

The power of true strategy

What do Google and Napoleon Bonaparte have in common? According to author Robert Greene, both are -- or were -- great strategists of their time. And because of that, both wielded enormous power and control, which made them formidable forces to contend with.

When you delve deeper into how difficult it is to attain power, yet how easily it can be lost, then the power of true power becomes even more poignant.

“The need for power is so deep in humans, that it’s timeless, it’s universal,” says Greene, author of the bestseller, *The 48 Laws of Power*. Yet people are not usually very honest about it. “First of all, they don’t want to admit that they’re after power; that they have those kinds of ambitions. They don’t want to reveal the kinds of things they may have done in order to reach a position of power,” he said at a recent talk organised by the American Chamber of Commerce in Singapore.

Power though was much simpler in the past when it was centred around a person: a king, queen or emperor, who held the key to power. But ‘historic fatality’ -- which he says occurs when a great idea takes over the world so completely that it becomes its only way -- changed all that, and power moved from being extremely concentrated to increasingly more diluted.

Greene explains that this happened because, in order to keep control, the leader needed more people to keep power centralised. With that, he had to assemble a team of military advisers. But as the circle expanded, people began to form power

Visit **INSEAD Knowledge**
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

centres of their own. They started to think about their own interests and advance their own agendas, not just the king’s. “Once you give power to people, they don’t want to give it back. Once you start this division of the atom, if you will, it keeps on going and going,” he adds.

This historic fatality (the other was the advent of agriculture from which came organised human society) was accelerated by the birth of modern capitalism and the internet, the latter which Greene says “put it on warp speed like the *Starship Enterprise*”.

That’s because the internet unleashed untold powers to the masses. It allowed people to access information like never before; it created e-commerce, effectively eliminating the middleman; and it gave people a voice through blogs, reviews and other similar platforms.

“I compare the effect of the internet going back to the nineties to this sort of small little wave that’s created way out in the ocean by maybe an earthquake. This little wave is going to get larger and larger and larger in volume, in mass over the course of many years.”

While the internet was a great empowering tool, it

has, ironically caused some companies to lose that power or market dominance they once had.

“We have finally entered the information age. All that that represents is a whole new way of doing business, politics, etc. If you’re only focusing on the here and now ... then you’re not understanding the much deeper changes going on. And if you don’t understand that, you’re not going to be able to make the proper decisions; you don’t have the proper perspective, you are mistaking the forest for the trees.”

According to Greene, the only way to rectify this is through deep strategic thinking or what he calls, ‘true strategy’, though he concedes that this can pose a challenge. “In normal times, it’s very difficult for a human being to be a strategist. It’s not in our nature; we’re emotional creatures, we’re animals that are locked in the present moment ... In times of great change, it is even more difficult. In times of great technological advancement ... it becomes even more and more difficult, but that makes it more and more necessary.”

In order to deploy strategies effectively, an open mind and a deep perspective are needed. Citing the example of Napoleon Bonaparte, whom Greene calls “the greatest strategist in the history of mankind”, he says that the 18th century military commander was highly successful because he fought his battles in ways that confounded his enemies. Instead of traditional linear warfare, he engaged in manoeuvre warfare in which he was not fighting for a single position but over a potentiality.

With that, Napoleon could take divisions of his men and use them in a scattered pattern in a chaotic manner in the battle, instead of fighting in a line. Greene likens this to “a pack of wolves chasing a frightened rabbit.”

Greene believes only one company today comes close to being compared to Napoleon in his heyday -- and that company is Google. Like Napoleon, co-founders Larry Page and Sergey Brin did not think laterally. Unlike others before them, they built their company on very little.

So while most companies, including Microsoft and IBM adhered to a management ratio of 1:6, Google has a ratio of 1:20. “You have a company that has a completely light-on-its-feet structure; it’s this lightness, this speed, this fluidity of Google is what that has given it this incredible power. This incredible ability to adapt to what’s happening in the world; it’s the structure of Google that has made it into the monster that it is today.”

“Google was at the spearhead of the revolution for the information age. This was the company that was

Visit INSEAD Knowledge
<http://knowledge.insead.edu>

going to change the world, that was going to open the floodgates, all that was possible on the internet to the entire world ... What you have then is a new culture, an army of people working for Google who were much more motivated, much more excited; productivity is much higher than your average company.”

“Like Napoleon, suddenly you have a company that can fight in a new way ... they fight with manoeuvrable warfare; it’s not about position, it’s about potentiality.”

Although Greene admires other technology companies like Apple and Amazon, he singles out apparel company Zara whom he calls “way ahead of their time”, because like Google, they rebuilt a new structure that allowed them to adapt quickly to consumer tastes.

Regardless of industry, he thinks companies would do well to take their cues from these highly successful ones. “This is not an economic crisis that we’re living in -- I want to reframe that whole idea; it’s absurd, it’s silly, it’s stupid for people to talk that way. This is that moment where history is genuinely shifting, we’re entering a completely new age, a new way of relating to each other -- networks, people communicating freely around the globe -- that is going to create an incredible change in business, in politics in the years to come. That is what is responsible for all these changes, and you’re either on the right side or the wrong side of history.”

Robert Greene is also the author of ‘The Art of Seduction’, ‘The 33 Strategies of War’, and ‘The 50th Law’, co-written with rapper 50 Cent.

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-management/the-power-of-true-strategy-1155>

Download the Knowledge app for free

