

**The Indirect Approach**  
**In High Value Business Sales Situations**  
**Based on**  
**The Works of**  
**Captain Sir Basil Liddell Hart (1895-1970)**



By

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# Introduction

## Who was he?

During the later stages of the First World War, amidst the trench bound slaughter, British army Captain Basil Liddell Hart observed the initiatives of the Allies and Germans to break this deadlock, took the essence of the successes of both sides, and formulated his Theory of The Indirect Approach.

During the 1920s he worked with JFC Fuller on his Principles of War until Fuller's fall from grace, he then had a varied career; British Army Captain, Military correspondent for The Telegraph and The Times. Appointed personal advisor to The British War Minister in 1937 he resigned in protest at the slow pace of preparations to the growing threat from the Facist powers in Europe. Ironically his theories, largely ignored by the allies, were exploited by the Germans in WW2 and lead to their Blitzkrieg successes in Poland and France. He personally interrogated the surviving German Generals at the end of WW2, and gave their accounts of why they believed they had succeeded and failed militarily.

## What does The Indirect Approach Teach?

Out of the tactical methodologies he studied during WW1 Liddell Hart developed his theories of The Indirect Approach and The Expanding Torrent. The Indirect Approach described how to engage the enemy for greatest advantage, and The Expanding Torrent described the way of exploiting the positional advantages achieved via The Indirect Approach.

His basic tenant was that The Principles of War can be boiled down in a word to “**concentration**”, in a phrase to “**concentration of strength against weakness**”, and in a sentence to:

**Concentration of Strength against weakness depend on the dispersion of your opponent’s strength, which is brought about by the distribution of your own strength that gives the appearance of dispersion; the sequence is your apparent dispersion, followed by your opponent’s actual dispersion, followed by your concentration against your opponent’s dispersed weakness.**

True concentration is therefore the result of calculated dispersion.

He taught that simply trying to overwhelm an opponent in a head on collision is at best a costly approach, and at worst will prove disastrous. Even if you are stronger than your opponent, taking an Indirect Approach as described by Liddell Hart will bring success at less cost. Conversely utilising the Indirect Approach, you can take on and beat a much stronger opponent when a direct approach would only lead to defeat.

Using the Expanding Torrent shows how to fully exploit the initial successes of the Indirect Approach for maximum effect. The Expanding Torrent shows what to do in order to overrun an opposing area once the initial penetration is achieved.

### Liddell Hart’s Axioms

Liddell Hart boiled The Strategy of The Indirect Approach down to a list of principles, both positive and negative, or in modern terms, Do’s and Don’ts:

#### Do’s

1. Adjust your **ends** to your **means**.
2. Keep your **Objective** always in mind.
3. Choose the **Line of Least Expectation**.
4. Exploit the **Line of Least Resistance**.
5. Take a line of operation which offers an **alternative objective**.
6. Ensure that all plans and dispositions are **flexible and adaptable** to circumstances.

#### Don’ts

1. Throw your weight into a stroke whilst your **enemy is on guard**.
2. Renew an attack along the **same line** (or in the **same form**) **after it has failed**.

## **Liddell Hart's Synthesis of these Axioms in Practice**

From these basic principles Liddell Hart developed his theories of The Indirect Approach and The Expanding Torrent Effect.

The Indirect Approach advocated the avoidance of simple frontal attacks in favour of the use of surprise and flanking manoeuvres to overrun the command and control centres of enemy positions, thereby rendering their fighting forces ineffective and potentially demoralised by surprise approaches from flanks and rear. These attacks were managed at battlefield level involving a good deal of delegated decision making, with the axis of attack being decided by Intelligence and on the spot probing to produce a battlefield lead initiative.

The Expanding Torrent effect was a description of the phase of engagement after the initial penetration of enemy lines, i.e. the phase where troops fan out to attack soft targets such as command and control centres, supply dumps, and lines of communication. During this phase speed of movement, use of initiative, and the ability to act without direct guidance are crucial. Once total confusion and disruption are achieved, it is time to regroup to overrun enemy troop concentrations, which by now should at least be greatly reduced in effectiveness, and may be utterly demoralised, so taking them out will at worst be much easier than via frontal assault, and at best will be a simple matter of engagement to allow them the excuse to run away.

### **The Indirect Approach consisted of a number of stages;**

1. Gather Intelligence to look for potential areas of strength and weakness especially joins and gaps.
2. Probe enemy frontage to test intelligence, and distract enemy from guessing true objective, thereby approaching along a line of least expectation. Do not advertise your line of approach.
3. Use the line of least resistance to penetrate an exploitable weakness, throw the weight of the main forces against it, to widen and hold the gap.
4. Pour fast moving troops through the gap and drive as deep as possible as quickly as possible to cause as much dislocation as possible by cutting lines of communication.
5. Aim to overrun the enemy centre of gravity (Schwerpunkt as the Germans called it) this is generally represented by the main command and control centre. Doing this separates the centre of thought from the centre of action or metaphorically the head from the limbs.

### **The Expanding Torrent;**

1. Disruption: Push out along lines of least resistance behind enemy front to extend the area of damage and disruption, hit as many soft targets as possible especially centres of command, and communications.
2. Protection: Cut off concentrations of enemy resistance, avoiding direct engagements with strong positions.
3. Destruction: Attack enemy concentrations once they show signs of a collapse in morale.

