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**November 03, 2009**

## Lessons from Military strategies



The word "Strategy" is a military term derives from the Greek word "stratagem" which means "art of the general". Being strategic means, one must know where he presently stands, and next one must know where he wants to be, and finally one must find ways how to get there. Sri Lanka's President & Commander in Chief Mahinda Rajapaksa and his team of defence officials headed by Secretary Defence Mr. Gotabaya Rajapaksa, provide a perfect example of being strategic for they accomplished a mission that was deemed impossible a quarter century. With the strategy they devised, not only they could defeat the most ruthless terrorist outfit seemed to the world but also they were able to paralyze international network that backed terrorist in this country.

The importance of strategies used during the humanitarian operations now have been top listed to integrate with the context of Marketing by one of the most acclaimed Marketing specialist Dr. Uditha Liyanage in the Financial Times today.

### Ten Lessons from Military to Markets

**By Dr. Uditha Liyanage**

The LTTE was intransigent and they were considered invincible. Eelam War IV did the seemingly impossible. How was it possible, and what core military strategies made it possible? Importantly, is it also possible to translate these winning military strategies into market strategies?

Here are 10 such winning strategies - from the Military to Markets.

#### **1. Begin by defining your role and scope.**

From the Military: Two key conclusions reached at the outset of Eelam War IV, importantly, framed the role and scope of the military. The first conclusion was that the, "LTTE will not take the talks to a finish, that is, the LTTE's unwillingness and inability to see negotiations with the

Government of Sri Lanka (GOSL) as a viable option. The second conclusion: "The LTTE can be finished". That is, the LTTE's invincibility was a myth.

These two inter-related conclusions that clearly formed the bedrock of the military strategy were reached on the basis of intimate knowledge of the enemy's ideology and its capability. Predicated on the two conclusions, the pivotal role of the military was: "Eliminate the LTTE" (not merely fight, nor weaken) and the scope was: "Wherever they are". The defined role and scope, then led to the setting of many a specific goal and path. Moreover, in working out the path, the steps to be taken and the milestones to be achieved were set in specific terms. The larger tasks were neatly broken down into sub-tasks and so on. To the Market: First and foremost, one needs to figure out the organization's strategic role and scope.

Who and where you want to be?" (Role and scope) are the twin questions that need to be answered, in depth. Then, only then, should you ask, "Where do you want to go and how do you get there?" (Goal and path)

Figuring out the competitor's thinking pattern and belief system or competitor ideology assessment (CIS) is often not attempted deliberately. An analysis of the competitor's response patterns, over time, in multiple situations, and a reading of the ideology and life styles of the competitors' key decision makers could make such an assessment possible.

## **2. Gather strategy-critical intelligence, not mere information.**

From the Military: Not only did strategy-critical intelligence uncover the LTTE's deep-seated ideology and unexpressed intentions, and its fighting capability but it also pointed to the LTTE's key targets and its implementation plans.

The Intelligence Unit was restructured prior to the commencement of Eelam War IV. Many of the new recruits (replacing senior officers) did not have long years of intelligence-gathering experience. They were picked mainly from the infantry. "A "nose" for intelligence and an unwavering commitment to the task were the twin attributes that dictated their selection, forming a small team that did an extra-ordinary job.

To the Market: Gathering strategy-critical intelligence and not mere information is a lesson to be learnt by business organizations. If, for instance, the objective is to increase one's market share, then the source of additional business and how to capture it becomes strategic. Now, collecting that information which will help win that incremental business ought to be the focus and no other. A directed and concerted effort to collect such information should then ensue.

Collecting strategy-critical intelligence must be a continuous exercise carried out by a dedicated team, and not only by an outsourced ad hoc one.

**3. Select your top performers for top positions and back them to the hilt. From the Military:** The best people for the clearly defined role of "eliminating the LTTE" were not selected on the basis of their experience and seniority alone. In fact, the most battle-hardened officers were not favoured, largely because of their experiences associated with fighting the LTTE on previous occasions, which may well have hindered, not helped, adopt a new strategy.

A mainstream and a common stream were created for promotion. High-performing officers placed in, say, seventh or tenth in the hierarchy were brought in-to the mainstream, and were

moved up to command important formations and occupy pivotal positions at Army Headquarters.

To the Market: Selecting and promoting employees on the basis of their competence and indeed, performance, over any other criterion, help achieve one key thing, among others. That is the creation of an overall performance culture in the organization. The primacy of performance is thus established.

#### **4. Win the support of all those who matter.**

From the Military: As a leader, winning the support of his core team and that of others in the organization is absolutely necessary. In fighting Eelam War IV, there was the congruence of organizational vision and personal purpose. The Sri Lankan Army's vision was to defeat, in fact, annihilate the LTTE. This was the self-same purpose of every officer and soldier. A mismatch between the two would have put the whole military strategy in jeopardy.

