

More on Tactics Versus Strategy

This supplement includes a few more details and commentary on the difference between strategy and tactics the arguments in Chapter 6, several from the point of the view of the military.

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Problem Definition 1—Tactics are the How

One of the examples of the idea of “tactics are doing,” is the concept of “deploying strategy.” But the concept of deploying is a dangerous one and leaders deploy a lot less than they think they do. Deploying implies placing people and assets in nice, neat ways with good foresight, and conjures images of armchair commanders pushing armies around on the situation map. Perhaps frameworks are deployed in the sense of putting it out there to be followed by everyone, and perhaps certain assets are deployed in the sense of applying a tool or equipment for the job. But deploying something like capital, for instance, is highly constrained. To change where capital is going requires a change in framework and often

requires significant time because it's not feasible to suddenly remove money from businesses.

It's better to think of deployment as enabling and demanding the design of a proper frameworks throughout the organization, and helping people adapt and discover the way to execute when implementing those frameworks.

Consider that if “tactics” means nothing more than implementing or deploying or taking actions and decisions, then the term tactics isn't needed at all.

Problem Definition 2—Tactics are for Short Term

Jack Welch said, “Management is all about managing in the short term, while developing the plans for the long term.” When he was managing in the short term, were his actions not governed by the long-term “plans” developed earlier?

A Case of Incorrectly limiting Strategy to the War Only

Isolating rules to a given time horizon is not limited to Tactics versus strategy. British military historian, B. H. Liddell Hart states, “...while the horizon of strategy is bounded by the war, grand strategy looks beyond the war to the subsequent peace.”¹ This implies that there is nothing on the battlefield that is relevant to the peace. Yet is hard to believe that treatment of enemy soldiers and civilians has no impact on the peace. Is gentle and genuinely thoughtful treatment of them going to have a different impact on the peace than abusive and neglectful treatment? Would an approach of destruction of churches, schools and hospitals versus effort to preserve these structures at all costs have an impact on the peace? Perhaps there are cases where hatred is so strong that no matter what the army does, it will not have an effect on the peace, but in general these obviously do. This is not just a heartwarming thought of kindness in war leading to a lasting peace, the point can be made just as easily through the example that brutal destruction of an enemy might be the only path

¹ B. H. Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 1991, p 322

to a peace, and that preservation of the enemies schools, worship dwellings and hospitals will be viewed as a sign of weakness.

The conclusion is that strategy and tactics are for all horizons.

Problem Definition 3—Tactics are for Lower-Level Leaders (politico/military levels of war)

Chapter 6 introduced the problem caused by misinterpreting politico/military levels of war. Levels of war were first articulated clearly by the Prussian military theorist General Carl von Clausewitz (1780–1831):²

1. *Tactics* teaches the use of armed forces in the engagement
2. *Strategy* teaches the use of engagements for the object of the war
3. The objects of war are given by the government's *policy*

Or in the language of the emergent approach:

- The government's framework for employing all state capabilities—including economic, military, and information—toward aspirations such as national security, global peacekeeping, or attacking an enemy is called *policy* (also called *grand strategy*).
- The military leaders' frameworks for determining how to utilize the branches of the armed forces in support of the policy is called *strategy*.
- The field commanders' frameworks for employing battle capability in support of the strategy are called *tactics*.

It is from the levels of war that we get the label “strategic” for the non-battlefield actions intended to reduce the enemy's ability to fight and “tactical” for battlefield actions in

2 (Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret, 1976) See for instance, sections starting on pages 86 and 127. See also Gray, *Modern Strategy*, 1999, Chapter 1. Clausewitz's “On War” is widely available, but the Howard and Paret edition is comprehensive and includes commentary.

support of troops. Aerial bombing of factories, power plants, or seaports is *strategic bombing* and aerial bombing of enemy battlefield positions is *tactical bombing*.

So, in level of war, the labels of policy (also called grand strategy in modern times), strategy, and tactics are names for the frameworks of the government, high-level military leadership, and battlefield commanders. These labels have nothing to do with the function of policy, strategy, and tactics as rules, yet the military uses these terms functionally too, hence confusion as in this example from a military strategy text³ (*trinitarian framework* refers to a formulation in which *operations* is a hierarchical level between strategy and tactics):

Maintain clear distinctions among policy, strategy and tactics: these three magical words translate as purpose, ways, and means ... Understood strictly as a function, strategy must ply its trade of ends, ways and means at every level of warfare. These levels usually are identified in the Trinitarian framework of strategy, operations, and tactics. Functionally appreciated, strategy is done operationally and tactically, though there is merit in privileging the elementary binary of strategy and tactics.

