

Like not Is misses the Why

Introduction

I am not very good at Taekwondo. My knee drops after side kicks, I speak out in class, and I pick up the theory book weeks before testing to cram my way through. Don't get me wrong, I am not awful at it. Just mostly lazy. I got a good pass for my last grading and, although I think I may have fudged my way through the step sparring for a good mark, it was fitness and destruction that carried me through. I daresay I shall not be so fortunate for my testing to 3rd Dan, rumoured to be tested a great deal more stringently than 2nd, and plainly evident during my previous grading where only a single candidate was testing for 3rd degree, and he got a very thorough testing. I do aspire to be better, it's just I don't seem to have the drive to do what it takes. I am inspired by many students and Sabum around me and I wanted to understand what motivates them, so I can perhaps apply it to my Taekwon-Do.

Discussion

I suspect all but a few of us make our excuses as to what is holding us back in our Taekwon-Do journey. Age, either too old or too young, for some. Hip geometry, my personal favourite, limiting flexibility or movement in a particular manner. Time is also a commonly used excuse as to why we don't achieve our goals, but really what gets in our way is the inability to prioritise our goal above other "distractions". With true determination we can all overcome most of our excuses.

The key driver to our priorities is our personal motivations. *Why* do we do it? I looked to my fellow club members for their answers and many of the responses included the social aspect of training, performing some of the techniques or drills, or simply to maintain fitness. These motives are great for training at the gup grades, but do not necessarily inspire the dedication required to rise through the dan grades. I like a good "tornado kick" but even a really good one is not enough to earn a black belt on its own merits.

Surveying our Masters in New Zealand, those who have achieved the highest levels of our art, I asked them "What now motivates you to continue training?" I discovered that there are many similarities of what initially drew them to Taekwon-Do; mostly family, friends and intrigue from martial arts movies. The motivations for them to continue training now included friendships, health, teaching, helping, learning, and enjoyment but none quoted simply one thing, one single motivational factor that lead them to continue the art.

On reflection of the Master's responses I realised I may have asked the wrong question. After some initial thought prior to the survey, I believed I had the questions right, but phrased it as "What now motivates you to continue training?" The answers I got were a "what" aspect of their motivations, not the why of their behaviours. Some interpretation of the responses is possible, for example the mention of friendships may be from a sense of belonging and acceptance, similar in both the initial interest motivation at white belt and the continued training motivation after many years. The why then drawing from a tribal desire to be part of a group. Likewise, the aspirational emulation of the heroes of martial arts movies could be an urge to help protect the values of the group. The health and fitness aspect possibly relates to a survival instinct where one is trying to maintain vigour and energy as a basic survival measure. These "whats" describe a state of comfort or enjoyment, hardly surprising, but what elements are at play here during this state?

