

The Art of War Summary

By Sun Tzu

'The first rule of Fight Club is that you don't talk about Fight Club.' In much the same way the first rule of *The Art of War* is that you don't talk about it. Sun Tzu advises, 'Let your plans be dark and impenetrable as night, and when you move, fall like a thunderbolt.'

The Art of War has achieved mass cult status across a range of disciplines, and has become one of the most influential texts on military strategy. Despite its age, *The Art of War* is as relevant today, as when it was written over two thousand years ago.

The book juxtaposes two conflicting ideals: art, and war. On the one hand, you have creation, and on the other, you have destruction. However, Sun Tzu argues throughout his treatise that warfare is most successful when you achieve victory without any fighting. Throughout, he provides subtle and nuanced strategies to gain the upper hand, sometimes without your opponent even knowing about it. This takes us back to making our plans "dark and impenetrable."

Sun Tzu is attributed with writing this ancient treatise in about the 5th century BC. It's become a military, strategic and tactical classic, and has had a considerable influence on thinking in both the East and the West. At the very least, a superficial reading of *The Art of War* will give one a vast insight into the Chinese military and intelligence operations. If you level this up, one can begin to relate these insights to modern warfare and become more informed on historical and contemporary global conflicts. However, at it's best, *The Art of War* is a metaphor for every situation that you encounter that contains any element of conflict.

This summary will briefly take you through the core ideas from the thirteen chapters, and reveal that the art of war isn't about aggression, but about being a master of knowledge.

Knowledge Is Power

The decision to go to war should never be taken lightly, because it comes at a substantial social and economic cost. Fighting and conflict are costly and time-consuming, and the advice is only to proceed if it's absolutely essential. Sun Tzu advocates for non-violent strategies wherever possible, because war can completely destroy a country and leave its people in ruin. Therefore, only wage war if you're confident that you're prepared, and try to end the conflict as quickly as possible.

However, if one must proceed with war, one needs to do a series of calculations based on Moral Law, Heaven, Earth, The Commander, and finally Method and Discipline.

If everyone has the same moral code, we will follow a cause because we believe in it. At an extreme end, one can see this in militant groups such

as ISIS and Boko Haram. If we don't believe in what we're fighting for, or the project we're working on, there will be no motivation to put ourselves at risk. Heaven relates to factors such as night and day and the seasons; for example, many battles have been lost because of insufficient knowledge of extreme weather conditions. Earth accounts for the terrain on which you're fighting, and in contemporary times this can be extended to the Internet and digital space. The Commander is the person who upholds the values of the fight, and provides wisdom and guidance to everyone beneath them. If leadership is weak or ineffectual, then failure is imminent. Finally, discipline and method mean that everyone knows their role, and works for the entire team's benefit.

Once we've understood the five factors, we need to ask questions and do a set of calculations to determine our battle outcome. Begin by asking which side has more invested in their moral law? For example, if we look at a typical sporting scenario, we're often shown a coach motivating his team by telling them what they have to lose and gain by winning the game. Usually, the hungriest team, and the team with a greater sense of moral law, will end up victorious.

Which side has the better leader? Which side has more favorable conditions in terms of weather and terrain? Again if we look at a sporting event, the home advantage has a significant impact on giving one side the upper hand. Which side is more disciplined and more assertive? And finally, which side is better trained and consistent? Understanding the answers to these questions is pivotal in forecasting success or failure.

Moreover, Sun Tzu says that 'all warfare is based on deception.' The famous World War II adage, 'careless talk costs lives,' applies here, because knowledge is power. The idea is to seem unprepared, pretend to be in a state of chaos, and ill-disciplined. Irritate your opponents, and in

doing so, find out where their weaknesses are. Appear to be resting when you're training, and never let on that you're in a state of constant preparedness.

If you think back to arguments you've lost, deals you've not quite nailed down, interviews you've floundered in, or even games you've lost, how often has this been because you've been ill-prepared? Knowing yourself, knowing your opponent, and honestly and critically evaluating yourself and others is the first step to winning.

Know Your Enemy

One of the most iconic messages from the book, is to know your enemy. Sun Tzu explains, '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.'

Take for example the story of Mark Zuckerberg, Evan Spiegel, and Bobby Murphy. Mark Zuckerberg flew to L.A. to offer Spiegel and Murphy \$3 Billion to purchase Snapchat. Spiegel and Murphy refused, and Zuckerberg pressed them for information. The story goes that Zuckerberg announced that he would be debuting a similar platform called Poke, and intimated that the weight of Facebook would crush them. Spiegel and Murphy didn't back down and stood their ground. Once Zuckerberg left, Spiegel purchased a copy of *The Art of War* for everyone in his office. Snapchat remains a billion-dollar company that appears to have embraced knowing one's enemy, and always being prepared.

Knowing your enemy is also about how to defeat them without destroying the thing that you're fighting over. Frequently winning comes at a high cost, and it's better to recapture than to destroy. So choose your battles wisely.

Know Your Battles

Have you heard the old proverb, 'softly softly catchee monkey?'

Battle and warfare are about waiting patiently for opportunities to arise. Often, we win because our opponent makes a mistake, so the idea is to defend until opportunity strikes. Sun Tzu says, 'security against defeat implies defensive tactics; ability to defeat the enemy means taking the offensive.' What's more, avoid the enemy's strengths, and look for their weaknesses instead.

