

The Nine Situations From the “Art of War” by Sun Tzu

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The Nine Situations From the “Art of War” by Sun Tzu	1
1 Purpose of this Document	1
2 The Situations	1
3 The Rules How to Move on Which Ground	2
4 The Core 4 U Rules	4
4.1 Simplify	4
4.2 Apply It - Exercises	4
4.2.1 Dispersive Ground	4
4.2.2 Facile Ground	4
4.2.3 Contentious Ground	4
4.2.4 Open Ground	5
4.2.5 Ground of Intersecting Highways	6
4.2.6 Serious Ground	6
4.2.7 Difficult Ground	6
4.2.8 Hemmed-In Ground	6
4.2.9 Desperate Ground	6
4.3 Lead your army into the right situation and judge it correctly	6
5 Conclusions	7
6 References	7

1 Purpose of this Document

Management is about strategy and implementation of it. If one accepts that this means to overcome “situations” and “obstacles” to win, it can be seen like a war. Of course, one is well advised NOT to take the analogies too literal. This document is based on chapter 11 of Sun Tzu’s book “Art of War” which was written two and a half millennia ago in what is now known as China. Whereas it is excellent advice to read the whole book we have been trying to cut out Sections and derive rules as presented in the following. The text describes how to move in which situation. According to Sun Tzu there are 9 situations, characterized by the ground we move on. These grounds are characterized by clear conditions – and they can also be seen as metaphors. Recognizing a situation and using Sun Tzu’s rules to act is a good way to avoid big mistakes. Should you find any detail questionable or to be updated, please contact us at office@mqs.at.

2 The Situations

The art of war recognizes nine varieties of ground:

- (1) Dispersive ground
- (2) Facile ground
- (3) Contentious ground
- (4) Open ground
- (5) Ground of intersecting highways
- (6) Serious ground
- (7) Difficult ground
- (8) Hemmed-in ground
- (9) Desperate ground

3 The Rules How to Move on Which Ground

Table 1 shows the nine grounds, their definition and advice or rules how to act. In order to make this useful for us in our daily world we need to translate the situation into something we feel more familiar with. An excellent example for Sun Tzu's whole book can be found in reference [5]. In order to do this for our purpose here we will look at one of the most desperate fights: "Western European countries trying to compete e.g. in textile manufacturing against Eastern European and Asian competitors which have the huge advantage of much lower costs". To that purpose we have transformed Table 1 into Table 2, which is a brief overview of our textile army.

Table 1: The nine grounds, their definition and advice or rules how to act.

No.	Name of the Ground	Description of the Ground	Rule
1	Dispersive ground	Fighting on your own ground	do not fight define the goal
2	Facile ground	A short way into hostile area	do not stop emphasize unity
3	Contentious ground	Possession of this ground means a great advantage	do not attack push your slow troops
4	Open ground	Each side has the liberty to move on this ground	do not try to block the enemy's way mind your defense
5	Ground of intersecting highways	The first out of three who occupies this ground has a huge advantage	join hands with your allies
6	Serious ground	Deep into hostile area with the enemy's fortresses in your back	steal from the enemy secure your supply path
7	Difficult ground	Country hard to traverse due to obstacles	keep steadily on the march
8	Hemmed-in ground	Ground that is only accessible through narrow paths	block all ways of retreat
9	Desperate ground.	Ground where only an immediate fight can save us from destruction	fight

Table 2: Table 1 transformed into situations, encountered in the “textile war”.

