

ON LEADERSHIP

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INTRODUCTION

The following is an exchange between myself and my first ever instructor:

"I want to do Taekwon-Do, but I don't want to do sparring, and I am not interested in going through the belts."

~ Brett Kraiger, 20 year old university student

"Sure, no problem"

~ Mr Kevin Joe, Instructor, Massey University Taekwon-Do Club

So what happened?

How did I go from wanting to be a permanent white belt doing (a subset of) Taekwon-Do, to being a long-term instructor, and having students go on to start clubs of their own? As well as taking numerous groups of students training for black belt, being an organiser of events, holding the position of head of the tournaments committee (as it was known then), and most recently an ITFNZ Board Committee member.

Because of my own path to leadership positions within Taekwon-Do, I have a firm belief that there is something inherent in martial arts that allows leaders to develop.

I cannot really point to many **specific** instances where an instructor gave me "leadership quality development" opportunities outside of our day-to-day training.

But somewhere along the way, the leader within found his feet.

In Taekwon-Do, there are many forms of leadership opportunity other than instructing, such as committee membership, advisory groups, regional leaders, and roles around tournaments, such as referees, team managers, and coaches. There are also events to be organised at national, regional and club level. And of course, our gradings.

However a large proportion of these roles are filled with more senior members. Also, these same senior members have often led the way in organising events such as seminars, camps, and tournaments.

Given the changing demographics of our organisation in recent years, with a much higher number of very young members, and an aging instructor population, there is a sense that the organisation is approaching a crisis point in terms of the instructor base.

We are starting to see long-term instructors retire from teaching, and at times it's been difficult to find a replacement instructor, forcing clubs to quietly close. We are seeing older instructors leave Taekwon-Do, without youthful instructors coming through to take their place.

So how can we develop our up-and-coming members, and in particular our youth, so that they can continue our organisation forward into the future?

In my opinion, a lot of leadership development is inbuilt into the martial arts and is developed naturally over time. I will be exploring aspects of how this happens.

I will also be exploring how we can very specifically help develop our leaders of the future – discussing how we can make instructing an option that more young people are willing to take up.

"No – I'm definitely not interested in instructing"

~ Brett Kraiger, 1st Degree Black Belt, February 1995

"Welcome to Brooklyn Taekwon-Do"

~ Brett Kraiger, Instructor, Brooklyn Taekwon-Do, July 1995

HOW DOES TAEKWON-DO PROVIDE LEADERSHIP QUALITIES FOR YOUTH?

The following are all traits identified by leadership experts as being important qualities of a good leader. I discuss how they are developed within Taekwon-Do.

Although there are many other traits that could be listed as leadership traits, the following selection of traits will provide a solid foundation for leadership, and are all developed naturally within Taekwon-Do

- Honesty/Integrity
- Self-awareness/Humility
- Confidence
- Commitment and Passion
- Resilience
- Vision and Purpose / Goal setting
- Problem Solving

HONESTY/INTEGRITY

One of the definitions of integrity as it relates to martial arts is always doing your absolute best, and not taking shortcuts. A good instructor will frequently remind students that they need to be giving their best effort at all times, and call them out if they are caught "shirking". Doing 18 pushups when you're supposed to be doing 20 ... Time for a reminder about integrity!

This constant expectation of giving your best and being 100% honest with yourself, I believe, goes a long way to developing a well-rounded leader. Because you know you are always coming from the right place when the hard decisions must be made.

SELF-AWARENESS/HUMILITY

Self-awareness and humility go hand-in-hand in Taekwon-Do. And I have listed this one directly below Honesty and Integrity because these traits are inter-related. Improved self-awareness comes from a place of high integrity. An ability to honestly assess where you are at – whether it be a physical challenge or a moral dilemma.

Humility is developed as a by-product of self-awareness and integrity. Through an honest self-assessment of your skills and ability in Taekwon-Do, and by training with other people, you learn that no matter how good you think you might be, there's always going to be room for improvement. Perfection is never attainable; you can always improve.

*"I've always thought there should be a sixth tenet - Humility"
~ Grand Master C.E.Sereff*

CONFIDENCE

Over time with training in the martial arts, a student begins to develop confidence in themselves and in their ability. As they learn skills that they once thought too difficult, they begin to understand that they are much more capable than perhaps they realised. Also, their ability to perform in front of others will greatly improve with time. Because they have learned that they deserve to be confident in their ability.

I've had a student burst into tears the first time I asked them to do 4 direction punch in front of the class. That student is now a black belt. At our most recent kup grading, one of our students amazed us with his new-found confidence that we had never seen at a grading before.

