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Little Green Army Men

STRATEGY

Success Is in the Setup

It's one of the few times a five-year-old slows down. Just pour out a bag of little green army men and watch. Their minds give strategic consideration to each soldier and its meticulous placement. The time they spend setting up their army is enormous in comparison to the time it takes to play out the battle. Little green army men prove that success is in the setup.

Toy soldiers have been toy box regulars for centuries. Tiny military figures have been found in Egyptian tombs and Prussian palaces. They grew to their greatest popularity in the seventeenth century, at which time they were mass-produced for wargames as a pastime for the aristocracy of the day. Today, worldwide societies remain dedicated to the art of miniature war-gaming with toy soldiers.

Through the years these soldiers have been constructed from clay, wood, flour, paper, and sundry metals. In the late 1940s, with the development of plastics and the advent of the Second

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World War, they took the form and the name they retain today—little green army men. Though they have changed colors and weapons, they remain a favorite of children around the world. They have even made the jump to digital by becoming the star of a series of video games by 3DO.



It is in the moments of setting up those miniature toys that children formulate strategic plans of strike and counterstrike. They learn that good plans take careful thought, contain multiple steps, and create endless scenarios. Those little soldiers teach you that careful preparation increases your odds for victory. Henry Ford taught this principle when he said, “Before everything else, getting ready is the secret of success.”

For the leader, superior planning is more than keeping a to-do list and a calendar. It involves a calculated strategy and an intentional planning process. Whether in business or in your personal life, you have to dedicate yourself to planning to achieve positive results. “The will to win is not nearly as important as the will to prepare to win”—that’s how Bobby Knight, the winningest coach in the history of men’s college basketball, puts it. Wins seldom come without careful setup and commitment to that plan.

Planning consists of analysis, preparation, practice, and further analysis. The military utilizes checkpoints for a myriad of reasons, but at the heart of every checkpoint lies accountability.

Checkpoints measure the movement of people, inspect what they are carrying, determine how fast they are moving, and evaluate what types of people are involved. Let's examine five checkpoints that provide success in the setup or strategy phase. Remember, you must work through these in the order presented.

The Checkpoint of Involvement

When children pour out a bag of army men, they automatically get down on the floor with the troops. You just can't play with army men from a distance. The same is true in your setup phase. Your viewpoint must be the same one as the people with whom you are planning. By definition, strategic planning is grand in scale—focused on the big picture—and yet the place to start is on the ground. Gone are the days of unchecked power, lack of accountability, and the great gulf between management and labor. It is time to get to know those who work within the organization.

Herb Kelleher, the cofounder and former CEO of Southwest Airlines, understood the power of getting to know the people within his organization at every level. An article about Kelleher written by Allan Cohen, James Watkinson, and Jenny Boone recounts a time he traveled to congratulate a team for their outstanding performance and the impact it had on one of his employees:

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During his visit Herb took the time to speak with everyone, and Grant [Grant Bowker, the station supervisor] remembers how Herb asked about his family and children. Grant appreciated the genuine consideration that Herb showed to everyone, but it was their second meeting 2 years later that stuck in his mind, when Herb arrived to celebrate the launch of a new plane and upon seeing Grant he remembered his name and asked how his children were doing—also by name.¹

In the classic leadership book *In Search of Excellence*, Tom Peters calls this MBWA, or “Managing By Walking Around.”² This practice allows you to really understand the people you lead. Two of the best by-products of MBWA are open communication and genuine trust that develops within your team. Five minutes of face-to-face personal contact will do more than a week’s worth of e-mails. Instead of calling people to your office, consider meeting them in theirs. It is less threatening, and yet your presence is felt around the office. It requires more time but connects you with the people who get the real work done.

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Get to know your organization. Get down where the action is; talk with people at all levels. Ask questions and listen. A couple of questions to ask are “What project are you working

on now?” and “What obstacles are you facing?” There is no substitute for firsthand knowledge of the people, the programs, and the problems the people face. You cannot effectively reach the next checkpoint until you know your team. Remember, strategy begins at ground zero.

The Checkpoint of Assessment

As children start to play with army men, they look them over to see what they have. They count how many and what kinds. There's the radioman, the flamethrower, the crawling guy, and every child's least favorite: the minesweeper. You can't know your organization's potential until you know the potential of your people. Even a five-year-old understands there is purpose in their differences.

It's amazing to watch children actually go through something very similar to the SWOT analysis with the little green army men even though they have never heard of this principle before. The SWOT analysis helps plan strategies and is credited to Albert Humphrey, who first used this method while leading a research project at Stanford University. SWOT is the analysis of an organization's strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats. When applying this to your planning, you must

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recognize that strengths and weaknesses are typically internal descriptions, while opportunities and threats are typically external issues. SWOT sounds a lot like planning for battle, and kids at play figured this out ages before it was a staple in business schools.

You can see the wheels turning in the child's mind as he works through the setup of his little green army men. The strategy involves analysis and planning through various areas of counting. Just like the child, you count three different areas in this stage of planning.

1. Count the Troops

This is a quantity inventory. How many people do you have to tackle this project? Take into consideration the ratio of people needed proportionate to the project. This information is important because the group you lead sets the limits of some strategy. Bill George, the former CEO of Medtronic, states in his book *Authentic Leadership*, that “to build a top quality team around you, it is essential early in your tenure to assess whether you have the people in place who can enable the organization to reach its long-term goals.”³

The questions to ask in this stage are: Who is available? Who is necessary? Who has potential? Who is in the wrong place? If the count of people is not proportionate to the task or project, then you can recruit more people or adjust the task to an intermediate level of accomplishment. Some people fail