What does Sun Tzu’s Art of War—an ancient Chinese military treatise dating back to the 5th century BC—have to do with thriving in the modern world? Speak to Mr Daniel Theyagu, corporate trainer at human resource consultancy firm Lateral Solutions Consulting LLP, and you’ll learn that the timeliness of Sun Tzu’s words lies in their power to promote critical thinking.

Close to 40 NTU alumni spent two hours on 23 January 2019 unpacking the wisdom of Sun Tzu’s Art of War with Mr Theyagu at a workshop titled ‘Critical Thinking for Situational Analysis & Peak Performance’. Held at the NTU Alumni House at one-north, the discussion kicked off with Mr Theyagu explaining that critical thinking involves how we “critique” our own thinking processes. In the Art of War, such self-critique is embodied in the saying, “know thyself, know thy enemy”.

“Knowing yourself is the guiding principle of critical thinking, because you are your greatest enemy, and it is not because of what you do, but how you think,” said Mr Theyagu. He further elaborated that our egos and biases have a tendency to cloud our thinking, leading us to make decisions that may not generate the best outcomes for ourselves and those around us.

But putting aside our egos and acknowledging our biases is easier said than done. Thankfully, Mr Theyagu provided the audience with five guiding principles found in Sun Tzu’s Art of War that can be used as a mental checklist for everyone to improve their critical thinking skills.

“A good general will keep five things in mind: the doctrine, the weather, the terrain, the commander and the moral law,” he said.

By understanding the reasons behind other people’s intentions, one develops perspective, which helps to combat one’s ego and biases (the doctrine). For example, Mr Theyagu said that understanding ‘the doctrine’ can be helpful for dealing with problems in the workplace. “An instruction given to you might be very clear, but the way you perceive it may be different, and that’s why screw-ups happen at work... [if you reflect on the situation later] you will find a mismatch between what you perceived and what was actually said,” Mr Theyagu noted.

Meanwhile, by logically assessing the weather and terrain, one can then take stock of available resources and come up with a feasible solution to a problem. Once a solution or course of action has been found, Mr Theyagu highlighted the need to appreciate how that action can influence the actions of others. This means taking into consideration the reactions of colleagues, clients or competitors—characters equivalent to the rival commander in the Art of War.

Last but not least, it is important to act in accordance with the moral law to avoid bad consequences, said Mr Theyagu. Critical thinking should therefore not be independent of ethics and values.

To help alumni better appreciate how their perceptions can misguide their thinking, Mr Theyagu then invited them to play, in small groups, several puzzle games which involved ice-cream sticks. The goal was to create various shapes using the sticks. Once each group had their solutions, Mr Theyagu would ask them to look at how others have approached the same problem, revealing logical missteps or missed opportunities to come up with a better solution.

At the end of the workshops, Ms Fiona Kwan (WKWSCI/2007) felt that Mr Theyagu had struck a right balance between “entertainment and education”, adding that by making the learning fun, Mr Theyagu had helped her better internalise the critical thinking skills and concepts.

“Mr Norman Tan (NBS/2018) said, “I thought Sun Tzu’s principles were intriguing and useful, especially when it comes to being mindful of our own biases for critical thinking.”

“A good general will keep five things in mind: the doctrine, the weather, the terrain, the commander and the moral law.”

– Mr Daniel Theyagu