

Customer Research  
Organizational Consulting  
Strategic Leadership and Change

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## **BILIK AND YASA:**

### **THE LEADERSHIP MAXIMS AND LAWS OF GENGHIS KHAN**

***“I am the Scourge of God! If you had not committed great sins, God would not have sent a punishment like me among you.”***

So bellowed Genghis Khan as he rode on horseback inside the sacred Mosque of Bokhara moments before he ordered the entire town razed and all inhabitants slaughtered, except for a few peasants “scattered to the winds to tell the tale of the horror they witnessed here.”

Not a very nice guy. He was not, in fact, the kind of person one expects to read about in studying contemporary business leadership. In fact, in a recent article in *The Economist* it was noted that: “Unlike other conquerors, he brought no ideology, no Napoleonic Code, no Roman Law. His simple fanatical aim was to amass huge areas of territory...Genghis’ empire, if that’s what it was, fell to pieces after his death....”

Presumably, in the view of *The Economist*, Genghis Khan was the kind of leader best left in closed history books, though even the disdainful *Economist* writer had to admit that “He had the pitiless single-mindedness that is the mark of the successful soldier. His cavalry had blitzkrieg efficiency.”

Still, however deplorable his methods, the accomplishments of Temujen, Genghis Khan, are extraordinary.

A hunted outcast on the steppe from the age of ten until the age of seventeen, he rose in four short years to be elected Genghis Khan (rightful ruler) of the Mongols. After defeat and desolation two years later, he rose to be Khan again and later to be Emperor of the Steppes and the World Conqueror.

He took scattered tribes of persecuted nomads, struggling for survival in a forbidding land of extreme hot and cold, and turned them into one of the greatest armies the world has ever known. The gigantic scale and speed of these Mongol operations were incredible in an age before firearms, mechanized transport and modern communication.

His empire stretched from within sixty miles of Venice to the tip of Korea, from the north of India to north of Moscow. It was said to take a year to ride across his territory and yet certain developments in one region were felt more quickly in another region than at any other time before the advent of electronic communication.

He had a keen eye for talent and promoted men on merit alone. He had the knack of inspiring fanatical loyalty among men he had just met. When he died, he divided his empire among his

sons and generals, and his Maxims (Bilik) and Laws (Yasa) were revered for two hundred years.

Perhaps, then, there is something that this “Scourge of God” can teach us about leadership.

## **SOME HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

### **The Mongols before the Rise of Genghis Khan**

Mongolia is a desolate place, much of it 3000-5000 feet above sea level, ringed by the snow-capped Altai and Tianshan Mountains in the west, the Gobi Desert to the south and east, and the forests of Siberia in the north.

The temperature ranges from -45° F in winter to 100° F in summer. The Mongols, before Genghis Khan, were one tribe in a land populated by many tribes of nomads: Tatars, Merkit, Kerait, Naiman, and hundreds more. They paid tribute to the Chinese who kept all the “barbarians north of the wall” weakened by promoting internecine war.

The Mongols were better horsemen than most of the other tribes. In fact, when William the Conqueror first mounted cavalry to fight at Hastings in 1066, the Mongols had been fighting on horseback for thirteen hundred years. Mongol horsemanship is said to be the reason the Great Wall was built in the third century B.C.

The Mongol people had twice been the dominant tribe of the region, once in the days of Kaidu Khan (who was Genghis Khan’s great, great, great, great grandfather) and once in 1135, in the days of Kabul Khan (who was Kaidu Khan’s great grandson and Genghis Khan’s great grandfather).

Temujen, the young Genghis Khan was born in about 1165, (scholars differ on the date,) in what is Inner Mongolia, in China, today. The clan of Temujen’s father, Yesugei, was not very powerful. The Mongols elected their Khans and so, Genghis Khan’s father, was not a Khan.

These were bad times for the Mongols in general. There were endless raids, one clan upon another, taking booty and women. A few Mongol men died in each raid, but the outnumbered losers usually fled leaving their possessions and their women and children behind. (One could always get another wife). The battles were of little consequence and always produced warriors ready to fight again next week, next month, next year. These endless steppe wars probably made an impression on the young Temujen that history would have been better off without.

