

Review: The Art of War

Ch 1: Strategic Assessments

In this chapter Master Sun and his commentators discuss the importance of assessing one's environment. When engaging in war it is dire to each side to examine the external conditions, such as the environment, and one's internal strengths and weaknesses. I related this to the business world because those same assessments need to be made before developing a strategy. They basically comprise a SWOT analysis, which sizes up a firm's internal strengths and weaknesses and its external opportunities and threats against each other. Master Sun states the five most important aspects to assess are "the way, the weather, the terrain, the leadership, and discipline." From a business perspective, these five elements can be viewed as the gap or niche in which the business is attempting to enter, the external conditions of the industry, what the possible market share is, what the managerial processes that should be employed to effectively run the business are, and what the guidelines to operation of it are. Once these assessments have been made, Master Sun directs you to, "structure your forces accordingly, to supplement extraordinary tactics. Forces are to be structured strategically based on what is advantageous."

Ch. 2: Doing Battle

This chapter actually details the necessary tactics and moves to employ once involved in battle. I related this to a start up finally entering into a market. The most important point Master Sun attempts to get across here is that battle should not be a long and exhausting process. If all assessments were made correctly, by either or both parties, the actual fighting period should determine a victor within a relatively short time frame. From a business perspective, once you have concluded your SWOT analysis, have determined that the venture is actually viable, and have developed a strategy, it should not take forever and a day for your market presence to begin to be acknowledged by your competitors. True, it is not reasonable to think that as soon as one enters the market one's company will be an immediate success. But, a predefined timeline should exist that detail how long it will take the company to begin to realize profits. This timeline should be executed to the T. Master Sun states that when you do battle for a long time it will dull your forces and exhaust your resources. This also applies to the business world.

Ch. 3: Planning a Siege

This chapter entails the necessary steps to not only compete, but to takeover. Master Sun writes, "Therefore those who win every battle are not really skillful— those who render others armies helpless without fighting are the best of all." What this says is that your aim shouldn't be to just win every head to head battles or competitions with other small or similar sized businesses. Your aim should be to render the entire industry helpless and to become recognized as the dominator. You should not focus on battling frivolously with those who are in the same market position as you. Go after the industry leaders tactfully by developing plans to foil their strategies and eventually conquer their market share. Word to the wise though: This must be done skillfully and impeccably or it could lead to your destruction. One of Master Sun's commentators, Zhang Yu, states, "A skillful martialist ruins plans, spoils relations, cuts off supplies, or blocks the way, and hence can overcome people without fighting."

Ch. 4: Formation

This chapter concerns the formation of an army, or in an entrepreneur's case, the organization. One's structure should never be totally visible to those outside of it. There should never be a point where organizational structure can be analyzed correctly. Hiding formation should be considered just as important as developing the strategy itself. Master Sun states, "In ancient times skillful warriors first made themselves invincible and then watched for vulnerability in their opponents." The business structure should be viewed as a predator stalking and evaluating its prey until it is time to attack. It camouflages and wants to remain unseen until that perfect moment arrives in which it reveals itself. In order to successfully achieve this, one must know his/her business structure in and out, thereby not allowing any chance of the misleading perception to become a reality. Also, you must not allow yourself to get too drawn into your evaluations of competitors because they may be incorporating the same methods of deception.

Ch. 5: Force

This chapter describes one aspect that can lead to domination, force. One commentator defines force as a shift in accumulated energy or momentum. This is a goal that should be top priority in executing your business plan and strategy. Capitalize of what other companies have done in the market in regards to advertising and building customer loyalty. When the right moment approaches, forcefully put them out of business and establish yourself as the new industry leader. Consumers will flock to your business once you are recognized as the industry superior. There are many methods to forcefully takeover a market. You must find the one that is tailored specifically to your organization and its competencies. As Master Sun states, "Making the armies able to take on opponents without being defeated is a matter of unorthodox and orthodox methods."

Ch. 6: Emptiness and Fullness

This chapter identifies recognizing who are the powerful and who are the weak as another important aspect in warfare. Du Mu writes, "Militarists avoid the full and strike the empty, so they first have to recognize emptiness and fullness in others and themselves." The content of this chapter can be considered common sense and natural instincts. You must know what your strengths and weaknesses are. You must know what your competitors' strengths and weaknesses are. You must only pursue those situations in which you feel you have a feasible chance of succeeding in. For example, it would not be wise for a mom and pop grocery store to go head to head with a retail giant like Wal-Mart. In order to find out who are those within your competitive reach and those that aren't Master Sun instructs, "Assess them to find out their plans, both the successful ones and the failures. Incite them to action in order to find out the patterns of their movement and rest."