Life would be much simpler if the hierarchical levels were called the government's framework, the military command's framework, and battlefield command's framework instead of policy, strategy, and tactics. (It doesn't help that the military literature, like business, defines the function of strategy in different ways too).

Confusion is a nuisance, but design failure occurs when hierarchical levels are interpreted to mean that some organizations don't need the functions of strategy or tactics. For instance, in his book *Fleet Tactics*, Military Strategist Wayne Hughes says, "There is no naval strategic warfare."⁴ He said this because the strategic hierarchical level cannot consist of a naval-only scope; it must include all military functions and capabilities (unless a country has a navy-only military). Failure occurs, however, if Hughes's statement is heard as "There is no central rule that guides and unifies action and decisions in navies." If a captain of a cruiser

³ (GRAY, *The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice*, 2010) p19-20.

⁴ Hughes.1997.Naval Maneuver Warfare.pdf, p 36

doesn't have a strategy, or a rear-admiral doesn't have tactics, then there's a problem. If a CEO has strategy but no tactics, and business units have tactics but no strategy there's a problem. The strategies and tactics of the admiral and captain, or the CEO and the business manager need not look remotely alike, only that each of them needs a complete framework with the *functions* of strategy and tactics both present.

An additional confusion is that hierarchical labels are not adaptable. Three levels were fine for Clausewitz's armies 200 years ago, but 10 or 20 or more levels are required to accommodate the structure of modern governments and militaries.⁵ Using fixed names for each entity means that every time the structure changes, it becomes harder to follow. Fixed labels also imply fixed hierarchical responsibilities. If the "strategy level" is what a commander of 5 million troops does, won't it have to be considerably different from what a commander of 15 thousand does? In business, the CEO of a conglomerate has a different framework than the CEO of a startup.

Clausewitz lived during the transition from European armies small enough to be personally controlled by sovereigns, to Napoleon's *Grande Armée* (inspired Clausewitz's), and peaking with the multi-million-troop army groups of WWII. Now armies are smaller again. It makes no sense that commanders of these different armies would have similar frameworks.

Using Nested Systems to Clarify Politico-military hierarchical levels

Labeling military hierarchy with policy, strategy, and tactics will always create confusion. The damage caused by thinking that only the highest-level commanders can have strategy functionally, and that only battlefield commanders have tactics functionally can, however, be avoided. They can be avoided by recognizing that these levels are nested frameworks as presented in Chapter 7. If the design principles for nesting presented there are followed, the military levels of war make complete sense.

All armies include a detailed hierarchical structure. The US Army, for instance, has army groups composed of hundreds of thousands of soldiers, and then armies, corps, divisions,

⁵ See for example, (YARGER, *Strategic Theory for the 21st Century: The Little Book on Big Strategy*, Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, 2006) p8.

brigades, and so on all the way down to squads of a dozen or so soldiers. The army also has functional organizations (branches) including infantry, Corps of Engineers, Quartermaster Corps, Field Artillery, special forces, Logistics, and medical corps. As argued in Chapter 6, an infantry General's framework for leading a 50 thousand troop division can't possibly be the same as an artillery corporal's framework for leading a squad of 12 troops; nor could the Colonel of Artillery's framework possibly be the same as the Colonel of Logistics'.

The situation is no different in corporations. CEOs, engineers, accountants, and middle managers each have a different framework, as do R&D, HR, manufacturing, and other functions. Governments, NGOs, universities, sports organizations, religious organizations, all have similar hierarchical levels and functional groupings. Properly designed nested frameworks enable the hierarchies and functional organizations to work together in harmony.

The essential design principles for nesting presented in Chapter 7 are that

1. Each nested system has its own unique and complete framework
2. It is no one's job to design or implement someone else's strategy or tactics
3. The parent framework is an external constraint on the child framework

One of Clausewitz's most important points was to show that military aims must be subordinate to, i.e., nested under, the political aims of the state, as in external constraints. He famously said: "War is a continuation of policy by other means."⁶ Not, war is an endeavor to undertake independent of policy so long as you win. The hierarchies under the policy levels are constrained by the policy level, just as the tactical level is constrained by the strategic level. In other words, each parent level is an external constraint on the child. Yet each hierarchical level has its own complete framework with aspirations, strategy, tactics, plans, metrics and so one.

