

Characters of Leaders in the Past: A Lessons for Manufacturers Now

By Ramil Quiapo

The success of an organization depends so much with the people behind it. General Schwarzkopf once said that **“leadership is a potent combination of strategy and character.** But if you must be without one, be without the former.”

There are a lot of leaders worthy to be emulated in the way they manage their respective fields. Each of them has their own fable to tell that can **teach us lessons which we could adopt in our quest for better manufacturing operations.**

In the Business Life column of The Philippine Star (March 12, 2007 issue), Mr. Wilson Lee Flores enumerated seven lessons which he synthesized from the character of King Leonidas in the movie ‘300’. Coincidentally, these lessons are asymptotic to my observations of the character of Jumong or King Deongmyeongseong, the first emperor of ancient Korea. The lessons are as follows:

- 1.) advocating proper and formal training
- 2.) using of the best equipment
- 3.) maximizing the terrain
- 4.) establishing a good strategy
- 5.) inculcating loyalty and team unity
- 6.) living the ideals and culture
- 7.) emphasizing a great leadership

1. Advocating proper and formal training.

The two mentioned leaders prioritized and emphasized proper training of their people. In the case of King Leonidas, his warriors were pre-selected when they were still babies. They were **then physically and mentally trained** as they grow up to become full-time professional soldiers. In the case of Jumong, his first line followers were pre-selected with their martial arts ability, **tamed by his exceptional character and guided by his noble undertaking** who in turn assisted him in the crash training and re-training of his warriors.

In the case of CFIF members, the reverse is true. Only a small percentage of all the member companies had allocated budget for training; had sent their workers to training courses; and had organized in-house training programs for their employees. More than the majority relied on previous skills and expertise of their workers thus, overlooking that oftentimes their workers are not able to deliver because they aren’t motivated or possibly their goals were not aligned with the management.

The two kings trained their warriors in order to win against their seemingly undefeatable opponent. The Cebu furniture manufacturers need to train their employees in order to outsmart their competitors and regain the market niche invaded by them. There is a need to establish a strong base in this market niche. Exploring new target markets without maintaining the present ones looks like a hit and run tactic. **Constant training and re-training of manpower is one of the key factors to having a great stronghold.**

2. Using the best equipment.

Prior to the war, the two kings devoted themselves in the fabrication of their arsenal. They exhausted all their efforts in **technological research** so as to come up with better weaponry and stronger armory. Therefore in their case, they did it before the battle.

As for us, we do it during the war where the procurement of machines and tools is usually done once the production order is served. Here, we are already attacked by our enemy- TIME. And this enemy already invaded our territory- **THE PRODUCTION LEAD TIME.** Because of this, the focus is now longer in getting the best equipment and tools but on procuring the ones with lesser lead time.

Those who had the best equipment normally win the battle. In the furniture manufacturing setting, there are a lot of internal battles due to poorly-maintained machines and tools that sacrifice the delivery of quality output with the right price at the right time.

The use of the good equipment, not necessarily the imported ones, will set us free from the cage of inefficiency. **The real battle is not against our Asian competitors but against ourselves, our mentality of not investing properly on the right machines, tools and other necessary infrastructure due to fear of losing the business later.**

3. Maximizing the terrain.

The two leaders knew their terrain and from it developed a strategy that allowed them to frustrate and intimidate their opponents. **Both of them used the narrow pass to limit the entry of their enemies and to perform other war tactics that pushed their adversaries in a disadvantage position.**

We also know our terrain- the current state of our manufacturing operations through the production of mixed media furniture. Majority of the manufacturers have this unique and captivating landscape of their furniture items with the use of locally available indigenous materials for a **niche market – a narrow pass for our competitors to get in.** However, we have not maximized this advantage. Instead, we used this as an excuse for producing the furniture pieces with longer lead times. We have not developed a **good manufacturing system then** which could allow us to produce this output faster at a lesser production cost. We also have not developed a **good value chain strengthening program** to obtain the indigenous materials in a specified quality, at the right time, and in a competitive procurement cost with the assurance of its sustainable supply. If we don't act now, we could be losing this terrain soon.

Nevertheless, CFIF will be implementing its Supply Chain Strengthening Program through PEARL 2 this year and will be piloting the three regional areas with the abundant source of abaca, lampakanay and rattan. Your participation in this program would be considered a significant step in protecting that narrow pass.

4. Establishing a good strategy.

King Leonidas used a relay of **fresh troops** to smash invading hordes in a non-stop fashion where their corpses shocked the next battalion of invaders. Jumong made **alliances with the other tribes** to increase the number of his military men. He had then tactically **advanced his pioneers to crash the support troops** of his enemies.

