

Lessons From the Roman Art of War



Sometime in the late 4th or early 5th century, as the late Roman Empire stumbled along in the twilight of its power, an author of whom almost nothing is known compiled a book on the art of war to present to the emperor.

Rome's economy was soft, its politics corrupt, but what most concerned the author was the creeping disintegration of the one institution that at least kept those other two extant: the military.

Like the rest of Roman society, its once mighty fighting force had fallen victim to decadence. Whereas the army of the early empire had consisted of highly disciplined, well-trained Roman regulars, the standards of the legendary legionaries had fallen, as had their numbers; a much smaller standing army was now supplemented with auxiliary units composed of barbarian mercenaries.

Epitoma Rei Militaris (*Epitome of Military Science*) by Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus (known simply as Vegetius) was an attempt to get the emperor to remedy the military's weaknesses before it was too late. "Epitome" here refers to a summary, as Vegetius' work was not an entirely original composition, but rather a collection of "commentaries on the art of war abridged from authors of the highest repute." The *Epitome of Military Science* collects the wisdom of Rome's early military commanders on organization, equipment, arms, leadership, logistics, and more. The book contains both practical advice on how to recruit, train, and harden troops of excellence and courage, as well as pithy maxims on tactics and strategy. Vegetius said the work could be called a "Rule-Book of Battle" or the "Art of Victory."

Vegetius sought to reach back into the history of the early empire in order to illuminate the principles in force when the Roman military had been at the height of its powers, and to demonstrate that those methods and tactics were what created its power in the first place. In reviving these principles, he argued, Rome's greatness could be revived as well.

Vegetius' call for reform ultimately went unheeded, failing to stem either the Roman military's shift towards greater reliance on mercenaries, nor the laxity that permeated the remaining shell of its citizen-staffed army. However, as the only surviving Latin art of war, it remained a popular and influential guide book for officers and generals in the centuries that followed. In the Middle Ages, it was an essential part of a prince's military education, and leaders up through the 19th century continued to consult its classic tips on gaining the upper hand in battle.

While *Epitoma Rei Militaris* is lesser known today than other works on the art of war, it's still a worthy volume packed with advice that, like all martial strategies, can be applied to challenges and competitions beyond the battlefield — literally and metaphorically, on a personal as well as societal level.

Below you'll find some of the most vital lessons from the book, which when carefully pondered, can be used to improve your approach and tactics in whatever fight you're facing.

No Other Art, Without the Art of War

"For there is no secure possession of wealth, unless it be maintained by defense of arms."

"Who can doubt that the art of war comes before everything else, when it preserves our liberty and prestige, extends the provinces, and
...the Empire?"

saves the empire:

“O men worthy of the highest admiration and praise [the Spartans] who wished to learn that art in particular without which the other arts cannot be.”

The above quotes explain the impetus behind *Epitoma Rei Militaris*.

The late Roman empire had plenty of problems, but fixing them would be irrelevant if the empire were conquered by invaders. No civilization is possible if it is not undergirded with a strong defense and inhabited by men who have maintained their martial prowess. Or as Theodore Roosevelt put it, [“Unless we keep the barbarian virtues, gaining the civilized ones will be of little avail.”](#)

The Romans learned this lesson the hard way, when, despite all their technological advances, structured government, and tolerance for moral license, they were conquered not simply by men who had kept the barbarian virtues, but by actual barbarians.

Strength Acts as a Deterrent

“For there is nothing stabler nor more fortunate or admirable than a State which has copious supplies of soldiers who are trained. For it is not fine raiment or stores of gold, silver and gems that bend out enemies to respect or support us; they are kept down solely by fear of our arms.”

“He who wants victory, let him train soldiers diligently. He who wishes a successful outcome, let him fight with strategy, not at random. No one dares challenge or harm one who he realizes will win if he fights.”

Vegetius wasn't a warmonger. Rather, he saw the development of martial strength as the best way to actually prevent conflict. It was he, in fact, who first penned that now famous maxim: “Whoever desires peace, let him prepare for war.”

The principle of deterrence through strength, Vegetius argued, is premised not only on maintaining a well-trained, highly-disciplined fighting force, but displaying the potency of that force as well. Appearance matters. For as he observes, “The glitter of arms strikes very great fear in the enemy. Who can believe a soldier warlike, when his inattention has fouled his arms with mold and rust?”

