



Alexander The Great's Art of Strategy

The Timeless Lessons of History's Greatest Empire Builder

by Partha Bose
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Take-Aways

- Alexander the Great (356-323 BC), son of Philip of Macedonia, died at age 32, having conquered most of Asia, from Greece to Northern India, and south to Egypt.
- Those inspired by Alexander include Julius Caesar, Hannibal, Napoleon, George Washington, Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant and Norman Schwarzkopf.
- His father was a great military leader in his own right, and was the first general in history to master alternatives to the brute-force frontal assault.
- Alexander was the first general to prove that a smaller force using the right strategies and tactics could consistently defeat a larger foe.
- Aristotle was Alexander's tutor, and he taught him sensitivity to other cultures.
- Not a single country occupied by Alexander ever rebelled against him.
- Alexander led the battle by charging in front of his troops, not by leading from behind.
- Alexander later forgot Aristotle's teaching to permit expression of contrasting views.
- Alexander was a charismatic leader who connected with his soldiers personally.
- He and his father both failed to prepare for succession.

Rating (10 is best)

Overall	Applicability	Innovation	Style
9	8	9	8

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Relevance

What You Will Learn

In this Abstract, you will learn: 1) How analyzing problems like Aristotle helped Alexander and can help you; 2) How to use Alexander's tactics; and 3) How Alexander motivated his men, constructed his organization, kept his moral compass, became a legendary leader and left a lasting legacy (but not a successor).

Recommendation

Partha Bose has crafted an impressive volume that stands equally well as a work of interpretive history or as a contemporary guide to effective business strategy. Like any lessons-of-history-applied-to-business volume, it works to find a delicate balance between past and present. Its practical business examples range from Honda to IBM to the war in Afghanistan (a land which Alexander was the last to conquer successfully). Fortunately, Bose avoids the temptation to give the facts of history short shrift. Do not expect to find an answer about whether to do that big acquisition deal. (You'll never establish your own business empire if you get too caught up in the details!) Instead, this volume brings to life the classic lessons of leadership that march across the eons, unstoppable, unchanging, unchallenged, like the Macedonian legion itself. *getAbstract.com* highly recommends this book to executives, strategists, history buffs and all those who harbor a secret desire to rule the world!

Abstract

Greatness Defined

The Greek poet Archilocus wrote that, "the fox knoweth many things, the hedgehog knows one great thing." On July 26, 356 B.C., a boy was born in Macedonia's royal capital of Pella. His name was Alexander III. His tutor would one day be none other than Aristotle, who would teach him to combine the broad knowledge of the fox with the wisdom of the hedgehog. History would come to know him as Alexander the Great.

The historical impact of Alexander the Great would be almost as difficult to exaggerate as that of his famous tutor. Although he is primarily considered a warrior and conqueror, Alexander's strategic thinking has influenced leaders through the ages, including the likes of Julius and Augustus Caesar, Mark Anthony, Hannibal, Napoleon, George Washington, Robert E. Lee, Ulysses S. Grant, Irwin Rommel and, more recently, Norman Schwarzkopf. The generals of the world now plotting to defeat terrorism almost certainly will be drawing – knowingly or unknowingly – on lessons first mastered by Alexander. You can adapt those lessons to serve effectively in the executive suite or boardroom.

The training he received as a youth planted the seeds of Alexander's phenomenal success. Aristotle used the Socratic method of questioning to train Alexander and his companions to seek facts and analyze them properly. He also encouraged them to consider the moral implications of their decisions. Without a moral direction, he suggested, their actions would lack conviction.

Alexander's school was extraordinary by any measure. Its students included Ptolemy, who later served Alexander as one of his generals and went on to establish an empire that ruled Egypt for some 300 years (a dynasty ending with the death of the last Ptolemy,

"Learning about the ideas and actions of Alexander the Great is an experience akin to drinking from the original fount of knowledge about strategy and tactics."

“He was in most ways not only the originator of even today’s strategic and tactical practices that nations use to win wars and businesses to defeat competitors, but in applying them he also changed the way generations for almost 2,500 years have viewed and interacted with the world.”

“Alexander was the first general to reveal how a smaller force could overwhelm a large one through smart strategies and tactics – repeatedly.”

“Under Aristotle’s guidance Alexander learned to be sensitive toward people and cultures in a way that no ruler before him and few rulers after him did.”