Genghis Kan’s first Maxim (Bilik) in *The Yasa* is probably a result of this observation:

*“Leave no enemy behind you. Next year he will still be an enemy and next year he may be stronger and have allies.”*

## The Rise of Genghis Khan

When Temujen was ten, the Tatars poisoned Yesugei. His kinsmen took his possessions and drove the young warrior, his mother and three brothers out on the steppe alone. They spent the next seven years hiding in the mountains and keeping herds on the steppe. Temujen gained a certain reputation for ruthlessness: he killed his half-brother with an arrow at age eleven in a quarrel over a fish.

When Temujen was seventeen, his clansmen, nervous about his approaching manhood, sent a thief to steal his herd of eight horses. Horses were the lifeblood of the Mongol; he hunted on them, drank mare's milk, and ate krimis (mare's milk yogurt).

Temujen set off to recapture them alone. He rode for three days, so the story goes, when he came upon a goatherd. Temujen slowed his horse upon approaching, dismounted and walked the last hundred yards. He inquired after the herd, the goatherd's health and background, and at length asked him if he had seen a rider pass driving eight horses. The goatherd said they had passed not an hour before, and mounted unasked to join Temujen in the chase and could not be dissuaded. The goatherd, Bo'orchu, became the first companion.

The story of Temujen's rise to power in four short years is one of attracting companions like Bo'orchu, forming very strong relationships like that with his "*anda*" (blood brother) Jamulka, and strategic alliances such as that with his kinsmen Toghrul, Ong Khan. He formed bonds and alliances and aggressively reformed them when his "allies" betrayed him. Finally, he drew many supporters and was elected Genghis Khan (rightful ruler) of the Mongols. Temujen was in fact a Khan, but a small one.

His rise was set back again when his "*anda*" Jamulka and his uncle Ong Khan betrayed him to fight on the side of the Naiman against him. After two years of defeat and desolation, he mounted an army and defeated Tayang Khan of the Naiman. *The Secret History of the Mongols* describes how Tayang Khan became disheartened when Jamulka, who had allied against Temujen but had a change of heart, spread stories of the "four hounds of Genghis Khan who were kept in chains and fed on human flesh: Jebe, Subedei, Jelmei, and Kubalai." When the Naiman asked who led the four armies against him he was told the generals Jebe, Subedei, Jelmei and Kubalai and he lost the will to fight and was slaughtered.

Genghis Khan later killed Jamulka according to Jamulka's own request by piling stones upon his body wrapped in a carpet. He went on to defeat Ong Khan and was named Emperor of the Steppes. In a series of other campaigns he destroyed his nomadic competition.

The Khan's conquests continued. In 1211 he invaded China, and, after a two-year assault on the wall, sacked Beijing. In 1218, in response to the beheading of one of his ambassadors, he attacked Persia where he made his famous "I am the Scourge of God" proclamation. The unfortunate Sultan of Bokhara, who had beheaded the Khan's ambassador, was pursued by Jebe and Subedei to the other side of the Black Sea, where he was finally caught and summarily beheaded.

## The Army of Genghis Khan

Harold Lamb, a scholar of Mongol history who has written a children's biography of Genghis Khan, gives Yesugei the credit for teaching Temujen the lesson of guerilla warfare.

Temujen, we Mongols are not the hundredth part of Cathay.  
The only reason we have withstood her is that we are all  
nomads carrying our supplies with us. We are experienced  
in our kind of warfare. When we can, we plunder what  
we need. If we build towns and change our old ways  
we will fall into misfortune.

*(Genghis Khan and the Mongol Horde)*

However he came by the knowledge, Temujen learned the lesson well. He refused to live in Beijing when he conquered it and retired to his yurt in Karakorum. At his death in Persia in 1227 from a riding accident, his third son and heir Ogodei carried his body home and, as instructed, secretly interred the Khan on Mount Baldhur where he had hidden as an outcast in his youth.