## How to apply The Indirect Approach to Sales Situations

### Do's

#### **Adjust your ends to your means.**

It's far better to have a plan than not to have one, however, there is no point in having a plan that is unrealistic. Look at your objective, then look at your resources, then look at your objective again. Be bold in formulating your plan, but not reckless, be cautious in formulating your plan but not cowardly, assuming that everything that could go wrong may go wrong, but be prepared to exploit your advantages, and never doubt your luck.

The hardest thing at the start of any campaign is to say is "NO!" to an enterprise; the account that has the problem your solution fixes and the money to pay for it but has already been penetrated and controlled by your competition, the account that makes all the right noises and the need for your solution but lacks the money to purchase, and the account that has the money but not the problem that your solution solves. You must not be tempted by these, always weigh up the potential reward, then work out the likely time and resources that will be required to achieve the reward, is it both realistic in terms of effort, and achievable in terms of time scales?

#### **Keep your Objective always in mind.**

Once you have your plan, stick to it as long as it stays ultimately realistic. Don't deviate from it unless circumstances have changed substantially, if they are the same as when the plan was formulated then there is no logic to changing it. Put all of your efforts into reaching that ultimate goal, think of every move leading to that objective.

Don't be lead astray by adventures in areas that don't move you on further towards that goal. The easiest way to loose your objective is to dissipate your efforts piecemeal, with members of your team being drawn into doing what they enjoy or feel confident with rather than what is required to move towards the objective.

#### **Choose the Line of Least Expectation.**

Look for an approach that you haven't advertised to your opposition. Don't let marketing broadcast your intent. Attack a spot that offers no resistance and you are sure to win. Understand what your solution can do outside of what the manual says, understand what your customer wants not just what he needs, and understand your competition's weaknesses better than they do. Use the element of surprise to give you an advantage in terms of time, and to multiply the effect of your efforts.

Once the initial defences are penetrated it is possible to generate lines of least expectation by controlling lines of communication, thereby preventing the opposition being able to gain intelligence as to your plans and actions, they will never know where your next move will take place.

**Exploit the Line of Least Resistance.**

The line of least resistance is often brought about as a result of an approach along the line of least expectation; you aren't expected, so you aren't resisted, you take your opponent by surprise.

It is essential that the advantage provided by surprise is exploited to the maximum, and the first successes along the line of least resistance, if exploited quickly, can have a domino effect allowing the line of least resistance to be extended along the vector of your thrust.

As you are adhering to the line of least resistance, you should not deviate along a line of greatest resistance, i.e. should stiff resistance be met along the vector of your thrust, an alternative line must be chosen.

**Take a line of operation which offers an alternative objective.**

Plan in advance the possible outcomes of proposed actions en route to your ultimate goal. Approach down parallel lines so that whichever offers the easiest route can be taken if heavy resistance is encountered on the alternate route. When taking an action to achieve a new position think of more than one way to utilise this new position in case the obvious outcome is not as expected.

**Ensure that all plans and dispositions are flexible and adaptable to circumstances.**

Think of as many alternate outcomes to actions as possible, both good and bad, and have back up plans to allow you to continue to move forward towards your ultimate goal, without losing momentum no matter what fate may throw at you. You must be prepared to quickly transfer resources to suit the new circumstances, and must have put plans in place to logistically achieve this before the event.

## **Don'ts**

### **Throw your weight into a stroke whilst your enemy is on guard.**

Threaten to attack in such a place, but only to hide your true intentions, make the right noises, but do not engage simply because it is the obvious thing to do or is “expected” of you.

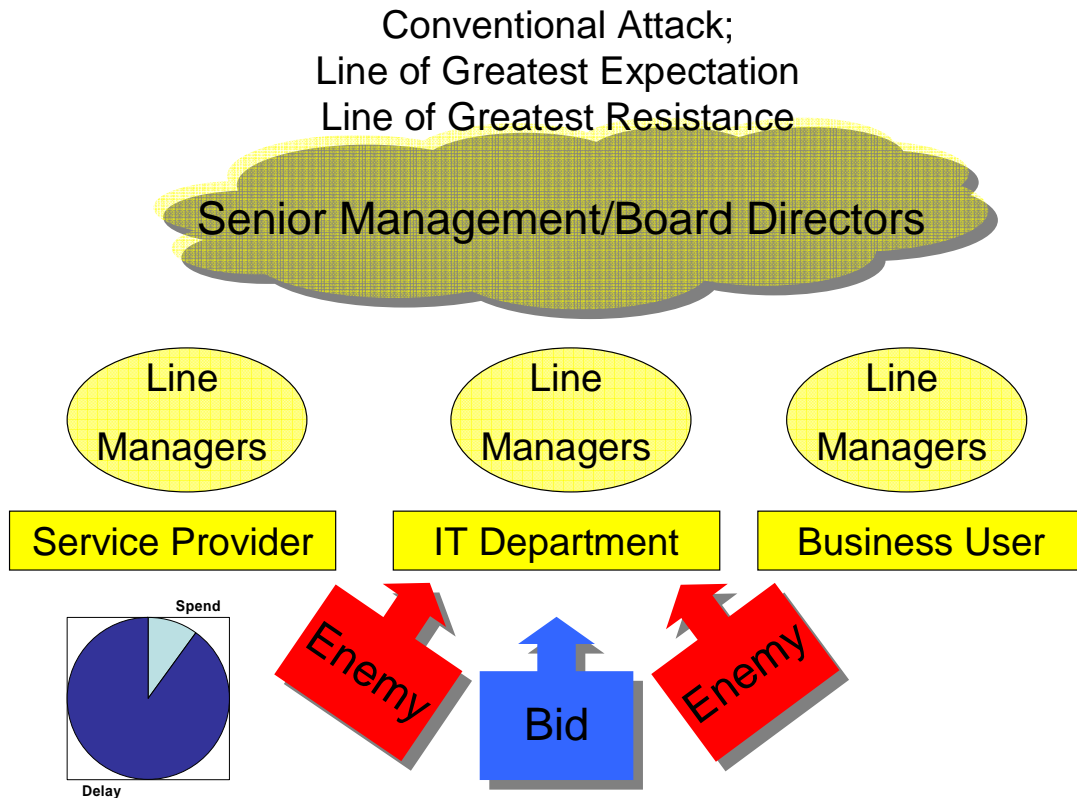
### **Renew an attack along the same line (or in the same form) after it has failed.**