Peace Creates Complacency

“A sense of security born of a long peace has diverted mankind partly to the enjoyment of private leisure, partly to civilian careers. Thus attention to military training obviously was at first discharged rather neglectfully, then omitted, until finally cosigned long since to oblivion.”

[Every society \(and every man\) experiences a cycle that oscillates between complacency and vigilance.](#)

In times of war, a nation awakens to its unpreparedness for battle, and desperately scrambles to get its men and arms in fighting shape.

This sense of mission and disciplined alertness lasts into the immediate aftermath of the war, as the lessons from the battlefield remain fresh.

As peace deepens, however, so does a sense of complacency. Memory of the war fades. Those who actually fought in it die off. It seems that, at long last, a permanent peace has been established. War will never come again.

Until it does. And a nation once more rushes to strengthen its flabby martial muscles.

This is what happened in Rome. As soldiers left the army during periods of peace, they were not replaced with new recruits. Citizens spurned military service for private careers. The job of protecting the realm was outsourced to mercenaries. As the army's ranks depleted, its standards fell. “Corruption usurped the rewards of valor and soldiers were promoted through influence when they used to be promoted for actual work.”

Better it would be, Vegetius exhorted, to keep one's fighting force at full strength whether conflict was imminent or not, so that, should it become so, the army would not be caught flat-footed. As he explained: “It is obviously a sound principle that they ought always to be doing in peacetime what it is deemed necessary to do in battle.”

Hardships Toughen; Luxury Enervates

“From the country, then, the main strength of the army should be supplied. For, I am inclined to think, a man fears death less if he has less acquaintance with luxury in his life.”

Vegetius believed that men who grow up in rural areas make for better soldiers, because the environment in which they are raised naturally cultivates the kind of mental and physical toughness required for a successful career at arms:

“They are nurtured under the open sky in a life of work, enduring the sun, careless of shade, unacquainted with bathhouses, ignorant of luxury, simple-souled, content with a little, with limbs toughened to endure every kind of toil, and for whom digging a fosse [ditch] and carrying a burden is what they are used to.”

In contrast, men from the city are accustomed to greater comforts and convenience, and have a more difficult time bending their will to the work of a warrior.

Vegetius admits, however, that sometimes “necessity demands that city-dwellers also be conscripted.” In such a case, these urban men have to develop the foundational taste for hardship their previous lives lacked, before they can begin to be taught the arts of war:

“[They] must first learn to work, drill, carry a burden and endure heat and dust; they must adopt a moderate, rural diet, and camp now

[They] must first learn to work, then, carry a burden and endure heat and dust, they must adopt a moderate, rural diet, and camp now under the sky, now under tents. Only then should they be trained in the use of arms and, if a long campaign is in prospect, they should be detained for considerable period on outpost-duty and be kept far away from the attractions of the city, so that by this means their physical and mental vigor may be increased.”

Quality Trumps Quantity; Skill Beats Talent

“The ancients, who learned to remedy their difficulties from experience, wished to have armies that were not so much numerous as trained in arms.”

“In every battle it is not numbers and untaught bravery so much as skill and training that generally produce the victory.”

While Vegetius was concerned about the number of Roman citizen-soldiers in the military relative to mercenaries, increasing the sheer size of the army was not his priority. The quantity of an army’s soldiers, he argued, was far less important than their quality — that in fact, a smaller force of well-trained men was not only easier to manage, but more effective than an ungainly and poorly disciplined horde.

Learned skill, Vegetius says, is not only more important than size, but also overcomes deficiency in natural talent. He asserts that “Romans conquered all peoples solely because of their military training,” as he sees no other way the legionaries could have bested what he describes as the taller Germanics, the fiercer Africans, the stronger Spaniards, and the smarter Greeks. “What succeeded against all of them,” Vegetius posits, “was careful selection of recruits, instruction in the rules, so to speak, of war, toughening in daily exercises, prior acquaintance in field practice with all possible eventualities in war and battle, and strict punishment of cowardice.”

“Bravery,” he concludes, “is of more value than numbers.”

