Master and Commander: lessons in CI, strategy, leadership, and execution.

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Seemingly escapist fare from 1805 has much to teach 21st century business leaders. “Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World,” with Russell Crowe starring as the illustrious British captain, is more than an entertaining, fictional drama about Napoleonic era naval strategy. From the very beginning of the film, I was amazed by the many business management best practices captured in almost every scene of the film. Through the eyes of this intelligence analyst, “Master and Commander” provides a classic case study in competitive intelligence, strategy, leadership, and execution.

First comes Intelligence.

At the movie’s beginning, a lookout is sitting atop the crow’s nest of the formidable British warship to help the ship’s navigator determine which way the winds are blowing. Immediately I associated the crow’s nest with the role of the intelligence analyst: to help company leaders determine industry risks and opportunities that lie on the distant horizon.

In “Master and Commander,” with the vast sea depicted as the ever-changing external environment, things are never static and you can’t “command the winds.” As the opening scene progressed, a remarkable naval battle ensued as the British warship came under heavy, surprise attack by the French frigate Acheron. There had been no anticipation of the French attack or the force of the attack. The lack of competitive early warning led to surprise – and near defeat – of the aptly named HMS Surprise.

Another intelligence lesson comes after the encounter. While refitting the ship and contemplating next moves, the captain receives intelligence from two of his able seamen that the new, technologically advanced hull design of the French ship made the opponent faster and stronger than their own ship. Herein lay two messages. First, technology is a key driver of change in all sectors of life including business, government/military, and certainly in a consumer’s standard of living. Second, competitive intelligence can and should emanate from all levels of any organization. More important, leaders must be open to accepting objective, fact-based intelligence from cogent sources, even when it identifies their own inferior strategies or capabilities.

Next comes Strategy.

In short, “Master and Commander” is a story about how to use strategic flexibility and creativity to beat a competitor that seems bigger, faster or stronger than you. As the British crew pursued its opponent, the master and commander – and his leadership team – assessed their strengths and vulnerabilities, searching for a calculated strategy that would allow them to defeat the French captain and take his ship as a prize.

As it turns out, strategic flexibility was one of the leadership team’s greatest strengths. By marrying things they knew with things they were constantly learning about the changing environment, such as the new technology used in the French ship, the British naval officers were able to create an emergent strategy.
One extremely provocative aspect of the story was the ability of Crowe’s character to embrace knowledge from other disciplines, in this case from the captain’s friend and ship’s doctor who was also an accomplished naturalist. It was from the naturalist and his young protégé that the captain learned about “the insect that disguises itself as a stick to fool its predators.” Likewise, in business, a handful of forward-thinking companies are harnessing inter-disciplinary learning to expand their potential strategic alternatives.

Naturally, any movie called “Master and Commander” is sure to provide lessons in leadership and Crowe’s character demonstrated many attributes of sound business leadership. The lessons were endless. In addition to the integration of competitive intelligence with strategy, there were lessons such as:

- knowing when not to engage in battle
- positive reinforcement for solid performance (“an extra round of grog for everyone”) and corresponding admonishment for unacceptable behaviors
- inspiration to pursue achievable stretch goals
- the delicate balancing of compassion and leadership of subordinates
- leadership development, mentorship, and succession planning

Finally, there’s Execution.

The best-laid strategies developed with the most insightful intelligence are completely and utterly nullified without focused execution. In “Master and Commander,” the emergent strategy called for the British crew to disguise themselves as a whaling ship to fool their French opponent. As such, specific roles were delegated and the required level of accuracy in executing their roles was reinforced. Curiously, the plan also required that the crew temporarily discard their traditional behaviors such as saluting the ship’s officers to effectively complete the masquerade.

In the end, the British crew was victorious as they never succumbed to the possible paralysis that could have set in with the significant change in the landscape and in strategy. Often in business, the difference between winning and losing in the marketplace depends on a company’s resolve to execute a focused strategy. And often, execution requires embracing new behaviors or practices to be successful.

My fellow intelligence analysts, whether you see the movie or read the book “Master and Commander,” I am certain you will agree that its lessons in competitive intelligence, strategy, leadership, and execution are phenomenal. My takeaway from this movie is emphatically this - competitive intelligence provides the analytical underpinnings that enable emergent strategies and help win battles through skilled leadership and focused execution.

About the author

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