

Winning People in Leadership Using Sun Zi's *Art of War*

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Once Heraclitus, the Pre-Socratic philosopher, wrote: "We must know that war is common to all and strife is justice, and that all things come into being and pass away through strife."¹ The thought of this aphorism finds a more explicit and concrete expression in the Chinese philosopher Sun Zi's words: "The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected."²

And this subject of inquiry – WAR should not be taken as a univocal term, for it has in fact an analogous signification. During Sun Zi and the Period of Warring States (approximately from 403-221 B.C.) when more than three hundred wars were fought within China, the meaning of war in this context had something to do literally with wars, battles and combats. This was the setting of Sun Zi's elegant opus *The Art of War*.

But in this world and age, there are other wars being waged by men and women. R. L. Wing enumerates four of them, namely, (1) war in the self; (2) war in the environment; (3) war among leaders; and (4) war with another. The following could be a brief account of them:

¹ Rex Warner. *The Greek Philosophers* (New York, 1964), p. 26.

² Lionel Giles, Trans. *Sun Tzu on the Art of War* (Singapore, 1988), p. 1.

First, *war in the self* is an inner struggle wherein a part of the person is hindering his positive growth in life; it can be a vice or a psychological obstruction. Second, *war in the environment* is an outer struggle wherein the surroundings are restricting one's personal development; it can be at home or at work. Third, *war among leaders* is the inter-organizational antagonisms arising due to disagreements in ideologies and resources; it can happen in business, politics and social groups. Finally, *war with another* is an interpersonal difference due to a relationship that is detrimentally affecting the person concerned; it can occur in career or partnership situations or in any situation where people convene to interact or compete.³ In this case, the opponent may not really be an individual, but a relationship.

Therefore it is made evident that the concept of war is not merely militaristic. In other words, it is not just about chariots and horses, guns and ammunitions, but also about persons, milieus and organizations. What weaves them all together is the presence of conflict and disharmony, as well as the steely determination to achieve victory by the careful employment of strategies and tactics.

New Leader's Conflict with Members

To the majority, conflict is negative for it is unsettling and disruptive. It may even be physically and mentally agonizing. However, optimistically speaking, conflict also is potentially good. Temporary conflict can lead to a greater good. It can arouse interest and activity, introduce change and even strengthen the human character.⁴ Nevertheless, conflicts do have also their harmful effects which should be wisely resolved by all possible means.

This work entitled "*Winning People in Leadership Using Sun Zi's Art of War*" is an attempt to apply some of Sun Zi's time tested principles on what R. L. Wing calls the war/conflict with another, arising out of a relationship that is established between the new

³ R.L. Wing, Trans. *The Art of Strategy* (New York, 1988), pp. 14-19.

⁴ Harris W. Lee. *Effective Church Leadership* (Minneapolis, 1989), p. 158.

leader and the members of the group. The study is focused on what victory is, what knowledge and qualities a new leader must have, and what strategies and tactics he must employ to win over the dissident members of his group.

Being a neophyte leader can be anybody's worst nightmare, most especially if one is unexpectedly elected or assigned to assume a huge responsibility. There are no accumulated past experiences from which to draw wisdom and most knowledge based on mere hearsay and observation. Leading a group with which one is unfamiliar is equally intimidating as leading one's very close friends and associates, who used to be your equals. But such situations do happen in reality.

If the new group leader comes from an outside community, it is not uncommon to discover members examining closely his credentials to see whether he is able to meet their expectations, and other members comparing him to his immediate predecessor. And if the new leader comes from the same group, it is not unlikely to find members hoping him to remain as he is in his dealings, like he were not an official at all. Consequently, there will be unforeseen and extreme challenges. There will also be pain and misgivings. It can just be too overwhelming. "We all experience difficulty at the beginning. It occurs when the creative and receptive unite to create. This is always and naturally the case."⁵

Logically there will also be strife and conflict between the leader and some members of the group who may be dissatisfied. This is what R.L. Wing labels as a nonnegotiable conflict⁶ which begets an interpersonal crisis threatening the personal fulfillment and happiness of everyone in the group, from the hierarchy to the file. The leader is left with two options: either to bear with the conflict throughout his term or to offset it and achieve a win-win solution for everyone. The second alternative is what this study endeavors to accomplish with the drawing out of strategies and tactics to win the members as if the leader is an able general.