Cleopatra); and also Seleucus Nikator, who was also a general for Alexander and later created the Seleucid empire that ruled most of Asia. Aristotle emphasized learning how to think critically, from different points of view, and how to analyze a problem. When Alexander and his cohorts put those lessons into practice in the real world and on the field of battle, they succeeded like none before them.

Alexander’s Father

Philip of Macedonia was a great military leader in his own right. Although the practice was unheard of in ancient times, Philip would capture a strategic town or city merely as a means to an end. He might not have been interested in controlling the town at all – but if capturing it helped attain a strategic objective that brought him closer to a larger goal, he seized it. Philip also believed in conquering the enemy’s capital city to exert real or psychological pressure. While the techniques of war have advanced tremendously since Alexander’s day, these principles are still in effect. In the U.S. war against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda in Afghanistan, for example, the U.S. opportunistically captured cities like Herat and Mazar-e-Sharif in order to position itself to capture Kabul, the Afghan capital. Ironically, Kandahar and Herat were first established by Alexander during his conquest of Afghanistan.

Together, Philip and Alexander advanced several key principles of warfare. First, their strategy discouraged using the blunt weapon of frontal assault. By using maneuver and intelligence, they demonstrated how a smaller army can often defeat a larger foe. Secondly, they relied not only on tactics, but also on strategy. In business as in warfare, one of the most important elements is deciding what not to do; Alexander might wait a year after conquering a city, pondering his next move, before going forward to his next objective. As one important element of strategy, Alexander felt that determining when and where to battle were critical elements of success.

Succession Plans

Many companies and CEOs find out the hard way that it is crucial to have a succession plan in place. When Alexander’s father died unexpectedly, the victim of assassination, Alexander had to struggle with rivals to attain leadership of Macedonia. The reason: Philip had failed to name a successor. The lessons for today’s corporations:

- Look ahead – Appoint leaders in advance to manage your transition process.
- Clarify roles – Make it clear who the boss is. The handoff at GE from Welch to Immelt was remarkable because each person involved understood his or her role in the transition.
- Assure transparency – Your succession plan should be transparent, not secretive. A poorly managed succession hampers incoming leaders with a legacy of conspiracies.
- Set the tone immediately – Once new leaders take over, they must set the tone for their leadership without hesitation. In virtually all successful transitions, the leader will grab the reins firmly and make clear to everybody what the new administration is all about. Alexander immediately took swift action against city-states that threatened to secede from Macedonian control after the death of Philip.

The Noble Conqueror

Alexander proved time and again to be noble rather than vindictive in victory. As an empire builder, he understood that while it was necessary to command respect, it was

“He always led from the front, never demanding of his troops anything that he wasn’t willing to do first himself – the first to charge into battle, always in the thickest of the fight, ready always to come to the rescue of a fellow soldier, no matter what his rank.”

“When to push and when to pull back; and when to strike offensively and play defensively – are all revealed in the approaches and behaviors of the Macedonians.”

“Act swiftly to stave off rebellions.”

“Alexander had an uncanny ability to inspire his troops.”

“His men knew that their contributions were being recognized.”

counterproductive to engender hatred. He understood that the enemy he defeated today might become the ally he needed tomorrow. Thus Macedonians fighting under Alexander were strictly forbidden to pillage.

Once, after defeating his arch rival Darius, Alexander was resting in his bath when he heard wailing. He sent a commander to investigate. The commander reported that the anguished cries were coming from Darius’ mother, wife, daughters and son. The relatives had been informed that Darius had been vanquished and that Alexander had taken possession of his bow, royal mantle and shield. Alexander jumped from the tub and dressed. He personally met with the family to console them, and promised to protect them and keep them from harm – a promise that he kept.

A Commanding Style

Aristotle taught Alexander that being an effective leader meant being angry at just the right time at just the right person in just the right way and for just the right reason. Through the early part of his career, Alexander seemed to manage this effectively.

Alexander understood that nothing motivates others like trusting them. A colleague once warned him that his doctor, Philip, had given him a poisonous medical potion. Philip was a dear childhood friend, so Alexander loyally gulped down the potion. He had a keen instinct about whom to trust, and once he trusted someone, he did so implicitly.

