



Leading thoughts

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Leading Thoughts

Mastering the Martial Art of Leadership Practical Strategies for Magnifying Power & Effectiveness: Part 2

By Robert Pater

Much written or discussed about leadership is too general, too hypothetical or overly idealistic. Best theory must be consistent and grounded in reality. Few disciplines are as practical and realistic as martial arts—methods and techniques must get the job done without excuse or blame, or they are quickly discarded by the advanced practitioner.

Specifically, the martial arts have many similarities to both leadership and safety. Self-defense is an ultimate goal of safety, preventing damage from high risk and unexpected circumstances. Further, best leaders, similar to martial masters, are calmly effective under pressure, rely on powerful sets of principles and are highly strategic.

Many industry titans consider swordsmaster Miyamoto Musashi's A Book of Five Rings a font of practical strategic wisdom. In the March 2016 Professional Safety, I suggested realistic ways to enlist the first three of nine Musashi guidelines for winning strategically: 1) Do not think dishonestly. 2) The way is in training. 3) Become acquainted with every art.

Here are the next three of these keys. These are far from esoteric. Think of how you might incorporate any of these toward cutting through blockages to highest-level performance.

4) Know The Ways of All Professions

In an era of progressively complex technical knowledge, the push is often toward specialization. But, while it has strengths, this narrowed focus can also make it increasingly difficult to think and act globally as a strategic leader. However, in most successful companies, leaders from all professions work together toward common aims, with mutual respect and support. So to be perceived as a leader and not be pigeonholed as the safety-is-the-only-thing-that-counts bureaucrat, it is important to comprehensively see your organization.

Some safety professionals have accomplished this at the highest levels, such as Mark Fracchia, president of Potash Corp., and Allan Bohn who was promoted to Domtar Paper Co.'s general manager. Do you aspire to follow in their footsteps? Ensure that your actions and words demonstrate your understanding of how safety fits with, and actually propels, the overall organizational goals. Be flexible, positive and actively supportive of other managerial and departmental missions. Think globally and systematically to aspire to influence your organization.

Discern the limitations of your own training and professional paradigms. All systems have shortcomings. Whatever your background, broaden it. Upgrade systematic thinking while simultaneously developing specific areas of expertise.

Objectively look at your own practice as if you were an outsider, assessing its strengths and weaknesses. Develop an understanding for different approaches within the field—both status-quo preserving and change-agentry propelling; look for the value and limitations of each.

Seek exposure to professions far afield from your own. Take particular note of those you do not comprehend, then fill the gaps in your understanding. Consider taking a class or reading about salesmanship, marketing, accounting principles or economics.

Search for similarities between your profession and others. When speaking to other professionals, use their language. All

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professions employ jargon as a conversation shortcut as well as to recognize who belongs to that field. With language flexibility, you will be able to speak to different audiences more fluently (e.g., cost-benefits to accountants; gains in learning transfer to management development specialists, risk-benefits to executives). Examine past terminology and you might discover underlying principles that you can also apply to your tasks.

Meet with professionals who are not in your field. Occasionally attend their professional meetings. This immersion approach, while helping better understand other systems, also breaks down stereotypes.

A widened perspective and generalist's point of view will help you better recognize interrelationships within your company. You can then boost organizational flexibility and strength by blending seemingly disparate professional approaches.

5) Distinguish Between Gain & Loss in Worldly Matters

To make protective adjustments, the martial artist must discern when s/he is winning versus when the tide is turning against her/him. This is not as straightforward as it sounds, as people often become sidetracked and lose sight of their ultimate goal.

When stress and pressures mount, remember what is truly important. If your true purpose is to protect others, it can be a diversion to try to build a dynasty or pump up your image. But uncontrolled fear tends to shorten perspective, often leading to potentially disastrous short-term decisions. There are endless examples of how an overly reactive decision to cut losses or reduce overhead has turned out to be costly even after a short time. Add to this the common chase after trailing indicators rather than maintaining focus on continuing improvement by identifying and addressing what plagues the company most. Of course, there is time to be reactive, when in crises of different magnitudes. But best strategists keep this to a minimum.

In High Output Management, Andrew Grove admonished readers that activity is not output. In other words, leaders do best when they focus on results, not on how many hours they have worked, how many meetings they have attended or how many more safety policies were written.

Line matters with both short- and long-term vision. Remember that an immediate loss may be turned into a large longer-term conversely, a short-term gain may lead to a major long-term deficit. When things go sour, find ways to convert them into opportunities. For example, treat breakdowns as signs of organizational movement, indicators of areas needing refinement or opportunities to clean up previously hidden issues. This perspective can help everyone stay calm and perform better.

McClellan is a world-class martial artist who shows clients how to apply these principles toward injury prevention and highest-level culture. He suggests the dedicated practitioner invest in loss. This entails training to become comfortable in being apparently, but only momentarily, vulnerable then turning this to advantage—a process of dispassionately sensing, then letting go of the wooden reaction of directly pushing back against incoming energy. This is easy to say, difficult to master, but, when done produces dramatic results.

6) Develop Intuitive Judgment & Understanding for Everything

Many martial arts emphasize developing greater sensitivity and more reliance on intuitive feeling. At crucial times, the thought process can be too slow. When a glass falls off the table, there is no time to think about grabbing it. Think and it breaks; notice and respond intuitively and you may catch it, moving faster than you believed possible.

Thought is certainly useful but when employed alone runs directly counter to mindfulness, being attuned to the motion of change. When you use all of your resources (intellectual and intuitive) you will have knowledge of what is going on combined with the feeling for how things are proceeding.

Change and people are unpredictable. But combining past knowledge with real-life experience serves as the start, where the feeling for what is right to do is the end product. The calmness of a martial master is critical to best sensing and to revealing intuitive senses.

Develop your intuition in balance with your intellect. Pay attention to your internal messaging system. Orient your view to an organization's entire system. Perceive it as a living, breathing organism. Look beyond the rules, especially for when these do not best apply.

Stay connected. Do not lead from mental castles. Keep your feet grounded, know what you are really trying to accomplish, recognize the current situation of who you wish to reach, understand influencing outside forces and sense shifts in organizational mood.

Next month's column will examine how to apply Musashi's last three guidelines to tap the inner power of safety and leadership.

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