Ch. 7: Armed Struggle

In this chapter Master Sun conceptualizes armed struggle as a situation to steer clear from. He defines struggle as the pursuit of an advantage and states that fighting with people face to face over advantages is the hardest thing in the world. This reference back to Ch. 2, "Doing Battle", in which the main point is not to engage in frivolous head to head battles. In competing with a local business, do not take it head on. To gain a complete advantage over it, think outside of the box and use resource strengths and distinctive capabilities to out-gain it in every aspect. Assess whether to use direct or indirect approaches and heavy or light tactics and then proceed to attack. This will lead to your best chance of victory. Master Sun states, "Act after having made assessments. The one who first knows the measures of far and near wins— this is the rule of armed struggle."

Ch. 8: Adaptations

This chapter's content can be considered the most important content within the entire book. It elaborates on a topic we all should not only be familiar with, but should have had to apply at some point in our lifetimes, adaptation. Zhang Yu, yet another one of Master Sun's commentators, defines adaptation as "....not clinging to fixed methods, but changing appropriately according to events, acting as it is suitable." In a business climate, adaptation is another key success factor. You must be able to change with the industry conditions in order to survive as an organization. Plans for these changes should already be established as they should be included in the initial strategy. Business owners and executives should have full knowledge of the industry they are operating in and how fickle it is. As Master Sun writes, "Therefore generals who know all possible adaptations to take advantage of the ground know how to use military forces. If generals do not know how to adapt advantageously, even if they know the lay of the land, they cannot take advantage of it."

Ch. 9: Maneuvering Armies

This chapter fixates on the concept that setting objectives is only half the battle. You must have detailed plans of action in place in order to execute those objectives. It describes different tactics and procedures to put an opponent at a disadvantage and how to elude situations that puts you and your troops at a disadvantage. From a business perspective, you can view this chapter as tips on how to run your organization. According to the chapter, your employees must be disciplined, aware of the environment, and always willing to make adaptations in order to be effective. You as a business owner or leader must analyze every possible route that can be taken with each decision and determine the most advantageous one to send your workers in the direction of. You must set guidelines on how to overcome deficits and establish manuals on what behaviors to exhibit. "If the army is unsettled, it means the general is not taken seriously."

Ch. 10: Terrain

This is a relatively short chapter. It uses terrain to describe routes that can easily be taken and ones that may require some expertise to get through. Either way, you should be fully prepared for whatever a particular route may bring because assessments of it should have already been made. In making corporate decisions, attempt to foresee every possible consequence and determine which would produce the most beneficial outcome. You can also relate this chapter to how easy it is to enter a market. Some markets are wide open for any potential business to enter; some are already saturated and require an efficient and effective business plan to succeed in. Master Sun states, "Some terrain is easily passable, in some you get hung up, some makes for a standoff, some is narrow, some is steep, some is wide open."

Ch. 11: Nine Grounds

This chapter describes nine types of competitive or battlefield grounds. These include: grounds of dissolution (where local interests fight among themselves on their own territory), light ground (when you enter others land but not deeply), grounds of contention (land that would be advantageous to you if you got it and to opponents if they got it), trafficked grounds (land where you and others can come and go), intersecting grounds (land that is surrounded on three sides by competitors and would give the first to get it access to all the people on it), heavy grounds (when you enter deeply into others land), bad

grounds(when you have to travel through mountain forests, steep marshes, or any route difficult to travel), and surrounded ground(narrow and circuitous land). Most of these different types of lands can be transitioned into market conditions and how easy it is for a potential new entrance. They also deal with being first movers and hard-to-match resource holders.

Ch. 12: Fire Attack

This chapter basically gives you five ways to attack using fire. These include: burning people, burning supplies, burning equipment, burning storehouses, and burning weapons. I could not see a correlation between this chapter and the corporate world unless one wants to go to jail for murder or vandalism.

Ch. 13: Espionage

This chapter entails the benefits of having information from within your competitors' infrastructure. It describes five kinds of spies: local spies, inside spies, reverse spies, dead spies, and living spies. The most important message to grasp from this chapter though, is the usefulness of specific information about your competitor in molding your own strategy and business model. Inside intelligence allows you to anticipate your competitor's next move and attempt to stay steps ahead of them. Of course the use of espionage is based on to what degree you feel it is unethical. But, if employed it can definitely lead to a significant competitive advantage.

P.S.

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