⁵ Bob Messing. *The Tao of Management* (Hants, 1988), p. 5.

⁶ R.L. Wing, p. 14.

However, here is a precaution: "When you enter the organization life, you are entering a stream that has been flowing for a long while before you arrived and will continue after you have gone. This is significant and should be respected."⁷ This means that the initiation of change in the organization should be done prudently, selectively and as naturally as possible. Sun Zi, very much influenced by the Daoist School, has this to say in Chapter 6:

Military tactics are like unto water; for water in its natural course runs away from high places and hastens downward... Water shapes its course according to the nature of the ground over which it flows; the soldier works out his victory in relation to the foe whom he is facing.⁸

The following are some steps to be taken in order to win people in leadership employing Sun Zi's *Art of War* as well as Sun Pin's⁹ *Art of Warfare*.

Define Victory and Aim for It!

The first logical step in engaging in a war or battle is to ascertain what victory is. This should be made clear from the very start, lest everything else will be rendered futile. The definition of victory will ensure the accurate measure for the success or failure of any subsequent exercise. Temporally it comes at the end, but intentionally it is at the beginning. After all, it is the primary determinate of strategy. "No matter how victory is defined, every successful organization must attain it. Leaders are responsible for defining what victory means, focusing the intention of the organization on it, and shepherding their followers in the quest to attain it."¹⁰ Once victory is defined, the leader should never make any

⁷ Stanley M. Herman. *The Tao at Work* (San Francisco, 1994), p. 19.

⁸ James Clavell, Trans. *The Art of War: Sun Tzu* (New York, 1983), p. 29.

⁹ Sun Pin is a descendant and follower of Sun Zi. He also wrote his own *Art of Warfare*, which was undeniably inspired by the founder of the Bing Jia. His writings serve as corollary to that of Sun Zi.

¹⁰ Theodore Kinni and Donna Kinni. *No Substitute for Victory* (New York, 2005), p. 41.

concessions; it becomes the only goal to accomplish in the soonest possible time or else energies will be dissipated.

But in order to enable the new leader to determine what victory is, he should be trusted and left on his own by his superiors. The principle of laissez-faire should be honored. There should be a certain sense of independence and freedom with bureaucracy minimized. Sun Pin wrote: "A commander who obtains the ruler's sole authority will be victorious."¹¹ Sun Zi wrote in Chapter 3:

He whose generals are able and not interfered with by the sovereign will be victorious... Now in war there may be one hundred changes in each step. When one sees he can, he advances; when he sees that things are difficult, he retires. To say that a general must await commands of the sovereign in such circumstances is like informing a superior that you wish to put out a fire. Before the order to do so arrives the ashes are cold. And it is said one must consult the Army Supervisor in these matters! This is as if in building a house beside the road one took advice from those who pass by. Of course the work would never be completed!¹²

Now, following the ideals of Sun Zi's *Art of War*, victory in an interpersonal conflict between the leader and the members may be specified as winning over to the leaders' side those who are originally dissident. This implies changing their attitude and converting them into faithful followers. It is probable that Sun Zi would discourage the elimination or dismissal of disgruntled members. He would not be after their personal destruction, for as much as possible, victory should be won with everything being taken intact, so that there will be something to build upon after the conflict. This will in turn be beneficial to both parties. The dissident members are after all a part of the whole and have something to contribute to the common good. Apparently, they may be trouble makers, but their loss leaves a vacuum in the organization which may never be refilled. One member affects many other members' lives, including the leader himself.

¹¹ Ralph D. Sawyer, Trans. *The Complete Art of War: Sun Zi and Sun Pin* (Oxford, 1996) p. 158.

¹² Samuel B. Griffith, Trans. *Sun Tzu: The Art of War* (Oxford, 1971), p. 83.