Alexander led his troops with inspirational style. He led from the front rather than from behind and often reminded them of their past successes. He regaled them with tales of how difficult situations had been successfully overcome in the past. Alexander knew how to connect personally with his soldiers. Before a battle he would ride up and down the front ranks, speak with them directly and call out familiar faces by name. He reminded them of their past bravery, and left his men with the sense that their conduct mattered greatly. Their battle became part of a larger cause.

Alexander also led fearlessly and aggressively. He always wanted to play the attacker, and never the defender. He sought surprise, which enabled him to shape the timing, location and direction of the battle. Alexander also positioned himself as a liberator rather than as a marauder. He wanted the goodwill of the people he conquered. In an age when pillaging was commonplace, Alexander always made sure that enemy troops received decent burials. Later, however, Alexander became increasingly intolerant of anyone who disagreed with his point of view. He oversaw the killing of thousands of non-combatants at Thebes, Gaza, Tyre, Multan and elsewhere.

This unfortunate tendency culminated in the death of his friend Cleitus, a superb commander. Cleitus, who was about 20 years older than Alexander, had saved Alexander’s life at Granicus. Indeed, he was the brother of a nurse who had looked after Alexander from the day of his birth. One night late in the summer of 328 B.C., in Uzbekistan, Cleitus and Alexander got roaring drunk. Cleitus began to harangue Alexander about his affection for Persian customs and clothes. At one point Cleitus was escorted from the tent, but he returned to give a speech against the evil customs that were pervading Greece. Alexander, outraged, took a spear and impaled him on it. Alexander very nearly killed himself thereafter in grief, and lay in bereavement for three days in his tent. Not only had he killed his friend out of anger, but he had allowed himself to be caught up in his own power and supposed infallibility.

“Execution of strategic and tactical moves in war and business often misses the element of surprise, because everyone is so focused on executing against plan...”

“Too often the legacy of a strong leader is an organization without sufficient leadership capacity to fill the void left behind by the departing leader.”

The lesson for your organization is clear: Leaders cannot afford to make a difference of opinion into grounds for dismissal (or more serious consequences). Design an organization where questioning, and even criticizing, accepted practices is not only tolerated but encouraged. Alexander realized that his act had undercut his own moral authority to lead, and after emerging from his tent, he immediately met with his commanders and confessed his error. Aristotle taught him that disagreements were subject to debate, and in no way implied disloyalty. Tragically, Alexander had to learn this lesson again. Or as Napoleon said, the rebels you must fear are not the ones who disagree, but the ones who lack the character to tell you they disagree.

Globalization

In a sense, Alexander was practicing globalization more than two millennia ago. Any attempt to globalize must begin with mapping a strategy. Alexander’s expansion was systematic, with achievement of one goal leading to the next. Alexander avoided wars of attrition, because he understood that the longer a war dragged on, the less valuable winning would be. He preferred to earn converts rather than kill them. On the other hand, he did not hesitate to punish those who resisted his rule. Whether he was kind or cruel, his motivation was always the same: to signal people not to resist him. To succeed in globalization, follow Alexander in encouraging pluralism and using local talent. If he approved of the way local officials were running things, he would leave them in place, rather than make a change for change’s sake.

Succession

When Alexander fell sick at age 32, probably of malaria, he had no firm succession plan. His troops passed through his tent, bidding goodbye to the great man as he lay dying. When they asked who should succeed him, he replied only, “the strongest one.” As with his father before him, Alexander died without having created order in the affairs that would follow his passing. One of the fundamental problems that CEOs face when they consider succession is that no organization wants to think about what it will do if it loses its leader. As uncomfortable a task as that may be, however, the prospect of leaving an organization without a clear plan is worse.

Another related pitfall is the business of promoting those who are loyal over those who demonstrate talent. When people are promoted for the wrong reasons, leadership ranks at the top become very thin. Powerful leaders too often leave their organizations lacking other strong leaders. As Alexander’s life proves, conformity is no substitute for diversity when you are growing an organization. Encourage differing points of view. Toward the end, Alexander’s generals went along with whatever he wanted, omitting the vital dialogue and debate that is part of a healthy organization.

About The Author

Partha Bose is the Marketing Director of Allen & Overy, one of the world’s largest law firms with 5,000 professionals and offices in 26 countries. Until March, 2003, he was the Chief Marketing Office of Monitor Group. Bose is a native of India who divides his time between Boston and London. He is a former partner of McKinsey & Company and editor of *The McKinsey Quarterly*.