



# Lessons from Africa's Great Strategists

*The terrain changes; the strategic primitives recur.*



## Shaka Zulu

ZULU KINGDOM, PRESENT-DAY KWAZULU-NATAL ·  
C.1787 TO 1828

### BUILT

From about 1816, Shaka transformed the Zulu from a small chiefdom into the dominant power across much of present-day KwaZulu-Natal. He ruled until his assassination in 1828.

### STRATEGY USED

Centralised regimental power and rapid encirclement: Shaka expanded and tightened the existing amabutho age-regiment system, drawing young men from conquered and allied chiefdoms into regiments serving the king. He is widely credited with developing or systematising the “chest and horns” battle formation, in which the chest fixed the enemy while the horns moved around its flanks, with a reserve held behind.

### EVIDENCE

Wright (2010); Eldredge (2014); Hamilton (1998); Wylie (2006).

FORMATION 01 / 06

# Concentrate.

force when the decisive window opens.

## IN MODERN STRATEGY: THE ENCIRCLEMENT

### Chest

PRODUCT FLOOD

Fix the incumbent at the core proposition.

### Left horn

NARRATIVE FLOOD

Shape how the market understands value.

### Right horn

ACCESS FLOOD

Expand the routes through which buyers reach you.

### Reserve

ADAPTIVE CAPABILITY

Hold capacity back. Read the response. Strike where the defence exposes an opening.

## THE RULE

### Move on the market from multiple fronts at once.

- Fix attention with Product.
- Close through Narrative and Access.
- Hold reserve to exploit the response.

