

Chapter 4: The Seven Guiding Principles

Many years ago, as a cadet hoping some day to be an officer, I was pouring over 'Principles of War,' listed in the old Field Service Regulations, when the Sergeant-Major came up to me. He surveyed me with kindly amusement. 'Don't bother your head about all them things, me lad,' he said. 'There's only one principle of war and that's this. Hit the other fellow, as quick as you can, and as hard as you can, where it hurts him most, when he ain't lookin'!

– Sir William Slimⁱ

At the risk of outdoing the Sergeant Major, we have distilled from *Warfighting* seven guiding principles of maneuver warfare: *targeting critical vulnerabilities, boldness, surprise, focus, decentralized decision-making, rapid tempo, and combined arms*. These principles, potent when applied individually and devastating when applied in subsets or as an integrated whole, provide a useful framework for thinking about business strategy.

In this chapter, which we offer as a standalone reference, we introduce each principle with an after-action review of the Israelis' actions in the 1967 War, as profiled in the previous chapter, and an illustrative example from the business world. We also preview the modern-day practices that the Marines employ to foster maneuver warfare in their organization in an effort to lay the foundation for our subsequent recommendations as to how you can foster maneuver warfare in *your* organization.

Please note the words “introduce” and “preview.” In the subsequent seven chapters, each principle will receive its own in-depth treatment, with numerous supporting examples and prescriptions to illustrate the appropriate application of maneuver warfare and selected counter-examples, to illustrate the downside associated with misapplication. But in this chapter, we start with the basics.

Targeting Critical Vulnerabilities

Targeting Critical Vulnerabilities – the principle of “hitting the other fellow where it hurts the most” – aims to identify and exploit those fundamental weaknesses that “will do the most significant damage to the enemy's ability to resist.”ⁱⁱ

As we saw in Chapter Two, Israel's resounding victory in the 1967 War began with its ability to target its opponent's critical vulnerability. Rather than attack the numerically superior and more heavily armed Egyptians head-on, Israel opted to pierce their defensive lines and disrupt their cumbersome, centralized decision-making process, thereby driving them into a debilitating state of chaos and confusion.

In a similar fashion, upstart MCI discovered in the early 1980s that incumbent AT&T's critical vulnerability was to be found in the long-distance telephone service market. The then-regulated incumbent's uniform pricing of long distance services was based on the duration and distance of the call rather than on its cost of providing the service. Moreover, prices for long distance service were significantly inflated to subsidize two unprofitable AT&T businesses: local telephone service, especially in rural areas, and long-distance service in remote, geographically challenging areas, like the Rocky Mountain states.

MCI exploited the vulnerability by attacking AT&T in markets that were large enough to be profitable and geographically benign enough that microwave communications technology could be deployed effectively: its first route, between Chicago and St. Louis, crossed no major mountains or other impassible geographic obstacles and was relatively easy to install. MCI also launched and won litigation that granted it to access AT&T's network: the courts forced AT&T to sell network capacity to MCI so that MCI could become a true nationwide carrier, without installing its own network connections in many locations. Targeting its opponent's critical vulnerability of uniform pricing, thus, afforded MCI a fundamental cost advantage in building and operating networks that AT&T could not match, and the upstart gained considerable market share at AT&T's expense.

The Marines' emphasis on targeting critical vulnerabilities can serve as a useful guide to implementing this principle in your business. They view targeting critical vulnerabilities as a top-down, bottom-up process, and all Marines, from the front line to the highest headquarters, constantly search for the enemy's fundamental weaknesses. At the same time, they are aware that their organization has its own critical vulnerabilities and constantly endeavor to prevent them from being targeted.

Boldness

Boldness is the daring to seek breakthrough results rather than incremental ones.

Israel jeopardized its national security when it committed nearly its entire air force to a pre-emptive strike on Egypt's air bases and left only 12 aircraft in reserve to protect its skies. This calculated risk was well rewarded, as the IAF eliminated the threat of Egyptian air attack on the Israeli homeland and afforded Israel air superiority for the remainder of the war.

In the past 50 years, Boeing has twice taken bold gambles that transformed commercial aviation. To enter the commercial jet aircraft market in the 1950s, Boeing committed the equivalent of 25% of its entire corporate net worth to the development of a prototype for the 707. Despite a historically poor track record in commercial aviation and an uncertain market outlook, Boeing successfully launched the 707, America's first commercial jet-powered passenger airplane, and became the definitive market leader.