You must analyse why your approach has failed, and what can be done differently to ensure that the next approach is successful, or what new approach can be attempted to bypass the difficulties of the previous failure.

One of the most common failures in businesses is a fear of admitting the true reasons for failure. There is only one reason for losing a deal, and that is because you've been outsold; full stop. The key is to find out how you were outsold, it will be because your competition fulfilled a personal “want” of your prospect better than you did. Find out what that “want” was, and make sure you don't get beaten in that way again.

## Sales Example

### Conventional Sales Approach



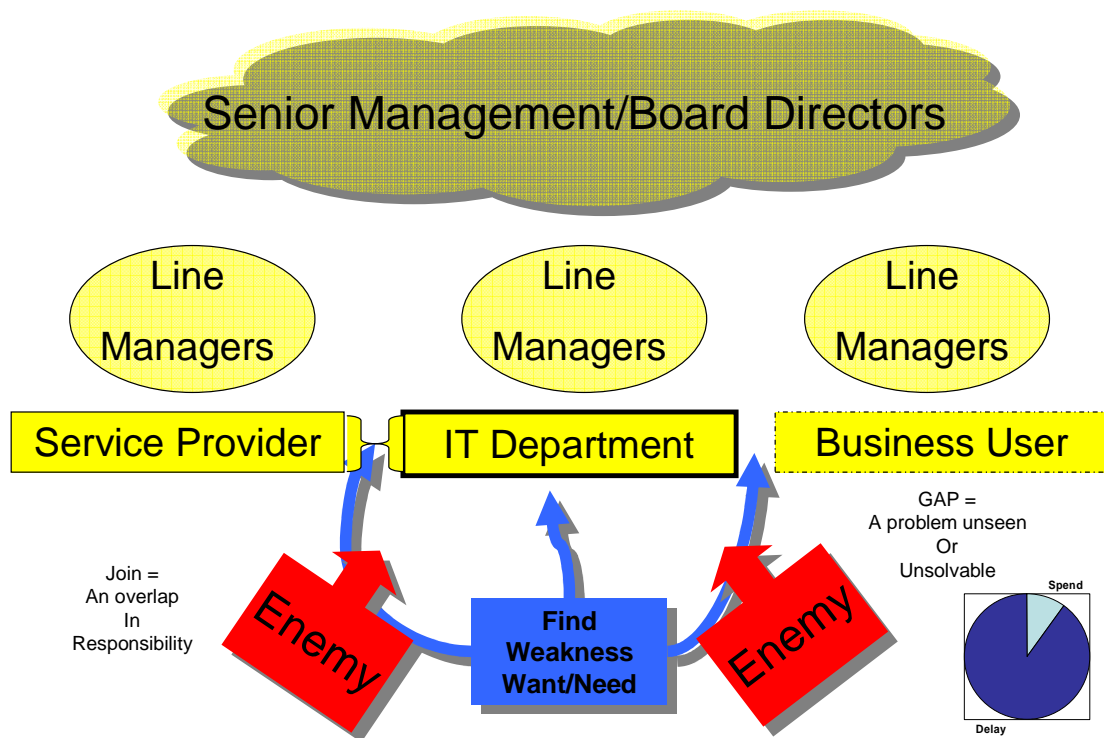
In a conventional sales approach most antagonists are drawn, by invitation (requests for tender etc) to concentrate along the line of greatest expectation, and therefore the line of greatest resistance. This is an area where the approaches are expected, anticipated, and countered. The result of this is that there is an inordinate amount of delay involved in this route.

Conversely the expected reward is low because operationally these projects are delegated as low down the organisation as possible, with decisions being made as to what is or is not acceptable being left with very junior technical people. This may all be pulled together by a management committee, but at this low operational level in the organisation the ability to spend is also low. So in effect a lot of time is spent fighting over a low potential prize in financial terms. Completely the opposite to what is required from a sales situation.



## The Indirect Approach

Indirect Approach;  
Line of Least Expectation  
Line of Least Resistance



With the Indirect Approach, instead of simply engaging in the same manner as everyone else i.e. along the line of Greatest Expectation and Greatest Resistance, it is necessary to gather Intelligence to look for potential areas of weakness and strength in the defences, as no defences are ever homogenous, no matter what assurances are given by the customer.

