

Strategy in the line of fire

Rhymer Rigby



The day started at London's Westminster Pier with a speedboat trip down the Thames to HMS President. Some might see this as a bit of a James Bond-style gimmick but for Chris Hart, UK partner of consultants McKinney Rogers "it blows away the cobwebs".

McKinney Rogers is an international management consultancy that draws 80 per cent of its partners from military backgrounds. On a sunny day last month, I attended one of its courses, which had been billed as a taster on how to apply military strategy and tactics to the boardroom.

The invitation declared: "Pre-emptive strike: see how many of the world's top businesses need military know how to win the corporate battle".

For as long as business and war have existed, managers have been trying to adapt military tactics to the running of companies. The idea became especially popular in the 1980s, when it was trendy for ambitious, go-getting managers to fill their bookshelves with historic tomes such as Sun Tzu's *The Art of War* and *On War* by Carl von Clausewitz, the Prussian general. More contemporary titles included *Marketing Warfare* by Al Ries and Jack Trout and *Business War Games* by Benjamin Gilad and Todd Stitzer.

The idea was simple. Whether it was long-term strategy or short-term tactics, there was much business could learn from thousands of years of military history.

When the end of the 1980s ushered in the more caring 1990s, soft skills came to the fore in management thinking and military strategy faded into the background. But with tough times upon us again, should we revisit the battlefield?

There are certainly those who think so. In the US, organisations such as Applied Battlefield Concepts claim to take you "from the battlefield to the boardroom" with a course modelled on the US Army's "battlefield staff rides", which study historic battles to find lessons that can be applied to the corporate world.

Mr Hart, a former British Army captain, agreed. "During a time of war, the military use tried and tested strategies and methodologies and you can certainly draw an analogy between the complexity and ambiguity of war and a recession," he explained. "You need absolute clarity and alignment."

After the speedboat ride, we started with the opening eight minutes of *Gladiator*, the Oscar-winning film in which Russell Crowe's General Maximus vanquishes the barbarians from northern Europe.

In spite of having seen the film a dozen times and heard it alluded to as a management exemplar on any number of occasions, I have never really understood how the first battle scene relates to boardroom strategy. When Mr Hart explained the significance, it finally made some sense.

The barbarians' normal strategy was to lure the Romans into the woods where they had the advantage. But Maximus switched tack: by having his archers and catapult operators set fire to the woods, he would drive the barbarians out into the open where the Romans might have the upper hand.

It was, Mr Hart said, all about understanding the landscape of your enemies (the competition) as well as aligning the goals of your foot soldiers (the employees) with those of your emperor (the CEO).

However, the battlefield for our session was the more prosaic car industry. And our goal, no less ambitious than achieving a Pax Romana, was to build an environmentally-friendly British car by 2015.

We were split into pairs with the task of studying the competitive landscape. I was lucky enough to be partnered with Russell Dickerson, the operations director of global renewable energy at RSA, the insurance company. We set to work trying to understand BMW's green strategy while the other pairs applied themselves to the rest of the world's ever-shrinking pool of viable carmakers.

Later, when we presented our findings, it was revealing how much people viewed the exercise through the prism of their own disciplines; it is curiously impressive, for instance, how marketeers are able to position a brand accurately before they actually know what they are selling.

We were then split into two large teams (I was, alas, separated from my useful partner) and under the leadership of two McKinney Rogers' consultants, were told to come up with our final car plan. I liked our brand – the Morris Minor reborn with a green sheen. However, I was a little less convinced about our overall offering.

Instead of choosing to revolutionise the automobile by creating a non-fossil-fuel car, the group decided on a super-efficient conventional car, made from largely recycled materials.

Matters were then wrapped up and it was back to the speedboat for those of us who didn't find the ride a bit too bumpy the first time.

These sessions normally take two days, so some parts were necessarily rushed and truncated. Still, as Kathryn Jackson-Day, HR director at Bacardi Martini, said, "it was a good introduction to strategic planning and talking about your competitors is an excellent discipline to do". Or, as John Burke, the company's marketing director, put it, "an enjoyable aperitif".

I did have one quibble. For something branded as military, it all seemed a bit civilian to me, from the moment we left General Maximus onwards.

Still, after 20 years of drawing business lessons from everything from Shakespeare to mice and their recently moved cheese, I'm pleased to see that military strategy is making a comeback.

Financial Times, New York, June 16, 2009, Management, online.