No.	Name of the Ground	Description of the Ground	Rule
1	Dispersive ground	Fighting on your own ground	do not fight define the goal
		The market of high price, high quality, special niche products - or products where spatial closeness to the customer is of importance	Make sure this goal is known and understood by all and people work towards it
2	Facile ground	A short way into hostile area	do not stop emphasize unity
		You try to succeed in your competitor's market and have made first steps	Keep your marketing and operations efforts focused and try to move fast with all sales and operations forces
3	Contentious ground	Possession of this ground means a great advantage	do not attack push your slow troops
		Contracts with major distributors or manufacturers who might buy from you	Here "pushing the slow troops" means that everybody in your "army" needs to understand how hard they have to work to KEEP these contracts, as this is "ground of intersecting highways" to your customer where he has an interest in you as long as you are com
4	Open ground	Each side has the liberty to move on this ground	do not try to block the enemy's way mind your defense
		An emerging market where the claims have not been made yet.	Do not waste energy on the active measures against your competitor - push your products. But keep an eye on the competitor to ensure the ground stay open. E.g. the competitor might try to create strategic partnerships which makes this contentious or groun
5	Ground of intersecting highways	The first out of three who occupies this ground has a huge advantage	join hands with your allies
		Contracts with major vendors for textile raw materials who sell to you	As opposed to driving suppliers into a catastrophic price war, a strategic partnership with some of them might be much more fruitful. Caution: ensure that your partner does not get "tired" and loses focus, as you he is now on dispersive ground.
6	Serious ground	Deep into hostile area with the enemy's fortresses in your back	steal from the enemy secure your supply path
		Competing in the low price segment where the others are just well prepared	Make sure you have the resources to move on this ground (secure your supplies). The most noble way in modern economics to "steal from your enemy" is to use production facilities in the competitor's terrain - globalization.
7	Difficult ground	Country hard to traverse due to obstacles	keep steadily on the march
		This is the typical situation of a company which develops new, promising products but has to overcome obstacles to reach this goal. Here this could be "special functional textiles", e.g. illuminated ones.	Stay on the march - do not question your direction every day, just because things have become difficult
8	Hemmed-in ground	Ground that is only accessible through narrow paths	block all ways of retreat
		This is slightly similar to number 7 but even "harder". The new product is now the only way to persist.	As the company goes through hemmed-in ground, make it impossible to go back. Focus your energy on THIS one goal (i.e. new product). One efficient way to do this might be to create business units and keep one away from hemmed-in ground but send another one
9	Desperate ground.	Ground where only an immediate fight can save us from destruction	fight
		You loose most customers due to the low-price policy of your competitor. Their quality is comparable to yours. No other advantages exist for you	Fighting here means to take the fastest action possible to avoid destruction. One might be, dropping thr prices tremendously. Fighting is not a long term process as it will ruin you. Your mistake was either (1) not to recognize when you were moving toward

4 The Core 4 U Rules

From our “The Core 4 U – Team” we want help you in using the rules and advice Sun Tzu has written down millennia ago. So here is what we recommend.

4.1 Simplify

Whenever things become difficult or one is looking for a strategy for the future. The analysis can be very complex and involved but there are always simple tools to help you turning your findings into action – e.g. the Excel file we offer in the next Section or tools we describe in other CORE documents [6].

4.2 Apply It - Exercises

There are a few blessed people who might understand all the implications as to “how to implement” Sun Tzu’s principles just by reading them. It is our experience that most people need to apply this at least once, potentially with a trainer [7], and are then able to use this as part of their personal “Toolbox”. To that end we have included a “9 Situation Excel Spreadsheet” in Table 3 where we ask you to try the method once for better understanding. When you try to apply this spreadsheet for your situation use the next Sections for advice.

4.2.1 Dispersive Ground

The challenge of this ground is not the enemy or the competitor. It is **DISTRACTION** in your “army”. So ask yourself what the position of your team or “army” is. Are you “fighting” at home? You should not do this for two reasons. First, your team might just be saturated and choose to drop the arms. Moreover, at home there might be excellent job-alternatives for your employees. If there are none, then this might become **Desperate Ground**. Company founders, e.g., take this into account by setting up operations in depressed areas, as people there do not have much choice. Second, when fighting at home, keep in mind the tremendous damages to your area. This is probably more difficult to translate into economic terms. So when on facile ground, either apply Sun Tzu’s rule **OR** try to lead your team into another ground. Creation of external enemies or perceived challenges has worked well in history.

4.2.2 Facile Ground

You have reached facile ground when your army is on the march. You are moving but no immediate problems are to be expected. At this point it is essential not to loose speed and focus.

4.2.3 Contentious Ground

Contentious ground can be taken as a metaphor for a technology, a method, a product that you would like to have as it means a big advantage. There is no point of attacking – the most important point is getting everybody in your team moving – especially those who are slow. You want to reach a position and those who slow you down are the risk.

Table 3: Table 2 (“textile war”) transformed into an exercise sheet for you.

