

Sun Tzu – Management Consultant – Makes The Presentation

The boardroom quickly went silent as the side door opened and Jenson Ryerson, Chairman, Chief Executive Officer, and President of Ryerson Industries strode into the room. The tall, graying patriarch acknowledged his senior management team and took his place at the head of the long, mahogany table. The others in the room quickly moved to their seats. The afternoon sun illuminated Ryerson's profile and cast long shadows across the elegantly framed portraits of previous generations of Chicago's business elite lining the walls. Their stern expressions glared down at the assembly before them.

Ryerson nodded his head to the group. "Ladies and gentlemen, please be seated."

Ryerson sat and leaned forward on his elbows, eyes alertly scanning both sides of the table. At the other end stood a young man in a pinstripe gray suit, flanked by an old man who was seated. The old man was small and hunched over, dressed in a long flowing robe, with a scraggly beard and mustache. His eyes were milky and betrayed no emotion. He received strange looks from the others in the room, save for the man now standing.

Ryerson gave a quick, curious glance at the old man and addressed the group. "Gentlemen, as you all know, I've hired The Universe Strategic Consulting Group to analyze our operations and give us some advice on how we can reverse our slide in market share and profits in many of our key businesses." He paused, ignoring the nervous frowns that went around the table. "I think you've all met Mr. Evans here. He is

the Project Manager for USCG and will be giving us a presentation on their findings to date.” Ryerson directed his smile towards the man standing at the other end of the table. “I hope you have some dramatic and substantive things to tell us, Mr. Evans. Your consulting firm is charging us an awful lot of money.”

Evans’ smile didn’t waver. “Thank you, Mr. Ryerson. Does everyone have the Heads-Up chip we passed out earlier?” He paused to get nods from those around the table. “Good, then let’s start. I won’t bore you with the usual introductory chatter about our firm and the process we used to arrive at our conclusions and recommendations. Suffice it to say that we are the best at what we do: providing consulting to top tier companies on the strategic use of technology.”

Evans paused as he contemplated the oversized, crystal chandelier above their heads. “Ryerson Industries is facing some interesting and serious challenges for the 23rd century. And we at USCG have put our best minds and talents to the problems of this firm.” His smile vanished, replaced by an intense scanning of the room, as he leaned purposefully forward on the table. “The challenges facing Ryerson Industries are so important, that we assigned our Senior Partner of Strategic Thinking to this project.” Evans nodded to the old man sitting next to him. “Sun Tzu has extensive experience in strategic operations dating back to 500 B.C. in the Kingdom of Wu where he was chief advisor of Ho Wu, King of Wu. Under Mr. Tzu’s management, The Kingdom of Wu expanded their market share into Ch’u state, and later into the states of Ch’i and Chin. Tzu was also instrumental in driving out all competitors in the capital of Ying. Wu’s market dominance over their chief competitors, the Kingdoms of Yueh and Ch’u, lasted for over two decades.”

Evans stepped back from the table and sighed theatrically. “Ryerson Industries is facing the same serious threats to its markets that the Kingdom of Chu faced so many centuries ago. We have taken the extraordinary step of including Mr. Tzu in our project team and I will now turn the presentation over to him.”

Evans nodded to Sun Tzu and sat down. The old man remained motionless, lost in some private reverie, while a long moment passed in silence. The executives around the table began glancing at each other uncertainly. Then there was a stir and the old man slowly rose from his chair and shuffled to the head of the table. Evans respectfully handed him a speaker chip and sat down. Sun Tzu shifted his robes and stared over the heads of the assembled managers, his eyes far away.

Finally, he regained focus and looked down. “Supreme excellence consists in breaking your competitor’s hold on the marketplace without selling.”

After another long moment of silence, one of the Company Presidents muttered, “What’s that supposed to mean?”

There was no response from Sun Tzu who remained motionless, his eyes again far away.

“Well, Charlie,” Lynn Turner, Chief Administrative Officer, began. “Let’s take you switching division. Your advertising budget has gone up 200 percent in the last two years and your sales and market share have declined.”

“Now hold it right there, Missie. We’ve been over this before. The market has become crowded and it’s getting more competitive all the time. My sales would be down even farther if I didn’t do more advertising.”

Ned, Vice president of Quality Assurance, broke in. “We’re also getting increased level of returns on your products, Charlie. That affects my budget.”

“You’re supposed to be training my on-site QA team,” he shot back.

“Customer complaints are up too,” Sherrie, Senior Vice President of Customer Service, added.

“And it’s just not switches,” another intoned. “We have the same problems with off-world mining and filament prefabrications.”

“Maybe you non-operational support types should get your asses out in the field more often to see what we’re really up against,” another said.

And the debate raged on for twenty minutes. During this exchange, Jenson Ryerson sat silently watching his management team tear each other apart. Finally, he shifted in his chair and cleared his throat. Immediately, everyone stopped talking and turned expectantly to him.