And bravery can be trained...

Train Hard, So Battle Is Easy

“It is advisable that [soldiers] should very frequently be felling trees, carrying burdens, jumping ditches, swimming in the sea or rivers, marching at full step or even running in their arms, with their packs on. The habit of daily labor in peace may not then seem arduous in war. Whether they be legion or auxilia, let them be training constantly. As a well-drilled soldier looks forward to battle, so an untrained one fears it.”

“No one is afraid to do what he is confident of having learned well.”

“Few men are born naturally brave; hard work and good training makes many so.”

“This should not be thought hard, once the habit has been gained, for there is nothing that continual practice does not render very easy.”

“Familiar things are not frightening.”

Arguably the principle Vegetius believed most essential to mastering the art of war was that success in combat was determined long before one marched onto the battlefield.

Rather, victory was almost entirely premised on the quality of soldiers’ training in peace.

The harder that training, the more it toughened up the men, the closer it approximated the stress and challenges of combat, the easier they would find the actual fight. For a “recruit so trained” Vegetius observes, “fighting against all manner of enemies in battle will be no terror but a delight.”

To this end, Vegetius recommended that Roman recruits be trained for at least four months before becoming full-fledged legionaries and tasting their first combat. Drills could occur several times a day during this “boot camp,” as repetitious practice “enabled them to do without nerves in battle what they had always done in exercises on the training-field.”

Apropos to this assumption was the practice of training with shields, spears, and swords that were double the weight of a soldier’s actual weapons, “so that when the recruit took up real, and lighter arms, he fought with more confidence and agility, as being liberated from the heavier weight.”

Training was performed not only with regularity, but also, crucially, with consistency. The only time legionaries drilled inside was if it was raining or snowing. Otherwise, no matter the season of the year, the intensity of the heat or the cold, “they were made to train on the exercise field, so that no interruptions to routine might weaken soldiers’ minds and bodies.”

The battle is won months, even years, before it actually starts.

Cut Your Teeth Before Biting Into Bigger Battles

“But if they become fully expert in field maneuvers, archery, throwing javelins and drawing up the line, they should not even then be lightly led into pitched battle, but on a carefully chosen opportunity, and only after being bloodied in smaller-scale conflicts.”

“A soldier should never be led into battle unless you have made trial of him first.”

Even with all the training in the world, Vegetius observes, it is unwise for a raw soldier to jump feet first into a fierce fight. Instead, he should acclimate to the stresses of combat by first engaging in battles in which the chances highly favor his success. These small initial victories build morale, preparing the soldier for greater challenges.

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Vegetius points out, having a real-time experience you first go round with something, finds motivation for future engagement with it, for it remains easier to train new men in valor than to reanimate those who have been terrified out of their wits.”

The More Skin You’ve Got in the Game, the Harder You’ll Fight to Protect It

Joining the Roman army was a serious commitment; in fact, the oaths recruits took to faithfully perform their duties, even onto the laying down of their lives, were known as the “sacraments” of military service. The seriousness of a soldier’s pledge was further symbolized by the tattoo he received upon enlistment, which permanently marked his status as a warrior onto his skin.

The way soldiers were paid also increased their, quite literal, investment in the military. It was required that half of their pay be deposited with the legion’s “standard-bearers,” who not only hoisted the unit’s flags and emblems in battle, but safeguarded their comrades’ pay. These funds could not be accessed until a soldier’s service was complete.

This practice was thought not only to help legionaries better manage their finances, but to spur deeper commitment; as Vegetius writes, he whose money was deposited with the army “never thinks of deserting, has greater love for the standards, and fights for them more bravely in battle, since [it is human nature to care most about things on which one’s fortune is staked.](#)”

Self-Sufficiency Is the Ultimate Security

“A well-trained legion was like a very well-fortified city, which carried all that was essential for battle around with it everywhere, and feared no sudden hostile assault: even in the midst of plains it would fortify itself upon an instant with fosse [defensive ditch] and rampart; it contained within itself all types of soldiers and arms.”