*The product attack is only the chest.*

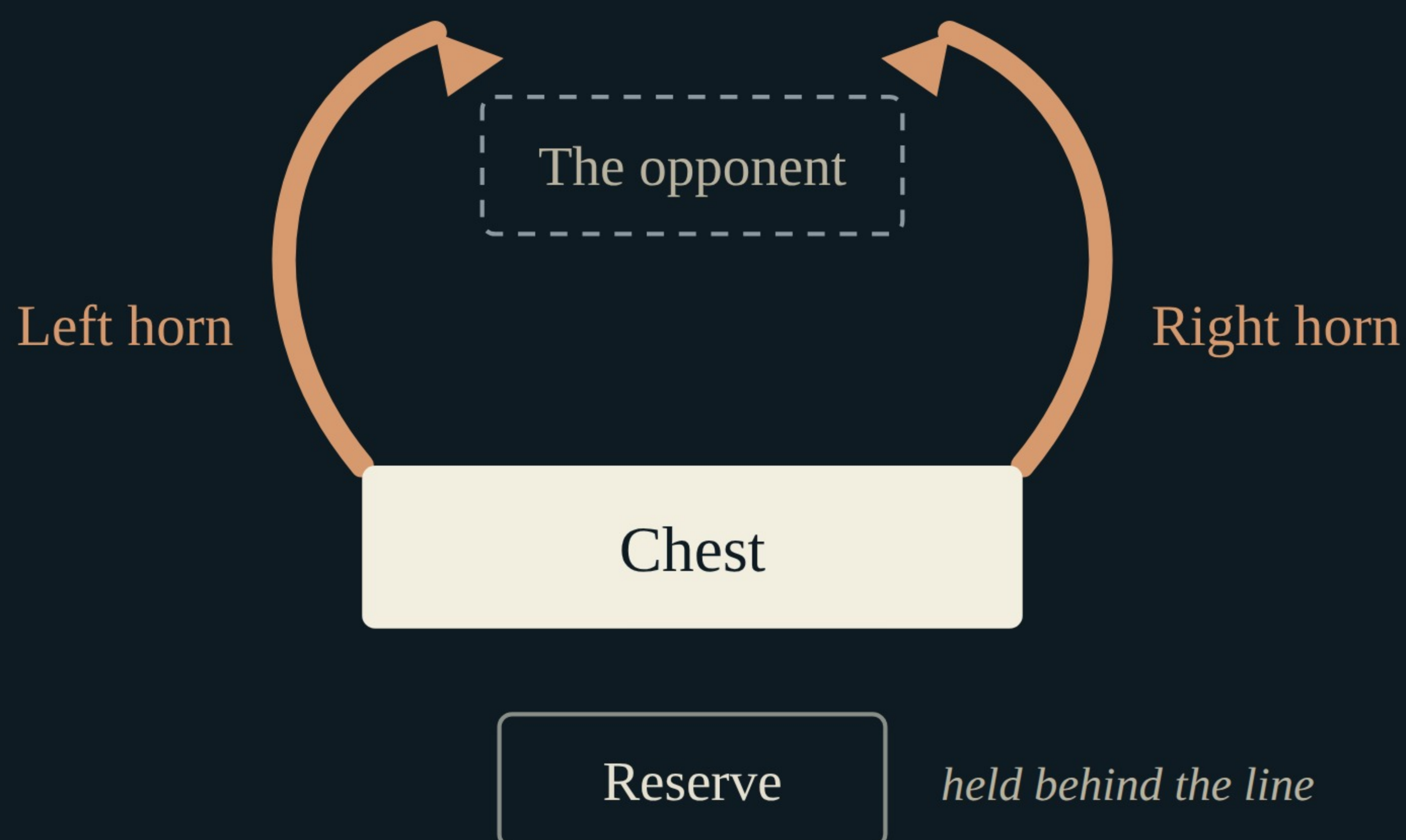


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## THE FORMATION

# How the encirclement works.



**Chest** Engages and fixes the opponent in front.

**Left horn** Moves around one flank.

**Right horn** Moves around the other flank.

**Reserve, or loins** Remains behind until needed.



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IN MODERN STRATEGY

## Now you are the incumbent.

This is how a new entrant plays the Shaka formation against you.

Chest to Product Flood

Left horn to Narrative Flood

Right horn to Access Flood

Reserve to Adaptive Capability



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## THE NEW ENTRANT'S OBJECTIVE

# What is the entrant actually trying to achieve?

BEACHHEAD

SEGMENT

SHARE

CATEGORY / ACCESS CAPTURE

FULL MARKET CAPTURE

## Beachhead capture

Win one defensible entry point.

One customer type. One product use case. One geography. One procurement route.

## Segment capture

Take a defined part of the market.

A customer segment, vertical, geography, ticket size or problem category becomes the entrant's territory.

## Share capture

Take meaningful business away from incumbents across a broader market.

The goal is not necessarily domination. It is to become a material competitor.

**Not every entrant needs the whole field.**

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## THE NEW ENTRANT'S OBJECTIVE

# Choose the objective before choosing the formation.

## Category capture

Own how the market understands the problem.

Its language, frameworks, standards or product architecture become the reference point. Narrative becomes terrain.

## Channel and access capture

Control or strongly occupy the routes through which buyers discover, procure or access solutions.

You do not need to own every product if you increasingly control how the buyer reaches the market.

## Full market capture

Become useful across multiple problems, legible in how the market thinks and reachable through multiple routes, all at once.

That is the full encirclement.

**A beachhead needs penetration.**

**A segment needs concentration.**

**Full market capture requires encirclement.**



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## THE READINESS GATE

### Do not play Shaka before you are ready.

Encirclement multiplies force. It also multiplies what can break.

#### 01 The product must be battle-ready

Do not launch a Product Flood while the core product is still a prototype or materially unproven.

You are about to invite comparison, imitation, scrutiny and response.

Before moving, ask: does the product work? Does the value proposition hold?

Can customers repeatedly get the promised result?

If not, concentration simply exposes weakness faster.

#### 02 You must be able to weather the response

The first wave will provoke countermoves.

Incumbents may cut prices, accelerate product, challenge your narrative, lock relationships or channels, increase marketing, or use capital, reputation or scale against you.

Do not begin the manoeuvre unless you have enough runway, capability and strategic optionality to remain standing after they answer.

**Your first attack should not consume the resources required to survive their first response.**

CONTINUED



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## THE READINESS GATE

# Never launch demand your operating system cannot absorb.

### 03 The window must be open

Shaka is not permanent aggression. Concentration is valuable when a decisive window exists.

Move when there is observable temporary advantage: demand is shifting, the incumbent is slow or distracted, a technology transition has opened, buyer behaviour is changing, distribution has loosened, a category is being redefined, or the competitor has visibly exposed a weak position.

If there is no window, three-front movement can become expensive noise.

### 04 You must be able to absorb success

Suppose the manoeuvre works tomorrow. Demand doubles. Then doubles again.

Can you produce at the same quality, deliver repeatedly, onboard customers, support them, finance working capital, maintain service levels and protect the customer experience while scaling?

If not, the entrant can create demand faster than its operating system can absorb it. And then the attack succeeds while the company fails.

**Do not manufacture urgency where the terrain has not created opportunity.**

CONTINUED



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## THE READINESS GATE

### Play the formation only when:

Product is proven.

Delivery is repeatable.

Capacity can scale.

Runway can absorb retaliation.

The window is open.

**If not, build first. Hunt later.**

A market-capture strategy requires a delivery system capable of surviving capture.

