

Book Review ‘Sun Tzu’s Art of War: War at Work’ (Malay Version)

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Written by Khoo Kheng-Hor, this book is in business genre and shows how the principles in Sun Tzu’s Art of War can be applied to resolve the various problems of the business world today such as keeping ahead of rivals, devising strategies to ensure competitiveness, making accurate decisions under tremendous pressure, mobilizing resources, motivating the workforce and the like. The author who has successfully tried and tested Sun Tzu’s teachings in the training of his managers, interprets them lucidly and then explains in layman’s language how to ‘fight it out’ in the modern business and corporate battlefields with the aim of improving profitability, productivity, working environment and interpersonal relationships. The ideas presented in this book will be extremely useful and relevant not only to businessmen, executives, managers and administrators, but also to anyone seeking ways and means to improve their performance in the workplace and eventually derive greater satisfaction in their personal lives too.

Most working persons will tell you that the workplace is often like a battlefield. There is always this urgent need to keep ourselves updated on what our business competitors are up to, sending our people to clinch the deals before theirs do, throwing ‘red herrings’ to our business rivals, bringing on or defending against legal suits, etc. And of course, the inevitable daily office politics which most of us are aware of, though some may not care to admit its existence. We should look on our daily management effort as a sort of warfare, that is, a serious exercise and not something to be treated lightly. In recognising the importance of human resource, we must first manage our staff well so as to motivate them to excel in commitment and productivity to solve our business problems and do better than our competitors. When we treat people with respect and fairness, they will reciprocate in turn. This is the essence of the moral law. Encourage team spirit, be firm yet fair.

In the modern context, heaven can be taken to mean climate, that is, an organisation’s climate - a warm, cohesive and happy environment in an organisation as opposed to a cold, fragmented and gloomy one. Thus, work towards improving the climate in our own organisation

so that our staff can be motivated towards happily racing ahead of our competitors at any time. As for Sun Tzu’s treatise on earth, the author interprets it to mean knowledge of the terrain, that is, the resources available to us, limitations and the environmental factors such as market demand, pricing, special norms, technological changes, legislation and others that affecting both ourselves and our competitors. Such knowledge is most important and ought to be studied carefully if we wish to make sound business decisions. One word of caution though - does not over study and end up making a decision which is long past its time and application.

If we are wise, we can recognise changing circumstances and thus act accordingly. If sincere, our staff can be certain of the way rewards and punishment is given. If benevolent, we are seen to care for employees, sympathise with them, and appreciate their effort and toil. If courage, we are not hesitant in making decisions to seize the opportunity. If strict, our staff are disciplined because they realised we will not hesitate to punish.

Management concepts like hierarchy as depicted in organisation charts, and functions of planning, organising, directing and controlling were already existence in China some 2,500 years ago. We must first organise ourselves within a systematic and efficient environment before we can ever dream of doing better than our competitors. Everything depends on how well we know our objectives, the circumstances, the resources available to us, the limitations we are subject to, and similarly those faced by our competitors. To put it simply, in Sun Tzu’s own words: “Know yourself; know your enemy, one hundred battles, and one hundred victories.” We should therefore make it a habit to undertake a thorough SWOT (Strengths-Weaknesses-Opportunities-Threats) analysis before embarking on any project. Sun Tzu’s seminal work “The Art of War” has been referenced for millennia by historians, military tacticians and world leaders. Therefore this book is essential to readers because the principles outlined in this book can be used to resolve problems when we working.

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