In the mid-1960s, Boeing, again, "bet the company" on a new category of aircraft, the jumbo jet, in spite of highly uncertain market demand. The result was the 747, which reduced per-passenger cost of transatlantic flight by 30 percent and redefined the commercial aviation market by making transatlantic air travel available to a whole new class of customers.ⁱⁱⁱ

Emulating the deliberate efforts that the Marines undertake to encourage calculated risk-taking and build self-confidence throughout the ranks will enable you to foster a propensity for boldness in your organization. The Marines encourage an *obligation to dissent* in the decision-making process and tolerate mistakes that stem from bold zeal – except in the cases of indecision, timidity, or lapses in integrity. They also train their juniors to make decisions in the face of limited information and exercise initiative with confidence. And when all else fails, they default to the venerable option

that *it is better to beg for forgiveness than ask for permission* – provided their actions are in harmony with the organization’s overall strategic objectives.

Surprise

Surprise – the principle of “hitting the other fellow when he ain’t lookin’” – refers to the use of information to impair a foe’s decision-making ability and a subsequent unexpected strike. It can be achieved using one of three approaches: stealth, ambiguity, or deception.

Israel’s pre-emptive air strike on Egypt exemplifies the use of stealth to achieve surprise. “Nap of the earth” flight patterns were so low that Israeli aircraft could not be detected by Egyptian radar – until they wanted to be. Careful planning of departure times and approaches ensured that the attacks occurred simultaneously; consequently, none of the Egyptian air bases was able to alert the others of the strike – until it was over. The IAF also employed ambiguity to conceal the intent of its actual attack: by launching at the same time every day during the previous two years, the IAF lulled the Egyptians into believing that the take-off on the morning of June 5, 1967 was merely another training run.

In the mid-1990s, commercial airlines established Web sites to provide general information to customers. As the functionality of these sites expanded, customers could reserve and purchase tickets directly from the sites. Once the number of on-line orders reached a critical mass, Delta, in a move quickly emulated by other airlines, surprised unsuspecting travel agents by slashing commissions, from 10% of the value of each ticket sold to a flat \$50 (and recently \$0) per ticket. While the threat to travel agents of travelers buying directly from the airlines had been evident all along, the greater threat of declining commissions had not. Because travel agents weren’t aware of the power shift that the Internet enabled, they were unprepared to launch effective countermeasures.

The Marine Corps’s recent articulation of and commitment to the concept of *information operations* can serve you as a useful guide to employing information to achieve surprise in the business environment. Recognizing the increasingly central role that information will play in 21st Century armed conflict, the Marines have dedicated personnel and resources to the management of information in support of maneuver warfare and have formally integrated this new approach into the planning and execution of all combat operations. And this high degree of commitment suggests very strongly that a *disciplined follow-through* must accompany every well-intended use of information to shape the rules of competitive encounters.

Focus

Focus – the principle of “hitting the other fellow as hard as you can” – is the “generation of superior combat power at a particular time and place” that enables “a numerically inferior force to achieve decisive local superiority,”^{iv} thereby providing an advantage when and where it matters most.

At the strategic level, Israel endeavored to break the Arab coalition by focusing its attack on the coalition’s leader, Egypt, rather than face Arab threats on three fronts and risk dilution of its limited combat power. On the tactical level, Tal’s decision to strike

the Egyptians with a “fist of concentrated armor” enabled him to inflict heavy damage to critical points in his larger opponent’s defenses.

Since its initial public offering in 1999, upstart Juniper Networks has employed a focused attack to infiltrate the market for high-end Internet routers. Routers – devices that act as “traffic cops” to move data packets across the Internet – serve a wide variety of markets and command considerably different profit margins; the high-end “backbone” routers, used by telecom companies, yield the highest profits. Juniper managed to take share from Cisco, the dominant incumbent, who served all markets from high- to low-end routers; however, Cisco did not serve the telecom market with particular fervor or focus.

Sensing opportunity, Juniper committed all of its resources to building a faster, more reliable router designed expressly for these large telecom operators. It hired leading Internet Protocol engineers to design a faster router and dedicated researchers to “get in the trenches” with telecom operators to determine exactly what they wanted in terms of operability. And, between 1999 and 2002, it invested nearly \$450 Million in research and development.^v The result of these efforts was a router four-times faster than Cisco’s comparable offering and more suited to the unique needs of telecom companies. To date, Juniper has gained an approximate 30-40% market share.

The Marines’ high proficiency in focus can guide in your efforts to uncover lucrative opportunities, shift resources toward them, and manage the accompanying risk in business. The Marines rely heavily on information to locate lucrative targets as they arise and to commit available forces rapidly and in a coordinated fashion. In every combat engagement, they designate a *main effort*, which can change depending on the course of battle. And they acknowledge that focusing resources in support of the main effort requires *economy of force* elsewhere.

