

## **About *Armed Conflict***

People think that war or competition consists of only one thing: engaging in direct confrontations. Sun Tzu called this particular type of competition “armed conflict.” Unlike most people, he did not consider it the central fixture of warfare. For him, the heart of competition was positioning, not conflict. In his era and in ours, people mistake the art of war as the art of fighting. They focus too much of their thinking on direct, violent conflict. They confuse fighting with winning. Sun Tzu addresses these misconceptions in this chapter.

In business, we don’t have actually come to blows with our competitors, but we do have direct, hostile confrontations, which are the modern equivalent of armed conflict. Everyday commerce requires us to face a host of unpleasant, painful confrontations. We have to fire people. We have to deny people what they want. We have lawsuits. We sometimes have to face competitors directly in a sales competition and stop them. What should our attitude toward these hostile confrontations be?

Sun Tzu always wants us to keep our focus on the higher prize of competition: success. Do direct confrontations help us find success or do they hurt us? What is our goal when we get into a confrontation? What are we trying to accomplish? Is the hostile confrontation truly unavoidable? If so, what are the important issues in managing the confrontation? How do we make sure that the confrontation ends successfully?

## Lesson 106

### What is the most dangerous situation in competition?

- A. Facing a larger opponent.**
- B. Facing a hostile confrontation.**
- C. Holding a weak position.**
- D. Sustaining a loss.**

*Everyone uses the arts of war.  
You accept orders from the government.  
Then you assemble your army.  
You organize your men and build camps.  
You must avoid disasters from armed conflict.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- B. Facing a hostile confrontation.

People think of competition as a fight, a hostile confrontation. Sun Tzu saw that successful competition usually depends on avoiding such confrontations. The goal of war is not battle. When we “accept orders from our government,” the goal is to accomplish something. For this purpose, we put together our “army,” our resources. We organize ourselves to achieve the goal that we’ve set for ourselves. Sun Tzu wants to make it clear that hostile confrontations, armed conflict, is more often a hinderance to achieving our goal than it is a benefit.

Some people want to fight. They want to beat, embarrass, or hurt people they think have wronged them. These people are not true competitors. The goal of competition is never simply beating an opponent. Beating an opponent gets us nothing. Sun Tzu’s system is completely profit-oriented. His concern, starting from the second chapter, is on making competition pay, that is, making the cost of competition worth the investment.

To this end, armed conflict, hostile confrontation is extremely risky. Every hostile confrontation courts “disaster,” that is, a costly failure. Sometimes hostile confrontations cannot be avoided, but they certainly should never be sought out.

## Lesson 107

**How much difficulty should you be willing to go through in order to avoid conflict?**

- A. You should not detour from your plan.**
- B. You should not create problems for yourself.**
- C. You should be willing to create problems.**
- D. You should be willing to face confrontations.**

*Seeking armed conflict can be disastrous.*

*Because of this, a detour can be the shortest path.*

*Because of this, problems can become opportunities.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- C. You should be willing to create problems.

Avoiding hostile confrontations is extremely important. Instead of seeing a potential confrontation as a problem, Sun Tzu sees it as an opportunity to get creative. People get into conflicts because they are too lazy or too foolish to avoid them. Energetic and inventive leaders can avoid almost all forms of conflict and benefit from the experience.

Why do confrontations occur? Sun Tzu poses two possible reasons.

First, hostile confrontations occur because we are unwilling to change our plans. We hold to our course despite the fact that we see it leading us into conflict. People who are unwilling to avoid conflict are going to find themselves embroiled in it. Sun Tzu teaches us that this is foolish. Confrontations are always much more expensive and time-consuming than changing our plans. We are foolish if we are not willing to take detours to avoid confrontations.

The second common reason that we find ourselves in hostile confrontation is that conflict is easy to fall into. People's self-interests naturally collide. We have to work to avoid conflict. Sun Tzu suggests that avoiding confrontation is well worth the effort. We discover our best ideas and opportunities in working to avoid conflict.

