Managing Uncertainty: Lessons from Xenophon’s Retreat

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Leadership and Management in a Changing World: Lessons from Ancient East and West Philosophy
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Xenophon

- Contemporary of philosopher Socrates
- Chronicled experience of Greek mercenary force in Persia ~400 BC
- Likely influenced Alexander the Great’s invasion of Persia
- Wrote multiple books that have survived
Perspectives on Change

Competing philosophies of change

– Rational or logical

– More haphazard

Neither are likely sufficient, but where are the boundaries?
Perspectives on Change

Dynamic Capabilities

– Organizational responses to internal and external change

– Implications of path dependence and nature of change

*Proposition 1a*: When current conditions resemble the past, organizations focus on increasing the efficiency of using current resources.

*Proposition 1b*: When facing uncertain conditions, organizations attempt to develop complementary resources that improve the effectiveness of familiar resources.
Perspectives on Change

Organizational Politics

– Provides arena for sharing information
– Can inject randomness needed to adapt
– Use influence to achieve common goals

Proposition 2: When faced with uncertainty, middle managers are more likely to recognize and act on divergent ideas than top management.

Proposition 3: The consistent exercise of power to enact change culminates in reduced influence.
Method

Single-case study founded on theoretical propositions (Yin, 1994)

– Unique circumstance
– Large body of information for building case

Setting:
– After Peloponnesian War (431-404 BC) that resulted in large number of unemployed mercenaries
– Cyrus contesting for Persian throne with older brother, Antaxerxes
– Case divided into four segments
Map of Travels

THE PERSIAN EMPIRE
490 B.C.
SCALE OF MILES
0 100 200 300 400

KEY
Limits of the Persian Empire
Route of Xenophon and the 10,000

Two years and 2,000 miles
Greek Mercenaries

Hoplite

Peltast
Case Analysis

Dynamic capabilities
– Greeks took action to increase effectiveness of hoplite core
– Failed to adopt revolutionary Karduchian long bow

Politics
– Rivalry between Clearchus and Menon contributed to Tissaphernes treachery
  • It also galvanized the Greek mercenaries
– Xenophon put on trial once mercenaries reach ‘safety’ of Black Sea

Experiences of Greek mercenaries support propositions
Implications

Management Research

– Understanding of how organizations change and adapt remains elusive
– Impact of politics can be positive – how can it be used effectively?

Management Practice

– Ethics and deception
– Role of firm size in adaptation and survival
– Importance of diversification to survival
BACK-UP
Case Summary

Prelude

– 10,400 hoplites and 2,500 peltasts under five (5) different Greek generals

– Dissension among generals
  • Clearchus and Menon
  • Clearchus and Xenias

– Greek soldiers
  • Ethnically diverse
  • All volunteers with democratic ideals
  • Separate military and logistics

– Twenty day strike when realized misled on Cyrus’s aims
Case Summary

Battle of Cunaxa

– Cyrus not aware of Antaxerxes’s army
  • Disarray of march delayed deployment of army
  • Greeks deployed on right along Euphrates river

– Battle commenced in late afternoon
  • Greeks charge and disperse opposing forces
  • Cyrus focuses his Persian forces against his brother’s bodyguard
  • Cyrus wounds Antaxerxes before he is killed
  • Persian cavalry sack Greek camp

– Uneasy truce
  • Greeks try to play kingmaker
  • Greeks refuse to surrender and are led north
  • Tissaphernes treachery and death and capture of five (5) leading Greek generals
Case Summary

The Retreat

– Council endorses new leadership (Xenophon) and goal of going North

– Innovative responses
  • Burn baggage and wagons
  • Hollow square formation
  • Form cavalry and slingers from captured material
  • Switch signals for charge and retreat

– Missed opportunity
  • Karduchian longbow and oversized arrows that could punch through Greek shields and armor
Case Summary

The Sea, The Sea!

– Euphoria of reaching Black Sea
– False familiarity and removal of threat
  • Try Xenophon for assault
  • Break into 3 groups and experience highest casualties
– Experience honed capabilities
– Xenophon and 5,000 mercenaries hired by Sparta to fight Antaxerxes ~399 BC