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In the year 512 BC, Sun Tzu served the Kingdom of Wu (ancient China) as an army general and strategist. His military successes inspired him to write *The Art of War*, which became popular with strategists of all seven rival kingdoms during the Warring States Period (475-221 BC). Sun Tzu's philosophy, concepts, and strategies have been proven to work over and over again in a variety of situations--in the military, in business, and in sports. You too, can easily apply the ancient strategic principles of Sun Tzu to aspects of your management and leadership functions.

The Art of War was written as a guide to overcoming obstacles. When we are faced with challenges, our natural reactions are "flight" or "fight," either running away from a challenge or getting into conflict with it. As an alternative to these reactions, Sun Tzu emphasized the science of strategy. Our English word "strategy" comes from the ancient Greek term for "thinking like a general." The fact that Sun Tzu's book is about strategy rather than simply fighting explains why its methods apply so well to management.

The Art of War offers a distinct, nonintuitive system for problem-solving. It solidifies a vague idea of a strategy into a clear, well-defined set of principles. Sun Tzu teaches strategy as a system of continuously improving your position. *Success goes not to the stronger or most aggressive but to those who best understand their situation and what their alternatives for improving it really are.* When you have mastered Sun Tzu's system of strategy, you are able to almost instantly analyze competitive situations, spot opportunities, and make the appropriate decisions.

Sun Tzu wrote about the psychology of organizations, as well as the importance of innovation, momentum, and esprit de corps. Human organizations haven't changed in the last two thousand years and won't over the next two thousand. The only differences between modern organizations and the ancient military

armies of Sun Tzu's era are the types of tools we use and the battlegrounds on which we compete.

Sun Tzu saw that, at their roots, all competitive challenges are economic. *The secret to success*, he concluded, *is not just winning battles, but winning in a way that minimizes costs.* This insight led to his entire approach to competition as an exercise in analysis, organization, positioning, momentum, and persuasion in an effort to minimize costly conflict. This same thinking will also be the basis for your success in your organization.

Though strategy shows you how to find success in competitive situations, *Sun Tzu's recipe for success is to avoid unnecessary conflict.* He sees such conflict as inherently costly. He does teach how to handle direct, hostile confrontations when they cannot be avoided, but his basic approach is to defuse these situations before they occur. *His method is psychological: you must convince potential opponents to give you what you want without a fight.*

The challenge of management is effectiveness and efficiency. Your goal as a manager shouldn't just be to get the work done but to get it done as efficiently as possible. All organizations compete for resources. Even as part of a larger organization, you will only continue to receive financial support if you are more productive (or more persuasive) than other managers. The competitive environment gradually weeds out ineffective and inefficient organizational groups. Don't be weeded out!

An essential ingredient of success is picking the right battleground, or in other words, selecting the right focus for your activities. Every operation has limited resources. Unfortunately, there is no such limit on the demands made upon organizations. It is the manager's job to evaluate what must be done and what can be left undone, picking the best possible places to invest the organization's limited resources.

According to Sun Tzu's teaching, managers cannot succeed through their own efforts alone--they need a team of supporters and collaborators.

Managers don't create opportunities, the competitive environment does. The secret is recognizing these opportunities when they present themselves, and once recognized, being confident enough to act. Sometimes management requires watchful patience, and at other times, instant action. Sun Tzu believed that opportunities are always abundant since every problem creates an opportunity (and there are always problems). But despite being abundant, opportunities are still difficult to recognize and act upon.

Finally, we all know that decision-making is knowledge-intensive. Sun Tzu sees success going to the best-informed and best-trained decision-makers. In Sun Tzu's system, there is no substitute for good information, and good information is worth any price. *The Art of War's* last chapter, titled Using Spies, makes it clear how good information is essential and explains all types of information we must acquire. In fact, Sun Tzu's ideas almost predicted today's information economy!

As your responsibilities change and you face different types of decisions, you certainly can apply Sun Tzu's principles in different ways in different situations, but only if you take some time to read reread them periodically. With every reading you will develop more insight into Sun Tzu's methods and your own situation. As your situation changes, different parts of the book will become more important. In general, the book is organized so that the broadest and longest-term issues, such as strategic planning, are addressed in the initial chapters. Later chapters tend to focus on the special challenges encountered under specific conditions.

Despite its relatively short length, *The Art of War* contains more valuable information about good management than other books two or three times its size. Do not expect to appreciate all of its principles in one reading. Time spent studying Sun Tzu's system is always time well invested.

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