BUSINESS AND THE BLITZKRIEG

By H. William Dettmer

It would be foolish, however, to disguise the gravity of the hour. It would be still more foolish to lose heart and courage or to suppose that well-trained, well-equipped armies numbering three or four millions of men can be overcome in the space of a few weeks, or even months, by a scoop or raid of mechanized vehicles, however formidable. We may look with confidence to the stabilization of the Front in France...

—Winston Churchill, May 19, 1940

Prophecic words—too bad they were completely wrong. Thirty-two days later, in the same railroad car, at the same place where Germany signed an unconditional surrender in 1918, Hitler accepted the surrender of France.

During World War II, no battle group struck more fear into the hearts of its opponents that the German panzer corps. In 1939-40, fast-moving tank divisions, operating in independent, flexible, small groups, swept across Poland in 26 days. The Baltic States fell in less than a week, Denmark in four hours, and France in five weeks. [2] British forces on the continent were pushed back against the sea at Dunkirk. The only reason they survived to be evacuated across the English Channel (by small boat flotilla) was that the Germans inexplicably decided to stop their advance. Later, in 1942, Rommel’s panzers similarly ran the north coast of Africa from Egypt to Morocco, devastating British forces.

The British and French armies, in particular, were standing, well-trained professional armies. Why, then, were the German panzer corps so effective while their opponents acted so confused?

Learning from Experience

The difference: The Germans learned more from their experience in World War I than the Allies (including the Americans) did. While the British, French, and Americans focused on deploying technology improvements, they pretty much prepared mentally to re-fight the direct, slow-moving frontal engagements of “the war to end all wars.” (Too bad it really wasn’t that!)

Spearheaded by the creative Prussian military genius, Heinz Guderian, the German Army developed the concept of maneuver warfare we know as the blitzkrieg—literally, “lightning war”—and it caught the world totally by surprise in 1939. [2]

For decades, businesses throughout the world have operated much the same way the French and British did in 1939: they’re fighting the last engagement, albeit with newer technology, such as the Internet, e-business, and sophisticated information systems such as Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP). But their thinking, and the behavior that springs from it, remains the same as it always has been.

However, as in 1939, times have changed. While the world has “grown smaller,” it is in many respects a less stable place now than it was in the 1930s. This is especially true of economics and politics.

Maneuver Warfare

German tacticians created the blitzkrieg to defeat discrete, known opponents through speed, flexibility, agility, and surprise—a concept that can be generally characterized as maneuver warfare. It has long been accepted that these same attributes of
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finger tips to the instrument—instinctively and inherently correct the first time.

_Fingerspitzengefühl_ is inextricably tied to _einheit_. As a team works together over time, they become better at what they do, both individually and collectively. This breeds confidence in one another, which is fundamental to realizing mutual trust. Who would you trust more: a world-class performer with whom you’d worked regularly, or a newcomer you’ve never seen before and know only by their résumé or press notices?

_Auftragstaktik._ (pronounced “OWF-trags-TACTic”) This is a virtual or implied contract between superior and subordinate. Simply put, the superior tacitly avoids ordering a subordinate to do something. He or she asks the subordinate to accept the responsibility for getting it done. _Einheit_ and _fingerspitzengefühl_ figure prominently into the _auftragstaktik_. Because the team has worked together repeatedly for a long time, they have developed an intimate knowledge and respect for each other’s skills and capabilities. Superiors know what subordinates are capable of and where their limitations lie. For their part of the contract, superiors avoid asking subordinates to take on responsibilities beyond their capabilities without having a valid, justifiable reason. For their part of the contract, if they accept the superior’s charter, subordinates agree to accomplish what has been asked of them, applying the steel self-discipline that comes of _fingerspitzengefühl_ and every last ounce of their effort to get the task accomplished as the superior expects it to be done. The subordinate implicitly trusts the superior not to ask more of him or her than they are capable of doing. The superior implicitly trust the subordinate to deliver what he or she has agreed to do without continually having to be checked or prodded.

_Schwerpunkt._ (pronounced “SHVER-punked”) Literally, “hard or difficult point,” the real meaning is more like center of gravity, or focus point—the place where the majority of effort is directed. For the German panzers, this was the target of the main thrust of combat efforts. In the practice of constraint management [3], this is the system constraint. Two underlying assumptions are inherent in the concept of _schwerpunkt_. The first is that in a complex operation, some parts of the organization—the ones most directly responsible for the _schwerpunkt_—are more critical to immediate success than others. But going hand in hand with the _schwerpunkt_ is the idea of _nebenpunkt_, or essential supporting activities.

The classic (and most successful) example of the military application of the blitzkrieg—and _schwerpunkt_ and _nebenpunkt_ as well—is the German attack on France in 1940 through the Ardennes Forest. With French and Belgian troops massed in the Belgian plains against German Army Group A, German Army Group B moved quickly through the narrow roads of the Ardennes toward the city of Sedan. Thinking this approach improbable, the French defended Sedan with third-rate troops and reserves. As the Germans slashed through the Ardennes, the French defenders broke ranks and ran, even before the panzers completed their crossing of the Meuse River. Army Group B wheeled around to the north and enveloped the French and Belgian armies from the rear. (Turn this whole layout 90 degrees clockwise, and you essentially have General Schwarzkopf’s “left hook” maneuver with the VII and XVIII Corps in Operation Desert Storm.)

In the conquest of France, the _schwerpunkt_ was the Ardennes penetration. The _nebenpunkt_ was the supporting role played by Army Group A, whose primary function was to draw the attention of French and Belgian forces (which it did most successfully) while Army Group B circled around from behind. We’ll...
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examine this concept of schwel punkt and neben punkt more in the fourth installment of this series.