In Vegetius’ time, the size of legions was made smaller, and supported in battle by units of auxilia. The latter, he argued, represented an inferior fighting force. Made up of disparate units of barbarian mercenaries cobbled together from all over the empire and pressed into temporary service according to need, their unity was lacking. The members of auxilia had “nothing in common with one another either in training, in acquaintance, or morale.” Their fighting styles differed, and, being strangers to their new comrades, they struggled to follow commands and move as one.

In contrast, the legions of the early empire contained all the “cohorts” required for battle — cavalry, heavy armament (frontline warriors equipped with sword, shield, spear, javelin) and light armament (archers, slingers, catapultiers) — without reliance on outside support. Having trained exhaustively together, such a legion “acts with one mind and equal commitment to fortify a camp, draw up a line, do battle” and being “complete in every part and needing no external additions — it usually defeats any numbers of the enemy.”

Containing everything it needed within itself, a legion feared no attack or change of fortune; they were able to set up a well-defended frontline anywhere, anytime. As Vegetius observed, “Soldiers spend days and nights so secure behind the rampart — even if the enemy is besieging it — that they seem to carry a walled city about them everywhere.”

Warriors Are Not Physical Specialists

The physical training of early Roman legionaries was continual. It was intense. And it was multidimensional.

Roman warriors were not just strong. Or fast. Or agile. They were all of these things. And well-versed in employing a wide range of weapons.

The Epitome of Military Science prescribes a varied training program for legionaries which includes carrying burdens, marching, running, swimming, combatives, jumping, javelin throwing, bow shooting, and more.

Marching formed an essential core of this fitness protocol. Infantry soldiers had to be able to ruck 60 pounds of weight at the regular military step of 20 miles in 5 hours, as well as the full, faster step of 24 miles in the same time. Twice a month both cavalry and infantry were led out on *ambulatorium*, which for the latter required advancing “ten miles at the military step, armed and equipped with all their weapons, and then [retiring] to camp, completing some part of the march at the brisker running pace.”

While the ability to ruck was considered foundational, being able to run for speed was also deemed important, “so as to charge the enemy with greater impetus, occupy favorable positions swiftly when need arises and seize them first when the enemy wish to do the same, to go out on scouting expeditions speedily, return more speedily, and overtake fugitives with greater ease.”

Runs often ended with a dip in the water, so that soldiers “might wash off sweat and dust after training in arms, and lose their fatigue from running in the exercise of swimming.” [“The art of swimming” was considered an important physical skill to learn](#), for the obvious reason that “rivers are not always crossed by bridges.”

Jumping and leaping were practiced so that soldiers could smoothly vault over ditches and hurdle obstacles without missing a beat. Being able to forcefully move one’s body in space came in handy in the heat of battle as well, as “the soldier coming on by a running jump makes the adversary’s eyes flinch, frightens his mind, and plants a blow before the other can properly prepare himself for evasive or offensive action.”

Infantry soldiers practiced sword fighting on each other, as well as on wooden posts that they wacked away at a couple times a day. Heavy javelins were also hurled at these dummy opponents to build up arm strength.

Cavalry soldiers, meanwhile, practiced mounting a wooden horse until they could vault onto an actual steed from a standing position on both the left and right side, while holding a sword or lance. “Having trained with such dedication in peace,” they were “able to mount without delay in the stress of battle.”

Roman soldiers were not only able to perform such physical skills in isolation from each other, but [worked to combine them into agile maneuvers](#). As Vegetius advised, “Let them grow used to executing jumps and blows at the same time, rushing at the shield with a leap and crouching down again, now eagerly darting forward with a bound, now giving ground, jumping back.”

Here was ancient fitness at its most rigorously functional.

The Healthy Prevail

“From this it is appreciated how zealously an army should always be trained in the art of war, since the habit of work may bring it both health in the camp, and victory in the field.”

“Military experts considered that daily exercises in arms were more conducive to soldiers’ health than doctors. So they wished that the infantry be trained without cease.”

“It is hard for those who are fighting both a war and a disease.”

Roman soldiers trained their bodies not only for the direct effect this exercise had on their proficiency in the arts of war, but because it lent itself to preserving their overall health.

In many wars throughout history, sickness has slain more warriors than the sword.

The healthy can better outlast opponents, and may beat them in the fight, without there ever being a clash of arms.

