

THE ART OF WAR: STRATEGIC PLANNING REVISITED

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Sun Tzu is the military strategist believed to have authored *The Art of War*. This book is long considered a masterpiece on strategy and has been translated in many languages, interpreted through many other authors, and applied into many disciplines. The business management sector is no exception, and you can find the *The Art of War for Managers* in any local bookstore.

There is little doubt that *The Art of War* is a difficult read. It is based in Taoist theory, and the translation from Chinese to English provides a rudimentary sentence structure for the principles he writes about. The interesting piece about this book is that a military strategist from the 2nd century BC adeptly identifies the same components that the ABA (American Bar Association) writes about in their guide, ["Lawyer's Guide to Strategic Planning."](#) Who would have thought such a correlation would exist?

I've been in the legal community long enough to know that it feels like there is significant art in navigating any planning with partners! There are 13 chapters in Sun Tzu's work, and I've succinctly "translated" 8 of them into the language of law firms:

I. LAYING PLANS

"The art of war is vital to the state. It is a matter of life and death. The Commander stands for virtues of wisdom, sincerely, benevolence, courage and strictness."

This one is easy - "the art of strategic planning is vital to the law firm." It is a matter of success. The Executive committee, managing partner, administrator and others who are in charge represent the virtues of the organization, hopefully including some of the ones Tzu has identified. Strategic plans, whether formalized and written down, or verbalized in a haphazard way, have a direct correlation to the economic success of your firm. How much time do you attend to yours?

II. WAGING WAR

"It is only those thoroughly acquainted with the evils of war that can thoroughly understand the profitable way of carrying it on."

Surprisingly, not so tough - "understanding the downside of having no strategic plan will give you a grasp on how to create, update, and implement this plan so you are profitable." The various elements of a strategic plan come quickly when you fail to have them. Unfortunately, often that failure is a great learning, coming at a great price. Once you adopt a solid plan, review it annually, make it alive in your firm by referring to it in dialogue with other decision-makers, and update it to maintain a current document with 3-5 years down the road laid out.

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- SUN TZU -

III. ATTACK BY STRATAGEM

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

Again, translation isn't too difficult - "in your strategic plan consider compromise for the greater good." Knowing that your role is part facilitator, part designer, and part visionary - focus your strategic planning discussions on the highest good for all. Examining practice groups that aren't profitable is difficult at best, and considering how to create flexibility for those attorneys to move to another area of law, or another facet of their client base will maintain good relationships in the firm, and move the firm toward profitability in this problem area.

IV. TACTICAL DISPOSITIONS

"One may know how to conquer without being able to do it. The general who is skilled in defense hides in the most secret recesses of the earth; he who is skilled in attack flashes forth from the topmost heights of heaven. Thus, on one hand we have ability to protect ourselves; on the other, a victory that is complete."

We're on a roll - this one's simple too - "In your strategic plan be sure to include all the components for success." This means there is a place for finders, minders, and grinders in the distribution of work. This means there is a place for your expertise in running the firm, and the rainmaker's expertise in building the business. This means there is great importance in including the various practice areas and skill sets so that you are not defeated when one area hits a slump - and we all know firms that have fallen because their "defenses" weren't skilled.

V. ENERGY

"Fighting with a large army under your command is nowise different from fighting with a small one: it is merely a question of instituting signs and signals."

Sounds like - "No matter what your firm size, strategic planning is critical. It is merely a difference of complexity in communicating the plan so there is synchronicity throughout the firm." An important component of any strategic plan is spreading the word. This is one time when there is no advantage to withholding the information! All the members of your firm are invested in the profitability and success - it's their livelihood! A component of your strategic plan is a communication strategy to roll out the pertinent details to the right individuals.

VI. Weak Points and Strong

"Whoever is first in the first and awaits the coming of the enemy, will be fresh for the fight; whoever is second in the field and has to hasten to battle will arrive exhausted."

In one easy expression - "competitive advantage." When you are operating from a strategic plan, you are leading the way to the field of opportunities in the marketplace. Your structure and process - to develop new clients, new work teams, new employees, etc. - provides you the energy to be on the forefront of challenges. You are prepared for the future, and are nimble in addressing 'what's next' on a regular basis.

VII. Maneuvering

"Maneuvering with an army is advantageous; with an undisciplined multitude, most dangerous."

Another chapter with a basic tenet - "leadership." When we operate from a strategic plan that has been disseminated among our employees, we all set out in our daily tasks with the end goal in mind. Having direction and understanding as a universal tool removes the undermining and sabotage that can otherwise

exist. Take the leadership role in your process, and be sure to include all the owners in the development of your strategic plan. You want to create your “army” for advantageous gains.

VIII. Variation in Tactics

“When in difficult country, do not encamp. In country where high roads intersect, join hands with your allies. Do not linger in dangerously isolated positions. In hemmed in situations, you must resort to stratagem. In desperate position, you must fight.”

In other words, “Be flexible in your planning; know what the terrain is in your firm such that you have the courage to speak up during the strategic planning process.” The other message here is to not be reckless in your planning. Preparing a document for the sake of doing so isn’t the true meaning of being strategic. Thoughtful and measured discussions lead to complete and functional plans.

The exact structure of your strategic plan might be very different than the plan Sun Tzu laid out for his troops. Then again, it may be the same. Strategic planning has several key components, as we just identified, and without considering all of them you will have a weakness in your plan.

For more information and further reading on Strategic Planning, visit our [online library](#).



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Judy understands teams. And she knows how to help you maximize the potential of yours. For over two decades, Judy has applied her vast knowledge of team dynamics, emotional intelligence, work/life balance, leadership, finance, and legal management to help law firms improve their people, process, performance and, ultimately, profits.

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