Like them, we have **fresh ideas so we are always able to come up with new designs** which are greatly admired by our competitors. However, we cannot subdue our enemies' counter attacks. Our products have become subjects of our competitors' studies as they come up with the same products at a lesser cost and lead time.

Likewise, we made alliances with other **sectors such as the subcontractors** to increase the number of our workers. However, the orientation is just a mere customer-client relationship. Once the job order is released, it is up to the subcontractors to do the subcontracting work without prior intervention from the exporters. This is contrary to how Jumong played with his strategies. He instead included the newly allied forces in the training and supplied them with same weapons and

armors to become better warriors He has done all these to realize his goal of establishing a new nation.

We then need to start considering our subcontractors as partners. Having known that 95% of the exporters do subcontract, the exporter's efficiency is shaped also by the subcontractors. By developing these subcontractors through training and offering them assistance in improving the condition of their workshops would mean improvement of their current efficiency and in turn stretching and strengthening the overall capacity of the exporters to become future capable and world class companies.

It is but timely to announce then that CFIF will be implementing the **Subcontractors Development Program** with the support of **PEARL 2 and DED**. The new program provides the basic training and consultancies and also upgrading courses and linkage to a financial institution. So far, four exporters and fourteen subcontractors joined the first run through PBSP's **I-Build program** last year and out of these fourteen subcontractors, eleven of them have qualified for the second phase of the program now called the **Subcontractors Development Program**. Out of four exporters, one have already availed of the financial assistance program through a Purchase Order Loan by Sugbuanon Rural Bank for their subcontractors. Right now, all are ready for launch as CFIF starts the first series of trainings.

5. Inculcating loyalty and team unity.

Loyalty and unity of their respective constituents is another secret of the two mentioned heroes. This happened not by chance but through **constant inculcation and construction of a reciprocal relationship with them**. This loyalty and unity prevented their enemies to outflank them in that narrow pass.

Gaining loyalty and unity from our workforce is a opportunity we can explore and thereby can also be our strength. This should be regardless of position and stature in the company.

The provision of the necessary infrastructure and other motivational activities is an act of loyalty by the management for these employees. The mere presence of the company owners can motivate the workers and drive out alienation and indifference. As love begets love, so does loyalty begets loyalty. This is the main outcome of a symbiotic relationship within and among the company's total employees. This loyalty and team unity prevents employee turnover and in turn could lower the rising migration of our skilled workers to other furniture producing countries to seek greener pastures.

6. Living the ideals and culture.

These two leaders exhibited a common trait: their readiness and willingness to die for their respective aspirations, their endless effort to let their constituents empathize their ideals in life, and the congruency of their effort to attain their cherished goals. This was the source of inner motivation of the both King Leonidas who lead his 300 Spartans and resisted the territorial expansion of the Persian empire and Jumong who completed the unfinished mission of his father and together with his able and competent warriors freed their country from the presence of Han empire, saved the common people from slavery, preserved their own culture and most of all established a new and independent nation.

CFIF, along with its member companies have the vision of producing high quality design oriented furniture, but there is a deviation in such a way that majority of the manufacturer's goals are not alligned with their manufacturing operations especially when it comes to quality. They want to produce quality furniture and furnishings but they don't want to invest proper machineries and infrastructure. Thus, **the presence of poor and ill-maintained machines and infrastructure and**

inefficient manufacturing system does not contribute in any way to our goal of producing low cost but high quality furniture pieces and delivering them on time.

Our designers who have supposedly developed and provided better designs seemed to be bribed by other furniture producing countries and had somewhat acted like Judas and had let the competitor pass in our narrow terrain. However, we could not blame them because of the circumstances that they have encountered. **Possibly, we need to look on our company practices as well as our relationships with them which could have triggered their leaving.**

1. Emphasizing a great leadership

It is but the traits of King Leonidas and Jumong that guided them in the course of their endeavors. The fundamental role of a leader is to be able to train and guide his followers. Likewise, it is also the **basic task of a supervisor or manager to continuously coach and train his colleagues in the work area.** Furthermore, it is a **key deliverable of the company to empower and motivate their key personnel** through training and proper orientation and guidance so that they could align their efforts with the company's vision.

In the battle of inefficiency in the manufacturing operations, our **best weapons are our properly-maintained infrastructure as well as our motivated employees.** Our terrain - the production of mixed media furniture could be well-guarded from our competitors through **dynamic product innovation and continuous improvement programs** to the extent of partnering all the links in the supply chain.

Our strategies - the positioning of our industry in a niche market, becoming a leader in design oriented furniture, and partnering with the subcontractors and suppliers could be our hope; our door towards a better future for the industry. Like real warriors, we need to have a fathomless commitment, unwavering dedication, continuous involvement and a greater focus as we travel this road. Though this is a difficult journey, it is not unattainable.