

Sacrifice the Plum Tree in Place of the Peach



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Strategy 11

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Know contentment, and you will suffer no disgrace. Know when to stop, and you will meet with no danger. You can then endure.

Lao Zi, *The Tao Te Ching*

There are circumstances in which you must sacrifice short term objectives in order to gain the long term goal. This is the scapegoat strategy whereby someone else suffers the consequences so that the rest do not.

Warring States Period China

Sun Zi's worthiest opponent was Fan Li, a general of the state of Yue. Against Sun Zi's advice, King Helu of Wu took the army personally to attack Yue. Fan Li, though outnumbered, was confident of winning, since the king's military abilities were not in the same league as Sun Zi's.

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Fan Li prepared a shock tactic by scouring the kingdom's dungeons and prisons for condemned criminals. He offered the convicts a last chance to earn honor in this world and provide benefits for their families. Since they were to die anyway, if they sacrificed their lives on the battlefield instead, then their names would be restored to honor and their families richly rewarded. With nothing to lose, the convicts agreed.

When the two armies met and were arranged into battle formations Fan Li gave the signal for the convicts to play their part. Dressed in Yue uniforms they marched to the front of the lines, drew their swords, and, before the horrified Wu army, cut their own throats before dropping dead to the ground.

Taking advantage of the shock and demoralization of the Wu army, Fan Li quickly sent a readied detachment to attack Wu's flanks and in the resulting confusion defeated the Wu army.

Warring States Period China

While in residence at the Qi court, Lord *Meng Zhang* sent his retainer *Feng Xuan* to collect the taxes from his little fief in Xue.

Before he left, Feng asked Lord Meng, "*Is there anything I may buy for you when I return?*"

"If you see something my house lacks, buy it." replied the lord.

Feng Xuan went to Xue and sent out officers to summon the people to settle their debts. When he had collected all the tallies Feng feigned that he had received an order from Lord Meng absolving all outstanding debts. He returned all the money, burned the tallies, and returned to Qi.

The next day Feng called on Lord Meng who was surprised to see him return so soon. "*Why do you return so speedily? Have the debts been collected?*" asked Lord Meng.

"They have already been collected," was the reply.

"What did you purchase on your return?"

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"My Lord asked me to see if there was anything your house lacked. It was my humble opinion that your castle was filled with precious objects, that your stables abounded with steeds, and the lower palaces with beauties. It seemed that only one thing was lacking, and that was fealty. This I bought my Lord."

"How can one buy fealty?" asked Lord Meng.

"At the moment you hold the little fief of Xue, yet you do not cherish the people there as your own children, but look on them as a source of profit," replied Feng.

"Your servant took it upon himself to feign an order from you relieving the people of their debts and they cheered your name. That is how your servant purchased fealty."

Lord Meng was displeased but said, *"So be it! You may now rest, sir."*

A year later the old king of Qi died and the new king distrusted all of his predecessor's advisors. Lord Meng was informed he was being relieved of his duties and sent back to govern his own fief. Lord Meng and his entourage set out to return to Xue, but when they were still a hundred li from the city, all its people, even the elderly and children, came out midway to welcome their lord in joyous celebration.

Lord Meng turned to Feng and said, *"Your purchase of fealty on my behalf, sir, is apparent to me today."*

"My lord," replied Feng, *"even the wildest rabbit needs more than one bolt hole to escape to in order to survive."*

Three Kingdoms Period China

On one of his campaigns Cao Cao was running short of food. He asked his supply sergeant what he could do. The sergeant suggested reducing the rations by secretly using a smaller cup to parcel out the rice.

Cao Cao praised the sergeant and gave his consent to use the smaller measuring cup. After a few days, the soldiers began to complain and

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accused their commander of cheating them. Cao Cao again called in the supply sergeant and told him the situation.

"I will do anything I can to help, but what would you have me do?" asked the sergeant.

"I'm afraid I am going to have to borrow your head," replied Cao Cao and he had the sergeant decapitated and his head stuck on a tall pole with a banner that read "Caught cheating on supplies by using a smaller measuring cup."

Summary

In order to gain one thing it is often necessary to lose another. Trying to hold on to everything at once may cause you in the end to lose everything. Instead, sacrifice smaller concerns to strengthen your more important endeavor.

