

Attacking Problems

In this chapter, Sun Tzu discusses the roles of focus, strength, strategy, and company politics in attacking problems. We use the word “problems” here very loosely. The title of this chapter in the original was “Planning an Attack.” For our purposes, a problems can be anything that requires change in the organization.

What happens when we plan change? How does the organization react? How can we keep the organization strong in the face of change?

How do we get the organization to cooperate with our attack on a problem? How do we handle opposition to change? What are the techniques for preventing opposition from forming? What should we do if strong opposition forms against something we want to do?

What do we do if our ideas are broadly supported? What do we do if our ideas are unpopular?

What happens to the organization when company politics arise? What is the nature of company politics?

The chapter ends with a discussion of company politics and its harmful affects on organizations. This ties together the discussion of attacking problems with the topic that begins the chapter, the need for organizational unity.

Question One:

What role does management play in an organization?

- A. An organization must be managed to survive.**
- B. Organizations require management in new projects.**
- C. Bad management is worse than no management at all.**
- D. Management has different roles in different organizations.**

Your organization requires your management.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- A. An organization must be managed to survive.

Management is needed because the situation changes. In a competitive world, an organization without management decision-making is quickly outmoded. If the processes and procedures within an organization were completely stable, people could just perform their jobs and the organization could function without management. Change necessitates management decision-making. Our ever-increasing pace of change means that management is more important than ever.

A problem is anything that requires change. A problem is identical with an opportunity for improvement. Sun Tzu generally sees no difference between problems and opportunities.

Planned changes are necessary for a variety of reasons. We may want to expand the organization. We may want to make it more efficient. We may face a competitive threat in the marketplace that we need to address. Change can be driven from inside the organization by innovation or from the outside by competitive pressure.

We should realize beforehand that change is never popular. Organizations resist change. Everyone is more comfortable doing what he or she has always done. Change means uncertainty. Everyone fears the unknown. This is why organizations need management and managers.

Question Two:

How can you tell strong organizations from weak ones?

- A. Strong organizations are smart; weak ones dumb.**
- B. Strong organizations are experienced; weak ones are new.**
- C. Strong organizations are united; weak ones are divided.**
- D. Strong organizations are large; weak ones are small.**

A united organization is effective.
A divided organization is ineffective.
A united department is effective.
A divided department is ineffective.
A united team is effective.
A divided team is ineffective.
Devoted employees are effective.
Indifferent employees are ineffective.
A united group is effective.
A divided group is ineffective.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- C. Strong organizations are united; weak ones are divided.

Sun Tzu redefines the idea of strength for a competitive world. The natural mistake is to consider size and strength as the same thing. Sun Tzu said that this view was totally wrong. Size doesn't matter. Large organization can be beaten by smaller ones. The difference that determines strength is not in size, but unity.

Of course, we say "unity," but Sun Tzu actually just used the Chinese ideogram for the number "one" contrasting it with the character that means "divided" or "broken." He meant "unity," but he also meant focus, single-mindedness, and, as it says in a later chapter, concentration. He meant unity of purpose, ideas, and people.

Problems always threaten this unity. Change is also a threat. Before we can solve any problem, we must realize that keeping the organization focused is vital.

Question Three:

What should you react to opposition to the planned change?

- A. You must overcome all opposition to the change.**
- B. You must ignore opposition to the change.**
- C. You must reach a consensus on doing the change.**
- D. You must prevent opposition to the change.**

Unity works because it enables your organization to solve the problems it encounters.

This still doesn't make you a great manager.

Avoid creating problems, and accomplish your goals.

This is the right goal for a good manager.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- D. You must prevent opposition to the change.

Problems are not problems if people accept change. Power is not about overcoming opposition. Indeed, in Sun Tzu's method, conflict is the *failure* of successful strategy. Unity within the organization is the foundation of success. Opposition to changes within the organization is dangerous and destructive, a serious problem in itself.

In addressing a problem, we want to put ourselves in a position in which others will be discouraged from opposing change.

