

Discerning the Landscape

By Steven F. Fox – ISSA member, Motor City (Detroit), USA Chapter



Information security professionals operate in the context of a business landscape. This landscape is analogous to the physical world. Some territories can be traversed with little opportunity cost. Other territories require profound agility from those wishing to tap their resources. In the *Art of War*,¹ Sun Tzu details unique environmental situations he called the “Nine Grounds.” This month’s installment will discuss the situations common to our trade. We will explore how the landscape can be used to our advantage. According to Sun Tzu, “*When you know what is to others’ advantage and what is to your advantage, you are not in danger.*”

The Ground of Dissolution

This environment is characterized by conflicts where “*local interests fight among themselves on their own territory.*” Generally, the stakeholders in this environment are “*attached to the land.*” By this, Sun Tzu meant that they are focused on preserving their status in the environment rather than adapting to new opportunities.

Rather than fight to change the status quo, Sun Tzu advises leaders to “*unify the minds of the troops.*” I once performed a vulnerability assessment in this kind of organization. Due to political intrigue, most of my time was spent maintaining the role of an objective consultant. As I analyzed the business, various stakeholders inquired on how they could control the flow of information from their functional areas. I decided to promote a security awareness program to educate the system users while addressing the stated concerns of the customer. In the end, the company focused its efforts on addressing the vulnerabilities that affected its ability to do business.

The Ground of Contention

These are positions and/or alliances in most organizations that allow an individual or team to exert unusual influence. From this position, “*a few could overcome many, the weak could strike the powerful.*” One manifestation of this environment is a process bottleneck that enhances the power of a given group. Identifying this group is critical to employing successful procedures that support the security policy. The ground of contention can also express itself as a group that can employ a strategic process shortcut under certain circumstances. The risk assessment must reflect an awareness of these forces.

Trafficked Ground

Trafficked ground is the ideal environment in which a business operates. This landscape is characterized by interconnected processes and lines of communication. Sun Tzu suggested that consultants must “*make alliances firm*” in order to implement a risk management plan. The consultant should avoid interrupting lines of communication whenever possible.

Intersecting Ground

Sun Tzu described this landscape as “*the intersections of main arteries linking together numerous highway systems.*” This position is sought for its strategic, information gathering, and alliance building advantages. To this end, Sun Tzu noted that “*if you establish alliances you are safe, if you lose alliances you are in peril.*” The characteristics of this environment also afford the security consultant the opportunity to employ business analysis techniques to determine the underlying

nature of the business. This allows the association of risks to those processes.

Success Factors

The use of guides is instrumental in understanding the unique way Sun Tzu’s *grounds* express themselves in a given environment. While these guides can be found among the client’s employees, the best guides come from outside the organization. These individuals can help discern the subtle organizational and behavioral indicators in the environment.

While scouts are useful, the development of a strong network of allies must not be neglected. “*If you do not compete for alliances anywhere, do not foster authority anywhere, but just extend your personal influence, this makes town and country vulnerable,*” said Sun Tzu. The success of any security program depends largely on the relationships developed by the security consultant.

According to Sun Tzu, “*the form of the land is the basis on which the military is aided and victory is established, so it must be measured.*” It is the effective leader who not only bases his strategy on the environment but also acts strategically with that knowledge.

About the Author

Steven F. Fox is a senior IT auditor at GM Audit Services. He is the IS advisor for NPower Michigan, a nonprofit IT service provider and also serves on the board of the Detroit ISSA chapter. He can be reached at steven.fox@gm.com or at <http://www.securelexicon.com>.

¹ All citations from Thomas Leary, *The Illustrated Art of War* (Boston, MA: Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2004).