## Lesson 108

**Which of the following ideas is more important in competition?**

- A. Taking advantage of opportunity.**
- B. Intimidating rivals.**
- C. Destroying opponents.**
- D. Proving our superiority.**

*Use an indirect route as your highway.*

*Use the search for advantage to guide you.*

*When you fall behind, you must catch up.*

*When you get ahead, you must wait.*

*You must know the detour that most directly accomplishes your plan.*

**From *The Art of War***

Answer:

- A. Taking advantage of opportunity.

When we seek to compete, we are not looking for a fight. We are looking for an opportunity. There is a huge difference between these two ideas. Competition is accomplishment, achieving a goal. It is not conflict and destruction.

Opportunities are not found by using the same methods used by other. We must plan on using new methods to execute our plan. Innovation isn't that difficult if we are looking for an opportunity. The search for opportunity naturally takes us to places that others have missed, along routes others have not taken. Conflict only gets in the way of our search for opportunities.

Even though we are taking advantage of opportunities, we can still execute a plan. The plan must subjugate itself to the opportunity, but planning is often the key in taking advantage of an opportunity. In executing a plan, we must still keep to our plan and timetable even when we are being opportunistic. In execution, we cannot forget our timing. We cannot let ourselves fall behind, nor should we get ahead of ourselves. To keep our forces together, we must make sure that some don't get ahead of the others.

## Lesson 109

### Should we always avoid hostile confrontation?

- A. We should not avoid confrontation if it is to our advantage.
- B. We should not avoid confrontation if it hurts the competition.
- C. We should never avoid confrontation.
- D. We should always avoid confrontation.

*Undertake armed conflict when you have an advantage.  
Seeking armed conflict for its own sake is dangerous.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- A. We should not avoid confrontation if it is to our advantage.

Hostile confrontations are dangerous, often disastrous. They are always costly. However, we *can* find ourselves in situations where such confrontations are to our advantage. When confrontations offer us a real opportunity, we should not hesitate to engage in them.

Though people are often much too quick to engage in hostile confrontations, we can also be too shy about confrontation. We cannot let our fear of confrontation guide us. We must be guided only by opportunity. When a confrontation is an opportunity, when we will probably win much more than we lose, we must directly challenge the competition.

Because such confrontations are always costly, we certainly should look for ways to avoid them. Again, most confrontation occur, not because they offer a true advantage, but because people are either too stubborn (in sticking to their plans) or too lazy to work to avoid them. The work involved in avoiding confrontation is almost always effort well spent. It saves us more than it costs us. We avoid confrontation because it is usually extremely profitable to do so.

The point is that the cost of confrontation is no excuse for fear or cowardice. The cost can be trivial compared to the gain. However, it must be the gain that matters.

## Lesson 110

**How do you set up confrontations where you have an advantage?**

- A. You build up your resources.**
- B. You must act quickly.**
- C. You push your people harder.**
- D. You can't set up such confrontations.**

*You can build up an army to fight for an advantage.*

*Then you won't catch the enemy.*

*You can force your army to go fight for an advantage.*

*Then you abandon your heavy supply wagons.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- D. You can't set up such confrontations.

We are masterful at fooling ourselves. We want to think that we are in control of the situation. We want to think that we can create the opportunity to beat our competition. We want to think that we can beat our competitors if we try harder. Unfortunately, competitive situations are beyond the control of any one party.

The basic concept is that we must recognize opportunity. We can't create it. We certainly can't create it out of conflict because conflict is so costly that both parties often lose. One may win the battle, but in many conflicts, the costs are so high that even the winner is really a loser.

People are often so interested in beating their competition that they only think about the punishment that they can inflict on their enemy. We forget about the punishment that we will also inflict upon ourselves. Sun Tzu wants us always to be completely focused on our self-interest. We must worry first about our own situation. We must think about the long term as well as the short term. In trying to create a confrontation with our enemy, we forget that our competitor is adjusting his strategy to counteract ours. We cannot be so worried about hurting our enemies that we endanger ourselves.

