



Sun Zi Art of War - Areas of Strategic Planning and Execution

In the first part of Chapter 1 of Sun Zi Art of War, it was mentioned that going to war is of vital importance to the state, because it can determine whether it survives or not and also whether it will prosper or be destroyed. There is no in between. Since the stakes are high, initial planning and assessment are critical.

So which areas should the ruler look at before deciding to go to war? Sun Zi proposed these five main areas and they are broken down into seven sub areas.

We can see from the writings that Sun Zi is a very meticulous person because he broke the five points down to the dimensions that one should look out for. For example, he broke down the weather into cold or hot, night or day and which season it is in.

The 5 areas are:

故经之已五，校之以计，而索其情：一曰道，二曰天，三曰地，四曰将，五曰法。

1. Political leadership of the Ruler (道)
2. The weather where the battle is taking place (天)
3. The terrain where the battle is taking place (地)
4. Generalship, the person commanding the battle (将)
5. Army organization structure and systems (法)

The 7 Sub areas are

1. Political Intelligence of a Ruler (主孰有道?)
2. Capability of General (将孰有能?)
3. Advantage of provided by Weather and Terrain (天地孰得?)
4. Effective and Efficient Execution of Orders (法令孰行?)
5. Equipped level and numerical strength of army (兵众孰强?)
6. Training level of army (士卒孰练?)
7. Administration of rewards and punishment (赏罚孰明?)

Business Application

Relating to business aspect, these are important factors that determine the successful implementation of a company's strategy. The key here is to relate these factors to business. There should not be much difficulty in relating these factors from military to business.

1. Employer or top management ability to unite the company or department behind a vision or to achieve certain goals.
2. Capability of Manager or Team Leader.
3. Uncontrollable Aspects of Market like the culture of people, government set rules and regulation.



4. Business Systems like inventory management, delivery system and others.
5. Technology available to staff.
6. Skill set and knowledge level of staff.
7. Administration of rewards and punishment.

Unity

As the heading says, political leadership in war is equivalent to the ability of the top management of the company to unite behind certain goals and vision.

Easier said than done? Sure but I think there are certain guidelines we can follow, first of all, the idea and purpose of the goals and vision should be made as clear as possible to the whole company. How do you do that? Quite easy, in my opinion, involve the whole company in crafting the goals and painting the vision. For those of you who has seen The Apprentice 3, in the graffiti competition, the leader of Magna Corp, was able to consult some of the kids from the street to provide some input to the graffiti that they were painting. In the end, because the focus group that determines the winner was able to identify with the graffiti, (the kids and the focus group came from the same neighborhood), the Magna Corp won the competition.

Capability of Manager or Team Leader (Leadership)

This is more straightforward than the previous sub-area. This is one area that is quite important in my opinion. The reason why I say this is because firstly, a good leader would have been able to unite and command the respect of his army and people of the nation. A wise general would not be leading his army to attack when weather conditions are bad or terrain is unfavorable. Even if he is forced to do so, his wisdom (one of the characteristics for mentioned for comparison) would be able make his troops avoid engaging his enemies or turn disadvantages into advantages. Good generals would be able to create a strong organization structure and control in his army through the other four characteristic mentioned for comparison.

The five capabilities that are advocated by Sun Zi are Wisdom, Benevolence, Courage, Discipline and Trustworthiness. Just these five characteristics are definitely not an exhaustive list of the characteristic of a good leader, but in my opinion these five are the most important so that in army, or in business, the project team or department can function properly. And from these five words, there are a lot of things to look out for, which I shall not write here or I would be writing a whole chapter.

Uncontrollable Aspects of Market

This is something that is not straightforward, not a lot of people can relate from weather and terrain with respect to the area of business. After reading some books and some digestion, below are my thoughts on its application to business.



For weather, we know that in war, the advantages and disadvantages presented by it can be tremendous and influence is wide ranging. It is one of the factors that we cannot control at all. For business, these could be the trends that are happening in the broad industry. Like certain consumer trends or even the actual weather itself because weather can affect harvest of certain commodities.

So what about terrain? I think it can be comparable to the market you are battling or catering to. Depending on the market and your strategic focus, the barriers of entry and exit are determined. Why I relate terrain to barrier of entry is, if you have looked through Sun Zi Art of War, you would have known that when Sun Zi mentioned about terrain, it is most of the time, how easy or difficult one can enter the terrain.

Business Systems

In the fourth sub-areas proposed by Sun Zi, it queries whether an army is able to execute orders efficiently and effectively.

In war, if the orders are not clearly passed down to everyone in the army, confusion will prevail and would render the whole army useless and in the end the general would not be able to execute his strategy. In Romance of Three Kingdoms, we have always marveled at the strategies formulated by Zhuge Liang, but if the generals that he delegated the assignment to was not able to execute them well, his strategies would be useless.

Relating this to business, I think the most prominent thing that a company should go for is to improve the business systems in his company. Most companies should aim to improve their systems. Make it more convenient and effective for the staff.

So how do you improve the systems in your company? Well, need I say more, ask the people who are using the system.

Technology available to staff

Now in war, the equipped level and the numerical strength of the army plays an important part in victory. Because with a larger army, one can strengthen more positions or attack more places to distract your enemy. The next best thing would be to equip your army with the best armor and weapon so that they have the advantage over the enemy's army.

So how does this relate to business? We can easily interpret this as the equipped level of your staff in carrying out their jobs. For instance, an employee cannot do much if you only provide her with a typewriter. All she can do is fill out forms or file a report. But if you provide her with a computer, she can do calculation of account, enter accounts and so on.

Each and every staff should be equipped with the bare necessities to help improve their work rate. Of course all these have to be weighted against the costs of buying and



installing the technology. Be well versed with the latest available technology, note their development and once it is advantageous to equip your staff with it, go ahead and buy it.

Skill set and knowledge level of Staff

When we say equipped level, most people would quickly relate to technology available to staff and we tend to overlook the software which is the skill sets. We need to send our staff to attain more skills and knowledge. A computer is nothing if one does not have the knowledge to use it efficiently. Now another point I want to mention here is that most employer would send their employees to pick up skills that are needed immediately but this often does not provide a company with a competitive edge. Employers should look out for is sending staff to obtain skills that are needed in the future so as to reduce the reaction lag as mention in Porter's Competitive Strategy.

Administration of Rewards and Punishment

Here I would like to stress the importance of rewards and punishment. Han Fei Zi, a great politician during the Warring States Period stressed the importance of administering rewards and punishment, writing two chapters on it. He said that the administration of it is so important it actually determines the survival or demise of the nation. And he equate the administration power of rewards and punishment of the ruler to the fangs and claws to a tiger. Without the power, the ruler would not be able to administer the affairs of the state well.

So it is important in the modern business that they structure their reward and punishment correctly so that their work is aligned with that of the business strategy and culture. For example, if you reward base on individual sales, it is very likely you would not be promoting teamwork.

Besides aligning with the business strategy and culture, the administration of rewards and punishment plays an important role in talent management strategies as well. To me, the structuring of a good reward and punishment system is really a form of art and the company that can structure it best can have a huge advantage over his rivals.

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