⁷ Pareto, in (Craig/Pareto, Makers of Modern Strategy, 1986) p125.

Note that the higher level can choose to impose a strict mission on the child. This perfectly consistent with nested frameworks. Such a mission could be a tactic. Still, however, the mission is an aspiration for the child framework, not a strategy.

Napoleon did not give freedom

One of the values of nested frameworks is that each level can be given maximum freedom to achieve their missions if the parent frameworks impose minimum essential constraints on the child frameworks. A classic example of where this did not occur is Napoleon. Military historian Peter Paret argued (using different words) that Napoleon's downfall was hastened because he failed to use nested systems properly. In essence, he did not allow the divisional commanders to have their own frameworks.⁷

Napoleon truly needed nested frameworks because of the unprecedented size of his armies. He created divisions and corps that included infantry, artillery, cavalry, and support, where each was a complete fighting force. Yet Paret says, "Napoleon commanded everything both politically and militarily, his commanders did not participate in the creation of strategy, and as the armies got bigger, and the battlefields less connected, the system broke down." Napoleon's *Grand Armée*, that in 1812 hopelessly invaded Russia, was at least half a million troops strong. His greatest victories six years earlier at Austerlitz and Jena had involved smaller forces in smaller ranges of operation. In these cases, the lack of proper nested leadership was not so damaging.

Problem Definition 4—Tactics are for Winning Battles

Chapter 6 identified the fallacy that the criteria for winning battles can be independent of the strategy and that there are local criteria that are more important than the holistic criteria on which the strategy is based. Consider additional examples that illustrate this fallacy.

⁷ Paret, in (Craig/Paret, Makers of Modern Strategy, 1986) p125.

Battle of Chesapeake Bay

In the battle of *Chesapeake Bay*—a part of battle of Yorktown that ended the American Revolutionary War—the French fleet blocked British reinforcement from sea. Military scholar Robin Ranger wrote that the battle “was a tactical standoff but strategically conclusive. Graves [the British commander] was obliged to break off the action after an unsuccessful attack and withdraw to New York when French reinforcements (eight ships) arrived ... as a result, Cornwallis surrendered on 19 October 1781.”⁸ Why was the battle a tactical standoff? Was it a standoff just because the French didn’t destroy more ships than they lost, or lost fewer sailors, per the fixed and standard criteria for success in a naval battle? Wasn’t this “standoff” a complete success from the viewpoint of the overall war, no matter the number of ships lost?

From the American point of view, if the French had annihilated the British fleet (a perfect tactical victory by the traditional view), it is possible anger, fear, or humiliation could have made the British less or more pliant in negotiations. From the French point of view, if the true criterion of tactical success was to keep the British from reinforcing Cornwallis, not destroying British ships, the French had freedom to use a defensive only approach, preserving French lives and ships. The fixed and standard definition of tactical success leaves no room for these gradations.

Pyrrhic Victories

A fixed definition of victory can lead to pyrrhic victories.

Britain and World War I

Did Britain “win” the First World War? By some fixed definition based on who surrenders to whom, perhaps they did. Yet they lost 750,000 troops in battle, including some of their best and brightest, and many more to disease at home. The war put them in an economic hole from which they never fully recovered. The bloody carnage was so traumatic that it

⁸ (RANGER, *The Anglo-French Wars, 1689-1815*, 1989), in (GRAY/BARNETT, *Seapower and Strategy*, 1989) p180.

drove collaboration with the French to impose a vengeful, self-righteous, brutally punitive peace treaty onto the Germans*—a treaty that encouraged a great nation, with an extraordinary heritage of philosophy, art, music, literature, medicine, science, and technology, to allow a psychopath with a massively seductive and anxiety-reducing message of revenge to get in the door, then take them to the point of no return and to their ruin. The treaty came back to London in showers of bombs and V rockets and drove the suffering and deaths of millions more British in battle and at home, not to mention countless millions of lives in other nations. This timeline ultimately put the lights out in Britain's economic, military, and political world hegemony. Victory?