## Lesson 111

**How do you command your people to create an advantage?**

- A. Don't let them stop day or night.**
- B. Use many routes at the same time.**
- C. Let your stronger people lead.**
- D. You can't command your people cannot create an advantage.**

*You keep only your armor and hurry after the enemy.*

*You avoid stopping day or night.*

*You use many roads at the same time.*

*You go hundreds of miles to fight for an advantage.*

*Then the enemy catches your commanders and your army.*

*Your strong soldiers get there first.*

*Your weaker soldiers follow behind.*

*Using this approach, only one in ten will arrive.*

*You can try to go fifty miles to fight for an advantage.*

*Then your commanders and army will stumble.*

*Using this method, only half of your soldiers will make it.*

*You can try to go thirty miles to fight for an advantage.*

*Then only two out of three get there.*

**From *The Art of War***

Answer:

- D. You can't command your people cannot create an advantage.**

Sun Tzu's point is simple. We can try a lot of different things to create an advantage, but, no matter what we do, it will cost us. That cost will show up somewhere else in our competitive efforts.

There is a natural balance at work. When we push our people, we trade speed for unity. We give up our strength for hurry. We cannot "create" an advantage and shouldn't try to. The enemy must leave us an opening to give us an advantage. If it isn't there, we can't create it.

The power to command people is easily confused with the power to make things happen. As leaders, it is our responsibility to direct people to success. We are abusing our power if we arrogantly think that we have the power to force our people to create success for us.

## Lesson 112

### What is the risk in pushing your people too hard?

- A. You will fail completely.
- B. You will suffer a serious setback.
- C. You will fall behind the enemy.
- D. You will not be as successful as you think.

*If you make your army travel without good supply lines, they will die.*

*Without supplies and food, your army will die.*

*If you don't save the harvest, your army will die.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- A. You will fail completely.

Remember that the first goal of competition is survival. The most serious mistakes that we can make in competition are those that risk destruction. Sun Tzu clearly puts the mistake of pushing our people or rushing our army into this critical class of potentially fatal mistakes.

We *can* win armed conflict, but pressing for an advantage and searching for confrontation is worse than foolish. It is totally self-destructive.

In the long term, “beating the competition” in direct conflict is relatively unimportant. More important is protecting our sources of income (“good supply lines”). More important is protecting our resources (“supplies and food”). Even more important is conserving our profits (the harvest) to provide for the future. If we manage our organizations well, we preserve our ability to compete in the future. We survive. This should be the first and foremost goal of any organization.

If we keep ourselves financially strong, we are in a much better position to compete than we are simply by seeking situations where we can beat our opposition. The purpose of competition is never simply beating the competition. The purpose of competition is survival, growth, and prosperity—nothing more, nothing less.

## Lesson 113

**In competition, where should you focus your attention?**

- A. On the competitive ground.**
- B. On the competition's position.**
- C. On the trends of the time.**
- D. On the skills of your organization.**

*Do not let any of your potential enemies know of what you are planning.*

*Still, you must not hesitate to form alliances.*

*You must know the mountains and forests.*

*You must know where the obstructions are.*

*You must know where the marshes are.*

*If you don't, you cannot move the army.*

*If you don't, you must use local guides.*

*If you don't, you can't take advantage of the terrain.*

**From *The Art of War***

Answer:

- A. On the competitive ground.

Where does our income come from? What is the source of our resources? What is the basis of our profitability? In other words, what is the foundation of our ability to survive? It is the competitive ground; in business, it is the marketplace.

Controlling and understanding the ground is paramount in our ability to survive and prosper. It is the ground that potentially gives us an advantage, not our ability to push our people. We must avoid confrontation with the competition unless we have an advantage. Since that advantage comes only from the ground (the market), not our own efforts, we must know and use the ground (the market).

To gain the advantages of a marketplace, we must not hesitate to make alliances with others that control some part of it. We must not hesitate to employ those who are familiar with the territory. We must know especially the problems and difficulties in dealing with a specific market. This is what gives us an advantage.

## Lesson 114

### How do you upset your competition?

- A. By confrontation.
- B. By misdirection.
- C. By observation.
- D. By consolidation.