*If overnight success would break your company, you are not ready for full market capture.*



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## HOW THE MANOEUVRE IS PLAYED

# How the manoeuvre is played

*From first contact to adaptive encirclement.*

- |                                                                                                                      |                                                                                                                                                |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>01 Choose the objective</b><br>Beachhead, segment, share, category and access, or full market capture.            | <b>02 Pass the readiness gate</b><br>Product proven. Delivery repeatable. Capacity scalable. Runway sufficient. Window open.                   |
| <b>03 Launch the first wave</b><br>Chest to Product Flood. Left horn to Narrative Flood. Right horn to Access Flood. | <b>04 Force the incumbent to respond</b><br>Their defence reveals what they protect, where they are slow and which capabilities are stretched. |
| <b>05 Read the response</b><br>The first manoeuvre becomes an intelligence collection layer.                         | <b>06 Deploy the reserve</b><br>Commit held capability where the response has exposed the opening.                                             |
| <b>07 Zig-zag</b><br>Do not keep fighting the defended point. Shift pressure to another flank or route.              | <b>08 Repeat while the window remains open</b>                                                                                                 |

**The formation is coordinated. The response is observed. The next move is more informed than the first.**

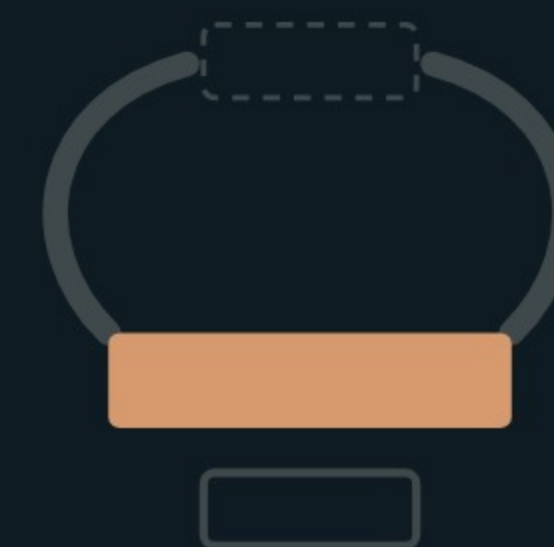


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IN MODERN STRATEGY: THE ENCIRCLEMENT

## The chest PRODUCT FLOOD



*A new entrant does not attack with one competing offer. It launches multiple value propositions, products and entry points while you are still defending one core proposition.*

### THE MOVE

Multiple products and value propositions hit your core market at once.

### HOW IT FIXES YOU

You are forced to respond. Add features. Repackage. Reprice. Accelerate the roadmap. Explain why your product is still better. Your product team, capital and management attention are pulled forward.

### WHAT IT TAKES TO COUNTERMOVE

You must either broaden fast enough to match the new surface area or concentrate around a core product whose superiority, integration or switching cost is difficult to dislodge.



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IN MODERN STRATEGY: THE ENCIRCLEMENT

## The left horn

### NARRATIVE FLOOD

#### THE MOVE

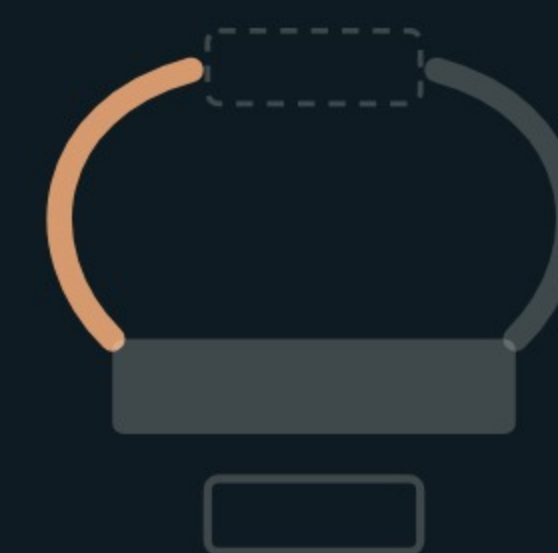
While the incumbent is defending the product, the entrant begins changing the language of the market: categories, frameworks, problem definitions and measures of what “good” looks like.

#### HOW IT FIXES YOU

Now you must defend not only the product, but the meaning of the product. Marketing and leadership have to explain why the existing category still matters.

#### WHAT IT TAKES TO COUNTERMOVE

Reframe the category, simplify the buyer decision around a stronger metric, or accept that the market is increasingly evaluating you on someone else's map.





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IN MODERN STRATEGY: THE ENCIRCLEMENT

## The right horn

### ACCESS FLOOD

#### THE MOVE

The entrant simultaneously expands routes to buyers: partnerships, procurement, referrals, strategic introductions and direct channels.