* It turns out that if they had not surrendered, the Germans were planning to do the same to the English and French. In fact, some might argue that the Germans had exacted an even more brutal peace on the Russians in 1917 with the treaty of Breast–Litovok.⁹

In Other Endeavors

In business, is the launch of a new product that sells quickly winning? Maybe yes, but in some cases, it may be a total disaster. The company may have had to lower prices on all products or cannibalize some. The company might be led to believe that the next product will be just as successful when the first was a bit of a fluke. Maybe the company formed a bad alliance or bad joint venture with some crooks to get the sales. Maybe they invested too heavily in an asset or capability that won't pay back. In government, is lowering or raising taxes winning? Is soundly defeating a bill sponsored by the opposition in Congress necessarily a win? In investing, does the fact that a stock goes up 100 percent in the first year mean success?

Is it truly a victory if an athlete has several wins while not sticking to the disciplines of her strategy, tactics, and technique? Not if it means a string of losses against stronger foes because bad habits, or fantasies that they don't need their coach's advice, have taken over. In the arts, the seduction of local solutions is an enormous challenge. In the arts, it is ridiculously easy to fall in love with some musical pattern, or some writing device, or some

⁹ [REFERENCE]

aspect of painting or sculpture, and stay with and revel in it even though it makes no sense in the larger context of the whole with which it must be consistent.

Without a framework for the entire scope of the endeavor, and knowledge of how these occurrences fit into it, no one knows.

References for Views of Tactics Versus Strategy

Military

All of the views of tactics versus strategy that are today used in business and government and other endeavors were first formulated in the military. See (Gray, Modern Strategy, 1999) for

Strategy proposes but tactics disposes (p. 207, 212)

Strategists plan and tacticians do (Huges, as quoted in Gray, 1999, p.21)

Also, (GRAY, The Strategy Bridge: Theory for Practice, 2010) p. 20. [See quote in Problem Definition 3 above]

H. Richard Yarger, *Towards A Theory of Strategy: Art Lykke and the Army War College Strategy Model*

Strategy differs from operational art and tactics in functional, temporal, and geographic aspects. Functionally and temporally, tactics is the domain of battles, engagements of relative short duration. Operational art is the domain of the campaign, a series of battles occurring over a longer period of time. Strategy is the domain of war which encompasses the protracted level of conflict among nations, armed or unarmed. Tactics concerns itself with the parts or pieces, operational art with the combination of the pieces, and strategy with the combinations of combinations. Geographically, tactics is narrowly defined, operational level is broader and more regional in orientation, and strategy is theater-wide, intercontinental, or global. It should also be noted that with the advances in transportation and communications there has been a spatial and temporal convergence of strategy, operational art, and tactics. Increasingly, events at the tactical level have strategic consequences.

General Change

Gibbons, Paul. *The Science of Successful Organizational Change: How Leaders Set Strategy, Change Behavior, and Create an Agile Culture*. Pearson FT Press. Kindle Edition.

- Table II.1 (Kindle Locations 1322-1323) contrasts several differences between change strategy and change tactics.

Goldratt et al.2002.The TOC approach to Strategy and Tactics.pdf.

Strategy, as we said, is setting the objective(s). In other words, the strategy sets the "What for?" Tactics, on the other hand, are supposed to tell us "How we are supposed to reach the objectives." In other words, tactics is answering the "How?".

Business

Wheelen & Hunger *Strategic Management and Strategic Policy*, (2010, 12/e)

A tactic is a specific operating plan that details how a strategy is to be implemented in terms of when and where it is to be put into action. By their nature, tactics are narrower in scope and shorter in time horizon than are strategies. Tactics, therefore, may be viewed (like policies) as a link between the formulation and implementation of strategy. (p. 193)

Pearce II and Robinson *Strategic management*, (2011, 12/e)

Functional tactics are different from business or corporate strategies in three fundamental ways: (1) specificity, (2) time horizon, and (3) participants who develop them. p. 271

Chet Holms, *The Ultimate Sales Machine: Turbocharge Your Business with Relentless Focus on the 12 strategies*

“A tactic is method which is used to attain a short-term goal...A strategy is a carefully thought out and detailed plan designed to achieve a long-term goal. ...From a business standpoint, a strategy defines what your company will ultimately look like, where it will be positioned in the market, and what you would like it to achieve. To become a brilliant strategist, you will develop a long-term strategy and achieve it by utilizing tactics that are specifically designed to get you there.”

Other Definitions

de Kluyver and Pearce II, 2009, 3rd ed, *Strategy, A View from the Top*, p. 5.

Strategy focuses on doing things differently; doing thing better than competitors is tactical in nature. [...isn't doing things better doing things differently?]

They state also that tactical things are “easily copied” and give no long-term advantage.