*You make war using a deceptive position.*

*If you use deception, then you can move.*

*Using deception, you can upset the enemy and change the situation.*

*You can move as quickly as the wind.*

*You can rise like the forest.*

*You can invade and plunder like fire.*

*You can stay as motionless as a mountain.*

*You can be as mysterious as the fog.*

*You can strike like sounding thunder.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

B. By misdirection.

We don't disturb our opponents by direct confrontation. They see it coming and prepare for it. We can seek strength and advantage from the ground, that is, the market, but if the competition understands what we are doing, they will move to counter us. If they understand what we are trying to get from our position, they will try to get it as well.

The same holds true for allies and customers. If they understand how profitable our opportunities are, they will want a piece of the action. If we discover a particularly profitable position, they will want to benefit from it as well.

We must therefore disguise our opportunities. People must not see clearly what our opportunities are and how much we will benefit.

We must keep our methods for generating value a secret. We must not let others know what are doing until we have done it.

## Lesson 115

**When you discover a profitable ground, what should you do?**

- A. Unite.**
- B. Divide.**
- C. Wait.**
- D. Defend.**

*Divide your troops to plunder the villages.*

*When on open ground, dividing is an advantage.*

*Don't worry about organization, just move.*

*Be the first to find a new route that leads directly to a winning plan.*

*This is the how you are successful at armed conflict.*

**From *The Art of War***

Answer:

B. Divide.

When we face the enemy, we must unite our forces, but when we find an open area, an area overlooked by the competition, we should do the opposite. We should divide our forces, finding as many sources of revenue as possible from the new fertile ground. When we find open, underdeveloped markets, we must waste no time in addressing as many of their needs as possible and getting as much out of them as we can.

Notice how the discussion has switched from confronting the competition to getting the most out of the market (the ground). What started as a discussion about direct confrontations (armed conflict) has turned into a discussion about finding open areas that we can profit from that the competition doesn't know about.

How do we win armed conflict? By avoiding it entirely. Instead, we find areas where we can enrich and strengthen ourselves. Then, instead of uniting our forces to face the enemy, we can spread out our resources to get the most out of the ground. Winning the wealth of the ground is the way we beat the competition.

## Lesson 116

**In direct confrontations, what must be your first consideration?**

- A. Communication.**
- B. Direction.**
- C. Resources.**
- D. Vision.**

*Military experience says:*

*“You can speak, but you will not be heard.*

*You must use gongs and drums.*

*You cannot really see your forces just by looking.*

*You must use banners and flags.”*

**From *The Art of War***

Answer:

- A. Communication.

The best way to win direct confrontation is to avoid it entirely, but what about when we can't avoid it? Employees must be fired. Opponents must be confronted. Mistakes must be addressed. These are the situations that Sun Tzu addresses in the last half of this chapter.

In a direct confrontation, the first key is communication. Remember that battle is confused and messy. In making our plans, we must expect battle to be confused and messy. We try to gain the initiative in battle by preparing surprises and innovations in advance that will carry the day for us, but none of this planning will work without communication.

For an organization, an important element of the communication system is *visibility*. We cannot see what is happening within the organization simply by looking. Managers always get the good news, but problems are usually hidden. A meaningful, constant measuring system must make all activity within the organization highly transparent. Problems and changes must be easy to see. For an organization to be successful, it must plan good communication systems. Ideally communication among all parts of the organization should be instantaneous, and every meaningful task should be measured.

## Lesson 117

### What is the purpose of good communication?

- A. Creativity.
- B. Unity.
- C. Discipline.
- D. Order.

*You must master gongs, drums, banners and flags.  
Place people as a single unit where they can all see and hear.  
You must unite them as one.  
Then, the brave cannot advance alone.  
The fearful cannot withdraw alone.  
You must force them to act as a group.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- B. Unity.

Unity is important in competition in general, but during direct confrontation unity is critical. The key to unity in expansion is moving our people together, but in any direct confrontation, unity requires strong lines of communication. This is only possible if we establish the lines of communication beforehand. Our people must understand our orders and we must see how our operations are proceeding.