Always Fight Fresh

“Beware also not to force to a pitched battle soldiers who are tired after a long march or horses that are weary from galloping. Men who are going to battle lose much of their strength from marching-fatigue. What is one to do, if he reaches the line exhausted? This is something the ancients avoided. . . For when a tired man enters battle with one who has rested, or a sweating man with an alert, or one who had been running with one who has been standing, he fights on unequal terms.”

Though continual training was a tenet of Roman fighting efficiency and health, such exertion was useless if not balanced with rest. For as Vegetius observes, to enter a battle fatigued is to begin the fight with one hand tied behind your back.

All blades dull through use; periodic sharpening is required to maintain an edge.

Take the Battle to the Enemy

“Always strive to be first to draw up the line, because you can do at your pleasure what you judge useful to yourself while no one is obstructing you. Secondly, you increase the confidence of your men and diminish the courage of the enemy, because the side which does not hesitate to challenge appears the stronger. The enemy, by contrast, begin to be afraid when they see lines being drawn up against them. Thirdly, it allows of the greatest advantage in that you may attack first while you are drawn up and prepared and the enemy is still ordering his forces and unsteady. For part of victory consists in throwing the enemy into confusion before you fight.”

The first mover is frequently at an advantage. That which is born from initiative can be carried to victory.

If You’re Imitating, You’re Already Losing

“In all battles the terms of campaign are such that what benefits you harms the enemy, and what helps him always hinders you. Therefore, we ought never to do or omit to do anything at his pleasure, but carry out only that which we judge useful to ourselves. For you begin to be against yourself if you copy what he has done in his own interest, and likewise whatever you attempt for your side will be against him if he chooses to imitate.”

Once you start copying what your opponent is doing, you’ve already begun to cede the field.

You’ve lost the initiative.

Surprise the Enemy as Much as Possible Through Secrecy

“Surprises alarm the enemy; familiarity breeds contempt.”

“No plans are better than those you carry out in advance without the enemy’s knowledge.”

The shrewdest and most successful Roman generals were able to keep their strategies — particularly the locations and movements of their troops — close to the chest. In so doing, they protected their own soldiers, while gaining the upper hand on the enemy’s.

“It is for this reason,” Vegetius explains, “that the ancients had the standard of the Minotaur in the legions. Just as he is said to have been hidden away in the innermost and most secret labyrinth, so the general’s plan should always be kept secret. A safe march is that which the enemy least expects to be made.”

Thwart the Enemy’s Surprises Through Reconnaissance

“To prevent added losses from a sudden commotion, soldiers should be warned beforehand to be mentally prepared and have their arms in their hands. In an emergency sudden things are terrifying, things that are foreseen do not usually strike panic.”

“He who is beaten in battle in a general engagement though there too art is of very great advantage, can nevertheless in his defense

accuse Fortune; he who suffers a sudden attack, ambushes, or surprises cannot acquit himself of blame, because he could have avoided these things and discovered them beforehand through good scouts.”

While a good leader wishes to spring surprises on his opponent, he desires to be as little surprised himself as possible.

It is for this reason that Vegetius extolls the importance of reconnaissance at length, encouraging generals to thoroughly investigate and understand the terrain in which they’ll be moving and fighting, as well as the relative strengths and weaknesses of the enemy.

The distances troops will be marching between locations should be gauged with exactitude. Knowledge of the quality of roads, and of shortcuts, should be complete and wholly accurate. A map of the landscape’s geographic contours and natural obstacles should not only be drafted, but annotated, illustrated, and studied. A mental map, just as sharp and detailed as the physical variety, should also be developed within the commander’s mind.

To aid in this reconnaissance process, knowledgeable guides should be employed; especially useful are those captured from the enemy’s territory, and flipped in loyalty.

When the army actually sets out upon its march, the wise general positions scouts not only ahead of it, but to the sides and the rear, tasked with watching for enemies lying in wait.

Not only must the lay of the land be known, but an accurate assessment of the opposing forces’ habits must be gathered as well, so leaders know:

“whether they usually attack by night, at daybreak or during the rest-hour when men are tired [in order to] avoid that which we think they will do from routine. It is likewise in our interest to know whether they are stronger in infantry or cavalry, in pikemen or archers, and whether they are superior in numbers of men or military equipment, so that we may adopt the tactics which are judged useful to ourselves and disadvantageous to them.

