Women Marines in Combat: What is the Lesson for Your Workplace?

The Marines recently released a summary report on their study of women in combat roles, fueling the firestorm of controversy about whether women should be in combat. [http://www.npr.org/2015/09/10/439246978/marine-corps-release-results-of-study-on-women-in-combat-units](http://www.npr.org/2015/09/10/439246978/marine-corps-release-results-of-study-on-women-in-combat-units) The study found that all-male units outperformed mixed-gender units.

Interestingly, U.S. Defense Secretary Ash Carter has already stated that it's U.S. policy that all combat roles will be open to women, unless a "rigorous analysis" of the facts shows that an exception should apply. Stay tuned to learn whether the Marines will apply for an exception.

The Marine study has its supporters and detractors but what I think is instructive for most workplaces, is to avoid stereotypes and focus on the facts. (Obviously, the military is subject to its own laws and policies.) Some of the criticism of the testing that went into the report, for example, focused on whether the physical tests of the unit really covered all of the requirements of any combat job. Jogging with heavy packs, climbing over walls, carrying and firing heavy machine guns, for example, might be required in some combat roles.

The summary report doesn't indicate, however, whether they tested combat skills unique to women, like strategy, communication, tracking abilities (strangely, women have better noses for detecting humans passing nearby), and keeping unit cohesiveness, skills that women traditionally test better on than men. While we might argue whether all these skills are driven by our biology or our training (would more specific strength training reduce stress fractures for women, for example, a problem more women than men had in the study), the reality of our current culture is that more, but not all, women perform better at certain kinds of tasks, and more, but not all, men perform better at others.

In non-military workplaces, the key is to determine what types of skills are really relevant to the job and then test (or interview) accordingly. Be careful not to use arbitrary or irrelevant measurements.

I worked with a large oil company, for example, that was introducing women into the job of driving large fuel tanker trucks. A test for that job had always been to require applicants to be able to lift 75 pounds, since the trucks had heavy fuel hoses and someone, at some point, had decided that's what the job required. When considering women, we recommended that they actually weigh the hoses. Much to their surprise, the
hoses weighed only 50 pounds, so they changed the requirements for the job.

This is a simple example -- not of lowering standards -- but of looking at the reality of what's required. Yet we had many discussions with the all-male drivers about their objections to the standards being lowered. And many assumed that only men could lift that amount of weight despite the reality that many men have bad backs and many women are weight lifters.

**What should you learn from the Marine controversy?** Look closely at what the actual job skills might be and whether you are excluding any particular group with your current standards. Avoid stereotypes and assumptions and design any job tests carefully. While your people might not need to carry 75 pound packs over brick walls, they might need -- like the Marines -- to have the skills required to nose out the competition or track a project with the latest technology. What individuals might be best for those jobs?