

The Martial Art of Safety Leadership

By [Robert Pater](#) • May 01, 2010

Safety is the ultimate self-defense. While a leader might never be physically attacked, he will likely be sometimes swarmed by multiple problems, probed for weaknesses by seeming adversaries, or off-balanced by forces of swirling change. Even confronted with situations that can result in accidents and injury.

Despite technological advances, I'm frequently reminded how fruitless it is to attempt to directly overcome the power of nature -- devastating earthquakes, volcanoes, hurricanes, tsunamis, snowstorms, winds, floods, and more. Just cleaning up after such extreme events is costly and overwhelming.

Similarly, it's fruitless to attempt to overpower human nature long term, though many would-be leaders still try to block or repress others. In contrast, master leaders jujitsu resistance into openmindedness, cultivate internal motivation, and redirect workers' natural motivation toward safety and organizational strength.

For the past 25+ years, we've applied select martial arts principles to preventing injuries in a wide array of companies worldwide. Experience has shown all quickly can learn to maximize their leverage and strength to elevate soft -tissue safety, solidify their balance to prevent slips/trips/falls, and meld attention and eye-hand coordination skills to heighten hand safety.

We've also found that certain martial arts methods also charge up leadership power. Think of the similarities between a master martial artist and a high-level leader: Both exhibit similar qualities of calmness under pressure, relaxed self-control, the ability to make positive results occur with minimal effort, a strong focus, and radiating presence.

Here are some martial arts principles that, when well applied, can transform a leader into a Black Belt in Safety Leadership:

1. Develop power efficiently. Martial artists acquire skills by:

- First, controlling themselves (honing their balance and ability to efficiently deliver force, free of unnecessary tension)
- Second, understanding and then influencing others' balance and power
- Third, utilizing the interaction between others and themselves for self-protection.

When an opponent targets me, moving slightly to one side will affect his balance and usable strength, to my advantage.

Similarly, would-be Black-Belt Leaders first control their own attention, motivation, physical energy, and ability to modulate stress. Next, they hone their skills at motivating others toward a common goal, harness conflict toward creativity and excitement, and strengthen others as deputized leaders. At a third level, they master change — making positive use of

events that unexpectedly come their way, planning change toward strategic ends, and implementing changes with maximum acceptance and interest and minimum pushback.

2. Enlist Proximity. All martial arts are based on physics; Newton's Law of Universal Gravitation states the closer two objects are to each other, the greater the force they exert. Understanding this, a judo expert can have to move in close to her opponent to effectively throw him. In the same vein, adept leaders strategically employ communication proximity to enhance their operational influence. For example, face-to-face messages (whether individually or in groups) are most likely to generate desired critical changes, followed by live phone contact, personal e-mail, and then general postings. And taking time to get closer to underperforming units or individuals is one key to initiating positive change.

3. Harness Empty-Full. This Wing Chun principle entails working with, not trying to force, openings. When you encounter stiff resistance, don't blindly resort to an overpowering mode or try to shove unwanted changes down people's throats (these actions are both difficult and exhausting). Instead, take a different angle — you can either go along with strong resisters as much as possible by incorporating their point of view or bypass them; just don't perpendicularly block them.

4. Heighten force awareness. Strongest leaders — and martial artists — deal with energies at low levels rather than trying to move mountains. Both are comfortable with handling and rewiring currents of power. But in order to redirect organizational energies toward safety and effectiveness, you first have to know where these now are. Best leaders develop a below-the-radar sense of current state of morale. Additionally, they actively elicit criticism on their timing — allowing them to take this info into consideration and also redirect resistance — rather than trying to squelch or ignore this energy. And they proactively set layered levels of leading indicators to monitor even slight changes toward critical objectives.

5. Affect perceptions. Many "internal" martial arts (such as Aikijujitsu and certain styles of Gungfu) study and make use of others' perceptions. These employ Secondary Pressure — sourcing their force where others can't readily feel and therefore can't counter it. For example, when choked, they might respond by originating force from their legs, rather than directly trying to fight hand pressure at the throat. Effective training allows them to make their first reactions the best ones.

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