Blue signifies the heaven towards which the plant matures into a towering tree as training in Taekwon-Do progresses

COMMITMENT AND PASSION

Progressing in Taekwon-Do is a significant commitment. We ask our students to come to training at least twice a week, for many years. And more often if they are preparing for a big grading.

Taekwon-Do, particularly at the coloured belt level encourages this commitment and passion by putting regular goals in front of the student. As soon as they move up a rank, their next potential grading is looming! And so back to work they go. It's relentless, and to keep progressing, a student must continue to prioritise Taekwon-Do over other options.

It takes a high degree of commitment and passion to head out in the middle of winter, when it's a howling gale and freezing cold rain, to walk into an unheated community or school hall wearing only a light dobok. This is how leaders are made.

RESILIENCE

There are going to be setbacks in a student's Taekwon-Do journey.

There will be injury or illness that prevents them from training for some time, and maybe miss a potential grading opportunity. (In these times of COVID, it might not even be your OWN illness that prevents you from training.)

Or perhaps, despite their best efforts, they get "stuck" on a belt level for a while, unable to quite meet the standard needed to move forward.

To keep going, despite setbacks outside of your control, requires a mindset that means you can keep believing in your own ability to overcome and eventually smash through the barrier that is in your way.

Resilience is one of our tenets under the guise of a different name: Perseverance.

VISION AND PURPOSE / GOAL SETTING

Short term goal setting, and longer-term vision, are inherent in Taekwon-Do.

As a coloured belt, a student will have immediate goals of getting the next belt. And they are also very likely to have that long term vision of one day achieving black belt.

Even within the black belt ranks we have both short term and long-term goals built in, with the way the belts are divided into distinct sections of Novice, Expert and Master.

Students learn through this that that seemingly "far away" vision of Black Belt slowly and surely becomes a reality as they get further and further through the syllabus. Learning along the way that a large project or goal can be achieved through regular progression towards smaller goals, and just putting the work in!

PROBLEM SOLVING

Sometimes a student will come up against a technique or a grading requirement that seems to elude them.

For example, it might be a destruction requirement, where they attempt a technique that they thought they could do, only to discover that they cannot break a board with it.

Or maybe it's just a difficult technique that they're struggling to perfect. Maybe the syllabus suddenly introduces a new kick that they have not spent much time doing before, and now must work out how to do it.

Of course, the instructor will work with a student to help them find flaws in their technique. They will give pointers and instructions on how to execute the technique. But it is the student who ultimately must work at the problem over and over, until they work out how to coordinate the different parts of their body to produce a quality technique.

WHAT DO YOU DO IN YOUR CLUB SPECIFICALLY TO DEVELOP LEADERSHIP?

RULE 3

Students at Spirit Taekwon-Do Newlands are constantly reminded of Rule 3.

"Always set a good example for lower ranking students. It is only natural that they would attempt to emulate senior students"

Source: Encyclopaedia of Taekwon-Do, Student/Instructor Relationship, Student rule #3

We make a very specific point of holding the front row to this rule. If I see behaviour that is sub-optimal – might be something as simple as fidgeting when they are supposed to be still – they will be reminded that people are watching them even if they don't realise.

Often, depending on the student, I will make this light-hearted. For example, in the case of someone fidgeting, if I later catch a junior student fidgeting I will "blame" the senior who I caught first.

Nobody takes it too seriously, it's just a bit of fun, but it does remind the students of the fact that they are a leader, whether they know it or not.

STUDENT-LED CLASSES

From time to time we give the students the option to run their own classes. They get to choose what they want to do, and work alone without direct instruction. The instructor will be hovering and available for input if needed, or to get things back on track if they go awry.

We want to do this more often, as it's been successful. The idea behind this comes from watching both my children attend Montessori school, where the students very much drive their own learning. It's also something that Ms Sam Young touched upon in her 2017 essay *"Old School: Tried and tested, but is it better?"* which can be found in the ITFNZ Essay Library.

It is helping the students learn responsibility, decision making, and how to take charge (as there is always one or two who take over)

TEACHING PEERS / JUNIOR RANKS

Sometimes, usually soon after a grading, we will call upon our students to teach lower ranks their new pattern. While this is most usually done by a black belt, we will occasionally have, for example, a green stripe teaching Do-San to the brand new green stripes.

Again, without a specific focus on developing leadership within our youth, we have not been doing this as a matter of course, but in the process of researching and preparing this essay, I have decided I will be doing it more often.

YOUTH REP ON CLUB COMMITTEE

Spirit Taekwon-Do runs on a committee structure, with one central committee that covers both Newlands and Kelburn clubs. As usually happens with these things, the vast majority of committee members have been red belt and above, and older adults.

