

Learn lessons from war for prosperity in peace time

Dr M Amr Sadik explains to Alan Hosking why HR professionals can learn much from reading Sun Tzu's ancient writings in *The Art of War*.

PROFILE



Dr M Amr Sadik (DBA, CHRE, CHRA, MMC, CCMT) is HR Advisor to the Chairman El Nasr Building and Construction – EGYCO and formerly Principal Consultant, Organisational Development and HR Business Advisor at Dimensions Consulting, Syria and Egypt. He is the winner of the 2010 Talent Challenge Best Practices in Talent Management Award, London, UK, the 2010 HR Leader Award from the Greentech Foundation, India, the 2008/2009 HR Leadership Award from the World HRD Congress, India, and the 2007 Best HR Executive, International Business Award from the Stevies, USA. Dr Sadik has held key human resources leadership roles for over 20 years in multiple industries within the Middle East and Gulf States.

Why are you suggesting we look at the writings of Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* which was written in 513 BC?

History provides us with collective wisdom and experience to learn from. There is no doubt that ancient stories and history books shed light on

different events and situations that happened in the past which are to a great extent similar to events and situations in our present day. Such history can teach us many lessons that we can put into practice today in managing complex organisations and their human capital.

Learning lessons from history has been a phenomenal source for free advice and inspiration. Thus, those who fail to learn the lessons from

history are condemned to repeat them, but most the significant thing we learn from history is that we certainly do not learn from it.

But what can military history say to managers and business leaders?

Military history has provided a number of useful representations for business, general management and for human resources management as well. To learn from military history, past events must be examined thoroughly so proper modules can be derived from them.

Over the past years, military descriptions have been used frequently in management topics such as Marketing, the Cola Wars – the story of the global corporate battle between the Coca-Cola Company and PepsiCo, Inc., and between fast food dynasties McDonald's and KFC. Everyone's trying to one-up each other amid intense competition. Also, in 1997 McKinsey and Company introduced the term "War for Talent" to describe the shortage of skills in the labour markets, which became part of Human Resources' annual planning activities to attract and retain the most talented staff.

To this end, certain comparisons can be made between company competitions and military warfare:

- Both strive for a winning position by defeating their competitors while defending themselves;
- Competitions and wars are confrontational activities;
- Organisations must be well organised and well managed;
- Organisations and wars require strategies and tactics;
- Leadership styles of both army and organisation have an important influence on the shaping of success;
- Both need high quality and committed people;
- Both thrive on information;
- Both have to have discipline and communication systems to convey the news and information; and
- Both have to ensure the strong management of people.

With this in mind, we should be able to expand on those aspects of business that more closely resemble war – business competition and competitiveness. But, we will focus on the management of people's part.

Why choose a military man? Why not someone like a philosopher?

Sun Tzu and *The Art of War* offer valuable insights for HR Management in the modern business environment. His book was based on military strategies but in reality these strategies can be used in all job fields, such as Human Resources. His writings have been highly influential in both marketing and business management science.

In his writings he also shed light on some essential principles for HR to follow. HR practitioners ought to go through Sun Tzu's philosophies to appreciate his clear wisdom and the clarity of thought that we can put into practice, as some of the noticeable

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concepts that are embedded in his works can be applied to the Human Resources Management.

Sun Tzu said, "The art of war is of vital importance to the State. It is a matter of life and death, a road either to safety or to ruin. Hence, it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected".

In the contemporary management and HR business environment, achieving competitive advantage is done by and through people as a unique source that can't be copied easily. Other sources can. Therefore, from an HR point of view, the art of managing people is of vital importance to an organisation, it is a matter of life and death, a road either to prosperity and competitiveness or to destruction and bankruptcy. Hence, it is a subject of inquiry which can on no account be neglected. ■

Next month, *HR Future* will start featuring a series of follow up articles by Dr Sadik expanding on lessons business leaders can learn from Sun Tzu and *The Art of War*.