



# Have a plan if you want to end up on the winning side

  
**THE SUNDAY TIMES**  
February 19 2017



## General Sir Peter Wall

February 2017

Were it not for the Normandy landings in June 1944, we probably wouldn't be worrying about Brexit now. Europe would have become a rather different place.

General Dwight D Eisenhower's operation to liberate occupied Europe, conceived from his headquarters at 31 St James's Square, was based on the most complex military plan ever written.

The moving parts took years to assemble. For bold and intricate plans, nothing else comes close.

So why did he say, "In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable"?

People adhere doggedly to plans even when they are overtaken by events. Planning, on the other hand, is a training of the mind to handle uncertainty – a trait that is the lifeblood of agile organisations.

My background is in the British Army. It employs more than 100,000 people across

30-40 countries and has annual operating costs of about £7bn.

Tautly regulated, the army has a reputation that relies upon its ethics, values and leadership code – and ultimately on the benefits it delivers for its customers, the government and the nation.

Leadership is the driving influence on the army's ability to serve the nation's needs. As a military commander, whether leading a 30-strong platoon or a 60,000-strong corps, your role is mostly about focusing your soldiers' wills and capability on the getting the job done.

How, then, does the army get its people aligned behind a fighting mission? At any level, the start point is building trust and consensus within the leadership team. Its members expect to be involved in setting the overall aim and objectives, to question the thinking and to inject their ideas.

With their input, not only will the plan be more resilient, but the leadership team will understand it better and be

Peter is an occasional author and a speaker on leadership and geopolitics, drawing upon his experience of running the Army and working at the top of government. He is a visiting professor at Exeter University and Chairman of the think tank, Policy Exchange. He is CEO of Amicus and a director of the General Dynamics Corporation.

+44 7437 446599  
office@amicuslimited.com  
www.amicuslimited.com

# Have a plan if you want to end up on the winning side

February 19 2017, The Sunday Times

---



more aligned with it. They will carry mutual responsibility for the success of the overall mission, not just their own part in it.

Planning involves understanding opportunity, identifying potential courses of action, selecting the best option and setting out how to achieve it. As circumstances change, the plan is refined.

As the great Prussian commander Helmuth von Moltke the Elder said, “No plan survives first contact with the enemy.” In my experience, many plans do not survive contact with our own side, either. This is not an admission of incompetence. It is the reality of battle: even the simplest things are really hard.

Clear and concise orders are needed. In the military, those orders are about what has to be achieved. How it is done within the overall intent is up to the responsible commander. At every level, commanders are

empowered to take local decisions and adapt their actions to the unfolding situation. Those leaders with the most flair will do it naturally, others need a framework within which to excel.

That is why planning matters – the cultivation of a mind-training process that allows people to handle uncertainty.

The guidelines used by military planners are known as the principles of war. They have evolved over 2,500 years, taking account of what has worked and what has not.

Luminaries such as Sun Tzu, Machiavelli and Clausewitz have each had their say. They provide a handrail for the planning, preparation and conduct of operations as well as group attributes such as flexibility and morale. These principles are taught at Sandhurst, at the very beginning of officer training, because they are

as relevant to tactical thinking at the “sharp end” as they are to top-level strategic planning.

There are 10 principles. The master principle is selection and maintenance of the aim: what are you actually trying to do? Once you know, stick to it. Failing to focus is the key mistake of many commanders and businesses.

Unless circumstances change dramatically, knowing what you want to achieve is essential to success. This is closely allied to intelligence: a clear understanding of your own situation, the market and your competitors, as well as any other conditions that influence your outcomes, such as exchange rates, taxes and regulation.

If you don’t know the terrain – regulations or geography – your plans could come unstuck for reasons you could have known. If you underestimate the enemy or competition, you will end up wasting resources in areas you did not need to and risk failure, too.

Offensive action is about seizing and exploiting the initiative. Most of us have had that sinking feeling when we realise we do not hold the initiative in an aspect of our job. This is the time for decisive action and, to use the current slogan, to take back control.

If you have the initiative, exploit it fully. If you don’t, get it back somehow.

# Have a plan if you want to end up on the winning side

February 19 2017, The Sunday Times

---

Genuine offensive action is bold, to a degree that makes you feel uncomfortable. Business acquisitions or the launch of new products are examples of offensive action, with many characteristics that are similar to military interventions and attacks. Deception, surprise, psychology and communication; each plays a part.

The adage “the more you use, the less you lose” means the bigger your force for a given military operation, the less it will be depleted.

More importantly, you significantly increase your chances of success. Mass, or concentration of resources, is critical to delivering your objectives.

The resources may be financial, materiel, people or intellectual effort. They should be concentrated to maximise the prospects of success.

An austere approach may seem tempting, but creeping up to the line may mean missing it altogether. Get it done decisively, with momentum, to move on quickly to the next goal or objective.

The concept of unity of effort was best summed up by a former boss of mine, who would say: “I want one neck to put my hands around.”

Putting all the resources devoted to a particular objective under one person with the authority and responsibility to deliver the outcome. That person was in no doubt that he or she was in charge, and those who weren't had no excuse to meddle. This clarity is essential to good order in complex environments, and proper accountability.

These principles can be embedded into business thinking quickly.

Reading provides the basics and workshops with case studies bring them alive. They give a useful check list for improving your planning, and testing that of your opponents, so you can exploit their weaknesses. They can help you develop a more focused and competitive approach in your market.

Companies that have used these principles have seen clear benefits in performance and competitive advantage, and better employee engagement – or morale, in military terms – because we all love being on the winning side.

## The principles of war:

### **Selection and maintenance of the aim:**

Direct your efforts towards a clear, attainable aim

### **Offensive action:**

Seize, hold and exploit the initiative

### **Concentration of resources:**

Decisive, synchronised application of resources

### **Intelligence:**

In-depth understanding of your situation, competitors' capability and the future trends to enable evidence-based decisions

### **Economy of effort:**

Judicious allocation of resources

### **Morale:**

The will to win

### **Unity of effort:**

Invest authority in a single person

### **Security:**

Protect vital information and property

### **Simplicity:**

Simple plans and clear, concise orders

### **Flexibility:**

Adapt to changing circumstances