

***Project Business Management*^{1,2}**

Project Business and Chinese Stratagems, Pt. 5: Stratagems to Win Ground

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“Rumor is a pipe blown by surmises, jealousies, conjectures.”

William Shakespeare³



Summary

This article discusses stratagems 25 to 30 of the ancient 36 Chinese Stratagems (also known as sānshíliù jì, 三十六計). The focus of these stratagems is on weakening a strong opponent to win a battle or war despite one's weakness. Applied in Project Business, the intended win may be monetary or have a different nature.

And again, the stratagems come also as a warning: Someone may use them against you to undermine your organization and your project.

¹This is the 51st in a series of articles by Oliver Lehmann, author of the book *“Project Business Management”* (ISBN 9781138197503), published by Auerbach / Taylor & Francis. See full author profile at the end of this article. A list of the other articles in PM World Journal can be found at <https://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/oliver-f-lehmann>.

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³ Henry IV

The Fifth Set of Stratagems

The first set of six stratagems, carried over from ancient China focused on a situation of strength. The second article of the series, written for professionals in Project Management and even more in Project Business Management⁴, looked at six stratagems using deception. The third set included offensive stratagems for attacks. The fourth set of stratagems brought confusion into an adversary's camp.

In this fifth collection, the focus is on situations when the adversary is stronger and stratagems are used to impair him.

And for these, as for all stratagems described in this series, the article is also a warning: Do not get deceived by others applying them.

The Series of Articles

The stratagems are ordered into six groups, which are each discussed in a dedicated article:

1. Introduction, Stratagems for a position of strength⁵ (first article)
2. Deceptive stratagems⁶ (second article)
3. Stratagems for attacks⁷ (third article)
4. Stratagems for confusion⁸ (fourth article)
5. Stratagems to win ground (this article)
6. Stratagems in the moment of defeat

The Stratagems to Win Ground

The enemy may be stronger, have more people, and may be better armed. However, using asymmetrical warfare, a weak party may still have a realistic chance to finally win a battle or the war.

4 (Lehmann, 2018)

5 (Lehmann, 2023a)

6 (Lehmann, 2023b)

7 (Lehmann, 2023c)

8 (Lehmann, 2023d)

In the world of Project Business, one does not necessarily have to be a big player to gain benefits. On the other hand, assuming that as a big player, one is undefeatable may turn into a weakness:

25. Replace the Beams with Rotten Timber

(偷梁换柱)

A house that rests firmly on sturdy posts may be weakened by replacing these posts with rotten wood. An army that is well-led, trained, and equipped may be disorganized and debilitated by malicious gossip and defeatist talk. A society that works well as a system where people act together and people's obligations and entitlements are in balance may be destabilized through disinformation, conspiracy theories, and divisive slander.

In the year 383 AD, the Chinese states of Qin and Jin were in a tense military standoff with their armies positioned on opposite sides of a river. Neither side was willing to initiate an attack, as crossing the river would have put them in a vulnerable position. The soldiers on both sides were on high alert, anticipating the slightest move from the other side that could trigger a full-blown battle.

In a surprising turn of events, Qin offered to withdraw its army a short distance and let Jin cross the river for a fair fight before both armies would run out of food supplies. Jin accepted the offer, and the two armies prepared for battle. However, Qin had a cunning plan up its sleeve. The plan was to turn back and launch a surprise attack while Jin's soldiers were crossing the river.

Unknown to Qin, Jin had already infiltrated its soldiers into the Qin army. These soldiers spread rumors about an impending attack by Jin that Qin would not be able to withstand. While commanded to retreat only for a short distance, the rumors caused panic among the Qin troops, and they fled. This unexpected turn of events transformed Qin's planned move into chaos and confusion, and Jin emerged victorious.

The battle of 383 AD between Qin and Jin is a testament to the importance of intelligent stratagems in warfare. It is also a reminder that sometimes, the outcome of a battle can be determined not just by the strength of the army but also by the cleverness and resourcefulness of its leaders. And, when stratagems clash, by their strength and the quality of implementation.