In a nutshell, *rather than fighting with enemies, it is better to transform them into friends*. This is the greatest triumph because it engenders unity and harmony in the community. The conflict is removed and its impact is neutralized. In Chapter 3, Sun Zi says:

Generally, in war the best thing of all is to take the enemy's state whole and intact; to ruin it is inferior to this. To capture the enemy's entire army is better than to destroy it; to take intact a battalion, a company, or a five-man squad is better than to destroy them. Hence, to win one hundred victories in one hundred battles is not the acme of skill. To subdue the enemy without fighting is the supreme excellence.¹³

Sun Pin corroborates this by stating: "Victory in warfare is the means by which to preserve vanquished states and continue severed generations."¹⁴ In the *Art of War*, assaulting the enemies is only the last resort, and is not even the most preferable way to victory. True victory is making peace with enemies before any full scale war escalates and goes beyond control. It is winning over people to one's side by being humane!

Know Yourself and Be Well Prepared

After setting victory as the sole objective, the new leader's first response to conflict with members should be to know oneself. Before anything else, a leader is a person. Hypothetically, the way a person sees himself may ultimately be reflected in the way he relates with other people. And the manner a person projects his image in public may eventually influence other people's response to his persona and office. A confident and dignified bearing will command respect, while a sloppy and unsure stance will encourage ridicule. In Chapter 3 of the *Art of War*, Sun Zi asserted that one should not fear the result of a hundred battles if there is sufficient self knowledge.¹⁵

¹³ Gerald Michaelson, Trans. *Sun Tzu for Success* (Avon, 2003), p. 9.

¹⁴ Ralph D. Sawyer, p. 140.

¹⁵ Lionel Giles, pp. 24-25.

Therefore, it is good to ask what kind of personality and character type one has. Psychologists speak of the sanguine, the choleric, the melancholic and the phlegmatic types, while New Age literature introduces the enneagram. Harris Lee affirms that some people are interested in affiliation, some in achievement, and some in power. The differences in orientation can be the source of conflict because the values and goals of each are different.¹⁶ For example, a goal-oriented leader may overlook the painful process members are undergoing, thus creating a negative repercussion. If it is detected from the outset, the leader can make necessary adjustments and will become more popular and effective.

Indeed most new leaders lack self-confidence, and whatever is internal is manifested externally. But this should not always be the case. In Chapter 1, Sun Zi declared: "All warfare is based on deception. Therefore, when capable, feign incapacity; when active, inactivity. When near, make it appear that you are far away; when far away, that you are near."¹⁷ The statement can be inverted to serve our purpose: when incapable, feign capacity, when inactive, activity.

What is being called into attention is that the new leader should never show his vulnerabilities. His weaknesses, fears and uncertainties should be kept from his subordinates as much as possible, for these may cost him their trust and morale. Never should he give the signal of being unprepared. In one word, he should attain formlessness by keeping his thoughts to himself. He should also instill in their minds his assured leadership. This will in turn discourage some members from taking advantage of the ongoing transition. Thereby, trouble is given a nip in the bud.

However, merely projecting a strong front is not enough for deception can somehow be detected. A leader's strength has to be actualized. And the inerrant way to do this is through careful preparations. After all, good leaders are not born, they are made.

¹⁶ Harris W. Lee, p. 159.

¹⁷ Samuel B. Griffith, p. 66.

The general who wins a battle makes many calculations in his temple before the battle is fought. The general who loses a battle makes but few calculations beforehand. Thus do many calculations lead to victory, and few calculations to defeat; how much more no calculation at all!¹⁸

When someone whose wisdom is inadequate commands the army it is conceit.... To ensure the security of a state of ten thousand chariots... and to preserve the lives of the people of a state of ten thousand chariots, only a general who knows the Tao is capable.¹⁹

Therefore it is advisable for the new leader to undergo a leadership training program before assuming office. This will give him the much needed confidence. It is also recommendable for the new leader to consult superiors as well as the outgoing leader to know not just the scope and limitations of his functions but also the probable challenges.