Ideally, we want them to agree with the need for change and goals of the project. Reaching a consensus, however, is not always possible. Change is frightening for many people. Even if we win agreement that change is necessary, we are unlikely to get complete agreement about the type of change needed. Even if complete agreement is possible, it can take too long to establish. This is the primary weakness of the Japanese consensus system.

Speed is the essence of management in a competitive market. We must address weaknesses quickly, but we also want to make changes in way that minimizes creating more problems. Sun Tzu offers a number of techniques for doing this.

Question Four:

What is the best strategy for dealing with problems?

- A. Solve problems before they are created.**
- B. Untangle problems to find a common source.**
- C. Find solutions that directly address the problem.**
- D. Reorganize your processes to eliminate the problem.**

It's best to solve problems before they are created.

The next best is to untangle problems.

The next best is to solve problems.

The worst is to try a complete reorganization.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- A. Solve problems before they are created.

This is a fundamental rule in Sun Tzu's method. We want to foresee potential problems. By preventing problems before they occur, we avoid the need to place blame. People aren't put in a position of having to defend themselves or their practices. This preemptive strike eliminates unnecessary conflict within the organization.

Too many managers are too tentative and uncertain about addressing problems before they become serious. They wait too long. They may foresee potential problems, but they are afraid to fix what isn't broken. By delaying, they actually precipitate internal debate and dissention. Decisive action gives the organization confidence. The less direct approach gives people the time to develop entrenched positions. After people have entrenched positions, no matter what we decide, we have opposition.

If we cannot make a preemptive strike, the next best tactic is to untangle problems to identify their source. Problems seldom show up where they are created. Most problems appear downstream, after they have been created earlier in the process. A small change earlier in the process can solve a large problem later in the process. The smaller the change, the more certain the solution.

Question Five:

If you must reorganize your whole operation to solve a problem, how do you do it?

- A. You must take the time to plan the reorganization.**
- B. You must expect new, smaller problems from reorganization.**
- C. You must be willing to invest money in consulting.**
- D. You must avoid complete reorganization.**

Look what happens when you completely reorganize. It looks great as a plan, but it will not succeed. First, you must reinvent the processes needed. You need the right people and resources. This can take months and creates more problems. You try to work around the problems. After more months of work, you still won't make progress. Everyone involved gets impatient for results. You then try to throw money at problems. This undermines your credibility and effectiveness. You are still unable to make progress. This approach is a disaster.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- D. You must avoid complete reorganization.

Sun Tzu doesn't believe that we are smart enough to tackle huge problems all at once. Large reorganizations are much too risky for the organization. We can make changes at the top or the bottom of the organization, but we shouldn't make changes everywhere at once.

The strength of our organization comes from its focus and unity. Nothing is as certain to destroy that focus and unity as trying to "reengineer" the entire organization at once.

We always have an infinite number of opportunities to improve the organization. The idea that we can make a big changes infrequently to keep up with competition is simply wrong.

Question Six:

How can you solve serious and numerous problems if you can't make big changes?

- A. We must start with problems arising from processes that people are most devoted to.**
- B. You must accept that all organizations have to live with some of their problems.**
- C. You must solve problems incrementally and continuously, minimizing the organization's resistance.**
- D. You lay out a complete solution for your problems, but implementation is a little at a time.**

Make good use of your management time.

Let your people abandon poor practices.

You can solve problems with minor changes.

You must lure people away from their entrenched positions.

You do this gradually, a little at a time.

You can overcome any opposition.

You must keep your goals simple.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- C. You must solve problems incrementally and continuous, starting minimizing the organization's resistance.

Do not mistakenly think that Sun Tzu preaches that we should let problems linger. He wants us to solve problems. Nor does he believe that we can know all the solutions ahead of time. We must be smart about it. We must avoid creating new problems. We must avoid creating opposition within the organization. The best strategy is to solve problems incrementally, in small steps that are impossible to oppose.

This accomplishes two goals. First, it decreases the resistance and fear of change. Secondly, it shortens the time it takes to implement and test the new solution. Using this technique, problem solving and continuous improvement become habits within the organization. Our people get adjusted to a continuous, high rate of change.

