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LESSONS IN LEADERSHIP – HANNIBAL BARCA



"I will either find a way or make one" Hannibal

Hannibal, General of the Carthaginian army, lived in the second and third century B.C. He was born into a Carthaginian military family and was made to swear by his father to forever be hostile towards Rome due to Carthage's loss in the first Punic war. His father, Hamilcar Barca, was a Carthaginian General who fought in the first Punic war. Hamilcar commanded the Carthaginian land forces in Sicily from 247 BC to 241 BC, during the latter stages of the First Punic War. He kept his army intact and led a successful guerrilla war against the Romans in Sicily. Hamilcar retired to Carthage after the peace treaty in 241 BC, following the defeat of Carthage.

During the Second Punic War, Hannibal swept across southern Europe, famously crossing the Alps where he consistently defeated the Roman army, but never taking the city itself. Hannibal won decisive victories against the Romans, the most famous being the battles of Trebia, Lake Trasimene, and Cannae resulting in Rome losing one-fifth of the entire population of male citizens over 17 years of age.

Although the Romans had lost an enormous portion of men, they did not break and after years of careful tiptoeing against Hannibal regaining its strength Rome counterattacked, and Hannibal was forced to return to Carthage where he was defeated at the battle of Zama by his rival Scipio Africanus, consequently breaking Carthage's will and ability to wage war.

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Following the Second Punic war, Hannibal worked for a time as a statesman before he was forced into exile by Rome. To avoid capture by the Romans, he eventually took his own life.

Hannibal ad Portas (Hannibal is at the gates) – a phrase that not only exemplified what an entire generation of Romans went through but also reverberated into popular consciousness during the later years of crisis faced by the Roman Empire. Merely meaning ‘Hannibal is at the gates’, it was an adage used by parents who wanted to scare their children at night.

Take Risks

With the Second Punic war beginning in 218 BC Hannibal looked to gain the early advantage by crossing the Italian Alps with his army to surprise the Roman Army. The crossing of the Alps is regarded as a military action that is tantamount to daredevilry on a large scale. While risks were involved in the endeavour, the audacity of the scope was fairly well planned by Hannibal. Simply put, the crossing was not just tried and accomplished purely for the shock and awe factor that would psychologically afflict the Romans. There was a deep strategic side to the entire affair, and the Carthaginian general precisely weighed his option and then decided to go for the calculated risk.

It took incredible courage to enter hostile and unmapped terrain, filled with unknown and hostile tribes, with the only thing waiting for him on the other side being the enemies’ country guarded by the Roman army – the best soldiers in the world. That shows his grit, determination, and fearlessness in the face of mighty obstacles.

Innovation

The real genius of Hannibal was not confined to his generalship and strategies during war but also defined his very character even during times of peace. In other words, the high level of education received by the leader in his younger days was revealed in full during the later years after the Second Punic War, when Hannibal the commander became Hannibal, the statesman.

Already claiming massive support on his return from Italy (and even after his defeat at the Battle of Zama), the leader was chosen as one of the two suffetes, which gave him the rank of the chief magistrate of the Carthaginian state. By this time, however, Carthage was already stripped of its formerly mighty empire and left with vast war indemnities to be paid to Rome. But the tireless Hannibal set to work by first successfully obtaining a revision in the constitution and then initiating an agreement condition that limited the power of the council (also known as the Hundred and Four) with annual elections.

Administration

Beyond politics, Hannibal also played a significant role in administration by revamping the state system, thus countering several acts of corruption, embezzlement and even unpaid taxes. All of these factors proved that a war indemnity could be paid without heavily taxing the general public. And was the case with Barcid ingenuity, he even trained many of his

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soldiers in agriculture. So the combined efforts in the fields of both commerce and agriculture – supplemented by Hannibal’s sweeping reforms, once again made Carthage prosperous. In fact, the levels of prosperity were reached at such an efficient rate that by 191 BC, the state was wealthy enough to pay its complete war indemnity of 8,000 talents in a lump sum. But given Rome’s preeminent position in the Mediterranean, they arrogantly declined the offer.

Hannibal beat the long odds against him, and was victorious for so long against the Romans because he had a brilliant mind for tactics. He used the terrain to his advantage and turned the strengths of the Romans into weaknesses. Over and over again, he was able to find a weak spot, and throw his strongest troops against it to win the day. His battles are famous in world history, and for a good reason. From Lake Trasimene, wherein an unparalleled feat he hid his entire army and ambushed the Romans, to Cannae, where he executed a double envelopment of the Romans opposing him, a feat which generations of generals have tried to replicate.

For years Hannibal sustained a war effort alone, with very little significant support, raising his own finances and recruits in a hostile country, while holding the affections of his allies and seeking to bring more nations to his side. Although Carthage eventually fell to Rome, there is much that we can learn from his struggle and his years of wise leadership in the face of incredible adversity.

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