Sun Tzu's system respects the dynamics of an organization. It recognizes that people have different skills and abilities. These differences among people are less important than our ability to get people to work together. Given good communication systems, we can take advantage of our people's strengths while minimizing their weaknesses.

Sun Tzu taught that unity depends both on what people see and what they hear. He teaches us to make our graphic displays and presentations striking and attention getting. He teaches us to make our message loud and difficult to ignore. We must be subtle and secretive in our planning, but we must be extravagant at communicating our mission, assignments, and progress within our own organization.

## Lesson 118

**What is the most important consideration in choosing our methods of communication?**

- A. The type of organization.**
- B. The type of confrontation.**
- C. The type of opponent.**
- D. The type of environment.**

*In night battles, you must use numerous fires and drums.*

*In day battles, you must use many banners and flags.*

*You must position your people to control what they see and hear.*

**From *The Art of War***

Answer:

- D. The type of environment.

Our competitive environment has two components: time and place, heaven and earth. Heaven changes and is beyond our control. Different positions on the ground offer different advantages and disadvantages, but we get to choose our position.

We must recognize these two different aspects of our competitive environment in planning our communication systems.

First, we must adjust our communication to what we cannot control. We must recognize that time passes and changes the conditions under which communication can take place. These changes are as significant as day and night. We can also include changes in weather or the season in this category. All these changes require a change in communication tactics. We must adjust to the dominant trends of the time in communicating our message. Whatever the time, communication must take place.

Finally, we must recognize that our choice of ground also affects communication. Organizations that are centrally located have less difficulty in communication than those that are spread out. Large organizations must have better communication systems than small ones.

## Lesson 119

**What is the most important element in communication?**

- A. The value of information.**
- B. The timeliness of information.**
- C. The accuracy of information.**
- D. The emotional content of information.**

*You control your army by controlling its emotions.*

*As a general, you must be able to control emotions.*

**From *The Art of War***

Answer:

- D. The emotional content of information.

Information within the organization should be valuable, timely, and accurate, but more important than any of these is its emotional content. Too often, managers focus on the obvious values in communication, but they overlook its critical emotional content.

People choose to work with us because they *feel* that it is in their best interest. We use our emotions to predict an uncertain future. Even when we develop logic to back up our feelings, our feelings come first. Our emotions are the basis for our actions. This is especially true in the highly emotional context of direct confrontations.

We must continuously consider the emotional content of information that passes through the organization. All information has emotional impact as well as intellectual impact. Managers can never afford to treat their our people as if they were automatons, machines that automatically do our bidding. We must tailor every communication to satisfy our people's emotional needs.

When we think about communication within the organization, our first consideration is the emotional impact of our messages. Do we make people feel as if the situation is under control? Do we make people optimistic about the future? Do we give them faith in our decisions? These are the critical issues in communication.

## Lesson 120

**When should you engage in a direct confrontation?**

- A. At first dawn.**
- B. Before midday.**
- C. In the afternoon.**
- D. At the end of the day.**

*In the morning, a person's energy is high.*

*During the day, it fades.*

*By evening, a person's thoughts turn to home.*

*You must use your troops wisely.*

*Avoid the enemy's high spirits.*

*Strike when they are lazy and want to go home.*

*This is how you master energy.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- D. At the end of the day.

Given the emotional nature of direct confrontation, we must consider not only the emotions of our people and allies but also the emotions of our opponents. We control our people's emotions through communication. We can only address our opponent's emotions by timing confrontations to our advantage.

The general rule of Sun Tzu's system is that we don't want to fight. In situations where direct confrontation is unavoidable, we want to minimize the fight in our opponents. One way to do this is to time the battles so that they take place at the end of the day when people have less fight in them.

The end of the day is just one example of a time when our opponents don't want to fight. We could also force a confrontation right before a holiday. We could also pick a time when they aren't feeling well. We might pick a time after they have gotten some bad news. Any event that weakens their resolve and depresses their spirit makes them a good target for a confrontation. Our goal is not to create a "fair fight" but to minimize the fight as much as possible.