Genghis Khan's army was divided into decimal units, 10 an arban, 100 a jegun, 1000 a mingon, 10,000 a tumen. A hierarchical organization, the army moved in long columns sometimes separated by great distances and kept in touch by fast messengers. The army attacked in five rank formation: two ranks of heavy cavalry, three ranks of light cavalry.

Aside from his own family, Genghis Khan promoted by merit alone. The Khan had a knack for picking and promoting talent. The story is told of meeting Jebe, who later became one of the Khan's top generals. In battle a lone enemy bowman stood against the full charge of the Khan and his horsemen. This bowman took aim and shot the Khan's horse out from under him. A week later Temujen came upon this man on foot in a field surrounded by the Khan's horsemen. The foot soldier called out for a horse and the Khan sent him one. He then mounted, cut his way through Genghis Khan's men, and escaped.

The bowman returned the next day to swear allegiance to Temujen who asked the man if he had fought in the previous battle. When he said that he had, the Khan asked the man if he knew who had shot the Khan's favorite horse. The bowman replied that he had. The Khan reputedly said: *"This man is a brave soldier and an honest man. I shall call him Jebe [the arrow] and he shall command a tumen."*

Genghis Khan formed specialized support units for his army: Persian and Chinese physicians to attend the wounded, Chinese engineers to run catapults and siege engines, supply officers, and the signal corps. He instituted a complex and sophisticated signaling system that included kettledrums, flags and smoke by day and torches by night. He formed the Keshik (Imperial Guard) selected from the best of all regiments. He maintained strict and harsh discipline, and liberally used the death penalty, but Genghis Khan also divided the spoils of war equally after each battle, often dismounting and personally carrying booty to the wounded.

He was not the best general of this time. Both times he fought Jamulka he lost, and Subedei, his commander of the west, was recognized in his day as a superior strategist. However, Genghis Khan commanded intense loyalty and created the most disciplined army the world has

ever known. In an early battle with the Merkit when his men were exhausted and outnumbered ten to one he called a retreat. In these times any retreat would turn into a rout with soldiers breaking ranks to flee for their lives. The Merkit general, though his numbers were far superior said: *“Stop. We will not follow these Mongols. Though beaten this army moves away as one man. I would not fight them if I had twice the men. If such discipline they show in defeat, they will be twice as hardened in attack.”*

## **BILIK AND YASA**

Genghis Khan could neither read nor write, but he decreed that Uighur scribes convert Mongol speech into writing using a specially designed form of the Uighur alphabet. In this alphabet some historical documents were written (such as the *Secret History of the Mongols*) but its primary purpose was in the administration of law. Laws (Yasa) were recorded and judges' decisions were documented thus building a system of case law that lasted for two hundred years. The *Great Yasa* was a written catalogue of traditional Mongol laws said to be dictated to scribes by Genghis Khan himself along with Maxims (Bilik) of leadership and instructions for the maintenance and deployment of the Mongol armies.

*The Great Yasa* was considered proof of divine sponsorship of the Mongol nation. Mongol Khans for several generations regarded it as a magical talisman not unlike the Hebrew view of the Torah and the Ark of the Covenant. Marco Polo describes the “book of laws enshrined in gold” that was a prominent feature in the court of Kubalai Khan.

### **Traditional Mongol Law (Yasa)**

As I have noted, prior to the rise of Genghis Khan, the Mongols were a disunited collection of nomadic tribes. Internecine wars were common and much of the common traditions of moral law found within all peoples was “observed in breach.” It is therefore unclear how much of the moral law of *The Great Yasa* was traditional and just recorded by the scribes of Genghis Khan and how much was absorbed from contact with other cultures. However, regardless of origin, Genghis Khan saw fit to include in *The Great Yasa* these moral precepts:

- *“Love one another;*
- *Respect wise men of all peoples;*
- *Do not steal;*
- *Do not bear false witness;*
- *Whoever intentionally lies or practices sorcery or spies upon others or intervenes between two parties in a quarrel to help one against the other is put to death;*
- *Neither betray your brothers nor promise what you cannot keep;*
- *Do not commit adultery; an adulterer is to be put to death, whether he is married or not. Adultery with the concubines of clerics is no offense;*
- *Praise the righteous and protect the innocent;*