It is also relevant to find out the character of the adversary himself, his senior staff-officers and chieftains. Are they rash or cautious, bold or timid, skilled in the art of war or fighting from experience or haphazardly? Which tribes on their side are brave or cowardly? What is the loyalty and courage of our auxilia? What is the morale of the enemy forces? What is that of our own army? Which side promises itself victory more? By such consideration is the army’s courage bolstered or undermined.”

Reconnaissance sets the stage for victory — killing the enemy’s element of surprise and enabling the creation of plans that most stack the advantages in your favor.

Humility Clarifies Vision

“An important art useful to a general is to call in persons from the entire army who are knowledgeable about war and aware of their own and the enemy’s forces, and to hold frequent discussions with them in an atmosphere from which all flattery, which does so much harm, has been banished, to decide whether he or the enemy has the greater number of fighters, whether his own men or the enemy’s are better armed or armored and which side is the more highly trained or the braver in warfare.”

The fullest possible reconnaissance cannot be conducted if some channels of feedback have been closed. Many leaders in history have surrounded themselves with yes-men — sycophants who hid a force’s or plan’s weaknesses and painted only the most favorable picture of the commander’s chances for success.

[The successful leader is open to all feedback](#), even if it negatively compares his resources with his opponents’, in order that he might have a clearer understanding of the field of conflict and when and how to enter it.

Fortify Your Vulnerabilities

“The part which the enemy is expected to approach one should be particularly careful to reinforce.”

Balance in the art of war operates on a delicate scale. On the one hand, vigorous training and battlefield success leads to greater confidence. As confidence grows, however, so can complacency, which can lead to defeat. As Vegetius puts it, “Necessarily, more freedom from fear generally brings with it graver danger.” A leader must thus remain vigilant in identifying and shoring up his army’s vulnerabilities, even, or rather especially, when the tides of war are flowing his way.

The most vulnerable times for the Roman legions came when they were eating, grazing their animals, and particularly, marching; Vegetius, in fact, notes that “Those who have made a careful study of the art of war assert that more danger tends to arise on the march than in the battle itself.” When moving from point A to point B, soldiers can’t see the enemy and are less alert — their bodies fatigued from the effort, their thoughts on the destination ahead.

Armies are also very vulnerable in the midst of a celebration of victory; should the recently defeated resurrect and return for revenge, “over-confidence is suddenly turned to panic.”

Knowing that “the enemy immediately penetrate any gaps,” a leader must therefore bolster all potential weaknesses — whether physical or psychological. “If the enemy surround on all sides, reinforcements must be prepared on all sides.”

Fight Your Battles on a Landscape of Your Strengths

“He should consider whether the terrain itself in which one is to fight appears advantageous to the enemy or to ourselves.”

“Terrain is often of more value than bravery.”

“He who has confidence in his cavalry should find places more suited to horsemen and wage war more by means of cavalry.

He who had confidence in the infantry forces should find places more suited to infantry and wage war more through infantry.”

Your opponent will try to meet you on ground favorable to his strengths.

You should try to lure him onto a landscape favorable to yours.

Attack From Within and Without

“It is the mark of a skilled general to sow seeds of discord among the enemy. For no nation, however small, can be completely destroyed by its enemies, unless it devours itself by its own dueling. Civil strife is quick to compass the destruction of political enemies, but careless about the readiness of (the nation’s) own defense.”

When on offense, before trying to knock down a wall from the outside, send in termites to eat it from the inside.

When on defense, don’t spend so much time looking for threats from an enemy’s camp, that you ignore problems brewing in your own backyard.

“Hunger Is More Savage Than the Sword”

“On any expedition the single most effective weapon is that food should be sufficient for you while dearth should break the enemy.”

“But most important of all, he should deliberate whether it is expedient for the crisis to be prolonged or fought out more swiftly. For sometimes the enemy hopes that the campaign can be ended quickly, and if it becomes long-drawn out, is either reduced by hunger, or called back to this own country by his men’s homesickness, or through doing nothing significant is compelled to leave in despair. Then very many desert, exhausted by effort and weariness, some betray others and some surrender themselves, since loyalty is less common in adversity, and the enemy who came in great force begins to be laid bare.”