In our definition a defensive weakness is basically an area where the customer has a want or a need over and what may be apparent within any strict guidelines defined in a tender, or known to the low level or technical staff who may be managing the tender, therefore the line of least expectation and therefore least resistance. A defensive strength is an area where the customer has nailed down narrow criteria which tend to be shared with all contenders, allowing an advantage to none of them, i.e. the line of greatest expectation and therefore greatest resistance.

So it is essential that the customer frontage is probed to test intelligence, and distract competition from guessing true objective, thereby protecting the line of least expectation. Under no circumstances advertise your line of approach, and maintain a presence on the line of greatest expectation in order to cover the real object of the activity. You must look for "Gaps and Joins" in the defensive front.

## So what are joins and gaps?

### Gaps

In this context a Gap is a problem which is either *unseen* by the lower level customer staff, or is considered *unsolvable* by them, conversely such problems should be visible to the top management echelons and they should want to find a solution to them. The problem should be grave enough from a business perspective for higher management to be prepared to pay for that solution. Solving a problem at a senior level will always outweigh solving one at a less senior level.

### Joins

Tend to be more complex. They are areas of overlapping responsibilities between disparate groups. These groups could be within the same organisation, or be composed of two or more separate organisations. The reasons that these areas of overlapping responsibility offer opportunities for penetrating past the normal line of engagement is because there is a very good chance that where there is an overlap in responsibility that each responsible partner will assume that the other is taking responsibility, and therefore no one will actually take responsibility. This is a very common repeatable psychological trait. This is especially true where there is a contentious or unpopular area of joint responsibility, in these cases none of the groups involved will want to take responsibility for such areas.

Joins often lead to a build up of frustrations between the responsible groups, which in turn leads to one group acting recklessly in their decision making process. From a sales perspective this is the kind of join that should be sought, as someone prepared to act recklessly can speed up the sales penetration process, by being prepared to sponsor short cuts to the normal procedures. Conversely if a group involved in a join tries to you're your sales efforts by a reckless reaction, you have the opportunity to exploit this by highlighting it to your allies within the account who can use it against your competition, however it is usually better to be backed by a reckless group than to be opposed by one, as reckless behaviour is often an outward sign of power and confidence, and less often of outright stupidity. Joins are therefore areas of instability which can be exploited to advantage.

Most of these exploitable tensions will come down to interpersonal issues, poor management, and geographic separation. The greater the harmony between the overlapping groups (often as a result of functional similarity), the less is the likelihood of reckless action, although there is still scope for areas of missed/ignored responsibility. The greater the functional diversity between the overlapping groups, the greater the disunity of aims from a management and personal goals perspective, the more there is a likelihood of irrational action and blind spots.

It is highly likely that you won't know what or where the Gaps and Joins are when you first start probing, so you must maintain a flexibility of approach, don't assume you know what they are and dogmatically attack that point, let your intelligence and probing provide the answer, maintain a flexibility of approach, let your customer tell you what their wants are. Look for an alternative Gap or Join in case your advance gets block on the initially identified weak point; time is of the essence, if you meet significant time consuming resistance, exploit your alternative approach (if you have one). However once you have identified what you see as the critical point to attack,

attack it single-mindedly until it is either breached or abandoned. Knowing when to attack and when to retreat differentiates the good sales people from the poor ones.

Having found the Gap or Join use this line of least resistance to penetrate and bypass the line of greatest resistance. Adjust your resources to concentrate the correct resource to attack the problem effectively and efficiently, pour fast moving sales staff through the gap and drive as deep as possible; to board level is ideal, as quickly as possible to let you take control of lines of communication from the board down. Throw the weight of your main forces against it the gap, i.e. your sales and marketing, and technical staff, and customer references, to widen and hold the gap open in order to allow you to bring in more resources in a timely fashion.

## **Examples of Gaps:**

### **Personal pressure/personal wins**

Any way your solution can help a senior individual gain a personal/career advantage, or remove a personal pressure. It is a fact of human psychology that people will go further to remove a personal pressure than to gain a personal win, however the higher up the tree within an organisation you operate, the more likely you are to find people who ignore personal pressures and are driven mostly by personal wins.

### **Legislation**

New legislation which will change the way the customer needs to operate or report on their business.

### **Return on Investment**

Pressure from share holders for the business to change in a certain fashion, usually associated with the need to increase profits, or reduce costs.

### **Competition**

Pressure from competition, and the need for the business to find a way to beat the competition.

### **Fashion**

A new trend or recommendation from Industry analysts, politicians, business leaders etc. that appears to senior management to be worthwhile, but has not been taken up at lower levels in the organisation.

### **Routine**

An accepted way of doing things that has outgrown its usefulness as far as senior management is concerned, but is generally still adhered to by lower levels in the organisation.

## **Examples of Joins:**

### **Contractual Obligations**

Areas where there is a contractual agreement between two groups, such as occurs with an outsourcing or facilities management contract, where there are likely to be disputes over fulfilment of service levels. There will be a tension between the service provider trying to deliver the minimum service to the lowest budget whilst looking for areas outside of the contract for which additional charges can be made, and to mitigate an areas of failure within the contract which could result in penalties, and the customer who receives the service who will wish to maximise the return for their investment, and withhold payments where they believe contracts and targets have not been met.