## Lesson 121

**What should *your* emotional state be during a confrontation?**

- A. Relaxed.**
- B. Angry.**
- C. Impatient.**
- D. Aggressive.**

*Use discipline to await the chaos of battle.*

*Keep relaxed to await a crisis.*

*This is how you master emotion.*

**From *The Art of War***

Answer:

A. Relaxed.

Confrontations aren't pleasant. We shouldn't expect them to be pleasant. They aren't clean. They aren't painless. We must be prepared for the unpleasantness that is bound to occur. The way to minimize our losses in these situations is to remain calm.

Many people cannot face a confrontation unless they work themselves into an emotional state. This is a form of cowardice. These people hide behind their emotions instead of simply doing what must be done. Their emotional state makes an employee firing, an argument, or a criticism that much more painful and chaotic. By remaining calm, we can defuse much of the chaos in these situations.

We don't seek confrontations. We want to avoid them. Still, they are sometime unavoidable. Employees must be fired. Opponents must be challenged. People must be called to account. When these situations become necessary, we shouldn't worry over them or feel badly that they can't be avoided. We must simply accept their necessity and do what must be done, knowing that it won't be pleasant.

We should be emotionally prepared for the unpleasantness of confrontation. We must expect confrontation to turn ugly. If we expect it to be unpleasant, we can keep our calm. If we keep ourselves cool and businesslike during such situations, we can turn them into successes.

## Lesson 122

**What should you do to prepare yourself and your people for a confrontation?**

- A. Work hard preparing yourself.**
- B. Starve yourself lean and hungry.**
- C. Pamper yourself.**
- D. Say your prayers.**

*Stay close to home to await a distant enemy.*

*Stay comfortable to await the weary enemy.*

*Stay well fed to await the hungry enemy.*

*This is how you master power.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- C. Pamper yourself.

In confrontations, it is the emotional edge that makes the difference. We want to time encounters so that our opponents are at their weakest. Conversely, we want to make sure that when encounters occur, we are at our strongest.

When we can choose a site for a confrontation, we want to choose a site where we are comfortable. We want the encounter to take place in our space, where we feel comfortable and our opponent is ill at ease.

We want confrontation to take place when we are rested and our opponent is tired. If we are planning a confrontation late in the day, we should get extra rest during the day to make sure that we are prepared. If we have to travel to the encounter, we should arrive as early as possible, not only to get comfortable with the surroundings, but so that we can get as much rest as possible after our journey.

It isn't a bad idea to have a celebratory meal before the encounter. We want give ourselves the emotional fortitude we need to be successful. These confrontations should be rare enough events that we can afford the luxury of pampering ourselves before the painful showdown. This increases our unity and power.

## Lesson 123

**What should you do when your opponent seems relaxed and well prepared for a confrontation?**

- A. Delay the confrontation.**
- B. Suspect appearances.**
- C. Accept the inevitable.**
- D. Confuse the situation.**

*Don't entice the enemy when their ranks are orderly.  
You must not attack when their formations are solid  
This is how you master adaptation.*

From *The Art of War*

Answer:

- A. Delay the confrontation.

Even when confrontations are inevitable, we can delay them. Given the paramount importance of emotion to the success of these encounters, we must pick a time that is right as carefully as we pick a winning position.

We must have trust in Sun Tzu's concept of Heaven. Our opponent may be orderly and well prepared now, but they won't always be. An opportunity in which we have the emotional advantage will inevitably arise in the future.

The mistake here is impatience. Since people dread these encounters, they often work themselves up to them. When these people reach an emotional state of feeling ready, they want to go regardless of the circumstances. This is a huge error. We may be ready for the confrontation, but if the opponent is just as ready, we should wait. This is why we must be relaxed and patient rather than emotional and hurried.

Adaptation has many different shades of meaning in Sun Tzu's system, but in the context of direct confrontation, it means waiting patiently until the right opportunity presents itself.