We recently recognised that we were not really representative of the demographics of our students, and so at the last AGM we created two new committee positions, being a youth representative from each club.

ORGANISE AND RUN INTER-CLUB TOURNAMENTS

As an organisation of two clubs, we try to regularly hold inter-club events. We've held several mini tournaments. These are very short-form fast-paced tournaments where everyone gets a turn at patterns and sparring, and if time permits we add in destruction as well.

While there is no venue organisation required for these, there is organisation involved in communications, prizes, food etc. We've often handed these off to the youth members to do – e.g. our teenaged black belts.

Even for the events that were organised by adults, we make sure it's not the "usual suspects" who do the work. We're getting very good at "shoulder tapping" people for the jobs.

At many of our tournaments, the instructors do not do anything but supervise from a distance. Running the entire thing usually falls to the teenagers.

TEAM LEADERS AT TOURNAMENTS

In some of the tournaments that we have run, we have split all the participants in to two teams. It's never "Newlands vs Kelburn", but we just split the participants randomly.

Because of the fast-paced nature of these tournaments, and the average age of the participants being under 10 years old, we get our blue belts and above (almost exclusively teenagers) to organise and manage their teams.

They have to get the right people to the right ring at the right time, as well as keeping track of their team. They are also tasked with building a team spirit. These events get LOUD!

This is a short duration, high intensity, job, managing a dozen or so unruly kids while making sure they are all having fun.

The teenagers do an amazing job.

WHAT IDEAS DO YOU HAVE TO FURTHER DEVELOP LEADERSHIP IN YOUR CLUB?

COMBINED TRAINING - INSTRUCTING

This is an event we have planned for later this year. We anticipate it will become an annual event.

Right now, we have 5 black belt teenagers in the Spirit group. All going well, this will soon be 6.

We plan to hold a combined training, run by these black belts. Instructors will be there supervising (and participating), but all of the classes are going to be run by teenagers.

We see this has having two distinct benefits. Firstly it gives these students instructing experience in a 'safe' environment. They will be out of their comfort zone, but they will survive! Secondly, it sets a precedent for the up and coming students. They know they might be asked to do the same thing in the future. Planting the seeds early, so that they understand there is more than just turning up and doing the training.

TOURNAMENTS – TEAM LEADERS

For regionals this year, we anticipate having a larger number of our junior students participating. With all the black belts being required for umpiring duty, we will be asking the next level down – blue and red belts – to help with keeping the Spirit Newlands students organised and ready to go for their events. They will also be asked to act as seconds.

Again I see this as an opportunity for these students to step up into a role that doesn't demand too much of them, but does put them into a position of leadership.

ORGANISING EVENTS

If we as a club take on organising an ITKD event (e.g., a grading or an instructors induction course) we make sure to include younger members in the organisation of that.

As mentioned, the two Spirit clubs have a fairly high number of teenaged black belts, who are all in need of contribution credits. We now offer to organise events, with the full intention of getting the younger black belts do most of the work. With supervision.

It helps them get their credits, but also teaches them new skills about running a project through to completion, including communication with participants and instructors, and booking venues.

YOUTH REPS

I mentioned this before, but it's only new so it's going to be under development this year. We need to get youth reps onto the committee, and then also help them understand what we expect of their role on the team. We'll be asking them to talk to their peers about what they would like to see our organisation do, what events to run, then bring that back to the committee...

AND be involved with the implementation thereof.

MORE INSTRUCTING OPPORTUNITIES

99% of the time, Newlands class will be taken by either myself or Mr Ward. As a part of my preparation for grading, we've decided to take me out of the rotation until after the grading, and pass some of that responsibility on to other black belts in the club. At the time of writing, we are asking one of our first dan adults to take some of the classes instead of me, as our teenage black belt is also preparing for grading.

But closer to the end of the year, Mr Ward will be well into his preparation for grading. At which point he will stop instructing, and we will have myself and the other black belts taking class. This is going to be the perfect opportunity to pull our black belts to the front of the class and give them some instructing experience.

Even though this has been initiated by the fact that both Mr Ward and I are grading withing the next 8 months, there is no reason that we should not be putting all the black belts on an instructing rotation. Even if they only take one class a month, that gives them plenty of opportunity to start developing this skill.

WHAT IDEAS DO YOU HAVE TO FURTHER DEVELOP LEADERSHIP IN THE ORGANISATION?

In this section I have focused mostly on the idea of developing Instructors, rather than "leaders". As mentioned in section one of this essay, I believe that leadership qualities are inherent in the way that we learn Taekwon-Do.