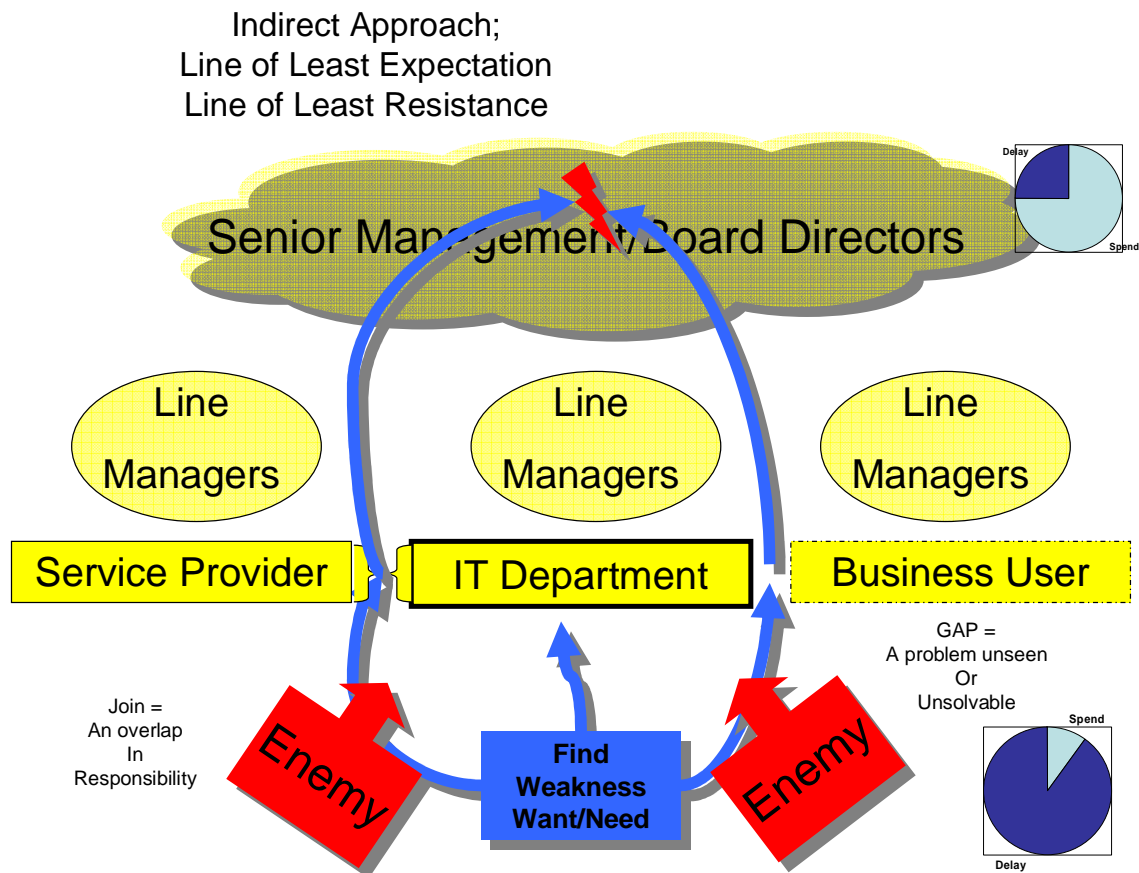
### **Tenders**

Any tenders which are to be managed by a committee of disparate groups, each with their own petty rivalries and agendas. Such tenders should be viewed as an amalgam of different wants and needs, some of which will carry a much higher value to powerful groups than others. It is necessary to deconstruct such a document and work out what these areas are. The other adage to remember is that if you receive a tender from a customer which you didn't help to write, then you may already be too late as one of your competitors will probably have helped to construct it.

### **Organisational Tensions**

A business process which has input from two or more areas, e.g. a sales area and a technical area, or a research area and a development area. Any decision being driven by an inward looking core controlling group, often from a central corporate part of the organisation and often with some specific technical or administrative function, and an outward looking customer facing, often field based group, often with a sales/marketing background. The central group will be interested in conformity, control, and long term stability, the field group will be driven by the need for quick results, and competitive advantage.