“For armies are more often destroyed by starvation than battle, and hunger is more savage than the sword.”

Success in war is often thought of strictly in terms of one army besting another in open battle. But sometimes victory can be maintained not by directly confronting an enemy, but simply by outlasting him.

Indeed, in ancient Rome, legions sometimes took territory and put down rebellions, not by conquering a city (at least initially), but by first laying it siege. Supply lines into the city were cut off, depriving its inhabitants of outside food and water. A war of attrition then commenced, with the side with the most resources at its disposal ultimately left standing. The word attrition in fact comes from the Latin root *atterere*, to rub against — i.e., to grind down.

Like sewing civil strife, starving the enemy was another form of weakening him from the inside out, “for hunger... fights from within, and often conquers without a blow.”

From a defensive standpoint, then, a city had to be adept at stockpiling as many supplies as possible, without which no plan B can exist; Vegetius lays down the hard reality of it: “The most thorough precautions should be taken against shortage of drinking-water or food arising at any time, since such troubles cannot be ameliorated by any stratagem.”

Equally important to possessing ample supplies, is having the disciplined stewardship to use and ration them wisely. All the resources in the world are useless, after all, if in a panic they are greedily consumed at once. The greatest resource for the besieged to possess, therefore, isn’t food or water, but sheer will; the length at which a man can manage hunger varies not simply by physiology but by psychology, and “men who began to keep a frugal diet while there was still plenty have never been in a danger of starving.”

The man with the greatest self-mastery can sometimes master his enemy, simply by having more patience, more tolerance for deprivation — simply by waiting for him to cry uncle, knuckle under, and give up.

Seize the Higher Ground

“If an open battle is being prepared in mountain-country, the higher ground should be seized by sending forces ahead so that when the enemy arrives, he finds himself on lower ground, and dare not attack when he can see armed men in front of him and overhead.”

“This is judged the more advantageous, the higher the ground occupied. For weapons descend with more violence onto men on a lower level, and the side which is higher dislodges those opposing them in greater force. He who struggles uphill enters a double contest with the ground and with the enemy.”

Once you’ve achieved a certain height, all your weapons land with greater impact. And your opponent will wear himself out simply trying to get where you are, expending his energy before he even reaches your position and can engage in a fight.

Seeing the peak already occupied, some will be deterred from even attempting the climb.

Inactivity Turns a Veteran Into a Novice

“The soldier, once he has been selected and sworn in, ought not to stop exercising at arms whether a novice or even an old hand. For he must fight for his own life and the liberty of all, and it is above all the ancient and wise opinion that all arts depend on practice.”

“An army is improved by work, enfeebled by inactivity.”

“All arts and all works progress through daily practice and continual exercise. If this is true of small things, the principle should hold all the more true in great matters.”

“Recruits and novice soldiers were trained morning and afternoon in all types of arms, but veterans and trained soldiers also exercised with their arms once a day without fail. For length of time or number of years does not transmit the art of war, but continual exercise. No matter how many years he has served, an unexercised soldier is forever a raw recruit.”

All skills are perishable.

Any Lost Art CAN Be Revived, If the Will Be Strong Enough

When Vegetius set out to compile *Epitoma Rei Militaris*, he saw his job “not so much to learn as to recollect.”

He reached back to the glory of the early Roman Empire, in the hopes that recovering the martial wisdom of the past age could revive the enervated armies of the contemporary one. He was frustrated that the very lessons Romans could glean from the past were still being studied by other peoples, but had been forgotten at home, pointedly asking: “Are we afraid that we are unable to learn what others have learned from us?”

Yet he was confident that if the foundational principles that had once garnered Rome such power and excellence were reinstated, its glory could return. Strong, brave men could be recruited. Training programs could begin anew. Everything could be re-started from scratch.