Question Seven:

What attitude should you have once a solution is initiated?

- A. You must advance a solution carefully to see if it works.**
- B. You must be totally dedicated to finding a solution.**
- C. You must be careful to make sure people like it.**
- D. You must keep it on time and within budget.**

Once committed to a solution, throw everything in it.
Never give up when tackling a problem.
You can always find a competitive advantage.
To do this, you must plan your approach to problems.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- B. You must be totally dedicated to finding a solution.**

Once we target a problem, we must be totally dedicated to solving it once and for all. Problems aren't solved unless we fight for their solution. We must always be looking for ways in which we can make the solution successful. Sun Tzu advises patience in the sense that we must await our opportunities, but he also wants us to embrace our decisions and see them through. Just because we don't risk our resources doesn't mean we shouldn't dedicate everything we have to make certain we are successful.

The future is never certain, but one of the best ways to predict the future is to shape it. Every problem has many different solutions, all with different benefits. Targeting a problem without solving it decreases the confidence of the organization. Solving the problems that we target increases the confidence of the organization.

Once a project is initiated, we want to concentrate on implementing it. We don't want to get sucked into debating its pros and cons. People must cooperate for the good of the organization. Not all solutions will be successful, but their failure should never arise from lack of dedication or support. Few solutions make everyone happy at the time. People's happiness comes from a successful organization.

Question Eight:

How does the weight of opposition to change determine your tactics?

- A. Different amounts of opposition call for different tactics.**
- B. Your tactics for dealing with opposition are always the same.**
- C. The size of opposition matters less than the individuals.**
- D. You can never work against overwhelming opposition.**

The rules for overcoming opposition to change are:
If you have ten times the support, go around the opposition.
If you have five times the support, attack the opposition.
If you have twice the support, divide the opposition.
If your support is equal, pick only battles you can win
If your support is weaker, avoid confrontations.
If your support is much weaker, outpace the opposition.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- A. Different amounts of opposition call for different tactics.

We must work out basic issues of philosophy over long periods of time. If we are dedicated to a certain change, we sometimes must work for it against the most of the organization for a long period of time.

In these cases, the size of our opposition does not determine its strength, but it does determine our tactics in making changes successfully. We can overcome huge amounts of opposition, but we must have the right approach. We must design our strategy to minimize destructive conflict.

Again, the basis of Sun Tzu's system is avoiding damaging conflict whenever possible. In situations where conflict is unavoidable, we must have a strategy that minimizes the period of debate. In situations where our supporters far outnumber our opposition, we can afford to act directly. In situations where our support is less than overwhelming, we have to be more patient and pick our battles to win the organization to our viewpoint.

Question Nine:

How does the popularity of an idea affect the chances that it is accepted?

- A. Unpopular ideas are fundamentally flawed.**
- B. Popular ideas are seldom successful competitive moves.**
- C. Unpopular ideas can become popular over time.**
- D. The popularity of an idea is seldom relevant.**

Unpopular ideas cannot generate broad support.
However, broad opposition cannot stamp them out.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- C. Unpopular ideas can become popular over time.

The popularity of an idea is a transient thing. If an idea is broadly unpopular, it cannot be broadly implemented at the moment. However, unpopularity never killed an idea. As long as an idea has one support in the organization, it will survive. This is especially true if we as managers support the idea.

The popularity of an idea depends upon the situation. Popularity shifts with the seasons. An idea that everyone laughs at today may seem the obvious thing to do tomorrow.

We have to know how to deal with the popularity or unpopularity of our ideas. If an idea is poorly received, we have to be patient. We have to wait until the times and circumstances are right in order to reintroduce it. On the other hand, if an idea becomes popular, we have to take advantage of its acceptance in order to implement it.

Organizations are not democracies, but we are managers, not dictators. We can work against opposition, but we cannot make unpopular ideas palatable. As managers, we always have to be sensitive to people's real feelings about an idea. False support and lip service doesn't guarantee our success.

Question Ten:

When planning a project, how should you think about your relationship with the organization?