Know Your Subordinates and Treat Them Accordingly

After knowing oneself, the next task of the leader is to become familiar with his subordinates. This is even a more daunting task to do because a community is composed of numerous characters, and the manner of relating should vary with each unique personality. Even if there is distributive justice and equality for all within the group, there can be no uniformity in terms of correspondence because every member has his respective needs. And the new leader should be sensitive to this, otherwise there will be mismanagement and he may lose his ascendancy because of unrest. Knowing the different personality types will facilitate in the unification of the community, not knowing it will divide it. In Chapter 10, Sun Zi expressed:

When the general is incompetent and has little authority, when his troops are mismanaged, when the relationship between the officers and men is strained, and when the

¹⁸ James Clavell, p. 11.

¹⁹ Ralph D. Sawyer, p. 166.

troop formations are slovenly, the result is disorganization... If a general regards his men as infants, then they will march with him into the deepest valleys. He treats them as his own beloved sons and they will stand by him unto death.²⁰

In handling people, it is valuable to have rapport and chemistry with them. This is usually achieved by empathizing and being concerned with their everyday needs. Mao Zedong, Eva Peron, John Paul II and even Jesus had this in common. There is something flattering in a leader having genuine interests in the welfare of his members, treating them not as lowly subordinates, but as prized associates.

In that case, the new leader should spend some quality time with his men, becoming familiar with them, but not too familiar as to breed contempt. It is reasonable to strike a healthy balance between proximity and distance. In this way, adulation and loyalty is built subconsciously. But no matter how hard one tries, not everyone will be pleased. In every organization, there will always be dissident and resentful members adversarial to the head. In this context, they can be identified as the "enemies." These people pose a real threat to peace and order, because their attitude may cause a ripple effect. There are two ways to deal with them.

One way is to strike their shepherd so that the sheep will scatter. Problem can often be traced to a single strong individual – the stirrer who poisons goodwill. If he is given room to operate, other members will succumb to his influence. The leader should not wait for the trouble to multiply. He should immediately neutralize the person's influence by isolating him from his power base. This appears more humane than eliminating him.²¹ And this is subtly done either by overwhelming his strategies or breaking his alliances.

²⁰ Gerard Michaelson, pp. 31-32.

²¹ Robert Greene. *The 48 Laws of Power* (New York, 1998), pp. 358-364.

Ergo, the new leader should be a keen observer of the trouble-maker's *modus operandi*, meaning to say his strategies. He should be able to perceive patterns and break them without being noticed. This is what is understood as outmaneuvering the enemy in the *Art of War*. Probable strategies of dissident members include harsh criticisms against the administration, spreading rumors and black propaganda, and emotional blackmailing. The means to combat these include making members participative in the administration, holding regular meetings to clear up misconceptions and present facts, doing exactly the opposite of what was preconceived, and the concealment of one's sentiments to prevent from being manipulated. The leader should not let members know what amuses him and what annoys him.

In Chapter 5 Sun Zi speaks of holding out baits and setting up traps to lure the enemy.²² Once the dissident member is caught in a problematic situation, like the commissioning of a public blunder, he is most likely to remain silent and to lose credibility among his peers. Then the new leader should act with lightning swiftness by offering the disgraced help in exchange for his willing cooperation.

Moreover, the "enemies" should be divided and conquered. This may be done by showing a semblance of playing favorites occasionally in order to make them envious of one another, dividing them in the process or by getting close to those they love in order to divide their influence. As a consequence, loyalties will shift. In Chapter 11, Sun Zi writes:

In ancient times those called skilled at battle were able to prevent –
The enemy's van and rear from reaching each other,
The many and the few from relying on each other,
Noble and base from helping each other,
Superior and inferior from coordinating with each other,
Separated troops from regrouping²³

²² James Clavell, p. 23.

²³ *The Art of War: The Denma Translation*, pp. 46-47.

