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Bob Porter
University of Central Florida



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What My Grandfather Taught Me About Strategy

By Bob Porter
UCF Forum columnist
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In 1862, the most important naval battle of the American Civil War took place in Hampton Roads, Va., adjacent to Norfolk. The battle was between two ships, the Monitor and the Merrimac.

My relative, John L. Porter, was the naval engineer who designed and constructed the Confederacy's first ironclad ship, the Merrimac. Naval records share that the Merrimac destroyed a fleet of wooden ships in the James River – until the union responded with its own ironclad, the Monitor. He watched from shore the day the two ironclads met for the first time in combat as history was being made. He had changed the competitive nature of naval battle.

In entrepreneurial parlance, he was a disruptive force. Maritime strategy would never be the same. As fate would have it, on my second engineering job with General Electric, I was assigned to a manufacturing plant in Virginia, about 15 miles from the site of this famous ironclad battle. It is truly a small world.

My grandfather was also a naval officer, Class of 1922, U.S. Naval Academy. I became a fan of naval strategy thanks to him. To paraphrase Mark Twain: I learned how much my grandfather knew long after he taught me many life lessons.

One of the lessons he taught me was about “firing solutions” – the method used by submarine commanders to decide when to launch a torpedo against an opponent. Submarines have a limited number of torpedoes, so each one is a key resource not to be wasted. Imagine the challenge of shooting at a moving ship, from a moving ship, while underwater, with strong currents, in the dark. When these variables were close enough – not perfect – the commander had a firing solution. And the first sub commanders did it with stopwatches, not computers.

The key lesson I learned about the concept of a firing solution is you don't have to have all of the variables lined up perfectly before you launch the torpedo. The variables just need to be close enough to solve the problem – that is, in the firing-solution zone.

Now, how does this apply to business strategy? Submarine commanders want to sink their opponents or protect the ships they are assigned to. This is how they create a naval advantage. In business, strategy is the process used to achieve a competitive advantage relative to competition.

Business leaders fire their resources at targets every day. Timing, as they say, is everything. If you wait for the perfect shot, you most likely will wait too long. However, along with timing the shot, you must hit the target, or at least get very close. Too often, many leaders don't do this very well. They love to fire the torpedoes, but businesses don't have an unlimited number of torpedoes, or resources.

When you ask any of my former students who have taken a class or workshop in strategic leadership from me to define competitive advantage, I trust they will answer: “To generate an above-average return.”

“Return” in this definition is typically a financial return, although it applies to nonprofit companies, as well. Above average indicates that the return will exceed what market-adjacent competitors generate. To do this takes hard work, a very good strategic plan and some luck. In terms of a firing solution, having good information based on facts is the key.

I'm often asked by my strategy students and consulting clients: “What usually makes the biggest difference between losing and winning business strategies?”

My answer? Define the variables that make up your firing solution, and then don't guess about the status of these variables. Businesses fail more often due to following a poorly designed strategic plan than from the poor execution of a great strategic plan. Poorly designed strategic plans are typically based more on intuition, on gut feel and on guesses, with too little reliance on facts. This is like shooting your torpedoes into the dark sea and hoping for a hit.

John L. Porter kept a notebook with more than 200 pages of detailed results from tests he made during the initial designs of the Merrimac. When they launched the 275-foot-

long ship with a crew of more than 300, he certainly held his breath. But the facts told him the ship would not sink.

Before you launch your next project – or torpedo – get the facts!

Bob Porter is executive director of downtown Orlando's Executive Development Center, part of the University of Central Florida's College of Business Administration. He can be reached at RPorter@bus.ucf.edu.