- A. You should not be concerned with the relationship.**
- B. You should be close to your people; they must care for you.**
- C. You must lead your organization and it supports you.**
- D. You must support your organization and it controls you.**

You must master management.

Your organization must support you.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- C. You lead your organization and it supports you.

Our relationship with our organization is critical. Our relationship is not necessarily an affectionate, caring relationship between individuals. Personal relationships often make good decisions difficult and uncomfortable.

Our organizations depend on us to lead. We cannot be uncertain or doubtful about our course. If we are confused, the organization will fall apart. We have the responsibility to make decisions. We cannot delegate our responsibility.

In order to implement those decisions, we need the support of the organization. Once a decision is made, the debate cannot continue. For the good of the organization, we must demand support.

An organization isn't a abstract entity. It is people. The organization is constructed from the roles that we define for our people, but people are always bigger than their roles. We define these roles for the effectiveness of the organizations, but none of our definitions are perfect. Roles and job definition must change. Our people must be willing to do what is necessary if the organization is going to work. If people fail to support us, the organization cannot work.

Question Eleven:

How does an organization's support of management decisions affect its ability to compete?

- A. Strong organizations can compete despite weak managers.**
- B. Weak organizations can't compete despite good support.**
- C. Their support determines organizational strength.**
- D. Their support determines management strength.**

Supporting its managers makes an organization strong.
Undermining its managers makes an organization weak.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

C. Management support determines organizational strength.

Organizations cannot compete if their management is weak. The support of the organization alone does not make a strong manager. Unity makes an organization strong. If an organization supports its management, it is unified and strong.

Weak organizations do not support their managers. They can fail to support their managers for a variety of reasons. Their manager may be a poor decision-maker and undeserving of their support. Their manager may be a good decision-maker but poor at explaining the need for change. There may be politics within the organization that undermines the manager's support. In every case, the organization is fractured and weak. Leaderless organizations are like rudderless ships. They cannot win a competitive challenge.

Everyone in the organization must understand the need for strong leadership and strong support for their leadership. They must appreciate the need for unity. Everyone's success depends on the success of the unity of the organization. The organization cannot succeed if people do not support its management. If some people believe that their manager is incompetent, they should be encouraged to leave the organization. They can find better opportunities elsewhere and the organization will be stronger without them, no matter how talented they are.

Question Twelve:

What problems for managers arise from internal company politics?

- A. People are too optimistic about what can be accomplished.**
- B. People are too pessimistic about what can be accomplished.**
- C. People are too confused to know what to do.**
- D. They are at once too optimistic, too pessimistic, and too confused about what to do.**

Company politics create problems for managers in three different ways.

Ignorant of which tasks are impossible, others insist on them.

Ignorant of which tasks are necessary, they propose different priorities.

This is called hamstringing your management.

Company politics is the opposite of management.

Everyone has an opinion about what must be done.

This confuses everybody's priorities.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

D. They are at once too optimistic, too pessimistic, and too confused about what to do.

Internal company politics destroys good organizations. What we call "company politics" is nothing more than failure of the organization to support its leader.

When an organization gets involved in politics, it loses track of its central reality. Only the chief executive is in a position to see the organization as a whole. Everyone else's focus is local. They see only their local area's problems and opportunities. This makes many organization tasks seem easier than they really are. It makes other tasks seem impossible even when they are necessary.

Without a global view that they can trust, the organization is thrown into chaos.

Question Twelve:

Why situations usually generate the politics that cause the organization to stop supporting its manager?

- A. A difficult and competitive market environment.**
- B. A wealth of opportunities in the marketplace.**
- C. The lack of a satisfying company focus and mission.**
- D. The divergence of personal and organizational goals.**

Company politics are blind to management hierarchy. They assumes all internal desires can be satisfied. This makes everybody uncertain of their goals.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- D. The divergence of personal and organizational goals.

Organizational unity does not fall apart because of external pressure. Indeed, external pressure can often bring an organization together. Internal politics is more likely to become a problem during or after periods of opportunity and success, but a wealth of opportunities by itself doesn't pit various parts of the organization against each other. The lack of a satisfying organizational mission does create problems, but internal politics can arise in organizations with appealing missions.