## The Ultimate Target



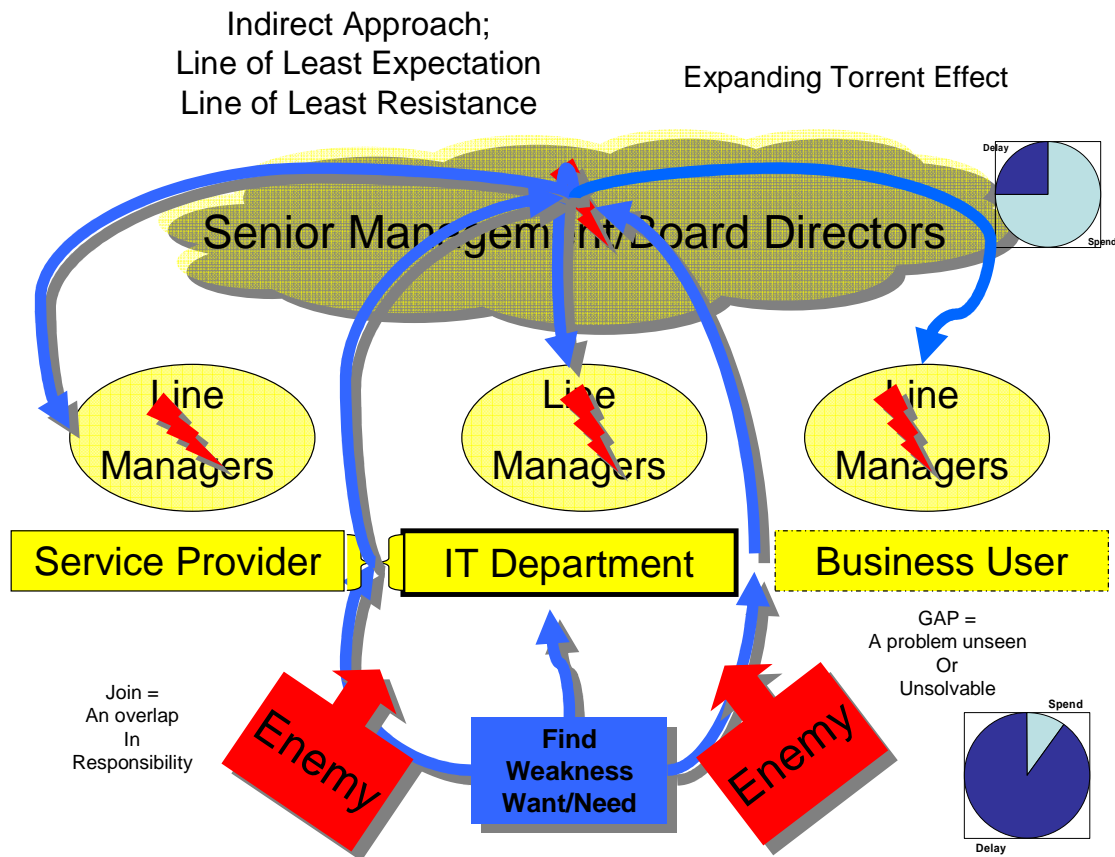
Remember your aim is to gain control of the customer centre of gravity (Schwerpunkt) The board or at least senior management. You do this by showing an ability to solve their problems. Doing this gives you control of the customer centre of thought which in turn gives you control of the centres of action (the head and the limbs).

The big advantage conveyed in working at this level is that you are working with people who are in a much better position to make quick decisions, it's one of the things they are paid to do, and also own or control a large budget, so are in a position to be able to pay to buy a solution to their problems.

The upshot of this is that your competition is working to a longer timescale lower down the food chain, and is competing for less budget, you however are operating to a much shorter time frame and can command a much higher budget for your solution.

At this level, even if you are rejected, you will be rejected much more quickly than at the lower level, so will waste less time fighting a battle that you can't win. It is a fact that you should only fight battles you can win tactically or strategically, the worst position to be in is to spend all your time tilting at windmills.