In the last couple of decades, both China and Russia have used this stratagem intensively to weaken Western alliances such as NATO and the EU and promote an expansive agenda. Russia brought its assets into powerful positions, such as Boris Johnson in the UK, leading the country to leave the EU in 2020, and Donald Trump in the USA, where he acted as a divisive force for NATO. Furthermore, Russia tried in vain to place more assets inside the EU particularly in France, Netherlands, Germany, and Italy, where they rode on a narrative of Nationalism and fiefdomism, the platform that was so successful in Britain.

China, at the same time, tried to apply the stratagem in Taiwan, the Democratic Island republic it wanted to submit under the rule of its dictatorship, by supporting China-friendly parties.

In Project Business, contractors often have employees on customer premises. While they do the work for the customer, they are often considered “fair game” as recruits. There may be some discussion about whether it is compatible with good business ethics to poach a contractor’s employees, however, it is clear that for the contractor, this weakens their business situation.

In the other direction, the contractor’s staff may weaken the customer side by spreading rumors and half-truths that are unsettling for the customer’s staff. Project Business builds on trustworthiness. Untrustworthy parties can damage a project heavily, and this stratagem is a good example how they may do it.

26. Point at the Mulberry Tree while Scolding the Pagoda Tree **(指桑罵槐)**



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Figure 1: Pagoda tree (David Stang)

The Pagoda Tree, also called Huai Tree and scientifically known as *Sophora japonica* or *Styphnolobium japonicum*, is native to China and Korea. It is a deciduous tree that can grow up to 30 meters in height. It can spread out to a width of up to 20 meters. The tree

produces beautiful white flowers in the late summer. In traditional Chinese medicine, the Pagoda Tree is believed to have medicinal properties, including the ability to reduce inflammation and improve blood circulation. To plant it, one has to leave a lot of open space around to allow the tree to grow without disruption. In return, its broad, domed canopy provides ample shade during the summer months. A perfect tree for the garden of a rich and powerful person.



Figure 2: Mulberry tree ([Kokoi](#))

The Mulberry tree (*Morus Alba*) has been used in China for more than 4,500 years for silk production. However, they are not only used to feed silkworms, but also sheep, goats, and cattle. The mulberry is a tree for people who have to work hard to make a living.

Geerd Hofstede described a field between cultures with high and others with low power distance⁹. China is among the countries with a high Power Distance Index (PDI) value. This says that a subordinate individual's respect for a more powerful person makes it impossible to criticize that person directly. A way around this constraint of communication may be to talk about the mistakes of a third person, someone who is not present and may not be liked

⁹ (Hofstede, 2023)

by the superior. This way, criticism can be communicated without angering the criticized person.

In Project Business, contract parties are, in theory, on eye level. However, in reality, we often find the opinion implemented, “Who pays the piper calls the tune”. There is an upper level, the paying customer, and the performing contractor on a subordinate level. This may make it hard to criticize the customer directly. Instead of correcting the criticized behavior, the customer may get frustrated and angry.

Talking about a third party may be a way out of the dilemma. Directing the criticism, that cannot be aimed at the customer, against a third party and hoping that the customer will understand.

27. Feign Foolishness but Remain Rational

(假痴不癡)

Playing dumb may be a way to avoid negative reactions from people who could otherwise feel they are getting attacked. A wolf in sheep’s cloths is less likely to draw other people’s ire than when the wolf shows its true nature.

The “Romance of Three Kingdoms”¹⁰ is a historical novel that narrates the events of China’s Three Kingdoms period in the 3rd century¹. In this period, the warlord Liu Bei hatched a plot to overthrow Cao Cao, a powerful general who served directly under the emperor.

One day, Cao Cao visited Liu Bei to verify rumors of a planned rebellion. Liu Bei, aware of the consequences of being discovered, pretended to be insane to avoid suspicion. He acted erratically, shouting and throwing objects, which convinced Cao Cao that Liu Bei was mentally unstable.

This cunning strategy allowed Liu Bei to continue his plans while appeasing Cao Cao’s suspicion.