Internal politics results from people defining their personal success independently from the organization's success. This can happen in two ways. First, groups compete with other divisions within the organization. Instead of seeing other departments as their partners in success, they see start to see them as competitors for resources and organizational influence. Secondly, individuals can come to believe that they can be successful in their careers despite the weakness of their organization. People sometimes think that they can advance themselves by being the strongest player a weak organization. Both types of thinking result in individuals putting their personal agendas above the needs of the organization as a whole.

Question thirteen:

What is the eventual result of internal political battles within an organization?

- A. A new, stronger leader will be found for the organization.**
- B. The entire organization is weakened inviting failure.**
- C. The organization comes to dislike internal politics.**
- D. The organization becomes indifferent to internal politics.**

If your people are confused, you lose their trust.

This invites new conflicts in every quarter.

We say that a disorganized organization fails at success.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- B. The entire organization is weakened inviting failure.**

When individual self-interest takes precedence over global goals, there is no happy outcome. Internal politics weakens the entire organization. Distrust and conflict between different managers create distrust and conflict between different divisions. A united organization is now a divided, weak one. When people try to further their individual self-interest, everyone's organizational interests are hurt.

Internal strife within an organization encourages internal competition. Once the focus shifts from external competition to internal competition, the organization starts to tear itself apart. No one's self-interest can be satisfied if the organization fails.

When politics flares within our organization, we must stop it at all costs. We must remove individuals and punish divisions that put their own needs above the needs of the organization as a whole.

When we are involved, this is a difficult issue because internal politics undermines our leadership. In defending our leadership, are we not guilty of the same battle for self-interest that others are wrapped up in? No, the organization must support us as its manager. Support of its manager bring the organization together. Politics tears it apart.

Question Fifteen:

With which of the five key elements discussed in chapter one is this chapter primarily concerned?

- A. The qualities of a leader.**
- B. The contribution to value.**
- C. Your use of time.**
- D. Your management philosophy.**

You must know five things to succeed.

Success comes from knowing what needs doing and what does not.

Success comes from handling large and small groups well.

Success comes from everyone sharing the same goals.

Success comes from turning problems into opportunities.

Success comes from good management and avoiding company politics.

You must learn these five things.

You then know the principles of success.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- D. Your management philosophy.

Remember that Sun Tzu's view of a management philosophy is everyone sharing the organization's goals and success. We don't manager our organization for our personal self-interests independent of the organization's interest. We direct the organization for everyone's success.

We started this chapter talking about the advantages of unity. Unity comes from our philosophy, from our shared mission. We putting that unity into practice by prioritizing and planning the change within the organization. Despite the fear that people have of change, we must get the organization's support for new projects. Change is risky, but, if the organization is united, its strength can survive the risks. If we let company politics weaken the organization, even minor changes are likely to cause major problems.

Question Eighteen:

What is the basis for Sun Tzu's theory about planning a project to assure success?

- A. It is a theory of unity.**
- B. It is a theory of effective decision-making.**
- C. It is a theory of organizational tactics**
- D. It is a theory of knowledge.**

We say:

Know your supporters and your opponents.

You will be secure in every confrontation.

You can know your supporters but not your opponents.

Then, for every battle you win, you will lose another.

You may know neither your supporters nor your opponents.

You will then lose every battle.

From The Art of Management

Answer:

- C. It is a theory of knowledge.

Although we have been talking about unity, focus, management control and organizational politics, Sun Tzu reminds us at the close that this is all about knowledge. We must know our focus, our shared goal. We must know where our opposition is and how big it is. We must know the right tactics to use. We must know when individuals are putting their self-interest ahead of the interests of the organizations.

We must know when changes are supported. It can be difficult to identify true support from support that is pretended. We must encourage opposition so we know when real opposition exists. We cannot punish our opposition for speaking out. If we do, we won't know when opposition exists. We must know how to handle opposition, how to win it over or overcome it. We must also recognize when it is justified.

Finally, we must keep opposition from flaring into internal politics. If it does, everyone loses.