Healthy relationships were established with allies. While material and moral support was received from China, Russia, Pakistan and others, the support of India was critical to the whole mission. Winning the support of the general public, and correcting false and misplaced information, was another key aspect of winning the support of many who mattered. Indeed, the negative campaigns launched in various quarters had to be addressed. The website titled [www.defence.lk](http://www.defence.lk) was a resounding success and it almost single-handedly fought the propaganda war of the LTTE.

In winning the support of the people, the choice of language and effective communications played a key role. During the final stages of Eelam War IV, in particular, expressions such as "fighting terror" were supplanted with "saving the people" and "humanitarian mission". This entailed the repositioning of the "warrior" as a veritable "saviour".

To the Market: Aligning the organization's vision with the individual's purpose is key. The employee's identification with the organization depends largely on this score. The personal values/belief system and that of the organization must be congruent. The larger role of the organization in society must be one that the key employees in particular, not only endorse, but also subscribe to. This is a key human resources management function.

Managing stakeholder perceptions in winning support is another key lesson to be learnt. What information to provide (and not) and how is a critical question in this regard.

#### **5. Provoke the enemy to err strategically.**

From the Military: The LTTE, while not altogether abandoning their guerrilla operations, especially in the jungles, began to develop in the mould of a conventional army. They started to defend and protect land and developed their fire-power as a typical conventional army would. The Sri Lanka Army, on the other hand, always fought a conventional war. Hence, it was a direct confrontation, over a long period of time. The LTTE's increasingly ambitious project made them transcend a guerrilla operation, while the Army attempted to overpower them in a terrain they knew less than the enemy did.

There was a shift of strategy in Eelam War IV. From deploying large formations in the battlefield, small teams were deployed. Conventionally, the Army fought on the chief supply

lines, which were around 20 km long. This was changed. Small teams, comprising four to eight men, away from main supply lines and in thick jungles moved forward and confronted the enemy at multiple points. This put the LTTE off balance, and got them to commit the strategic error of a radical shift from a guerrilla outfit to a full-blown conventional army, markedly weakening the former mode, their critical point of difference vis a vis the Sri Lankan Army. Consequently, the LTTE avoided the Army in the jungles. Importantly, the artillery procured by the LTTE which accounted for almost 70 % of its expenses, proved irrelevant and ineffective in the new theatre of war.

To the Market: Departing from an organisation's competitive strengths that are rooted in the collection of inter-connected capabilities, by adopting a strategy that does not make it superior nor differentiated vis a vis one's competitor, is a recipe for defeat.

For instance, a company whose competitive advantage lies in operating in a narrow segment of an industry and offer "more value for a higher price" value proposition may be provoked by a competitor, whose value proposition is akin to "less value for a lower price" in relation to the industry, as a whole. When the latter attacks the former player's narrow industry segment, a knee-jerk reaction on its part to lower price in order to ward-off the mass-market player is fraught with danger. It amounts to abandoning the strategic position, and indeed, the stand of the company. A change of role and scope in the face of competitive pressure is a denial of one's identity and position, although a careful change of the goal and path to keep competition at bay, may be prudent, on occasion.

## **6. Surprise and disorient the enemy.**

From the Military: It is typical to identify the enemy's weak areas and attack them while leaving the strong areas to be fought out another day. The Sri Lankan Army surprised the LTTE by doing the exact opposite of this typical approach. It confronted the LTTE's strongest positions.

Fighting at night was never the case for the Army. However, many major operations this time were carried out at night. The LTTE never expected this. In the past, it was the LTTE that had struck at night. The Army's increasing ability to fight at night got the LTTE on the back foot, and made them defensive.

In addition to taking on the strongholds of the LTTE, at unexpected times and places, the Army launched several operations simultaneously on various fronts. The multi-prong and multi-front attacks were not expected by the LTTE. They put the LTTE off-balance, and in total disarray.

To the Market: Unconventional though, attacking the competitor's strengths and strong-holds first, and making multiple and simultaneous competitive moves could confuse the competitor, making it vulnerable.

A strong competitor, for instance, may have a distinctive and a differentiated benefit that it has been offering its customers, over a long period of time. Now, an attempt to dislodge this competitor by either making a proposition that is superior to its strong point of difference, or challenging its value perceptions of it, in the minds of the customer, could put the competitor in

disarray. Once you succeed in doing so, then the weak areas or the competitor's points of parity with the rest in the industry could be dealt with, to the detriment of the competitor. In like manner, one could first attack a competitor's strong markets, say, geographically.