Decentralized Decision-Making

Decentralizing Decision-Making down through the ranks gives those closest to the action the latitude they need to take advantage of on-the-spot information unavailable to their superiors and exercise initiative without having to wait for approval.

As much as the Egyptians’ inability to function in the absence of orders contributed to their defeat, a reliance on decentralized decision-making contributed to the Israelis’ success. Colonel Mendler’s decision to attack opportunistically at Kuntilla, based on his understanding of unfolding events, exemplifies decentralized decision-making. But, by no means, were this and countless other on-the-spot decisions like it a product of happenstance. Long before the 1967 War began, the Israelis had, through rigorous leadership training, ingrained in its troops a willingness to make decisions in the absence of complete information and an inclination to exercise initiative. More than a positive attribute, initiative was, and continues to be, a *duty* among members of the Israeli armed forces.

Shortly after assuming the role of CEO at Continental Airlines in 1994, Gordon Bethune symbolically burned the company’s inflexible customer service manual and gave employees considerable latitude to make impromptu decisions regarding customer service. But to align employees’ individual actions with the organization’s overall

strategic objectives, he repeatedly emphasized the need to improve in three industry-important metrics: customer satisfaction, lost baggage, and on-time arrivals.

The employees of Continental rose to Bethune's challenge. Take, for example, a flight attendant on a full flight short of meals and needing to make an on-time departure. A pre-determined decision, dictated by the customer service manual, may have prescribed closing the doors before the arrival of the necessary number of meals, thereby ensuring an on-time departure. Alternatively, the resourceful flight attendant, possessing on-the-spot information, could offer free drinks to certain business travelers in lieu of a meal. Under this scenario, the plane departs on time, an entire planeload of people is happy, no one misses a connection, and no one stays in a hotel at Continental's expense. Collectively, such front-line decisions were a driving force behind Continental's widely heralded turnaround.

Emulating the techniques that the Marines employ to decentralize decision-making will enable you to maximize the potential benefits of unleashing the ingenuity of your people while minimizing the risks associated with a lesser degree of control in your organization. Within units, Marine leaders establish a baseline of trust with those in their charge, tailor communications with the aim of arming junior leaders with the "bigger picture" into which their actions fit, and vigilantly supervise the implementation of all directives issued. At the institutional level, the Marine Corps formally trains its members to make decisions in the absence of orders and uses technology to share information and, therefore, improve awareness among dispersed units. And as individuals, all Marines leaders keep in the back of their mind the venerable saying, *you can delegate authority but you can never delegate responsibility*.

Tempo

Tempo – the principle of "hitting the other fellow as quick as you can" – is relative speed in time: identifying opportunities, making decisions, and acting faster than one's opponent, thereby forcing him into a constant state of reaction.

From the outset of hostilities, the Egyptians struggled to react to Israel's faster tempo, and their ability to react deteriorated as the war progressed. Ultimately, the Egyptians were overcome by events. By the time the Egyptians were aware that their air force had been destroyed on the ground, the IDF had already launched its ground attack. After penetrating the Egyptians' first line of defense, the IDF immediately transitioned to the next stage of the attack and pressed hard into the second line. The Israelis maintained this momentum through the third line and on to the Mitla and Giddi Passes, where they intercepted the fleeing Egyptians.

Jenny Craig, the chain of weight-management centers, used rapid tempo to deliver a decisive blow to its archrival Nutrisystem in the 1980s. In this market, where diet centers were deriving almost all of their profits from the sales of portion- and calorie-controlled food products, Jenny Craig engaged Nutrisystem in a duel of product improvements: first freeze-dried food, then boil-in pouches, and, later, microwavable pouches.

Because Nutrisystem was primarily a chain of franchises, each product improvement required the approval of countless franchisees. Jenny, who, with her

family, owned most of her company's diet centers, was able to make company-wide decisions and implement those decisions much more rapidly. Almost immediately after identifying an opportunity to sell a new line of microwavable frozen foods, Jenny Craig invested heavily in the new product line and its requisite storage capacity. Nutrisystem, which struggled to gain consensus among its hundreds of independently-owned franchisees to invest in "yet another" product improvement, failed to respond to Jenny Craig's move, lost considerable market share, cancelled its IPO, and was eventually acquired. Now only the name survives.

Marines consider tempo a vital weapon, and this weapon can become part of your arsenal of business practices, as well. *Leading from the front* and pushing decision-making to the lowest levels, they endeavor to locate themselves as close to the point of decision as possible. Their adherence to the *1/3 – 2/3 Rule*, which reserves 1/3 of the planning time remaining before a deadline for a commander and the remaining 2/3 for his or her subordinates, reveals that they discipline themselves not to monopolize precious time during the planning process. Recognizing that excessive debate can slow tempo, Marines execute their leader's decision once it has been made *as if it were their own*. As an institution, they train decision-making speed. And they have even streamlined the formal planning process into a *rapid reaction planning process (R2P2)* for special situations.

