

19 Ancient Ways for a Modern World: Or How The Art of War Helped Me Become a Better Officer

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I recently re-read the Art of War, an ancient compilation of insight. The funny thing is that the book is about peace as much as it is about war, about avoiding trouble more than it is about fixing trouble. I thought that many of the lessons were applicable to the fire department. Take a look, a nice hard objective look at the lessons. I am paying a lot of money to go to management school and hear these same lessons spoken in a different voice.

I got a lot out of re-reading this book from a fire management perspective. I hope that I inspire you to read it too. There is still much left to learn.

Quotes from the text are bold any thing underlined is added emphasis from me, the rest are my musings on the subject at hand. A full reference citation is at the end.

1. **Set up rules not to be broken, do not fail to punish any offenders.** Cao Cao
This includes your pals. Remember the red-hot stove rule.

2. **Therefore I have heard of military operations that were clumsy but swift, but I have never seen one that was skillful and lasted a long time. It is never beneficial to a nation to have a military operation continue for a long time.** Master Sun

Two 1 ½” lines quickly placed are better than a 2 ½” line that takes 10 minutes to place.

3. **Now if there is division among the ranks of the enemy, so that there is no coherent chain of command, then they will fall apart by themselves...** Du Mu
HmMMM....

4. **To be able means to be able to motivate others to fight to the death...** Wang Xi
Can we do this and if not why not?

5. **...he fought hard for over a day, not daring to have any other thought as long as any of his soldiers were left. If we execute him now that he has come back by himself, this would be showing people there is not sense in returning.** Ho Yanxi

If there can be room for compromise and compassion in war why does the fire department have such a hard time with allowing people to maintain their humanity and dignity, even in the face of discipline?

6. **Complete means having both ability and intelligence...this means that generals have to be completely capable and completely knowledgeable. Generals in the field must already be acquainted with all the sciences of warfare before they can command their own soldiers and assess battle formations.** Ho Yanxi

Can we say the same for our lieutenants, captains and battalion chiefs?

7. **...it is necessary to delegate unbridled authority, so it is imperative that officers who are to be generals be both loyal and talented.** Wang Xi

8. **As a rule, in a military operation you need to change tactics a hundred times at every pace, proceeding when you see you can, falling back when you know there is an impasse. To talk about government orders for all this is like going to announce to your superiors that you want to put out a fire-by the time you get back with an order, there is nothing left but ashes.** Ho Yanxi

Teach us the strategy and tactics, teach the officers how to apply them and then let them go to work.

9. **When trouble is solved before it forms, who calls that clever? When there is victory without battle, who talks about bravery?** Ho Yanxi

Good fire departments are not shown on the cover of firehouse magazine. Good fire departments put the fires out long before the cameras arrive. Good fireman practice avoiding trouble not ladder bails.

10. **When the army is old, the soldiers are lazy, and the discipline and command are not unified, this is an opponent that has already lost.** Li Quan

That pesky chain of command idea keeps popping up.

11. **...If you do not plan first, hoping to rely on your strength, your victory is uncertain.** Ho Yanxi

Training and planning go hand in hand.

12. **The rules of the military are five: measurement, assessment, calculation, comparison, victory. The ground gives rise to measurements, measurements give rise to assessments, assessments give rise to calculations, calculations give rise to victories.** Master Sun

Measurement is size-up, assessment is risk assessment, calculation is tactical plan, comparison is recognizing the last fire in this one, and doing all that leads to victory.

13. **There are only five notes in the musical scale, but their variations are so many that they cannot all be heard. There are only five basic colors, but their variations are so many that they cannot all be seen. There are only five basic flavors, but their variations are so many that they cannot all be tasted. There are only two kinds of charge in battle, the unorthodox surprise attack and the orthodox direct attack, but variations of the unorthodox and the orthodox are endless. The unorthodox and the orthodox give rise to each other, like a beginningless circle-who can exhaust them?**
Master Sun

Equifinality- there are many truths are they are equally valid...

14. **The rule for delegation of responsibility is to use greed, use folly, use intelligence, and use bravery, allowing for the natural force of each one, not blaming people for what thy are incapable of, but choosing appropriate responsibilities for them according to their respective capacities.** Zhang Yu

15. **Roll rocks down a ten-thousand-foot mountain, and they cannot be stopped-this is because of the mountain, not the rocks. Get people to fight with the courage to win every time, and the strong and the weak unite-this is because of momentum, not the individuals.** Du Mu

16. **If an army is unsettled it means the general is not taken seriously.** Master Sun

17. **Look upon your soldiers as you do infants, and they willingly go into deep valleys with you; look upon your soldiers as beloved children an, and they willingly die for you.** Master Sun

18. **If you are so nice to them that you cannot employ them, so kind to them that you cannot command them, so casual with them that you cannot establish order, they are like spoiled children, useless.** Master Sun

19. **Rewards should not be used alone, punishments should not be relied on in isolation. Otherwise like spoiled children, people will become accustomed to either enjoying or resenting everything. This is harmful and renders them useless.** Cao Cao

[1] Tzu, Sun. (1988)The Art of War. Shambhala Publications Inc. Boston, MA.