the problems created by the hedgerows and the Nazi defense.

One day in a discussion between officers and enlisted men the idea arose of mounting saw teeth on the front of the Sherman tank. Many of those present laughed at the suggestion. One soldier, however, took the idea seriously. Sergeant Curtis G. Culin, a cab driver from Chicago, immediately designed and built a hedgerow cutting device made from pieces of steel rail that the Nazis had strewn across the beaches to slow down an amphibious attack. When tested, the new device easily sliced through the hedgerows.

It wasn't long before the Sherman tanks mounted with Culin's device were branded "Rhinos" by the soldiers because they made a Sherman tank look like a rhinoceros. Within days of testing the Rhinos, the idea was presented to General Omar Bradley, head of the First Army. In short order, he attended a demonstration of the Rhino tank and immediately ordered 500 of Culin's devices. Within two weeks sixty percent of the First Army's Sherman tanks were modified into Rhinos. With the Rhinos the First Army were able to proceed through the

hedgerow country in time to crush the Nazi army. In General Bradley's account of the war, *A Soldier's Story*, he praised the Rhinos for the key role they played in liberating France.

Curtis Culin's innovation might not have occurred had it not been for a chain of command consisting of Generals Omar Bradley, Dwight D. Eisenhower and George C. Marshall each of whom encouraged what we refer to as Knowledge Flow. We define Knowledge Flow as existing when everyone in the organization participates in an open, honest, and safe dialogue where leaders seek and consider diverse viewpoints in order to understand people, identify the best ideas and make superior decisions. In this instance, Knowledge Flow occurred when General Bradley encouraged suggestions, Curtis Culin responded by taking the initiative, and his idea was quickly considered, approved and implemented.

The lesson here is that you, as a leader, should seek out the buried treasure in the organization you lead. Get out and meet groups of people throughout your organization on a regular basis. Encourage them to take the initiative to identify opportunities, threats, problems and their solutions. Share the issues on your mind and hear what's on theirs. When people believe you are sincere and will truly consider their ideas, you'll discover the gold.

Michael Lee Stallard is the founder of E Pluribus Partners. Carolyn-Dewing Hommes and Jason Pankau are partners and co-founders of the firm. Together they are contributors to the book *What Managers Say, What Employees Hear* published by Praeger in April 2007.