



SUN TZU: THE BEST LEADERSHIP TEACHER OF ALL TIME? There's a reason he's still in print after 2,500 years.

Sir Robert Fry - 07.27.10

Thirty years ago, as a junior military officer, I picked up a copy of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War*. I was a young man then, and I realized that to succeed I would need to develop my intellect, to have a proper, fully rounded education. Or at least I'd need something more complex than banging out a ton of smoke and then going straight up the middle, as we used to say. There was nothing particularly mystical or exciting about the purchase. I bought it at an ordinary college town bookstore.


It has proved tremendously useful to me throughout my career. The basic principle that Sun Tzu returns to again and again is that to win victory you must know your enemy and know yourself. That principle served me well in the military in all the theaters I was ever deployed in, from Northern Ireland to Afghanistan. Of course a book on military strategy would be useful to a military man, but how useful can it be to a businessman? What can a 2,500-year-old text, heavy on the descriptions of chariots and mercenaries and cloaked in Confucian mysticism, tell us about the modern business environment? Why pick Sun Tzu over all his more modern competitors? Indeed, he isn't perfect. He's a man who likes his complete, detailed, prescriptive lists, and his quasi-mystical aphorisms can leave a modern reader scratching his head. Still, the book has its advantages over other great works of military advice. For a start, it's only about 50 pages long, so it's an exceptionally quick read for a work of its stature. And though it does occasionally lapse into chariots and banners and gold coins, all of the similar works (Jomini, Mahan, Clausewitz, Liddell-Hart) are equally bound up in the military conventions of their time.

One of the reasons I love Sun Tzu is the clear wisdom at work in the book, the clarity of thought running throughout it. It offers a unique view of the world that transcends its original military focus as it discusses the notions of appropriate use of resources, of "measuring, estimating, counting, comparing and gauging" both your own strength and that of the "enemy"—indeed, the idea of classifying knowledge itself as a precious resource. Those are all ideas that are immediately applicable today.

Ultimately, Sun Tzu was writing about how to engage a sentient opponent and come out on top. About avoiding a draining, attritional conflict and finding another way to win. About looking at your competitor and saying, "Where am I stronger?" And of course also saying, even though it hurts, "Where is he stronger?," and accepting that answer. That's all useful in business. Business isn't the same as warfare. Usually no one dies, for a start. But sometimes, when the crucial deal goes wrong, it can feel like war—especially considering soldiers spend a great deal of their time training and very little fighting, whereas people in business, especially in the modern globalized world, usually do battle, with major assets in play, 365 days a year. So, there's more to Sun Tzu than slavishly applying his aphorisms to a business environment. If it were that easy, we'd all be millionaires. Indeed, if a copy of Sun Tzu guaranteed success in all things, war itself would be a sight easier, too.

Sun Tzu wrote about a world emerging from a series of strategic shocks, including the death of Confucius and the crumbling of the Chinese empire into a succession of warring kingdoms. It was the kind of time that enables revolutionary thinkers and leaders to fundamentally change the way the world works. Thus he wrote, "Being victorious a hundred times in a hundred battles is not the most excellent approach. Causing the enemy to submit without battle is the most excellent approach." In saying that, he was redefining the whole concept of





warfare. We currently live in a similarly changed world, after those strategic shocks of the last decade: Sept. 11, the financial crisis and—as I believe we will come to realize—the Deepwater Horizon disaster. At times like this, it serves us all well to go back, look at old certainties and find what in them is still true.

So my advice is to pop into your local bookshop, buy a copy of *The Art of War* and have a flip through. Read it, and think about whether you "know yourself and know your enemy." It's certainly a habit that has lasted me a lifetime.