- *Share all food to be eaten; never eat before another lest you offer to divide your meal. Never eat offered food before he who offers it first partakes;*
- *Consider all sects as one and do not distinguish one from the other Nor interfere with a man who speaks with his God if he keeps the Khan's law;*
- *Shed not the blood of one of royal birth [members of the royal family were executed by wrapping them in carpets and beating or stoning them lest their blood enter the ground and their spirits be left behind to torment their executioners. Evidently in Mongol belief commoners' spirits had no such powers];*
- *Whoever becomes bankrupt thrice is put to death after the third time;*
- *Bathe not nor urinate in running water or in a yurt;*
- *Neither cause a knife to pass through a stream;*
- *Do not cause a knife to pass through fire or ashes; do not urinate upon them. [Note: Mongols had an animistic religion, which revered running water, wind, and fire]."*

***When a Mongol dies (Khan or peasant):***

- *"Purify his body with fire, let his ashes return to the steppe carried by the wind;*
- *Let no man interfere with his estate; if he has no heir his belongings should pass to his apprentice, slave, or to him who ministered unto him;*
- *His son and heir should marry all the father's wives, save his own mother, and adopt all his father's children;*
- *Thus will the Mongol people survive the cold wind of the steppe."*

As is evidenced by historical descriptions of Mongol ways, these moral laws were intended to guide Mongol conduct. While Genghis Khan rewarded courage and rectitude and punished cowardice and turpitude among his own people, his actions were reversed with his enemies.

*"...Let Mongols not threaten with the great size of their armies, but let them say only 'If you will submit yourselves obediently ye shall find good treatment and rest, but if ye resist God knoweth what will happen to you."*

**Maxims of Leadership (Bilik)**

In the *Great Yasa* there was a body of knowledge, much of which was intended as instruction to generals and Khans on the leadership and organization of the armies. The scholars tell us that these maxims were not distinguished from traditional moral law and that disobedience to them

brought the same harsh Mongol punishment (death in most cases) as disobedience to moral law. Presumably this is evidence of the cult of divine rule which surrounded Genghis Khan in his later years and after his death.

The Bilik are listed below organized by the concepts they embody:

### **On Organization:**

*“Here is the organization of the army:*

- *The arban [unit of ten warriors] is its own council,*
- *The ten noyat [officers] of the arban form the council of the jegun [unit of one hundred warriors],*
- *The ten noyat of the jegun form the council of the mingon [unit of one thousand warriors],*
- *The ten noyat of the mingon form the council of the tumen [unit of ten thousand warriors],*
- *The noyan [generals, princes, commanders of ten thousand warriors] form the council of the Khan;*
  
- *The Keshik [Imperial Guard of one thousand men] shall be composed of warriors commended for their skill at arms witnessed and approved by every council and the Khan. Any Keshik warrior should be fit to command any unit of the Khan’s army at any time;*
  
- *No man may depart to another unit who is not sent by his commander;*
- *No commander shall give refuge to another commander’s warrior.*
- *Therefore, no man can take liberties with his leader nor any commander entice him from his duty to his arban;*
  
- *Mongols shall not give to their kings and nobles many laudatory names like other nations. He who sits on the throne shall be called Khan and swear his allegiance to the Great Khan. [This simple feudal structure was presumably to limit the growth of aristocratic bureaucracy];*
  
- *Ambassadors, emissaries, and messengers, whether of the Khan or his enemies, are protected under the Khan’s law. He who interferes with them or harms them is put to death.”*

### **On the Conduct of Warriors**

- *“When a Mongol gives a time for his action or his presence, he shall not retard it one hour nor advance it;*
  
- *No Mongol shall draw a weapon on another Mongol;*
  
- *At the council speak your mind without fear of reproach, but when the wine is poured the council has ended. Debate no more;*
  