Another way is to learn how to use the “enemy” for purposes unknown to him. For instance, by giving an offer he will not be able to resist. This is confusing and disarming the “enemy” by treating him with benevolence. Taken aback, he is caught unprepared. He is even sheepishly embarrassed. Sun Pin taught: “To have a strategic advantage (*shih*) is to attack the enemy where he is not prepared, and to go by way of places where it would never occur to him you would go... to hit what is at hand (by looking from a distance).”²⁴ If one cannot have a head on collision with the “enemy,” then killing him softly with kindness is the next best alternative! In short, there are two ways of attacking the enemy: directly and indirectly, as expounded in Chapter 5.²⁵

There are times when it is opportune for the leader to assign the troublemaker some ego-inflating tasks to divert his attention and keep him busy, but he should be placed in a position where he cannot create any major problem or damage. As Sun Zi wrote, “To control the situation is... to be able to push the enemy like rolling logs and stones. It is the nature of logs and stones to lie motionless when level, to fall when out of balance, to stop easily when angular and to move easily when round.”²⁶ Therefore, weary the “enemy” by keeping him constantly occupied, and make him rush about by offering him ostensible advantages.”²⁷ This is to be done nonchalantly.

By carrying this out, the leader is provided with a full range of action. He is able to curb and neutralize his adversary leading him on the road to victory without appearing actually vicious and merciless. This is deception at its best!

²⁴ D.C. Lau and Roger T. Ames, Trans. *Sun Pin: The Art of Warfare* (New York: 1993), p. 165.

²⁵ Gerald Michaelson, p. 14.

²⁶ Zi-chang Tang, Trans. *Principles of Conflict: Recompilation and New English Translation with Annotation of Sun Zi's Art of War* (San Rafael, 1969), p. 198.

²⁷ Samuel B. Griffith, p. 114.

Tap Potential Supporters and Learn to Delegate

The new leader is not an isolated figure. He cannot afford to be on his own because the tasks are simply multiple. It is appropriate to focus on the more important affairs of the organization and leave the rest to his assistants. This would mean that he has to establish a harmonious working relationship with a carefully selected group to whom he can delegate other tasks under his supervision. Let them do the legwork and be at the background. If something goes wrong, they are blamed. If everything goes well, the leader gets the credit. So a good leader should be visible but uninvolved, as the Daoist concept of *Pu Shih*²⁸ suggests: *doing everything by not doing anything*. This will give him ample time to brace himself up and address more urgent matters.

But in order to be able to tap potential supporters, he should also make himself at least generally likeable. He will need to have a good publicity. "A sound leader knows too that he ought not call those he leads from too far ahead, nor demand of them abruptly what they find too unfamiliar or uncomfortable to give."²⁹ There are occasions when it is good to let them be. This spontaneity is Tse Ran,³⁰ another Daoist principle implicit in *The Art of War*.

The moment the new leader finds his associates and wins their confidence, he can make them his ubiquitous eyes and ears. He will be able to obtain from them vital information about the movements of the other members of the organization in the course of their meetings, which they may consciously or unconsciously give away, but he "should be capable of keeping his officers and men in ignorance of his plans."³¹ Sun Zi imparts in Chapter 13:

Unless one has profound sagacity and intuition, one will be incapable of using spies. Unless one shows benevolence and justice, one will be incapable of handling them. And one who lacks subtlety of mind and vividness of imagination will be incapable of ascertaining the truth of their reports.

²⁸ R.B. Blakney, Trans. *The Way of Life: Lao Tzu* (New York, 1983), p. 40.

²⁹ Stanley M. Herman, p. 18.

³⁰ R.B. Blakney, p. 40.

³¹ Alfredo P. Co. "Sun Zi's Art of War and His Message of Peace," *Unitas*, vol. 61, no. 3 (1988), p. 381.

Subtlety! Subtlety! Under no circumstances must one omit the use of spies... Hence the enlightened ruler and the capable commander who can make spies out of the most highly intelligent men can be sure of producing a great victory.³²

Once the leader perceives the strategies of the dissident camp, maneuver and attack is more easily executed with nary an effort, ensuring their dispersal and defeat. This success is due to the foreknowledge of the "enemy" situation. "In the land of two-eyed, the third eye gives you the omniscience of a god. You see further than others, and you see deeper into them. Nobody is safe from the eye but you."³³ When nonconformist members feel that they are under surveillance, they will be more discreet but less belligerent, more wary but less unified. The new leader then gains a potent advantage!