In the play “King Lear,” William Shakespeare delves into the complex and emotional theme of familial relationships, specifically the relationship between aging parents and their adult children. The play portrays King Lear, an elderly man who decides to divide his kingdom among his three daughters, but with a catch. He asks each of them to profess their love for him, and in return, he will divide his kingdom accordingly. Two of his daughters, Goneril and Regan, give him flattering answers, while the third daughter, Cordelia, refuses to indulge in such flattery. This infuriates King Lear, who banishes Cordelia and divides his kingdom between Goneril and Regan.

As time passes, King Lear realizes that his two daughters who professed their love for him were not sincere and had only sought to gain his favor for their own selfish reasons. They

¹⁰ (Guanzhong, 1522a)

mistreat him, rob him of his power, and even threaten to kill him. As a result, King Lear descends into madness, which ironically makes him seem harmless to his daughters. He wanders the countryside with his Fool, who tries to keep him sane, and a disguised Cordelia, who has come to his aid. Ultimately, the play ends in tragedy, with most of the major characters dead.

In Project Business, a way to make a business partner rethink a decision, a successful way is sometimes to tell the person, “I may be stupid but I don’t understand this decision. May I ask you to explain it to me?” During this explanation, it may be possible to open the other person for better decision options without critiquing the person directly.

Feigning stupidity may also be a way to avoid clear communication. The project manager asks contractor staff to provide details about the project, but no one has them.

28. Remove the Ladder when People Are on the Upper Floor (上屋抽梯)

During the period of the “Romance of Three Kingdoms,” Liu Qi was in dire need of advice from Zhuge Liang, but Zhuge Liang was not willing to help him. In order to persuade the reluctant adviser, Liu Qi invited Zhuge Liang to an upper-floor room and cunningly removed the staircase leading to the room, making it impossible for Zhuge Liang to leave without first agreeing to help. This clever ploy proved successful as Zhuge Liang eventually provided the much-needed advice.

Another popular example: Upon reaching the shores of Mexico, the Spanish explorer Hernán Cortés found himself in the year 1519 in a precarious position. He had a small army of 300 soldiers and was vastly outnumbered by the army of Aztec emperor Moctezuma II. To prevent his sailors from retreating, he made the bold decision to order the ships to be burned. Without any means of escape, the soldiers were faced with a daunting task - conquer the land or perish. This move created a sense of urgency and motivation among the soldiers, who were now fully committed to the conquest of the natives.

“Removing the ladder” or “burning the ships” is a dangerous stratagem. The lack of a fallback strategy for a project performing poorly may be a method to improve the team’s motivation, but it can also lead to disaster.

29. Decorate the tree with false blossoms (樹上開花)

The stratagem takes us back to the Chinese emperor Yangdi (569 - 618). during his reign from 569 to 618. Yangdi was widely known for his grand and ambitious projects that aimed at improving the infrastructure of his empire. One of his most significant achievements was the construction of the Grand Canal, which stretches over 1,776 km (1,104 miles) and

connects the Yellow River in northern China to the Yangtze River in the south. This project facilitated transportation and communication throughout the empire and contributed to economic growth. Additionally, Yangdi was also involved in the rebuilding of the Great Wall of China, which served as a defensive barrier to protect the northern regions of the empire from invaders.

However, despite his impressive achievements, Yangdi's military campaigns were plagued with failures, leading to unrest among the population and the eventual bankruptcy of his empire. The costly and unsuccessful military expeditions drained the treasury and caused widespread suffering. As a result, the legacy of Yangdi is mixed, with his grand feats of engineering being overshadowed by his military shortcomings.

During his reign, Emperor Yangdi sought to impress and attract traveling merchants to his kingdom. To do this, he organized grand concerts and lavish feasts that were free for all attendees. The emperor even went to great lengths to create the illusion of spring during the winter months by decorating trees with silk flowers. This not only pleased the merchants with the aesthetic appeal, but it also showcased the emperor's wealth and power.

In the Project Business world, it is not uncommon for contractors to use artificial enhancements to make unproductive projects look better. Such enhancements could be likened to adding artificial blossoms to a dead or hibernating tree.

In the last project undertaken by the contractor for customer ABC, several challenges were faced, leading to dissatisfaction and conflicts among the parties involved. Despite these encounters, the contractor was able to complete the project with a somewhat usable outcome.