#### HOW IT FIXES YOU

You now have to defend existing relationships and construct new routes because the attacker is appearing in rooms and pipelines that once belonged to you.

#### WHAT IT TAKES TO COUNTERMOVE

Deepen key relationships, secure longer-term channel arrangements, create new distribution, lock in strategic partnerships or bypass channels the rival has occupied.





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## THE INCUMBENT'S ARMY

# The attack is coordinated. Your response may not be.



The entrant moves as one formation. The incumbent often experiences the same attack as three separate departmental crises.

## THE ENTRANT'S ARMY

Product Flood

Narrative Flood

Access Flood

All three advance at the same time and are coordinated around one objective.

## THE INCUMBENT'S ARMY

**SALES** reports that routes, relationships or distribution channels are slipping.

**PRODUCT** reports a sudden increase in competing offers, features or value propositions.

**MARKETING** reports that the market language is changing and the existing value proposition is becoming harder to defend.

Each team sees a different problem.

But they are not separate problems.

They are the same manoeuvre arriving through three different parts of the organisation.

## The entrant coordinates the attack.

## The incumbent has to coordinate the response.

*If the incumbent cannot integrate the signals quickly enough, the formation gains time to close.*



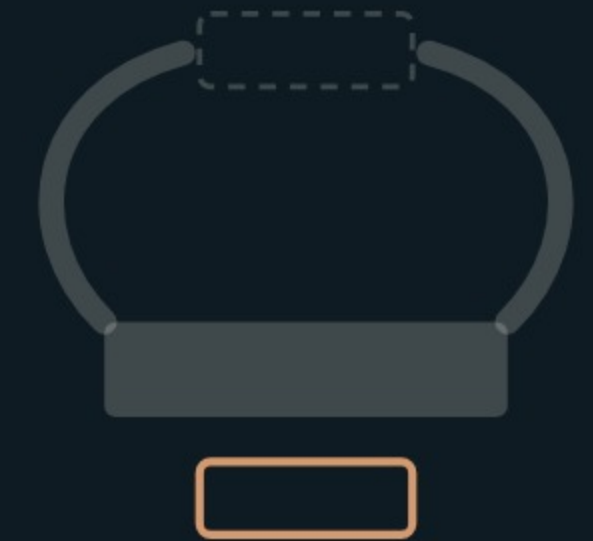
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IN MODERN STRATEGY: THE ENCIRCLEMENT

## The reserve

INTELLIGENCE LAYER, INFORMED SECOND STRIKE



### THE MOVE

The attacker does not commit everything at once.

Some capital, talent, product, narrative energy and relationship capacity remain uncommitted.

### WHAT THE FIRST MANOEUVRE REVEALS

The first three fronts force the incumbent to respond.

Those responses reveal where the incumbent is strongest, where they are exposed, what they protect first and which capabilities are already stretched.

### HOW IT FIXES YOU

You do not know whether the attack you are already defending is the full attack.

Your own defence exposes the weak point.

### WHAT IT TAKES TO COUNTERMOVE

You need reserve capacity of your own: capital, talent, decision speed and optionality not already consumed by defending the first three fronts.

**The first manoeuvre creates pressure.**

**The reserve converts the defender's reaction into intelligence.**

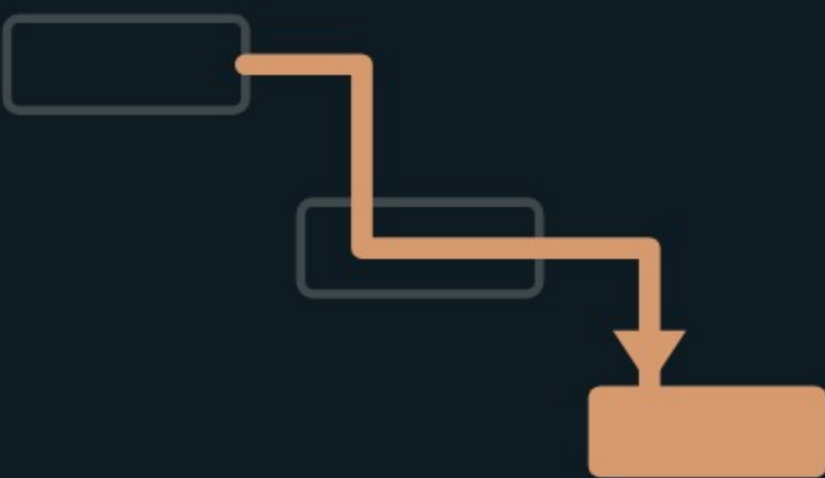


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## THE ZIG-ZAG

Do not defend the flank they chose. Shift the pressure.



