

## Managing Project the Sun Tzu's Way (Part I)

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Why would you want to use an ancient Chinese war strategy to manage a project? There at least two, or three, reasons:

1. It gives you a different perspective and angle on how to manage a project
2. If you are going to manage a cross culture project with the Asians, it could help you to translate the communication into their culture and mindset
3. It's fun to bring fantasy to work

Sun Tzu is an ancient Chinese war strategist who is believed to live during the early Han dynasty. In 1972, scholars uncovered a collection of ancient texts written on unusually well-preserved bamboo slips. The text is then known as The Art of War.

In the modern age, this ancient piece has influenced many notable figures. Mao Zedong, the founder of Communist Chinese was one and he even credited his glorious victory over his archenemy Chiang Kai Shek to the Art of War. The Department of the Army in the United States, through its Command and General Staff College, has directed all units to maintain libraries within their respective headquarters for the continuing education of personnel in the art of war. Sun Tzu's The Art of War is listed on the Marine Corps Professional Reading Program. It was also known that during the Gulf War, General Norman Schwarzkopf, Jr. practiced Sun Tzu's strategy to defeat the enemy.

### Laying Plans

***The art of war, then, is governed by five constant factors, to be taken into account in one's deliberations, when seeking to determine the conditions obtaining in the field. These are: (1) The Moral Law; (2) Heaven; (3) Earth; (4) The Commander; (5) Method and discipline.***

The Moral Law: The project team must have proper value, motivation and attitude. The project manager must spell out clearly his expectation of what values he wants his member to subscribe to. Select your team member carefully if you have the choice.

The Heaven: The heaven here talks about the wind, cloud and weather. Be wary of external factors in planning your project. There is a methodology called PEST (Political, Economy, Social and Technology) analysis. These are the factors practically beyond your control. Understand them. Know them well. Prepare for them.

The Earth: This is the battle ground. The terrain, the distance, the narrow pass are all the conditions that the army must face. In project management, this is your internal situation that is within your control to plan. They are, for example, your stakeholders, your customer, and not to forget the Project Scope Management. Plan well.

The Commander: He stands for the virtues of wisdom, sincerity, benevolence, courage and strictness. This is the same expectation for a project manager too.

Method and Discipline: Needless to say the importance of this and of course, *PMBOK® Guide* is the answer to this.

## **Waging War**

***In the operations of war, where there are in the field a thousand swift chariots, as many heavy chariots, and a hundred thousand mail-clad soldiers, with provisions enough to carry them a thousand li (approx. 0.3 mile), the expenditure at home and at the front, including entertainment of guests, small items such as glue and paint, and sums spent on chariots and armor, will reach the total of a thousand ounces of silver per day. Such is the cost of raising an army of 100,000 men.***

Plan the project cost as detail as possible. Break down the cost to most granular level of the WBS. It is amazing that the ancient script advises us to plan for the smallest item such as glue and paint and trivial items like entertainment. We seldom do that, and we pay the price, when the actual project cost is over the budget.

***When you engage in actual fighting, if victory is long in coming, then men's weapons will grow dull and their ardor will be damped. If you lay siege to a town, you will exhaust your strength.***

Some project can take years to finish. If it has been planned that it is indeed a long haul project, be prepared. Watch out for the member's stamina. Plan for breaks in between. Plan for some resource buffer so the members can have planned rest as needful. Watch for other resources too.

When you lay siege to a town, means a project where there is a high degree of uncertainty. Mitigate the risk and plan for worst case if the uncertainty drags too long.

***Thus, though we have heard of stupid haste in war, cleverness has never been seen associated with long delays***

In some cases, it might be smart and practical if a long project is broken into phases and there is a proper project closure in each phase. In the event of a delayed project due to uncertainty, decision should be made to suspend the project.

***Now in order to kill the enemy, our men must be roused to anger; that there may be advantage from defeating the enemy, they must have their rewards***

This is definitely not to advise your project team member to be full of anger or emotionally unstable. This is about a motivation and performance management. Find the "aha" that everybody is willing to die for. Design an open and fair performance measurement and management. Give them their fair share of reward. It's not just a celebration dinner at one of the restaurants, where the team members are actually dying to go home and be with their families, instead of listening to some big-talk from the big

boss who did not even go through the pain of the battle. Give them a holiday treat with their families. Ticket to Disneyland. Shopping vouchers. Think of something nice.

## **Attack by Stratagem**

***Hence to fight and conquer in all your battles is not supreme excellence; supreme excellence consists in breaking the enemy's resistance without fighting***

The essence of the battle is to win it. It is not about destroying or killing people. Moltke's greatest triumph, for example, the capitulation of the huge French army at Sedan, was won practically without bloodshed.

In the project world this principles apply:

- Be very clear about your project goal and objectives. Do not mix the outcome and the means. If you can achieve the outcome, with a better way than the traditional means, go for it. If the objective is to “reduce the response time of service desk function”, be careful that you do not mislead the project team and replace the objectives to “successfully implement the latest cloud service desk system”.
- Avoid losses as much as you can. Find ways to mitigate the risk.

***The general, unable to control his irritation, will launch his men to the assault like swarming ants, with the result that one-third of his men are slain, while the town still remains untaken. Such are the disastrous effects of a siege***

This is the case where a general who lose his focus. Out of frustration and losing his patience, he instructs his army to climb the wall of the city he has been laying siege to.

Be clear about the project main objective. Focus. If the objective is “to reduce response time of service desk”, and half way through you have realized that the technology you have chosen to implement will not be able to achieve the main objective, you may need to take a hard decision to abandon it.

This explains why there are so many projects were completed on time and on budget, but it was never a success story. It was never used in the end. It stays as white elephant; or a tragedy, if you will.

***Therefore the skillful leader subdues the enemy's troops without any fighting; he captures their cities without laying siege to them; he overthrows their kingdom without lengthy operations in the field***

On a practical note, it also means that if we can achieve objectives with as less conflict as possible, it would be good. There is no project without conflict. We spend so much time to get the buy-in, challenge some stakeholders, or confront people. That is reality. The best way, however, is through careful planning and diplomatic approach to the all the stake holders.

***Thus we may know that there are five essentials for victory: (1) He will win who knows when to fight and when not to fight. (2) He will win who knows how to handle both superior and inferior forces (3) He will win whose army is animated by the same spirit throughout all its ranks. (4) He will win who, prepared himself, waits to take the enemy unprepared. (5) He will win who has military capacity and is not interfered with by the sovereign.***

In summary of the above:

- Be clear of your project objective and ensure every single task is planned in the same direction of the goal
- Calculate your resource planning very carefully. If there is no enough commitment of resources, perhaps it may be better not to start the project at all.
- People are the key. Maintain their values, keep the spirit. Reward them fairly.
- Planning is the foundation of preparation
- Project Manager is a key position, and make sure if you are the one, you have enough sponsor and power to make all necessary decision on the ground

***Hence the saying: If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred battles. If you know yourself but not the enemy, for every victory gained you will also suffer a defeat. If you know neither the enemy nor yourself, you will succumb in every battle.***

I suppose, this is quite straightforward, right?