### **7. Make the enemy defensive and never let up.**

From the Military: Throughout Eelam War IV for almost three years, more often than not, the LTTE was on the defensive and reacting to the moves of the Army. The Army retained the initiative and engaged the enemy with all its force and surprise attacks. The pressure brought to bear on the enemy was never relaxed.

Pinning the LTTE down on many fronts, all at the same time, denied them of any respite to regroup and to gather its resources. The LTTE was compelled to be engaged on many fronts, and they could not, as they did in the past, retract and regroup. The thrust was never weakened nor abated.

To the Market: "Attack, stop and attack" or a "fighting" strategy is commonplace in business. A concentrated, short-duration attack on the competitor with a heavy burst of a campaign, and then being silent for a while, before taking on the competitor again, is dictated, in part by cost considerations, and also by reasons related to the perceived effectiveness of a discontinuous program of action.

A more continuous, competitive thrust, called "pulsing", is the alternative approach. Here, the continuity of low weight-level competitive activity is reinforced periodically, by waves of heavier activity. A "pulsing" strategy draws upon the strength of continuous activity, and keeping the pressure on the competitor, not giving it breathing space to marshal its resources and reserves.

### **8. Set strategy-based performance standards.**

From the Military: Importantly, previous Eelam Wars, over two decades, had one central measure of performance and success. That was the land mass that was captured from the LTTE. How many square kilometers of a particular territory have we captured --was the question that indicated the success or failure of a military campaign.

The experience of capturing land mass was that, although it helped to keep the enemy at bay, soon after the land capture, the task of holding the captured land, proved to be costly, both in terms of the men who had to be stationed, and importantly, the casualties that ensued, when the LTTE regrouped and attacked the captured areas with renewed ferocity.

In Eelam War IV, a different measure of success, indeed of performance was determined. It was not a matter of land mass, but the number of LTTE cadres that were killed. From "land to kill" proved to be a pivotal shift in focus and measure of success.

It is important to note that "fight to kill" is rooted in the overall strategy that was adopted: Eliminate the LTTE, not weaken them, nor keep them on a defensive mode. To the Market: Key Performance Indicators (KPI) are used by many organizations to set targets and monitor progress. Importantly, setting KPI's that emanate from one's core strategy is a critical lesson to be learnt from the military success. What is your overall strategy? If it is to capture market share, for instance, then what are the key drivers (not outcomes) of the expected performance?

They should constitute the critical KPI's, and not those that are conventional, which will be monitored anyway, through typical financial analyses.

### **9. Establish direct command and co-ordinate at the top.**

From the Military: The Army Commander of Eelam War IV kept the key divisions and formations under his overall control. He directly commanded some key Divisions. A direct chain of command was established, which went down to the grassroots.

The "hands on" approach of the Commander made him remove key officers and replace them with others, on the run, as it were. The intimate knowledge of what was unfolding made him appreciate the need for flank protection, when it was required, relocate counter-attack forces, and importantly, ask key questions from those in the battlefield that often challenged their assumptions about the enemy and its maneuvers. Importantly, this "hands on" approach by the Commander helped him adopt emergent strategies when pre-planned deliberate strategies did not seem prudent, given the unexpected emerging ground situation.

To the Market: Being on the field, at the scene of action, and managing by being there, walking around or otherwise is a leader-behaviour that pays off. This is another lesson. If the view from the top provides the vantage point of vision for co-ordination and alignment of multiple competitive moves and activities, then such moves must not be delegated, but made by the top brass of the organization. The popular notion of strategy and policy formulation at the top and overall co-ordination being left to the lower levels to handle, may well be dysfunctional and, in fact, flawed in many a context. This approach, however, need not necessarily thwart delegated power and authority being exercised by others.

Importantly, a "hands on" leader-role helps organizations to bridge the planning and implementation phases. The separation of the two-planning by those at the top and implementation by others, often fails in complex settings, where emergent rather than deliberate strategies work.

### **10. Play it straight; it drives performance.**

From the Military: "I implemented strict rules and standards. I sat on Tender Boards and was personally monitoring every detail", said the then Commander. Importantly, the appropriate and effective arms, ammunition, battle tanks, and armoured carriers got purchased as a result of the transparent procedures. There was no compromise on quality and effectiveness when it came to vital procurement.

To the Market: Conformance to standards, and good governance, and high levels of performance are often seen as being independent of each other. The positive impacts of conformance on performance are often ignored. A transparent procedure, as was evident, enabled a positive outcome and the leader's integrity allowed him to punish the offenders without a negative impact on the rest.

The morally upright leader has a distinct advantage of pushing through his performance agenda. His source credibility is heightened and his acceptance enhanced. Indeed, the clarity and transparency of the modes of reward and punishment, devoid of any hidden agenda, makes the whole organization function better. Another vital lesson, for sure!