Vegetius’ confidence rested on the fact that in the past troughs of history’s cycles, such turnarounds had emerged before:

“These skills were formerly maintained in use, as well as in books, but once they were abandoned it was a long time before anyone needed them, because with the flourishing of peacetime pursuits the imperatives of war were far removed. But lest it be thought impossible for an art to be revived whose use has been lost, let us be instructed by precedents. Among the ancients, military science often fell into oblivion, but at first it was recovered from books, and later consolidated by the authority of generals. Scipio Africanus took over our armies in Spain after they had been several times beaten under other commanders. By observing the rules of discipline, he trained these so thoroughly in every article of work and digging of fosses, that he said that they deserved to be stained by digging mud, because they had declined to be wetted by the enemy’s blood.”

Source:

[Vegetius: Epitoma Rei Militaris](#)



Brett and Kate McKay | February 24, 2017

[Relationships & Family](#), [Social Skills](#)

Social Briefing #3: The 4 Social Mindsets – 3 That Derail You, and the 1 That Leads to Success





[Social Briefings](#) are short bi-monthly dispatches that offer practical tips to improve your social skills. [Read more on their raison d'être.](#)

What do you think about the most when you're interacting with someone new? This mindset will determine much of how you behave, and the ultimate success of the encounter.

According to the authors of [First Impressions: What You Don't Know About How Others See You](#), there are 4 "focuses" people adopt (and typically switch between) when they're interacting with someone:

1. How you feel about yourself
2. How you feel about the other person
3. How the other person feels about you
4. How the other person feels about himself or herself

The social mindset of most people toggles between #1-3.

You do a lot of thinking about how you're feeling (#1): whether you're nervous, confident, bored, having a good time, annoyed, embarrassed, etc.

You mull over whether or not you like the person you're conversing with (#2): Do they seem nervous or confident? Are they boring? Are they attractive? Could this be a potential friend/girlfriend?

And you very likely spend a lot of time in #3 — wondering what your new acquaintance thinks about you. Do they seem interested in what you're saying? Have they laughed at your jokes? Are they liking you or not?

It's no surprise that the primary mode of most people's social mindset revolves around these first three focuses. When we're meeting new people, and getting to know recent acquaintances, it's common to be at least a little self-conscious — to be extra aware of what's going on with yourself, and how that self is being assessed by the other person.

Common as this mindset is, however, it's not an effective way to socialize.

Not only does excessive self-consciousness make you more anxious and less confident, by placing yourself at the center of the reality of an interaction, it becomes easy to mistake your having a good time, for the other person also doing so. But there isn't always a correlation between the two respective states. Maybe you talked a lot about all your favorite topics, which always makes you feel really energized, and you thus walk away from the interaction feeling like it went great. The other person, meanwhile, hardly talked at all, and actually felt bored and drained.

When there's a disconnect between how you felt, and how the other person felt, it will sink your chances of building a future relationship.

The Power of Focus #4

One of the most important dynamics to understand about socializing is that much of interest and likeability is premised on the principle of reciprocity. When someone sees that you are interested in them, they viscerally become more interested in you. People like people who like them — it's as simple as that.

So too, when you make someone feel good, those good feelings often boomerang right back to you, making the other person see you in a more positive light.

For that reason, focus #4 is the most powerful mindset to adopt for social success.

The more you think about how the other person is feeling, and take steps to enhance and elevate their feelings, the more their perception of you is enhanced and elevated. Or as the authors of *First Impressions* put it: "how you come across to others is less about what you say or how you feel and more about how you make people feel about themselves in your presence."

While this principle may seem obvious, and it is probably something you've heard in some form before, it's something you'll need to remind yourself of continually.

Because shifting into focus #4 requires real intentionality, while falling into #1-3 are default social mindsets — without conscious effort, your nervous monkey mind will automatically go right to them. Think about the last time you socialized: even if you went into the encounter reminding yourself to act interested in the other person, you probably left it realizing you spent almost no time thinking about how they were feeling, and all your time focused on how you were performing. In the heat of the moment, nervous self-consciousness will constantly work to throw the switch on track #4, and send your thoughts racing down lines #1-3. You have to learn to stop and consider how the other person is feeling in the midst of the interaction, and you achieve this level of social consciousness only through consistent practice.

Now you know that leaving someone feeling good about themselves is the key to leaving them feeling good about you. But how do you engender those good feelings?

That's what we'll tackle next time.

Tags: [social briefing](#)

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