The problem with these strategies is that they take a tremendous amount of energy and patience. Furthermore, mounting an attack takes a vast amount of strength, discipline, and energy. The lesson here is that winning results from making the least number of mistakes, and capitalizing on our opponents' errors. Ultimately it all comes down to building momentum, and developing creative strategies. Combining a range of strategies is paramount to victory, and here a good leader will be able to tailor ideas to specific scenarios.

One also needs to be aware of who has the upper hand at any given moment. For example, those waiting for the enemy, who are perhaps on home turf, are prepared and better positioned than those arriving at the battle site. That's not to say that you can't win if you're not immediately in control of the battle site, but rather that you need to be able to

maneuver, adapt, and strategize.

Know Your Faults

Knowing your faults and weaknesses will allow you to vary and modify your tactics. One of the critical pieces of wisdom here is that, 'the general who thoroughly understands the advantages that accompany variation of tactics, knows how to handle his troops.' Being prepared for war means being in a permanent state of readiness, and always having a series of plans to preempt an attack.

How often have you seen people lose things because of complacency? And, how often have you seen victory snatched from the jaws of defeat? Knowing your weaknesses, and being prepared for disaster, means that you'll always have a way to face catastrophes.

A good leader knows their weaknesses. According to Sun Tzu, there are five typical faults that leaders, or in this case, generals, display. These are recklessness, cowardice, being ill-tempered, being sensitive about their honor, and being too caring, which causes undue worry and concern. So next time you react to a situation, think about which of these attributes you're exhibiting.

Know Your Terrain

You can't go into battle if you don't know where you're fighting. If we look at the classic example of The Vietnam War, this illustrates just how vital terrain can be. Not only did the Viet Cong have home advantage as it were, but they had extensive knowledge of how to use their surroundings to their benefit. Guerilla warfare also allowed them to merge into their

surroundings and become invisible to the enemy. Furthermore, by controlling the Ho Chi Minh Trail, they could control military supplies and personnel's movement.

Having extensive knowledge about our environment allows us to act on the element of surprise, set up ambushes and traps, and strike when our enemies are complacent or caught off guard. Sun Tzu explains, 'when the enemy is close at hand and remains quiet, he is relying on the natural strength of his position.'

However, when your enemy is visible, look at their body language because what they're not saying is important. For example, if you see an enemy approach a water source and drink thirstily, the enemy camp may be short of water, or a long way from a stable water source. Furthermore, keep an eye out for insubordination and collapse, by observing how your enemies interact with each other. A well-disciplined and well-led army act in unison, and demonstrates no sign of discord.

The advice is to treat your soldiers, workers, and so on, like your children. Sun Tzu explains that if you do this, they will follow you unquestioningly. However, if you treat them as your sons, they will stick with you until death. On the other hand, if you're an overindulgent leader, your soldiers will act like spoilt children, and they will feel entitled and not fulfill any sense of purpose.

Being aware of the battle terrain and weather patterns is absolutely pivotal. Sun Tzu explains that 'if you know the enemy and know yourself, your victory will not stand in doubt; if you know Heaven, and know Earth, you may make your victory complete.'

Knowledge Is People

Knowledge is power, but having foreknowledge is even more powerful. So, how does one set about learning information quicker than anyone else? For those familiar with *Game of Thrones*, you'll know how Little Finger got his edge. He set up a vast network of trusted spies, and therefore had the superpower of foreknowledge, and could manipulate his enemies.

The only way to obtain this type of knowledge is to use spies, and here Sun Tzu differentiates between local spies, inward spies, converted spies, doomed spies, and surviving spies. When one has a well-coordinated network of spies, this is referred to as a "divine manipulation of the threads." And one should never underestimate its power.

During World War II, the divine manipulation of the threads was commonplace. Did you know that the famous children's author Roald Dahl was a spy during the war? Dahl was sent to Washington D.C. after being injured and was asked to feed information heard at prominent social events, back to British Security Coordination.

Coordinating spies and embarking on espionage requires great subtlety. It's also worth remembering that the other side may also use spies. In which case, the advice is to coax them out of hiding with bribes so that they will be converted.

In Conclusion

Sun Tzu says that there are five ways to reach victory. The first is

knowing when to fight and when not to fight. The second is that winning means understanding both inferior and superior forces. The third thing to remember is that the winning army will have a sense of purpose and a universal moral law to guide them. The fourth aspect is acting on the element of surprise and attacking when it's least expected. And finally, you'll win if you're guided by your unit, and not by exterior forces such as the sovereign.

Victory evolves, and once you achieve it, you need to keep how you reached it secret. Furthermore, you need to keep the enemy guessing because you'll never win the same way twice.

In a world heavily guided by social media and the Internet, it's worth taking a leaf out of Sun Tzu's book, and focusing on the power of invisibility, unpredictability, surprise, and patience. Furthermore, winning relies on everyone agreeing on the same ethos or belief system, and being committed to going to war for it. So before you go to war, make sure your team is invested in the same endgame.

Most importantly, if you want to know your enemy, and have the upper hand, don't tell them that you've read *The Art of War*.