## The Expanding Torrent

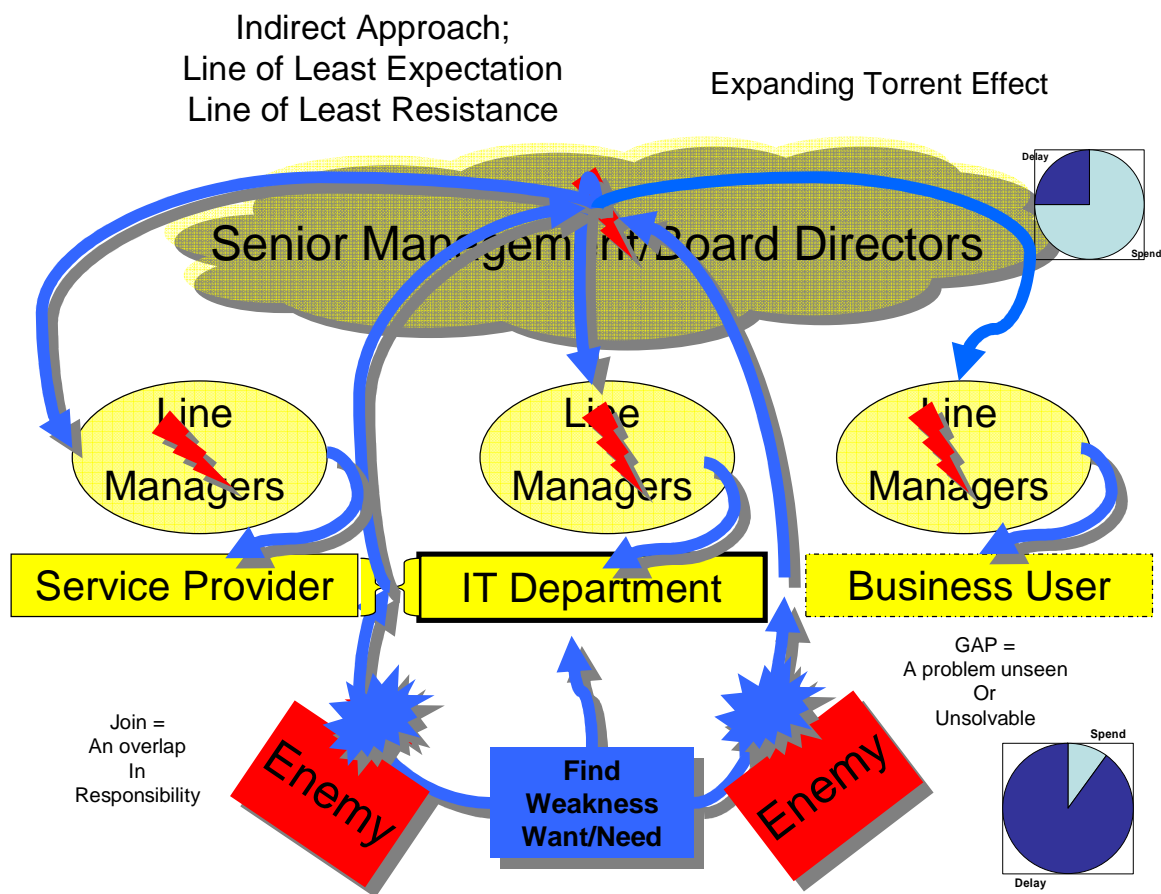


Once the centre of gravity is gained it is essential to push out along lines of least resistance behind the customer front line of conventional engagement to extend the area of control, convert as many subordinate management areas as possible as quickly as possible. This is the “Expanding Torrent Effect”.

Where strong resistance is encountered, this should be cut off and isolated from the main impetus of engagement, and you should avoid direct engagements with such strong positions until they weaken or you have time to concentrate on them. Attack them once they show signs of a collapse in morale.

So in effect The Expanding Torrent is where you curtail senior management’s ability to coordinate actions to resist your sales attempts by winning them over, you then have a free reign to overrun subordinate areas in detail from behind their lines. Senior management will communicate to the ranks below them what a good thing your solution is, because they have chosen it. Although some pockets of isolated resistance may be encountered, they can always be mopped up and overrun at your leisure with the backing and collaboration of the powerful senior managers. With no chain of command in place to apply control, checks and balances, subordinate areas down the command chain are left feeling cut-off, and can, at worst, only hold out in isolated pockets.

## The Ultimate Result



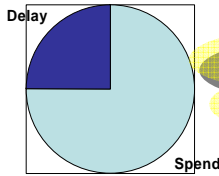
Further down the chain the story is the same with line managers compelling their subordinates to drop their current selection actions and adopt the solution chosen by senior management. This may be disheartening and frustrating for the guys at the coal face who had been going through their slow selection process with their limited budgets, but that isn't our concern, as long as we get their acquiescence as quickly as possible. Interestingly just as in battle, it is at this lowest level that the most niggling resistance can be encountered.

As for your competition, they will be cut off with no where to go. They have spent their time engaging at a level where the aim is to avoid making a wrong decision and a fear of risk, rather than a craving for innovation and excellence. The defence here is based on fear, a natural aversion to spending money, and a probable dislike of people who don't have a proper job, i.e. salesmen.

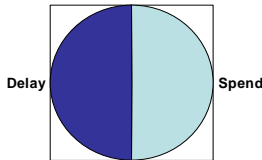


## Differences in the two approaches

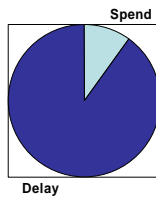
# Ability to Spend vs Speed of Decision



Senior Management/Board Directors



Line Managers



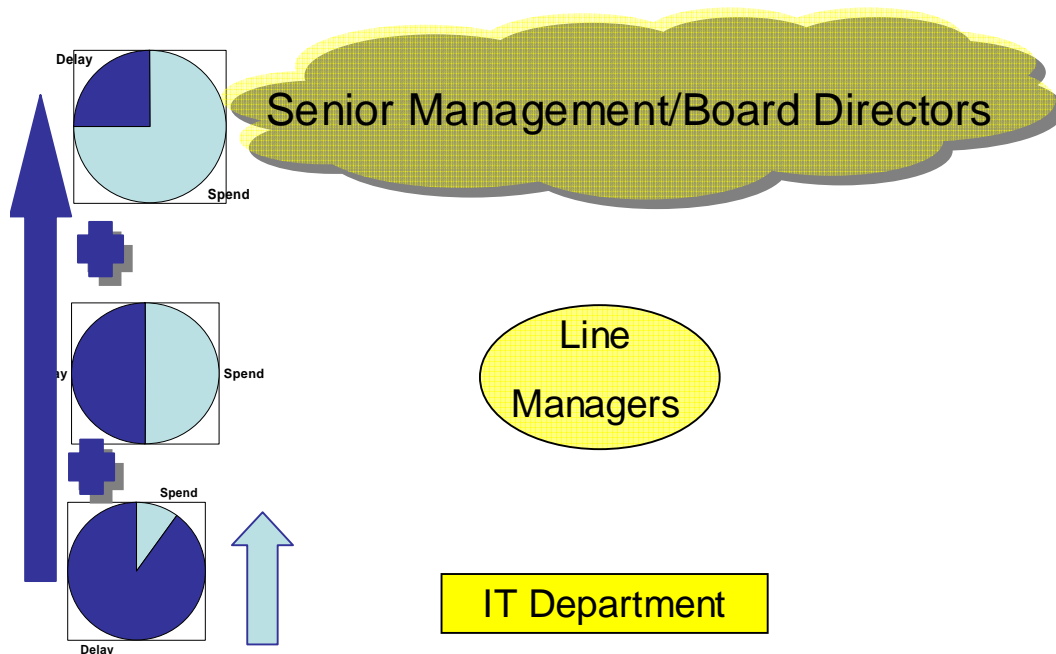
IT Department

The contrasts between different levels of an organisation are in direct proportion to each other. At the highest levels the speed of decision making is short, and the ability and amount of spend large, whereas at the bottom of an organisation the speed of decision making is slow and the amount and ability to spend small. Therefore it is much better to spend your time at the top of a hierarchy rather than at the bottom of it.