Now, the contractor is moving to a new project that is currently in the business development phase, where they are seeking to secure the next customer project. In this phase, they are presenting themselves in a much more positive light, highlighting their successes and achievements from the last project and maybe some more. The previous customer, who is proud of the end result of the project, is happily supporting them in this phase, the old conflicts and frustrations seem forgotten.

Overall, the use of artificial enhancements in Project Business is not new, and contractors often use this tactic to attract new customers and secure new projects. However, it is essential to ensure that such enhancements do not mislead customers or create false expectations.

30. Turn the Guest into the Host

(反客為主)

In ancient Chinese warfare terminology (just like football¹¹), the host is the party fighting on its own ground, and the guest is the party that came travelling as an opponent. The defender has a number of advantages that the attacker has to overcome, such as:

- Knowledge of the terrain
- Time to prepare the ground and the army for the battle
- Local resources
- Defense structures such as walls and trenches
- Short distances for logistics and supplies
- The motivating element coming from defending one's home turf

An example taken from ancient warfare in Europe: During the Gallic Wars in 52 BC, Julius Caesar led the Roman legions in a significant battle at Alesia, in what is now France. Caesar and his forces laid a siege to the oppidum (fortress) of Alesia, where Gallic general Vercingetorix had taken refuge with a massive crowd of soldiers, women, and children.

Caesar directed his troops to build a fortification around the oppidum, which was 11 Roman miles (16.7 km) long. The wall was made of earth and wood, and it had towers and arrow slits for defense.

Knowing that a relief army of Gauls was on its way to rescue Vercingetorix, Caesar ordered his soldiers to build a second wall outside the inner circle and several trenches to keep the reinforcements out.

To further impede the Gauls, Caesar instructed his soldiers to dig pits with pointed stakes inside them, which they covered with twigs and leaves. When the Gauls stepped into the pits, they would get severely injured, which would bind resources for rescue and damage the morale of the Gallic army.



Figure 3: Julius Caesar (left) and Vercingetorix

¹¹ Or soccer in North America)

The Gallic relief force arrived at Alesia and began to besiege the Roman fortifications. A series of battles took place inside and outside the walls, with the Gauls launching fierce attacks against the Romans. However, despite their valiant efforts, the Gauls could not overcome the Roman defenses.

The siege of Alesia had meanwhile taken several weeks, and the Gauls were running low on supplies. Vercingetorix realized that he could not hold out much longer. He surrendered to Caesar, who took him and his followers as prisoners of war. Vercingetorix's surrender marked the end of the Gallic Wars and secured Roman authority over Gaul in its entirety.

By turning the invader into a defender, Cesar and his troops could create a situation that gave them the defender's advantage and allowed them to win over the Gauls as hosts on their ground.

In Project Business, we are often on "foreign ground" as guests. During business development, we visit our prospective business partners, trying to do the business with us under favorable conditions. Later, when the project contract has been concluded, we visit the other party for meetings, cooperation, adjustments, negotiations on change requests, and many more. There are many ways to figuratively swap the roles of the guest and the host, at least temporarily:

- Surprise the other side and bring a box of cookies or similar with you. It's usually the host's job to hand out little snacks, so this tiny initiative changes the roles immediately.

If you're in doubt whether the other party may consider this corruption, simply ask before you put them on the table. The cookies will be welcome in some places but not all.

- Before we had PCs and tablets, travelers had briefcases with them with important paperwork and other stuff. Many celebrated the opening of these briefcases in a way that they became a replacement for their home turf, making the guest the host of the meeting.

Today, we use briefcases rarely, but we show presentations. The presenters should know them well enough to make them feel like figurative home ground.

- Our competency and knowledge are also home turf. We have the expert skills, the latest data, and the faculty of judgment that makes the other party listen, ask questions, and base decisions on.

In the next article: 6. Stratagems in the moment of defeat.

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Oliver F. Lehmann, MSc, ACE, PMP, is a project management educator, author, consultant, and speaker. In addition, he is the owner of the website Project Business Foundation, a non-profit initiative for professionals and organizations involved in cross-corporate project business.



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- <https://pmworldlibrary.net/authors/oliver-f-lehmann/>

ⁱ (Guanzhong, 1522a)