Leading by Intent

The immediate benefit in einheit, fingerspitzengefühl, auftragstaktik, and schwel punkt accrues primarily to the senior commander (the CEO, if you will). Rather than having to specify in detail everything he wants each subordinate to do, the commander can lead by intent. The leader of a blitzkrieg-oriented organization can describe the desired outcome and assign the resources to trusted team members, who, by virtue of their mutual trust, intuitive skill, and complete understanding and acceptance of the mission contract, can be utterly depended on to deliver the results. Subordinates are comfortable exercising their own initiative in their pursuit of the mission, and superiors are completely comfortable letting them do so.

Summary

What do the blitzkrieg and its underlying concepts have to do with a systems approach to management? As we saw in the first installment, the increasing complexity and size of the economic and political organizations in our world make an authoritarian control model impractical. No leader of such a system can possibly keep tabs on everything. In as unstable and dynamic an environment as we live in today, changes are demanded faster than their impacts can be analyzed—sometimes even faster than information about the need to change can be passed.

Success depends on responsiveness and agility, which in turn depend on the independence of team members to act without constantly requiring approval. Such independence depends on their willingness to take initiative, which in turn rests on a climate of mutual trust (einheit), intuitive skill and capability (fingerspitzengefühl), the confidence and assurance of an implied mission contract (aufragstaktik), and an unswerving focus on the most important effort (schwerpunkt).

In the future, all organizations will have to become faster, more responsive, more agile, and more unpredictable (to their competitors) or risk being relegated to “loser” status. And we know what losers do—they let things happen, or watch things happen and wonder what happened! We don’t want that to be us, do we?

Tactical agility is the ability of a friendly force to react faster than the enemy. It is essential to seizing, retaining, and exploiting the initiative. Agility is mental and physical. Agile commanders quickly comprehend unfamiliar situations, creatively apply doctrine, and make timely decisions. [4].

ENDNOTES

ABOUT BILL DETTMER

Bill Dettmer is a world recognised authority on Theory of Constraints & Total Quality. His publications include:

- Goldratt's Theory of Constraints (ASQ Quality Press, 1997)
- Breaking the Constraints to World-Class Performance (ASQ Quality Press, 1998),
- Strategic Navigation (ASQ Quality Press, 2003),
- Co-author (with Eli Schragenheim) of Manufacturing at Warp Speed (CRC St. Lucie Press, 2000).

ABOUT TOCCA

TOCCA is an Australian management consultancy, specialising in delivering high-impact systems-based solutions based on the principles of TOC (Theory of Constraints), and using the tools concepts and techniques of TOC, LEAN, & Six Sigma.

For more information please refer to our website at www.tocca.com.au or David Hodes at david@tocca.com.au
KNOWLEDGE TREE
Application of the Blitzkrieg Concept to Business Competition

113 Leaders can begin leading through broader missions and intent, rather than formally, specifically assigned tasks.

112 Communication among superiors, subordinates, and contemporaries can be implicit, rather than explicit.

110 Implicit communication means that subordinates can “get inside the heads” of leaders and understand intuitively what they want.

111 Superiors, subordinates, and contemporaries achieve an unprecedented level of mutual understanding.

109 The organizational team achieves a high level of confidence in one another’s ability to perform individual and group tasks.

107 Leaders feel no need to continually check and control everybody in the organization.

108 Leaders and subordinates alike enjoy a high level of intuitive knowledge and skill [FINGERSPITZENGEFUHL].

104 The organization achieves mutual trust, unity and cohesion [EINHEIT].

105 Individuals achieve a HIGH level of intuitive skill or knowledge.

106 Experienced, skilled individuals eventually become supervisors and managers.

103 Individuals devote the time and energy to developing skill, experience, and expertise.

102 Skill and expertise require time and repetition to develop.

101 An extended experience of training and working together engenders mutual trust, unity, and cohesion.

100 Superiors, subordinates, and contemporaries alike train and work together over an extended period of time.

218 DESIRED EFFECT
The organization defeats the competition.

214 The organization’s reactions speed up.
215 Competitors are confused by the organization’s agility.
216 Confusion causes hesitation.

212 The entire team is capable of fast reaction and adjustment when tactical situations change (faster decision cycles).
213 Competitors can’t react as fast.

209 Tactical situations change, sometimes drastically, on short notice.
210 Both subordinates and leaders expect that subordinates will sometimes ignore previous directives in the interest of furthering the mission (flexibility of action).

206 The competitive environment is dynamic, sometimes volatile.
207 Subordinates are comfortable exercising individual initiative.

113 Leaders can begin leading through broader missions and intent, rather than formally, specifically assigned tasks.

(From p. 1)

208 The exercise of effective leadership becomes an implied contract between a leader and the led [AUFTRAG].

AND

204 Subordinates know superiors will not order them to do something they can’t, or endanger them for no valid strategic reason.

AND

203 Broader missions and intent depend on individual initiative.

AND

205 The entire organization is unified in action and direction. [SCHWERPUNKT]

AND

104 The organization achieves mutual trust, unity and cohesion [EINHEIT].

(From p. 1)

201 Leaders ensure that everyone understands what the main focus of effort is.

AND

202 All activities of the organization are committed to support the focus of effort.

AND

200 Organizations are most successful when a unified efforts is directed toward a main focal (leverage) point.

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Application of the Blitzkrieg Concept to Business Competition
Adapted from Richards, Chet. Certain to Win. Xlibris (2004)