The incumbent's response tells you where not to keep fighting.

### IF THEY DEFEND PRODUCT

Do not get trapped in feature-for-feature combat.  
Advance Narrative or Access.  
Change how the market defines the problem, or reach the buyer through routes the incumbent is not defending.

### IF THEY DEFEND NARRATIVE

Do not spend the whole battle arguing.  
Advance Product.  
Ship evidence. Launch capability. Put something concrete in the market that makes the narrative dispute less important.

### IF THEY DEFEND ACCESS

Do not keep pushing against the blocked gate.  
Open another route.  
Partnership. Direct buyer. Different procurement channel. Different geography. Different introduction path.

First wave creates pressure.  
Defence creates information.  
Reserve interprets.  
Zig-zag reroutes force.  
Then the next move becomes more informed than the first.

The point is not to win every confrontation.  
The point is to keep the formation moving.

That is the zig-zag.



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## THE QUIET WINDOW

# Move in the quiet window.



The best moment to advance is often when the incumbent's response capacity is temporarily lower than usual.

### WHEN RESPONSE CAPACITY DROPS

- Friday evening.
- Before a holiday.
- During an industry conference.
- During leadership transition.
- During restructuring.
- At year-end.
- During a known budget or planning cycle.
- Immediately after they commit heavily to defending another flank.

### WHY IT WORKS

Because the move may land while decision-makers are unavailable, internal coordination is slower, communications teams are offline, approval chains are dormant, and people assume the field is quiet.

**Then by the time they regroup, the move is no longer an announcement. It is already terrain.**

**Do not only ask where to move.  
Ask when their ability to answer is weakest.**

*Quiet-window timing amplifies a good manoeuvre. It does not rescue a weak one.*



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## THE MANOEUVRE

The chest fixes.

The horns compress.

The defence reveals.

The reserve decides where the next force goes.

*Attack, observe the response, infer the structure, redeploy the reserve,  
press the revealed weakness.*

**That is the encirclement.**

You look up.

The chest held you.

The horns closed.

The reserve entered where your defence  
had already shown the opening.

You are inside it.

*The defender pays the cost of complexity.*



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WHEN THE HORNS ARE ALREADY CLOSING

**Even if you know you are inside a Shaka, most of the good cards are already gone.**

*Recognition does not dissolve the formation.*

You may see the Product Flood.

You may recognise the Narrative Flood.

You may know Access is closing around you.

That does not mean you can defend all three.

By the time the formation is visible, the incumbent may already have committed capital, attention and people to the first response.

**There are still a few cards to play.**

**None of them are comfortable.**

**Do not defend the perimeter. Break the formation.**



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## HOW AN INCUMBENT BREAKS A SHAKA

### The countermanceuvre is asymmetric.

If you answer every flank, you exhaust yourself. Choose where the formation must break.

#### 01 Counter-concentrate

Strike the attacker's sustaining core.

Do not attempt to match Product, Narrative and Access everywhere.

Identify the capability that keeps the formation moving: core revenue engine, critical distribution advantage, scarce capability, key commercial dependency, principal product advantage or source of operating capacity.

Concentrate force there.

Objective: make sustaining three advancing fronts too expensive.

*Do not fight the horns if you can weaken what is feeding them.*

#### 02 Deny the terrain

Make what they are capturing worth less.

If the entrant is concentrating on a particular profit pool, category or route, change its economics.

Possible moves: reprice or commoditise the offer, unbundle the product, open access to something previously scarce, move value into another layer, restructure the proposition, or retreat from an increasingly unattractive segment.

Objective: force the attacker to discover that the territory it surrounded is no longer the territory it expected.

*Sometimes preserving the company means refusing to preserve the old battlefield.*

One play remains.

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## HOW AN INCUMBENT BREAKS A SHAKA

### 03 Refuse fixation

Choose what you will not defend.

A Shaka depends partly on making the incumbent treat every pressure point as urgent. Do not.

Decide deliberately which flank can be temporarily conceded, which customer segment can be surrendered, which narrative does not require an answer, which legacy product no longer deserves capital, and where the business must preserve reserve.

Then concentrate where survival or future advantage actually sits.

Objective: recover freedom of movement.

*You escape encirclement by becoming willing to leave something behind.*

## WHAT THIS REQUIRES

Decision speed.

Reserve capacity.

Strategic clarity.

Permission to abandon  
legacy positions.

If every move requires defending  
the past, the formation has  
already fixed you.

*A Shaka is not impossible to survive. But once the horns are closing, there are rarely painless moves left.*