

This is the second of a series of 12 articles on systems thinking, a way of understanding complex organizations and society offering significant promise for improving the leadership and management of commercial companies, not-for-profit organizations, and government agencies.

Part 2

Business and the Blitzkrieg

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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 [1:17-18]

Prophetic 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 than 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 maneuver warfare can be translated into other domains, such as business.

But whereas the military application of maneuver warfare is aimed at discrete, specific opponents, its application to business may be less distinct. Yes, maneuver tactics in business can be particularly effective in head-to-head competition between specific competitors. But their greater value may be in their ability to help a business respond rapidly to a volatile, ever-changing operating environment. In other words, the concepts of maneuver warfare can help organizations deal with the uncertainty of a world that, more than ever before, is not standing still. Moreover, by understanding maneuver warfare as a potential strategic advantage, companies can develop a level of comfort embracing what Peter Drucker has called “discontinuous change”—even seeking it out or, better yet, leading it!

Our real opponent in business is the uncertainty of a volatile, constantly changing environment, as much as it is any particular competitor. In such circumstances, is the ability to change directions (and actions) “on a dime” any less important just because we're responding to events, rather than opponents?

There's an old saying: “When life hands you lemons, make lemonade.” Sound simple enough, but the ability to make this kind of adjustment on short notice demands the flexibility and agility—the responsiveness—that maneuver warfare offers. But it's one thing to *say* this; it's quite another to *apply* it. So it's appropriate to examine the philosophical foundation on which the blitzkrieg and its success were built.

The Conceptual Foundation of Blitzkrieg Tactics

The ability of the German panzer divisions to sow such dramatic confusion and fear among their adversaries depended on four interrelated concepts that were impressed into every member of those units: *einheit*, *fingerspitzengefühl*, *auftragstaktik*, and *schwerpunkt*. [1:51-59] Okay, so these words are a real mouthful for those not fluent in German. Let's take them one at a time.

Einheit. (pronounced “aye'n-height”). The literal meaning of the word is mutual trust. It's the sense of well being a member of a cohesive team realizes from knowing that he or she can depend utterly on fellow team members—superiors, subordinates, and contemporaries alike—for help, support, or just faithfully doing what's expected of them.

Mutual trust can't be mandated or imposed. It develops over time—it's *earned*, by all parties to the mutuality, and that doesn't happen overnight. *Einheit* is more than simple camaraderie, though it includes that, too. It's *knowing* that other team members will be in the right place at the right time to do whatever the situation dictates in fulfilling their responsibilities for mission accomplishment.

Fingerspitzengefühl. (pronounced “finger-SHPITZ-in-geh-fyool”) Literally “fingertip feel,” or “touch,” it really implies intuitive skill. This is the consummate skill in doing something that comes from having done it so many times, or for so long, that, as the song of the same name goes, “nobody does it better.” It's the kind of expertise that world-class musicians such as Yitzhak Perlman or Yoyo Ma have. They don't *need* to read the music and consciously translate it to hand movements; the music just flows from their heads, where they hear it in all its detail, through their fingertips 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 examine this concept of *schwerpunkt* and *nebenpunkt* more in the fourth installment of this series.

Leading by Intent

The immediate benefit in *einheit*, *fingerspitzengefühl*, *auftragstaktik*, and *schwerpunkt* 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 (*auftragstaktik*), 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

1. Richards, Chet. *Certain to Win*. Xlibris Corporation, 2004.
2. Macksey, Kenneth. *Guderian: Creator of the Blitzkrieg*. New York: Stein and Day Publishers, 1975.
3. Goldratt, E.M. *The Haystack Syndrome: Sifting Information from the Data Ocean*. Great Barrington, MA: The North River Press, 1990.
4. U.S. Army Field Manual 3-0, Operations