“I think what I’m hearing here,” he began, “is we need to find ways of improving our product quality and customer support. That perhaps gaining our old reputation of superior quality product will enable us to reduce our marketing costs and increase our prices and therefore profit margins.”

Everyone looked suspiciously at others around the table, but no one spoke.

“So,” Ryerson continued, “let’s set up some committees and focus groups to analyze our options and we can reconvene at a later date. In the short term, we can stoke up a new marketing campaign to emphasize the virtues of our new product lines.”

“Jenson,” Sherrie said, “our competitors are going to eat us alive if we rush any marketing campaigns. We have to pass everything through Legal and we all know how

much time that takes. And then we must test our message on a hostile customer group to gauge where we might be...”

Everyone went silent at the scowling of Sun Tzu.

“Mr. Tzu,” Ryerson said. “Do you have something to add?”

“If you know the competition and you know yourself, you need not fear the result of a hundred marketing campaigns.”

“Huh?” Charlie exploded. “What’s this BS? These consultants are a complete waste of time. Why are we even screwing around here? I’ve got more important business to attend.”

“Well,” Lynn chirped, “our marketing campaigns have been getting increasingly timid. Why do we need so much review before we hit the streets? If we’ve got the better product, let’s just go for it.”

“Because we’d then...” and the debate raged on, this time for over forty minutes.

Jenson Ryerson again called a halt. “This is getting us nowhere.” He was rubbing his temples with a pained expression on his face. He turned to the old man at the other end of the table. “Mr. Tzu, I’ve read your theories on leadership. Do we have a leadership problem here?”

Looks of surprise and anger surged about the room, but all eyes turned to Sun Tzu.

“Permit me a test. Please select two of your top managers.”

Ryerson looked directly at the two men seated on each side of him, his two Executive Vice-Presidents. They both stood.

Sun Tzu continued. “You are each in charge of the managers on your side of the table. Have everyone stand.”

When this was done, Sun Tzu went on. “When I say ‘Right turn’ everyone on your team will turn ninety degrees to the right. When I say ‘Left Turn’ everyone on your team will turn ninety degrees to the left. When I say ‘About Face’, everyone on your team will turn 180 degrees to the rear.” Sun Tzu looked quickly at both sides and said, “Right turn.”

No one moved. There was an immediate cacophony of laughter and protest directed towards the Chairman. Ryerson waved everyone silent. He stared curiously at Sun Tzu.

Sun Tzu explained, “If employees fail to perform and management direction is not clear, then it is the fault of the President. Does anyone have any question as to my direction?”

Everyone stared back at the old man in challenge.

Sun Tzu said, “Left turn.”

“This is total BS,” Charlie thundered.

“Jenson, why are we paying good money for this nonsense?” another pleaded.

And so it went until Ryerson waved everyone silent.

Sun Tzu continued, “If employees fail to perform and management direction is not clear, then it is the fault of the President. If management direction is clear, and the employees still fail to perform, then it is the fault of their managers.”

With that, Sun Tzu produced a disk from beneath his robe and quickly released small energy orbs towards the two Executive Vice-Presidents. They were both struck and

thrown back against the wall, their bodies ablaze for only an instant before dissolving into dust. The others stood in silent shock.

The silence was broken by the voice of Sun Tzu. “The next two men in line are now the new Executive Vice-Presidents.

“About Face.”

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Jenson Ryerson faced his Board of Directors with a smile on his face. “So in conclusion, we are well on track for having the most profitable year in decades.”

All faces nodded in agreement. One of them said. “Very impressive progress, Jen. I’ve just got one question: why the unusually high consulting expense this year, and most of it to this firm, Universe Strategic Consulting Group?”

Jenson Ryerson’s smile got even bigger. “Members of this esteemed board, that was the best money we ever spent.”

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Sun Tzu’s famous tome, “The Art of War” (not to be confused with Niccolo Machiavelli’s equally famous book of the same name) was practically required reading for anyone serious about a career in the military or national politics. It’s a short and rather silly collection of poetic phrases and euphemisms that might seem, by today’s standards, simplistic and obvious. But Sun Tzu was a great man of his day (I summarize his career in the first part of this story) and I’m sure he was writing towards the less sophisticated audience that would have been around 2,500 years ago.

A while back (1980's and 90's), I noticed that it had become fashionable for egocentric, bloviating businessmen and politicians to quote passages from Sun Tzu to justify whatever scatterbrained decision or opinion they were pushing; as if this somehow imparted on them some kind of great wisdom. And every time I heard this, I imagined Sun Tzu turning over in his grave at such phony blasphemy. And I couldn't help but wonder what would happen if Sun Tzu ever really encountered today's business executive.

As an aside, all of the Sun Tzu statements you see in this story are only very slight variations of his quotations from "The Art of War". Likewise, the final scene parallels something he actually did. I'm sure the Emperor's generals got the point.