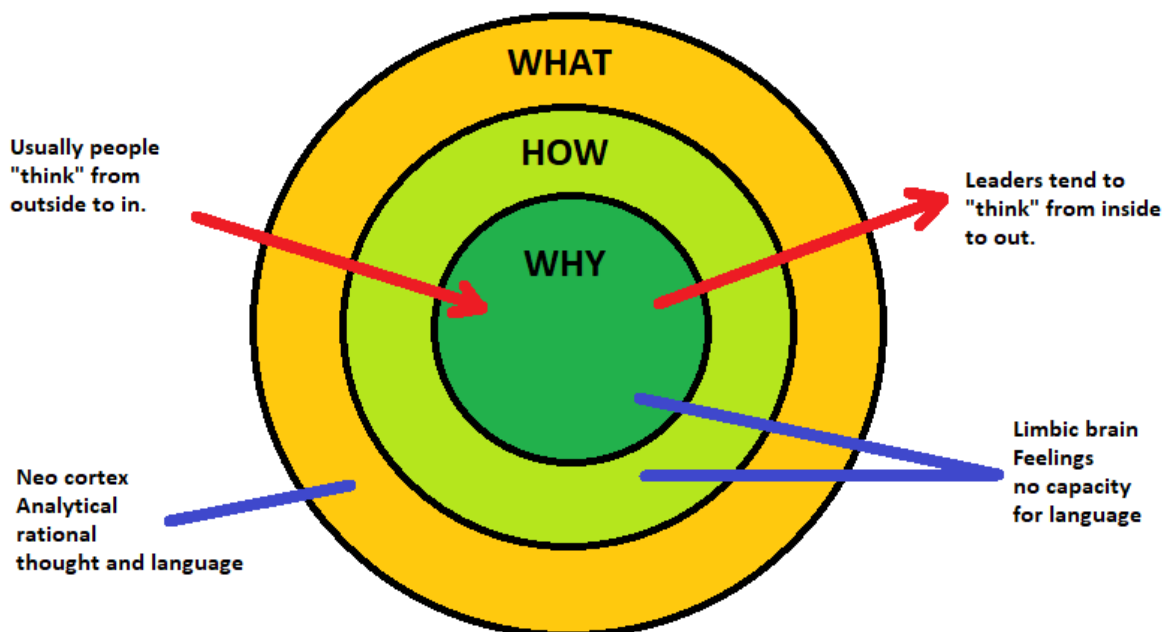
If we take a purely physiological approach and look at the chemical workings of the brain we know that exercise increases blood flow and releases a bunch of chemicals which all have an influence on how we think and feel, significantly Serotonin, Dopamine, Oxytocin, Endorphin, BDNF (Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor), Leptin, and Noradrenaline.

Simply put:

- Serotonin modulates mood, cognition, reward, learning, and memory among other things.
- Dopamine, possibly the most relevant of these chemicals, motivates towards or away from something.
- Oxytocin is produced during social bonding and may moderate appetite.
- Endorphins inhibit pain and sometimes generate a feeling of euphoria.
- Brain-Derived Neurotrophic Factor helps with neuron health and development, vital to learning and memory.
- Leptin motivates exercise and is responsible for the “runner’s high” experienced with intense exercise.
- Noradrenaline mobilises the brain and body for action, triggered in fight or flight moments.

Our Taekwon-Do experiences probably involve many of the hormones mentioned above floating around our brains and body, visible for example in the shaking from adrenaline (noradrenaline) during sparring, or the dopamine feel good factor of achievement either in grading or tournament success etc. Training students and their success would also stimulate these reward chemicals. Of particular note is the reward drive from serotonin, such that recognition and celebration of improvement within Taekwon-Do is great motivational encouragement. So our brains naturally programme us to repeat our actions to achieve these thoughts or feelings. But that doesn’t really help us understand why we do it.

Thinking in terms of a psychological view, focusing on the behaviour of successful marketing, motivational speaker Simon Sinek discusses the Why for businesses and successful organisations. Some of the important relevant parts of his talks are about what draws people to leaders and brands. This could very well apply to Taekwon-Do, and particularly ITF. Mr Sinek talks about how people choose things because “they just feel right”, hinting that decisions involving brand choices are not made by logic, but with feelings and associations made by trust that others share your feelings, that they are part of your “tribe”. He discusses that these feelings come from the Limbic brain, a part of the brain that is involved with many of the body’s important basic functions and includes the amygdala that we know is responsible for our “fight or flight” response. Part of our programming is a basic desire to feel like we belong, that our survival depends on it, and we achieve this by seeking out others with similar values, finding trust so that we can rely on each other. Sinek states that leaders are people who can clearly communicate and articulate what they believe and are authentic and reliable with that message.



