BUSINESS & STRATEGY

The Art of War

by Sun Tzu

An ancient general's short rules for winning any contest - the finest win needs no fight at all.

BEST POINTS FROM THE BOOK

01 **Before any contest, score it on five constant factors: shared purpose, timing, ground, leadership, and discipline.**

Chapter 1 ('Laying Plans') says the general who makes many calculations before the battle wins it. Most outcomes are settled in this honest audit, before anyone moves.

02 **All warfare is based on deception.**

When able to attack, seem unable; when near, seem far (Ch. 1). Fights are decided as much by what the other side wrongly believes as by force.

03 **The supreme excellence is breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting.**

His ranked order (Ch. 3): balk the enemy's plans first, then prevent his alliances from joining, then fight his army. Besieging a walled city is the worst policy of all.

04 **If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles.**

The full line (Ch. 3) is harder than the famous half: know only one side and your chances are even; know neither 'and you will succumb in every battle.'

05 **First put yourself beyond the possibility of defeat. Then wait for the enemy's mistake.**

Securing yourself lies in your own hands; the chance to win is provided by the enemy (Ch. 4). The victorious strategist seeks battle only after the victory is already won.

06 **Avoid what is strong, strike at what is weak - and keep no fixed form.**

Water shapes its course by the ground and rushes to the low places (Ch. 6). Just as water retains no constant shape, in warfare there are no constant conditions.

07 **Impose your will on the enemy. Never let him impose his on you.**

Appear at points he must hasten to defend; march swiftly to places where you are not expected (Ch. 6). An enemy who must prepare in every place is weak in every place.

08 **No country has ever benefited from prolonged warfare.**

A field army costs a thousand ounces of silver a day (Ch. 2), so win quickly and feed on the enemy's stores: one cartload of his provisions is worth twenty of your own.

09 **Never fight out of anger, pride, or spite.**

Chapter 12 ends the fire chapter on this: anger may turn back to gladness, but 'a kingdom that has once been destroyed can never come again into being.' Move only when there is advantage.

10 **When you surround an enemy, leave an outlet free. Do not press a desperate foe too hard.**

A cornered enemy fights to the death (Ch. 7). Chapter 11 runs the same law in reverse: your own soldiers fight hardest when there is no escape.

11 **Some orders from above must not be obeyed.**

Chapter 8 lists them flatly: certain roads not to follow, armies not to attack, towns not to besiege - and 'commands of the sovereign which must not be obeyed.' The commander on the ground carries the call.

12 **Foreknowledge cannot be drawn from spirits, experience, or calculation. It can only be obtained from people.**

The whole final chapter is spies (Ch. 13): no one in the army should be more liberally rewarded. Real intelligence is the cheapest edge there is.

THE BOOK, IN SHORT

The Art of War is a short ancient Chinese treatise on war: thirteen brief chapters of numbered sayings, traditionally attributed to Sun Wu ('Master Sun,' Sun Tzu), a general said to have served the king of Wu in China some 2,500 years ago. Scholars still debate the man and the date - the traditional placing is the late Spring and Autumn period, roughly the 5th century BCE, and some argue the text took shape later, during the Warring States period. Its standing is not debated: for about 1,500 years it stood at the head of China's Seven Military Classics, and generals, founders, and negotiators still read it.

It opens with calculation. War, says Chapter 1, is 'a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin,' so before any move the general weighs five constant factors - the Moral Law (a purpose ruler and people share), Heaven (seasons, weather, time), Earth (distances and terrain), the Commander, and Method and discipline - and compares his own side against the enemy's, point by point. Most of the famous lines that follow serve that one habit: an honest audit, done in advance.

Its second theme is economy. Moving an army costs a thousand ounces of silver a day and 'there is no instance of a country having benefited from prolonged warfare,' so the supreme skill is the cheap, whole win: balk the enemy's plans, break up his alliances, take his state intact rather than

ruined - and only fight his army when the cheaper doors are shut. Deception, speed, striking weakness instead of strength, and flowing like water around hard points all serve that same economy.

The middle chapters are the working craft: making your position unlosable, mixing the direct and indirect methods without end, manoeuvring, reading terrain, the nine kinds of ground, and the signs an enemy gives off (dust, birds, banners), plus one chapter on attack by fire. Running through them is a psychology of command: refuse the battles the factors condemn, leave a desperate enemy an outlet, refuse orders the ground contradicts, and never let anger move the army - 'a kingdom that has once been destroyed can never come again into being.'

The book ends where it believes wars are really decided: information. Foreknowledge 'cannot be elicited from spirits... It must be obtained from men who know the enemy situation,' so the last chapter lays out five kinds of spies and orders that none in the army be rewarded more liberally. Read straight, this is less a celebration of fighting than a discipline against wasting yourself: know, calculate, position - and spend as little as the contest allows.

DO THIS WEEK

Take one live contest this week - a competitor, a negotiation, a hard project - and run the book's own sequence. First, Chapter 1's audit: score yourself and the other side on the five factors, and write down what you do not know. Second, Chapter 3's question, before you spend anything big: can I balk their plan or unsettle their alliances instead of fighting them head-on? Third, Chapter 13's move: name one person who actually knows the other side's situation, and get that knowledge before you commit.

Traditionally attributed to Sun Tzu (Sun Wu), said to have been a general of the state of Wu in ancient China; the man and the date are debated by scholars - the text is usually placed in the 5th century BCE, and possibly compiled later. This summary follows the classic Lionel Giles translation (1910). Read it if you compete anywhere and would rather win by calculation and position than by force.