Further, if your competition stays within their comfort zone at the lower levels of the organisation, then they will be forced to work to the long time scales at that level, making it impossible for them to effectively compete with you.

## Effects of Working “From the Bottom up”

### Ability to Spend vs Speed of Decision

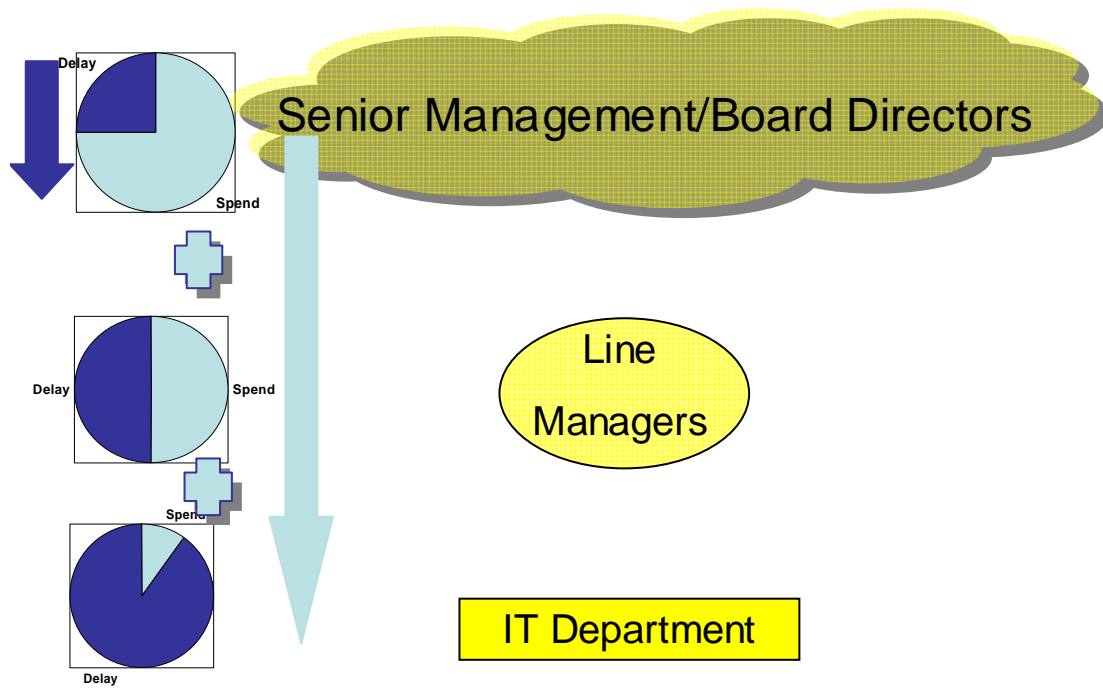


If working from the bottom up, each successive advance to the next management group up compounds the delay to closing a deal as each successive layer of management will go through its own decision making processes with associated delays.

In contrast, the amount of budget being fought over does not increase at each level, as it is only the budget at the lower level which has been justified. So the delay is compounded whilst the expenditure stays static, and in fact may actually reduce as the additional layers of management apply their own negotiations to the deal.

## Effects of Working “From the Top Down”

### Ability to Spend vs Speed of Decision



By contrast if you work from the top down, the decision gets made immediately by people who make fast decisions as part of their everyday jobs, therefore there is no need to go through the sales process for approval again at each subsequent layer, other than for reasons of courtesy.

The bonus is that because the decision has been endorsed at the highest levels, all the subsequent budgets in subsidiary levels are added to the win on the way down.

## Summary: What to do

### Do's

1. Adjust your **ends** to your **means**.
2. Keep your **Objective** always in mind.
3. Choose the **Line of Least Expectation**.
4. Exploit the **Line of Least Resistance**.
5. Take a line of operation which offers an **alternative objective**.
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4. Pour fast moving troops through the gap and drive **as deep as possible, as quickly as possible**, to cause **as much dislocation as possible** by cutting lines of communication.
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2. Protection: Cut off concentrations of enemy resistance, **avoid direct engagements with strong positions**.
3. Destruction: Attack enemy concentrations once they show **signs of a collapse in morale**.

## Where can I read more?

### **Strategy**

First published 1929, revised 1954 and 1967.

Published by Meridian 1991.

ISBN 0-452-01071-3

Explains his teachings in the context of historical campaigns.

### **The Other Side of the Hill**

First Published 1948, revised 1951

Published by Macmillan 1993

ISBN 0-333-60214 5

His interviews with the captured German commanders after WW2.