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Executive Search & Board Advisory

BURN THE BOATS



"When your army has crossed the border, you should burn your boats and bridges, in order to make it clear to everybody that you have no hesitating after home." Sun Tzu, Art of War

Sun Tzu in his book "Art of War" taught armies to burn their boats and destroy the bridges behind them as they advanced into new territory. He argued that soldiers without the option of taking flight are more likely to prevail over their objective.

It illustrates to everyone the leader is not retreating, that they will be with the team and will not be seeking a fall-back position or an escape route.

When you ignite the boats you ignite the desire of everyone not just to survive but to succeed. Providing no option other than victory or death, win or perish focuses everyone with one common goal, often against great odds. It extracts every ounce of effort needed for victory.

The ancient Greek soldiers understood the idea. They possessed an unwavering attitude to victory and commitment when Grecian armies landed on their enemy's shore, the first order the generals gave was to "burn the boats". They knew the power of motivation and necessity. They didn't give themselves the opportunity to hesitate, to reflect, to procrastinate, and they didn't know if they

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would be victorious. However, they were highly motivated because there was no other course, no other option.

Alexander the Great burned his boats upon arrival on the shores of Persia. By burning his boats, Alexander committed his men to victory over the Persians who greatly outnumbered the Macedonians. Considering what Alexander was feeling, the decision to destroy their only hope of retreat was extraordinary and proved to be a master decision.

In 1519, Spanish Captain, Hernán Cortés landed on the shores of the new world, Mexico, and gave the order to “burn the boats”.

We may not agree with the invaders but the act of burning the ships/boats is as relevant today as it was in ancient times. If ships are left in the harbour, your team will see that you are not fully committed to the battle, project or transformation. If you are the leader not fully committed why should they be? By removing any available path back to the status quo your team will become as fully committed as you are.

Business guru and writer Tom Peters believes in the strategy “burn the boats” and goes so far to suggest that companies should appoint a CDO, Chief Destructive Officer to follow through on executing the change or transformation strategy. Others have argued that strategy is all about commitment. If what you are doing is not irrevocable, then you don't have a strategy, because anyone can do it. That is why burning the boats is so important.

Burning the boats, in effect, is forcing businesses to innovate. Yet how many businesses use the word “innovation” actually cut off the return to the old? With technology creating seismic shifts on a global scale at an alarming pace, business must be prepared to adopt or be left behind. Change requires commitment. Leaders need to inspire the teams to follow and, as taught by Sun Tzu, will need to burn the bridges and boats to move their organisation forward to remain competitive. Leaders will achieve when they show their commitment to the task at hand. They have to make themselves accountable declaring that failure is not a choice. Great athletes, writers and adventurers have in their own way burnt their boats, they have cut off an escape route. They don't return to the past. Business leaders have to display the same character to advance their companies.

Gregory Robinson, Managing Partner, “Business leaders have incredibly dynamic challenges facing them daily. To move their team, direction or organisation to a new position they may have to display the necessary character to burn their boats and advance their companies before they become burned themselves by competition.”

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