- *There is never a council on the field of battle;*

- *Never deliver your commander to the enemy;*  
[There are several stories indicating that Genghis Khan held this law inviolate even to his enemies. In one account he accepts the service of the kinsmen of Tarquatai who helped their leader escape, saying, “If you had come here having laid hands on your lawful ruler I would have had your heads cut off. Yours and your sons and your sons’ sons.”]
- *Death is the penalty for deserting your arban, sleeping on guard, plundering before the battle ends and the Khan’s permission is given;*
- *All Mongols must be in day to day life like a two-year old fawn, at feasts and celebrations carefree as a young colt, but on the day of battle swooping to the attack like a falcon on a hawk. In daylight alert as an old wolf, in the night as vigilant as a black crow.”*

### **On Training and Readiness**

- *“Every Mongol shall learn to ride from the age of three, by five he must stand in the stirrups at full gallop and hit a target at one hundred yards;*
- *When Mongols are unoccupied with war, they shall devote themselves to hunting. The objective not so much the chase itself as the training of warriors who shall acquire strength and become familiar with the drawing of the bow and other exercises;*
- *All able bodied men shall participate in the Great Winter Hunt, the spoils of which shall be divided equally;*
- *At other times the hunter keeps what he kills after reporting what he kills to his noyat who takes note. But gluttony is punishable by death.”*

### **On the Supply and Maintenance of Equipment**

- *“Each warrior shall be issued a short bow [range under one hundred yards], a long bow [range up to three hundred yards, though some sources say one thousand yards], a quiver with sixty arrows [including signal arrows], and three horses. In the case of light and heavy cavalry such armor as lances and weapons as required;*
- *Warriors are supplied one day of food before a march and must forage beyond that;*
- *If a warrior drops something the man riding behind must retrieve it and return it;*
- *No horse may be ridden until three years old;*
- *No horse may be ridden in battle two days in a row;*
- *No messenger’s horse may be ridden but once in three days;*
- *No horse that was ever ridden in battle may be eaten.”*

## **On the Conduct of the Leader**

- *“Each officer must inspect weapons and equipment before battle and supply deficiencies on pain of punishment by the Khan;*
- *In peace the Kurultai [council] meets in the cycle of the moon [monthly], in war in the cycle of the sun [daily]. Listen well to the councils;*
- *Officers who do not attend councils or the Khan’s addresses or who fail to control their men in battle will be removed;*
- *Any word on which three well-informed men are agreed may be spoken anywhere; otherwise by no means speak them;*
- *In council or when accepting a man into your service speak last. When meeting a stranger or a friend, no matter what your troubles, inquire first after the other’s circumstances. Interest creates friendships;*
- *Though you command a tumen you must obey the lowliest servant sent by the Khan even if he is sent to flog you publicly or take your life;*
- *Never command the men of another tumen while their noyen draws breath. Let even your commanders command their own troops;*
- *As a man knows himself so should he know others;*
- *No man who is physically superior can lead ordinary men, he will not feel hunger and thirst as they do. Recommend him to the Keshik where he may find others of his kind. But leash not the tiger, only give him opportunity to find meat.”*

The Bilik and Yasa show Genghis Khan to be a thoughtful leader, one that believed strongly in structure, and disciplined operational processes. Many of us have an expectation of Genghis Khan’s ruthlessness, perhaps born of the stories told by his conquered enemies. The Bilik and Yasa show a demanding leader, but a leader with considerably more empathy than we might expect. This is the leader who united warring nomads with the promise of fair treatment and reward.

Genghis Khan set up a highly organized, disciplined, feudal organization appropriate to the military task of world conquest. This organization of absolute autocratic rules was severe in its punishment of transgression of the Yasa (death for gluttony). The Khan also offered absolute reward (equal share of plunder) for absolute loyalty and excellence of performance.

No one would suggest that this kind of feudal law is possible today. Neither would it be desirable or effective as a form of contemporary business leadership. Still we can take note of what the Khan gave the Mongol horde:

- ◆ **A sense of identity.** They became Mongols, not a collection of clans, tribes, nomads, and beggars. The word “Horde,” which originally meant “camp with corral for horses,” became synonymous with thundering blitzkrieg cavalry.
- ◆ **Discipline.** They trained in maneuvers relentlessly until they “moved as one man.”