## Lesson 124

**In a confrontation, what must you do?**

- A. Defend any position.**
- B. Disregard normal rules of competition.**
- C. Beat our opponents on every issue.**
- D. Never put your opponent's back against a wall.**

*You must follow these military rules.*

*Do not take a position facing the high ground.*

*Do not oppose those with their backs to wall.*

**From *The Art of War***

Answer:

- D. Never put your opponent's back against a wall.

Often Sun Tzu ends a chapter with a summary of the basic rules of war, reviewing his principles in the context of the chapter. Here, he ends the chapter looking at how we deal with direct confrontation.

The first rule is positioning. We never want to take an opponent on when we have a weaker position. In a violent confrontation in particular, attacking strong positions is simply too costly. In a conflict, our opponent will defend not one but many different positions. We must pick the positions in which we have the advantage.

We can take this general advice about military battles down to the level of an ordinary argument. A conflict between people usually raises a number of issues. We do not need to win every point to be successful. We should avoid attacking the strongest arguments against us. We can cede some points and still succeed in getting what we want out of the argument.

The end of this stanza reemphasizes this point. Our goal in a confrontation is not to destroy our opponents entirely. If we attempt to completely destroy them, if we put their backs up against a wall, we are only asking for a more difficult battle. By conceding to their best points, by respecting their strongest positions, we are telling them that they can lose this particular battle without being entirely devastated..

## Lesson 125

**In a direct confrontation, what must we *avoid* doing?**

- A. Following those who are fleeing.**
- B. Taking gifts our opponents offer us.**
- C. Fighting the enemies weakest forces.**
- D. Taking defensive positions.**

*Do not follow those who pretend to flee.  
Do not attack the enemy's strongest men.  
Do not swallow the enemy's bait.*

**From *The Art of War***

Answer:

- B. Taking gifts our opponents offer us.

This lesson is as familiar as the story of the Trojan horse. We must be suspicious of what happens in confrontations. It is almost certain that, in planning their side of the encounter our opponents have planned to mislead us into making a mistake. We must be continually suspicious of deception.

In this regard, we can and should follow people who are really retreating, but we don't want to follow those who are simply pretending to flee. In a conflict, a concession is often not really a concession. It is a setup. We are being positioned to face a tougher battle than we have already faced.

In the last chapter, we were advised to prepare these types of surprises for our enemies. We were told to lure enemies into traps by offering them positions that they would like. Here we are given the other side. Don't accept bait that lures us into a weaker position or forces us to face our opponents' strongest arguments.

The basic assumption here is that, in a conflict, our opponents are not going to give us anything. If we don't win the position or the point, we don't want it. Gifts are always traps.

## Lesson 126

**What should we do when an opponent tries to escape?**

- A. We should stop them.**
- B. We should let them go.**
- C. We should kill them.**
- D. We should cut them off.**

*Do not block an army that is heading home.*

*Leave an escape outlet for a surrounded army.*

*Do not press a desperate foe.*

*This is the art of war.*

**From *The Art of War***

Answer:

- B. We should let them go.

This is the logical, if—for many—uncomfortable end point of Sun Tzu's system for dealing with direct conflict and violent confrontation. We do not want such confrontations. When they are unavoidable, we must accept them and manage them as well as we can, but when the enemy loses the confrontations we have no interest in completely destroying our opponents. There are two parts to this logic.

First, we don't want to put our opponents in a position in which they must fight to the full extent of their abilities. We must not make any battle a matter of life-or-death for our opponents. This will simply increase the intensity, violence, and destruction inherent in the situation. Destroying people completely is much more expensive than simply winning the confrontation.

Second, the assumption is that there is no inherent benefit in destroying any particular force or enemy beyond beating them in unavoidable confrontations. Today's enemy may be tomorrow's enemy, but they may also be tomorrow's ally. We must respect them as people and not give them reasons for future hostility. We want to provide them a way to save their self-respect. If possible, we want them to retreat rather than to fight the battle to the end. Some confrontations may be inevitable, but winning the confrontation is all we want.