Combined Arms

Combined Arms, the integration of complementary weapons and capabilities, increases their collective effectiveness and creates for the opponent a "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situation in which "to defend against one attack, the enemy must become more vulnerable to another."^{vi}

At the Mitla Pass, the Israelis' combined arms attack increased the effectiveness of the weapons they employed and systematically eliminated the options available for an Egyptian response. The steep slopes on either side of the passes denied the Egyptians lateral movement, and Yoffe's man-made channel of destroyed vehicles funneled their forward movement. Artillery fire and a wall of tanks at one end of the pass halted the Egyptian vehicles, and air strikes and withering direct fire finished off the stationary targets with devastating accuracy.

From 1964-1966, IBM successfully combined marketing, sales, hardware design, software design, and service to create the System 360 computer. The System 360 (as in 360 degrees, or full circle coverage) was unique in that it was intended to be a single computer architecture that would support data processing for small and large businesses, as well as scientific and engineering applications. Some companies might have offered better scientific computing; others might have offered more powerful multi-tasking capabilities for business computing. But no one could match the 360's all-embracing architecture. To increase its advantage further, IBM offered on-site services, unparalleled after-sales support, and a superior parts distribution system. One-by-one competitors exited the mainframe business, ceding the market to IBM for decades to follow.

The practices the Marines employ to combine arms can help you put your competitors in the *horns of a dilemma*, the worst of all "damned if you do, damned if you don't" situations. The Marines keep all critical functions – air, artillery, infantry, armor,

and communications – “in-house.” All Marines undergo rigorous initial infantry training to establish a common grounding. And extensive follow-on cross-training in other specialties fosters a better understanding among the different functional areas involved in the combined arms effort. Finally, the Marines make the *human investment* necessary to ensure the efficient functioning of the combined arms team: the co-location of dedicated full-time experts.

Integration of Principles – “Bringing It All Together”

While each of the preceding principles of maneuver warfare represents a valuable concept on its own, the benefits of this combat philosophy are most fully realized when the principles are working together. Maneuver warfare is not about execution in isolation, but rather it is about applying the principles simultaneously – in subsets or as an integrated whole – to determine the most decisive outcome at the least cost.

A closer look at the Israelis’ experience in Chapter Two shows how the seven principles complement and reinforce one another when applied in an integrated manner. In the air attack, surprise complemented boldness; the Israeli pilots’ ability to conceal their intentions until the moment of the attack decreased the risk associated with the bold move. And both boldness and surprise reinforced focus. The Israelis would not have been able to deliver a “knockout blow” had they not committed almost their entire air force and had the Egyptians been expecting an attack.

On the ground, boldness again reinforced focus. Tal would not have been able to attack with a “concentrated fist of armor” had he not risked vulnerabilities elsewhere, and Yoffe would not have been able to deny Egyptian reinforcements had he not risked a crossing of the “impassable sands.” Boldness also reinforced decentralized decision-making, which, in turn, enabled a rapid tempo. Countless on-the-spot decisions made confidently in the absence of complete information maintained the blistering momentum of the Israeli attack. Finally, tempo complemented targeting critical vulnerabilities. The faster the Israelis penetrated into the Egyptian defenses, the more they created chaos and confusion and accelerated the collapse of the Egyptian command and control system.

Once we have provided a thorough treatment of each of the seven guiding principles, we will examine, in greater detail, this notion that the seven guiding principles are complementary and mutually reinforcing. We will offer the concept of *reconnaissance pull*, which encompasses targeting critical vulnerabilities, focus, decentralized decision-making, and tempo. Reconnaissance pull is a *real-time response to opportunity*, whereby an individual identifies an opportunity, directs the organization toward it, and then immediately leads in its exploitation. From there, we will demonstrate the synergistic effects of the fully integrated application of all seven principles in the business environment. And we will close with a discussion of leadership – again, the *backbone of maneuver warfare* – without which well-intended strategy never translates into actual results.

Chapter 4

ⁱ Slim, Sir William. *Defeat into Victory*, p550-551.

ⁱⁱ *Warfighting*, p47.

ⁱⁱⁱ Collins, James and Porras, Jerry. *Built to Last*, p91-93.

^{iv} *Warfighting*, p41.

^v Based on Juniper 10-K filings: research and development expenses 1999 through 2002.

^{vi} *Ibid*, p94.