

Lead Left Interview – Zachary Iscol

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This week we speak with Zachary Iscol, founder and CEO of Hirepurpose, an organization developed by veterans for veterans to assist in the transition from military to civilian careers. Zach is a combat decorated Marine Officer and Iraq veteran. He is also the Executive Director of the Headstrong Project, a non-profit organization that provides cost-free and bureaucracy-free mental health care treatment to Iraq and Afghanistan veterans.

The Lead Left: *Zach, first of all, thank you for your service. Tell us a bit about your background.*

Zachary Iscol: Thanks for the opportunity to speak with you, Randy. I went to Cornell undergrad, and was inspired to join the Marine Corps by my football coach there who had been a Marine officer in Vietnam. I was commissioned on August 11, 2001, exactly one month before 9/11.

TLL: *Unbelievable timing. When did you go to Iraq?*

ZI: I deployed twice to Iraq. My first deployment was in the fall of 2003, after the fall of Baghdad. It was a short uneventful deployment in Southern Iraq. Shortly after getting home, I volunteered for a second deployment to Al Anbar Province, which was becoming increasingly violent. That deployment was somewhat more eventful. I commanded a combined US Marine and Iraq unit called a Combined Action Platoon and our Iraqi soldiers became the only Iraqi unit to fight on the front lines of the second Battle of Fallujah.

TLL: *What's your perspective on the Iraq war looking back?*

ZI: After leaving the Marines, I went back in 2009 to make *The Western Front*, a 2010 Tribeca Film Festival Selection. That film told the story of the “Al-Anbar Awakening;” how in 2006 the most dangerous part of the country became the safest almost overnight. Marines started reaching out to tribal leaders, people who had been fighting alongside Al Qaeda, but often had legitimate grievances- a family member that was killed or they may have lost their job or role in the military.

TLL: *To separate them from the ones who were just bad guys.*

ZI: The fighters who were irreconcilably against the US had to be killed. But the key was to break apart the coalition we were fighting. To get the reconcilables to fight alongside us against the irreconcilables. Today ISIS is reforming those old alliances because the Iraqi government has made mistakes. Ten to twenty thousand ISIS fighters have the support of six million Iraqi people.

TLL: *Zach, let's talk about your new venture: hirepurpose.*

ZI: Companies want to hire professionals from a military background, but they often don't know how to go about doing it. Similarly, veterans aren't aware of the opportunities in the private sector. With our help, fifty of the Fortune 100 have hired us to help them with their veteran employment.

TLL: *Could you give us some examples?*

ZI: CarMax, eBay, Enterprise, Hilton, Ernst and Young, Eaton, Oracle, and Hertz all use us. Even GE and we just closed Salesforce.

TLL: *How do you facilitate the process of hiring vets?*

ZI: David Petrucco of Kayne Anderson, a big supporter of our program, describes it like a seventh grade dance. Both sides on each side of a big room, looking at each other, wondering what to do next. They need someone to bring them together. We help to put that process in place.

TLL: *Is hirepurpose a for-profit venture?*

ZI: Yes. But for veterans it is completely free. Essentially we help transition service members, and teach them how to use resources and make smart career choices. We have a team that offers a combination of products we bundle and sell as a subscription to companies. And they definitely need good people.

TLL: *Which companies are good models for hiring vets?*

ZI: JP Morgan has long had an outstanding program. Walmart just announced an effort to hire 100,000 veterans with honorable discharges. Airgas has said their growth is being hindered by being unable to find good workers. They offer six months on-the-job training. Firms like that will be your best employers.

TLL: *How do you convince non-military types that military personnel can manage in the business world?*

ZI: The Department of Defense is the world's largest corporation! It produces products and services bigger than all the offerings from CVS, Walmart, the airlines, logistics, technology, and auto companies combined.

TLL: *And a young officer can bring some pretty legit leadership experience.*

ZI: That's right. All things being equal, employers recognize a twenty-six year old may not be the best entry level analyst. But when you have to make that decision in four years, who will you trust more to lead people?

TLL: *Do you cover all branches of the service?*

ZI: Yes, and spouses of veterans and service members as well.

TLL: *Who's the easiest group to find jobs for?*

ZI: Junior officers and junior enlisted personnel. Of course, it depends on the individual's background.

TLL: *What type of government benefits are available in terms of training and job placement?*

ZI: The GI Bill is the biggest. Veterans each receive close to \$90k in educational benefits, which covers costs up to state school tuition. Then there's the 'Yellow Ribbon Program,' which supplements the difference between the GI Bill and private tuition.

To be continued the week of September 22

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