Conceptually from Sinek, the illustration summarises that generally everybody knows what they want - indicated by the encompassing yellow circle, some know how – a smaller subset of people in light green , but only a few know why – the dark green core of the diagram. For example, people know they want to get fit [what], some people know

how to get fit – through exercise and discipline and the details thereof, i.e. a pyramid of press-up exercises [how], but only a few know or can articulate that it is driven by a survival instinct [why]. The red arrows describe how people “think” and that mostly people start with the what, a process in the outer part of the brain, the neo-cortex, a place of rational thought and language to describe things. When asked people usually engage this part of the brain and describe tangible things, and when pressed for how or why find it more difficult and resort to expressing the feelings associated. If we start with why, we are accessing our limbic brain which has no capacity for language, we are beginning with feelings and primal drivers of our behaviour.

Understanding our Why speaks to our lizard brain and is a more powerful motivator for loyalty and trust, important for the growth and sustainability of our organisation. Success in Taekwon-Do often involves being outside our comfort zone, whether it is in a learning state, or a physical exertion state. Friedrich Nietzsche, a 19th century philosopher is quoted as saying *“He who has a why to live for can bear almost any how.”* This suggests that we can put up with almost anything if we know why we are doing it. If this why is clearly understood and reflected in the organisation then people will remain with the organisation. It will “just feel right” to them even though they may not be able to articulate why. The difficulties of mastering the techniques and understanding the philosophies of Taekwon-Do will not deter them.

Through writing this essay I have come to think that wanting to be like someone is not enough, that emulation will only get you so close to your aspirations. One needs to share their journey to understand their motivation, their Why, and then be able to match that motivation to succeed in the same manner. That doing what someone else does [what] and living how they have [how] misses the why they do it and so will not feel right and lack the drive to see it through. Much like Taekwon-Do without the Do. We need to find our own powerful why and live our own journey, with an understanding that it will look different to others, but the common feeling will bind us to the organisation and help us achieve. Achieve makes it sound as if what we are seeking is a finite goal, with an endpoint. This would hold true for many, who view the black belt as a destination, rather than a step on a path. A what, rather than a why. However, simply describing Taekwon-Do as a journey disassembles our thoughts from a why to a how. It suggests that we are seeking our Why by the action of travelling the path of learning and experience. Deeper down there is the drive to survive and thrive, through trust and tribe, that our chances are better with Taekwon-Do and we believe that.

I think General Choi Hong Hi perhaps understood these concepts with the Do aspect prevalent all through International Taekwon-Do. Whether or not it was a cultural instinct developed through his experience of his nations struggle for independence, or similar to the natural leadership expressed above, I am not sure. With the fundamental tenets and iconic historical figures he expressed his leadership in ideas and ideals with examples that call to others of the same “tribe”. Inspirational heroes and leaders which changed the lives of many for the better. I’m sure that it is no coincidence the final line in the oath, I will build a more peaceful world, though being a what, hints at a how and a why.

Plagiarising Sinek’s presentation we could make our organisations pitch as something like –

“We believe we can help people. We believe people are better with Taekwon-Do. We will build a more peaceful world, and you might just happen to make friends and get fit along the way.”

In summary:-

Recognition of milestone achievements helps our motivation by way of a natural chemically induced incentives. As we progress through these milestones along our Taekwon-Do “journey” our Why may alter, but our understanding of it may be the key to our success. Our motivations for doing Taekwon-Do vary from person to person on the surface, however long-term success and affiliation with the organisation relies on a clear communication, understanding, and alignment of the values at its heart. Those values call to instinctual feelings which we cannot necessarily explain, but are part of our innate programming for survival, safety and security. Experiencing our own success may be different to someone else’s and understanding why is powerful in the realisation of that success.

Imitation [like] rather than equal experience [is] misses the motivation [why] and will not truly match the talents of others, but your own motivations can focus you to your own success.

Wanting to be like someone without walking in their shoes misses the understanding of their journey and will give a different result.

My 13-year-old asks whether I think she will one day become a Grand Master? How do I answer that? She probably has an easier road to it than I do by starting at age 7 rather than 42, but the easier road doesn't always lead to the same destination. Possibly most important with all dreams and aspirations is the why, the motivation to get there. So my most helpful answer to her could just be "Why?"

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