



Leading thoughts

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Leading Thoughts

Mastering the Martial Art of Leadership Practical Strategies for Magnifying Power & Effectiveness: Part 1

By Robert Pater

Interested in surging your leadership power? Consider applying renowned swordsman Miyamoto Musashi's nine guidelines for dedicated warriors. In the late 16th century, Musashi, who retired unscathed from scores of battles, wrote A Book of Five Rings about practical martial strategy.

Musashi lists nine guidelines that also apply to developing black-belt leadership skills. Here are my comments on each directive, based on a lifetime of martial arts practice and more than 3 decades' experience applying these principles and methods to both leadership and specific injury prevention initiatives.

Numerous business leaders have turned to A Book of Five Rings as a font for wise decision-making. The first three of Musashi's nine potent methods deal with the strategist's relationship with him/herself, then focus on how to change personal outlook for much greater effectiveness.

A saying in advanced martial arts is, "The best secrets keep themselves." That is, great power only comes from working with, unpeeling the onion of, deceptively simple methods. Experience working with numerous companies proves that small, seemingly invisible modifications can make a world of difference, between being persuasive or seen as manipulative, perceived as concerned or overly controlling, laughed with or laughed at, magically effective or merely going through the motions.

Rather than just reading through these methods intellectually, consider reflecting on how these might actually apply to your leadership defaults and style.

1) Do Not Think Dishonestly

Black-belt leaders are critically honest with themselves. They assess their strengths and limitations without excuse and work to become deeply sure of themselves. Self knowledge recognizes that every strength is also a potential weakness. Yes, leaders with highly developed people skills can turn a disjointed staff into a smoothly working unit, but they can potentially sidetrack some into blind adulation or unwillingness to offer course-correcting feedback.

While it is tempting to blame others for our difficulties to try to avoid being personally accountable when things do not go well, one cannot hide from oneself and still be effective. Somewhere, down deep, each individual knows the truth and, ultimately, so will others. To maximize effectiveness, the leader must know what s/he can and cannot really do.

Of course, knowing those areas in which you excel and those in which you flounder is easier said than done. For the honest-thinking leader, it is essential to nurture sources of external criticism—colleagues, friends and family—that you can listen to without feeling threatened. Take self-assessment tests that provide insight into hidden strengths and weaknesses. Glean feedback from statistical indicators of performance, attitude survey results and others' responses to your actions. Pay attention to how you receive criticism. Do you react defensively or make excuses? Are you seeking approval or genuinely looking for ways to improve future performance? These are danger signs. Practice accepting feedback calmly, while considering how it might help you. Remember all have limits; no one is omniscient or perfect.

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Most important, mindfully pay attention to that inner voice that communicates mixed feelings (which everyone naturally has) even about people you most love or a favorable job. It is dangerous to ignore or rationalize away mixed feelings. Rather, make them your ally toward learning and contingency planning, and to better understand and then influence others who might disagree.

How many organizations or people have you known who have slipped from a position of strength from resting on their laurels? Also, develop a realistic view of your organization's strengths and limitations. If you cannot see the weaknesses, you cannot change them. Make self assessment an ongoing, ideally daily, default.

### 2) The Way Is In Training

Daily practice is the key to ongoing improvement. The memory of past successes will only take you so far. It matters more what you are now doing than what you have done.

You become good at whatever you practice. What you put into your training is what you will later get back. The martial artist is dedicated to self improvement through training. No one becomes a black belt without hours of weekly practice over several years. The same is true for all black-belt leaders I have met; their efforts toward self improvement never end. Hagakure, a lauded martial arts tome, states that once you begin to feel that you are a master, you are no longer making progress; self development withers with self satisfaction.

Training cannot just not take place in a controlled, artificial seminar room; it is an ongoing honing process of mindful trial and self-correction. Make it a habit to practice applying what you have read, seen and heard to your work as soon and as continuously as possible. Watch the results, then readjust accordingly.

Of course, things rarely go as smoothly as described in any article or seminar. Although sometimes frustrating, at-work leadership training eventually builds natural and effective action.

In the martial arts, training others is an essential element of mastery. Ultimately, you can only transmit to others skills that you deeply understand. Similarly, black-belt leaders relish training their staff (usually beyond formal sit-down sessions). Such training is a powerful weapon for strengthening performance and culture, and for raising morale.

### 3) Become Acquainted With Every Art

Each martial art system has weaknesses and strengths. Not seeing your weaknesses makes you more vulnerable to attacks you have not prepared for. Similarly, there are many leadership styles and it is important not to cling exclusively to yours. Each has strengths and limitations, from extremes of command-and-control/centralized to participative/decentralized.

Explore the range of arts within your organization. Become adept at all parts of a project: planning, budgeting, timing of milestones, decision making, evaluation, writing, editing, marketing (internal or external), making presentations and distribution. The more you really understand what is involved, the easier it is to maintain the leadership needed to delegate and monitor work or change direction quickly.

This way, you are less likely to be blindsided by an argument or resistance you do not understand. You will also be less threatened and better able to weave together different arts to achieve common organizational goals.

Keep abreast of leadership methods in other organizations, especially those of competitors; their progress may teach you about your own organization's patterns, weaknesses and strengths.

You can also improve your leadership by referring to what you have learned in other arts. Just as Musashi, after his retirement, transferred his martial arts skills to sumi-e brush paintings, you can apply the principles of any art (athletics, public speaking, playing music, gardening) toward making you a stronger leader.

In next month's Professional Safety, I will discuss how to apply Musashi's next three guidelines to advance significantly more powerful safety and overall leadership.

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