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THE ART OF WAR

SUN TZU

EXECUTIVE BOOK SUMMARY

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### BACKGROUND

Written somewhere in the 6th century B.C.E. (Before Common Era), Sun Tzu's *Art Of War* is considered to be one of the greatest war strategy books in the world. Since its writing, many have adapted Tzu's teachings on war for use in politics, business, and everyday life. Renowned for his ability to win battles, Sun Tzu imparts great wisdom in his book highlighting key leadership philosophies that center around the use of psychology rather than force. The parallels between war and business make this famed classic a staple for drawing crucial leadership qualities from.

This executive summary will draw those parallels, highlighting key takeaways from Sun Tzu's **The Art of War** for managers and leaders alike.



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Tzu states that **every war is fought to obtain something** and this can certainly be said of any process in life, whether it be an individual or a team of people who desire to achieve that specific goal. In this light, the term 'war' should be thought of as 'the pursuit of any goal' while the term 'army' represents the individual or team working towards something.

According to Tzu, the outcome of a war is governed by five constant factors:



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### “THE MORAL LAW”

Morals, or ethics in leadership creates team unity and causes followers to be in complete harmony with their leaders. When a leader acts in an ethical way, displaying fairness in all dealings with others and caring for their followers, then the followers will reciprocate, caring in return even to the point of great sacrifice. Love begets love. In business, a “perform-or-perish”, “hire-and-fire” attitude might seem like the fastest and most straightforward approach to achieving performance but it does not lead to loyal followers. If a leader clearly cares about their people then they will care for their leader and their team in return. Leadership begets followership.



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## “HEAVEN”

Tzu uses “heaven” to describe elements such as rain, sun, wind, calm, darkness and light; things that one cannot control but are a part of our universe. As the world is made up of opposing forces we cannot control, it is important as a leader to see and understand how these affect the trajectory of our team. What are the impacts of the conditions we are facing or might face in the near future? This contrast principle is important to consider in leadership because just as successful as one may be, so may failure become a part of our journey. Preparation, acceptance, and learning are all opportunities that come from the duality of opposites.

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## “EARTH”

As war is fought on the surface of the earth, Tzu draws our attention to the physical attributes of our world that can have an impact on us and our team. These factors range in nature from technology to geography, health, and physical space. An effective leader is aware of physical forces that shape and affect our battles, and accounts for them. This three-dimensional metaphor for our physical surroundings has great significance for leaders in all contexts.



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## “THE COMMANDER”

A commander, as leader of his army, must have the following traits:

### **Wisdom**

To know oneself and one’s abilities, and not to constantly seek to impress others with one’s own wisdom but to speak with only the words that are necessary.

### **Sincerity**

To be sincere is not to reveal all of one’s secrets; it is to be truthful with what one does say.

### **Benevolence**

Kindness does not imply weakness but rather, acting in the best interests of others in the long run, rather than for short-term gain.

### **Courage**

To be brave is not to be reckless; it is to dispose of useless fear or hesitation and know when to take advantage of critical moments.

### **Strictness**

To be strict is not to be cruel; it is to ensure that a leader’s instructions are followed precisely, and that the leader’s words are treated with respect, and the organization functions effectively.

Tzu states that those who are deficient in these virtues are not necessarily guaranteed to fail however, they make the implementation of their strategies and achievement of their goals more difficult by sowing doubt and dissent amongst their team members.

It is also important for leaders to separate war from peace (business and friendship) and never conflate the two.

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## 5 “METHOD & DISCIPLINE”

Tzu uses method and discipline to refer to the detail-oriented aspects of leadership. How many troops are there? Where are they? What are they doing and when? And how much money is required? In other words, organization. Especially the larger a team gets, it is important that each person knows where they should be and what they should be doing. In business or in life, sloppy organization is very costly and leads to a lack of clear direction. Team members should know their roles and what their goals are. Finances must also be in good order because at the end of the day, poor financial strategy can be the demise of any team.



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### Standout Quotes

AND APPLICATIONS FOR LEADERS

#### **“He who knows when he can fight and when he cannot will be victorious”**

Leaders must know themselves and what they are capable of and when. They must also be open to receiving feedback from others, from themselves and from their surroundings about potential downfalls, challenges, or weaknesses that could impair their leadership and adjust their plans.

#### **“Victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war and then seek to win.”**

Good leaders do not make critical actions without thinking and planning them through. This quote highlights the importance of vision and planning and that failing to plan, is, as the adage goes, ‘planning to fail’ before we have even begun. Seeking to win is not enough. Planning to win or to achieve a goal is where success lies.

#### **“The supreme art of war is to subdue the enemy without fighting”**

True leadership lies in the ability to garner consensus, support and success in one’s goals without conflict. Tzu here highlights the ultimate skill of leadership which is to gain achievement through mutual respect.

#### **“Move only if there is a real advantage to be gained”**

Ineffective leaders often make the mistake of concerning themselves with busy work, while effective leaders are thoughtful and deliberate in their actions which are tied to a specific goal which they can see a clear and worthwhile advantage in pursuing.

#### **“If you know the enemy and you know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles.”**

Understanding the challenges of the road ahead, including ours and other’s weaknesses, prepares us to circumvent these potential roadblocks and therefore bypass undue hesitation or fear.

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## KEY THEMES

FOR LEADERS

**STRATEGY** is more than simply clever process planning. Tzu repeatedly highlights the importance of a complex hierarchal understanding of all the moving parts of an army (or team) and the road to victory. Physical and virtual elements, personal abilities, vulnerabilities, potential challenges, and how each interact with each other along the spectrum of time must all be thought of as a leader.

**CHARACTER** is of the utmost importance in leadership. It is according to Tzu, what makes the difference between a follower who will go to the ends of the earth for you vs one who will cause dissent. Our team members are our family and they must know it.

**THOUGHT** is at the heart of Tzu's teachings. It is the basis upon which all other elements of leadership lie. It is the first line of action in any situation and should be the focus of a leader's arsenal – to think, consider, plan and organize in one's own mind first, before carrying out any action in the physical, tangible world.

**ENERGY** is thought of as a valuable resource by Tzu. Ineffective leaders waste the energy of themselves and their team while effective leaders treat energy as money and not something to be wasted. A good leader wants to see their energy and the energies of their members used only when needed and in the most prudent of manners towards achieving specific goals.

**VISION** is ultimately the overarching principle that governs how a leader plans and strategizes. The final result or goal (regardless of size) must be firmly established in a leader's head and communicated with his team to achieve harmony, motivation and true followership.



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