Understand the Situation of the Organization and Manage the Environment

The leader can use generic principles in his management, but he cannot simply depend on such. The situation of the organization must also enlighten his strategy. By situation, the writer is referring to previous and current circumstances. He cannot just work in a vacuum. It is judicious to study not just the nature of the organization, its vision-mission, but also the series of events which have transpired and the key players who were involved. It is also intelligent to find out what approaches were effective or ineffective in the past, so that the same mistake will not be repeated. Another relevant question is the model of leadership implemented by the prior administration and the members' dealings with one another. Knowledge of these things will hasten his integration and transition for it will give him insights on how to position himself and direct members from a vantage point of view. Therefore it is unwise to enter the organization with a clean slate of mind.

³² Zi-chang Tang, pp. 228-229.

³³ Robert Greene, p. 105.

"All organizations are part of a larger environment. The organization's capability to operate within that environment is a primary determinant of its success. Leaders are responsible for understanding and maximizing that capability... the environment offered powerful advantages to the leader and organization that could best adapt to it."³⁴ In Sun Zi's terms, this is equivalent to the terrain and ground discussed in Chapters 10 and 11 respectively:

We may distinguish six kinds of terrain: accessible ground, entangling ground, temporizing ground, narrow passes, precipitous heights, positions at a great distance from the enemy.³⁵

The art of war recognizes nine varieties of ground: dispersive ground; facile ground; contentious ground; open ground; ground of intersecting highways; serious ground; difficult ground; hemmed-in ground; desperate ground.³⁶

Sun Pin also has something to contribute to the topic in his *Art of Warfare*:

Master Sun Pin said: Generally, with respect to the course (tao) of the terrain, the yang is the outer surface and the yin is the inner one...³⁷

These six kinds of terrain and nine varieties of ground are not only physical entities having dimensions. They can also metaphorically signify the circumstances prevailing in the organizational set-up and the kinds of interaction that can take place. It can be said that in an organization the kind of terrain is entangling and the variety of ground is dispersive. First of all entangling for once the leader and the members find themselves inside the organization, there is difficulty of freely moving out. Moving out for the leader and member is tantamount either to resignation or termination. There is a slim chance of making a comeback.

³⁴ Theodore Kinni and Donna Kinni, p. 53.

³⁵ James Clavell, p. 50.

³⁶ James Clavell, p. 56.

³⁷ D.C. Law and Roger T. Ames, p. 159.

Secondly the variety of ground is dispersive for the leader is fighting his cause in his own territory. Practically the organization he leads becomes his own turf. Since the members were already there before him, they are able to establish a stronger position. What the leader can do is to transform the environment or situation so that together with him the members will start anew from scratch. Sun Zi implicated that there is no permanent kind of terrain or variety of ground. Everything has to be transitory.

In the final analysis, the new leader occupies the higher ground giving him an advantage over the members. No matter what happens, he will be the superior and the members his inferior. The disciple will always be subordinate to his master just as the employee to his employer. The leader should commit this into memory so that he may act accordingly and not go down into the level of the subordinates. As they say, only the one who acts like a king will be treated as one. The leader who understands this will emerge as the likely winner who will be able to survive this particular personal conflict!

Conclusion

As a conclusion, in the art of strategy, there are no fixed rules; there can only be variations. Flexibility is very much called for because the outcome of events can exhibit unpredictability. This is the probable reason why Sun Zi presented many varieties and alternatives. Furthermore, success really depends on the composure and ingenuity of the new leader. Victory and triumph also has its limits. Therefore, it is good not to overdo and to know when and where to stop. Too much aggression may cause leaders to win the battle, but to lose the war.

Thus new leaders should be instructed on how to win people adapting the centuries old wisdom of Sun Zi in this postmodern world, very different from the China of old. Sun Zi's teachings remain relevant and practical as they were on the day he imparted them. No wonder his *Art of War* has become a perennial classic to be read and reread by every generation. □