No.	Name of the Ground	Description of the Ground	Action
1	Dispersive ground	Fighting on your own ground	do not fight define the goal
2	Facile ground	A short way into hostile area	do not stop emphasize unity
3	Contentious ground	Possession of this ground means a great advantage	do not attack push your slow troops
4	Open ground	Each side has the liberty to move on this ground	do not try to block the enemy's way mind your defense
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4.2.4 Open Ground

In contrast to the previous example, in open ground there is freedom to move and also no preference to “occupy” something. Use the freedom and move. Do not bother blocking the enemy as this brings you no advantage. But make sure the ground stays open – this is one way to mind your defense. Watch the enemy to keep the distance

4.2.5 Ground of Intersecting Highways

This ground describes a situation where at least 3 parties are active. If you cannot claim this ground alone easily you should form strategic partnerships with potential allies.

4.2.6 Serious Ground

This situation is characterized by the fact that you are not moving deep into your enemy's territory and you have hostile fortresses surrounding you. You should make sure, your supply chain is intact and money to fund it for a certain time is in place – e.g. in economic competition make sure you have the means to compete for some time without collapsing just due to lack of resources. Moreover one of the advantages you can use in that situation is to “steal from the enemy”. You are there – take the resources where you can. Recruit employees from the competitor, try to establish a production site at his home-market, using e.g. the cheap labor he has available, build a plant there with funding from the country your competitor operates in.

4.2.7 Difficult Ground

Difficult ground is reached when you are on the march to reach an ambitious goal with many obstacles on the way. It is not the enemy or the fighting that endangers your progress – the main challenge is NOT to lose pace as you go, even if numerous obstacles are to be overcome. Hannibal's march across the Alps might come to mind.

4.2.8 Hemmed-In Ground

For this ground there are wonderful analogies in high tech competition. Narrow paths can be ONE technology leading to success. Almost no camera producer will survive without introducing digital cameras. This is the narrow path of technology everybody has to walk. Similar developments can be seen in the automotive industry (common rail Diesel) or in the chip industry (dual core processors).

4.2.9 Desperate Ground

Fight! At this point, destruction or defeat is imminent if you do not fight. In modern economy it is difficult to assess such ground correctly unless the situation is you have reached facile ground when your army is on the march. You are moving but no immediate

4.3 Lead your army into the right situation and judge it correctly

There are 2 additional rules which are important to observe if you want to derive the correct use from the principles described above.

- Be aware of the fact that you need to CORRECTLY IDENTIFY the nature of the ground you are moving on. The nature of ground – especially metaphoric ones – can change fast as boundary conditions change. New players can emerge. Patents might emerge. Custom barriers might be erected or might fall. New products can revolutionize a whole market (e.g. CDs/DVDs and digital cameras which meant a huge blow to magnetic media and chemical picture media).
- The correct judgment and rapid change of grounds can be turned into an additional advantage by you. Either lead your team into a different ground or try to change the ground, by changing the boundary conditions if you can, to use your strengths.

5 Conclusions

Sun Tzu has defined the grounds for us and left us with advice. Our part is the following:

- Study Sun Tzu's advice
- Learn how to apply it in some theoretical exercises before really using it
- Define your case
- Make appropriate connections between metaphoric grounds and the pictorial descriptions of real landscapes
- Make sure you judge the grounds you move in correctly
- Adopt to the ground you are on and/or lead your team to the grounds that are of advantage to you

If you should find Sections not clear enough or if information, you expected, was missing, please contact us at office@mqs.at.

6 References

[1] For training, consulting, project management and part-time engineers/managers please contact us under office@mqs.at.

[2] <http://www.chinapage.com/sunzi-e.html#11>.

[3] Sonshi.com, the largest Web site for Sun Tzu's The Art of War: <http://www.sonshi.com/>.

[4] Sunzi, Die Kunst des Krieges – edited by James Clavell, 1988 Knauer Munich, ISBN 3-426-66645-6.

[5] Sun Tzu für Manager – die 13 ewigen Gebote der Strategie – Werner Schwanenfelder, 2004 Campus Frankfurt, ISBN 3-593-37538-9.

[6] e.g. an 8D-report at our Website - "Management" and then "Tools".

[7] For training and consulting contact us under Services@TheCore4U.com, for Project Management and part-time engineers/managers please contact us under Projects@TheCore4U.com.