- ◆ **Absolute reward.** These Mongols were guaranteed an equal share of plunder, which the Khan might personally deliver to them if they were wounded.
- ◆ **Absolute accountability.** Clear expectations and punishment were the norm. Merit promotion was given for loyalty, honesty, and excellent performance. Death was ordered for deceit, lack of discipline, disobedience, and gluttony.

Life in today's organization is often not so clearly cut. Hierarchies are breaking down. I've heard many managers publicly yearn for the days "when people did what you told them." Those days are gone. The workplace has changed.

Peter Drucker, Professor of Management at Claremont Graduate School, observes a need for a new type of organization. In the contemporary organization, information, the stuff of decisions, is now freely available to all. This newly knowledgeable, independent work force, Drucker says, will work better in a new organization. Drucker likens this organization to a university or a symphony orchestra, a collection of specialists. This flatter structure is bound together by a single purpose and directed by a leader capable of bringing out the best performance of each individual and each specialty.

A new structure alone will not bring the results that Drucker describes. Leadership will be required.

But what kind of leadership? Will this group of specialists respond to Genghis Khan's style that offers identity, discipline, reward, and accountability? What else might they demand of their leaders?

Our challenge as business leaders is to examine the laws and maxims that lead to the phenomenal success of Genghis Khan in an effort to determine which of these leadership principles are relevant to the contemporary organization. We must also determine what new principles of leadership must be created in order to ensure like success. In the words of Genghis Khan:

*"There is an adage-verse: 'In a house everything resembles its master. ' So it is with the arben or the tumen . . . Whoever can keep ten men in order may be given ten thousand and he will also keep them in order."*

## Notes and Bibliography

I make no representation that *Bilik and Yasa* is a work of serious historical scholarship. I did, however, draw on the work of several well known scholars of Mongol history whose publications follow.

The Mongols had no written text; their records were written by the scribes of conquered peoples in their native tongues, most commonly Uighur. *The Secret History of the Mongols* was written in 1240 under the direction of the lawgiver Shigikutu at the command of Ogodei, Genghis Khan's third son and heir. This source, written thirteen years after the death of the Khan, survives only in the Phagspa (Tibetan) translation. It is the primary Mongol source upon which most biographers depend. The Juvaini *History of the World Conqueror* was written some twenty years later by a Persian potentate in the service of Ogodei, while Subedei and Batu still held Persia.

In the thirteenth century the Bilik and Yasa were kept by each of the Mongol Khans and read aloud at the ceremonies announcing a new Khan. No extant copy of them exists in Uighur, Phagspa or Chinese and what scholars have pieced together has been assembled from archeological inscriptions and secondary sources.

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## **TEAM EXERCISE:**

### **Building the Effectiveness of the Mongol Horde**

After reading *Bilik and Yasa: The Leadership Maxims and Laws of Genghis Khan*, discuss how to translate what you have read to your own organization, and prepare a presentation of your findings.

#### **Step One: Discussion**

This is a process of metaphorical comparison. Not all circumstances will translate easily. Use the following questions as a guide:

1. Compare the competitive environment you are currently facing to the political environment the Mongols faced during the time of Genghis Khan.
2. What is the state of your current organization and leadership? Are you closer to the Drucker ideal or the Genghis Khan ideal? Or stuck in the middle?
3. Which of the Bilik and Yasa can speak directly to your organization's current state? Which definitely should be avoided?

#### **Step Two: Write Your Own Bilik and Yasa**

1. Write a ten point statement of your organization's Bilik and Yasa which
  - a) is a day to day leadership guide
  - b) will help ensure your meeting your short-, medium-, and long-term objectives.
2. Discuss what would be necessary on the part of each member of your team to ensure that this is not some hollow document, forgotten by the end of next week. Settle on a few actions that are realistic and measurable.

#### **Step Three: Prepare a Brief Flip Chart Aided Presentation That**

1. describes something of your team's process (1-2 minutes)
2. gives your Bilik and Yasa statements (2-3 minutes)
3. describes what actions each of you will take to ensure that the Bilik and Yasa are followed (1-5 minutes).

This task is a serious one, but creativity and openness often flow from humor. What should not be treated lightly are the actions you commit to take.

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