One of the key threats to the long-term health of the organisation is the lack of people going on to become instructors. What can we do to make it easier for people to see this as a path they want to pursue?

INSTRUCTOR DEVELOPMENT SQUAD

At the moment, the organisation runs an 'instructor induction course', which is a requirement for grading to black belt, and for becoming an ITFNZ instructor.

Because of the requirement to do this course prior to black belt, many students are taking this class at red belt, or even blue belt, and it's a long time between taking the course and the time they open a club.

Although they must run three classes as a part of this training, that might be all the instruction they get to do between the course and opening a club!

During this period, there is no specific training for potential instructors. They do the one course, go on to get their black belt, and then at some point might begin instructing.

There is a big gap here, and one that could be filled either at a regional level or a national level.

The organisation could create an "Instructor Development Squad" of people who are considering one day becoming instructors. Maybe they don't know exactly when that would be, but it's on their minds that they might want to do it at some point in the future.

Or perhaps they just want to feel more comfortable running classes in their existing club, without thought of becoming the head instructor. (The current head instructor, on the other hand, might be thinking more long term!)

Such a squad could meet on a regular basis – either regionally or nationally (or both).

And there they get to learn about instructing – like the induction course - but most importantly they get to practice their instructing. The training could also cover the administration side of running the club.

Similar to how Spirit will be holding a combined training with the teenagers doing the instructing, the squads could organise combined trainings within their regions, with the trainings being run by squad members.

For students who really want to develop the instructing side of their Taekwon-Do, this squad will provide regular and ongoing opportunities to practice and learn instructing.

I would also suggest that Contribution Credits be available for people participating in this program.

CREATE BLUEPRINTS FOR BECOMING AN INSTRUCTOR (WITH DIFFERENT PATHS)

At the moment students have very few resources to learn and understand what it takes to become an instructor. In other words, all the "extra stuff" than an instructor needs to manage.

In particular if we want to encourage a younger set of black belts to take up instructing, then we as the seniors need to take them by the hand and lead them through the process.

This also needs to be tailored to the different options for running a dojang, which include

- Just going alone with no society or corporate structure (potentially the organisation may look to actively discourage this model).
- Run as a business without incorporating
 - Sole Trader
 - Partnership
- Run as an incorporated entity
 - Non-profit – incorporated society
 - Company (and the options therein)
- Volunteer or Non-Profit vs Setting up a professional club / business
- Just Taekwon-Do, or multiple martial arts?

I suggest an online training series to help people explore and understand this path, with information about the following – and specifically tailored to the various structures.

- How to set up a business, including company structure, taxation, compliance etc
- Pros and cons of the different structure options
- Deciding what you offer
 - Just Taekwon-Do? Or fitness / self-defence / other classes
 - Age groups – e.g., cubs / kids/ adults / mature students
 - Bringing in other martial arts to create an academy or supplement your offer
- Finding partners, putting together a team/company/partnership
- Having a mentor instructor
- Finding and hiring / leasing / buying a venue
- Setting up online options
- Types of classes, how to structure their training days,
- How to market and recruit members
 - how to position yourself uniquely in the market
 - what's your specialty / point of difference
- Member retention
- Covering for illness or injury
- How to build a team to support you
- Potential franchise options (as franchisee or franchisor)

The idea behind this would be to proactively provide actionable guides on to get started instructing, over and above how to teach. Teaching is only a part of running a club.

CENTRALISED ADMINISTRATION

This idea is not specifically about leadership, but about helping our potential leaders step up into the role.

Here at Spirit Taekwon-Do we operate with a committee that is responsible for the running of the club. The committee handles all the administration and financial side of the operation. As instructors, we never see the money, or manage registration and payments to ITFNZ.

Although I could easily do it, having done it for many years, I really enjoy the fact that this extra burden is taken off my plate.

There are two ways that I could see this being applied at a national level.

ENCOURAGE HAVING A COMMITTEE OR ADMINISTRATOR FOR CLUBS

By having a third party that takes on the operational side of the club, it frees the instructor up to concentrate on just instructing.

If an existing club is looking for a replacement instructor, or a new instructor is looking to get started, a committee or administrator this offers them a chance to get started instructing without having to learn a whole new skill around managing the club.

In other words, it removes a potential barrier to them taking on the role. It allows them to focus purely on the thing they've been practicing for the last 5 or 10 years.

Anyone can take on the administrative role, such as a supportive parent or existing student.

We also found with having the committee structure, that it was relatively easy to get our students to branch out to create new clubs. Over time we have had 6 separate "Spirit" clubs and have really been the only club in the Wellington region to successfully expand to multiple locations with multiple instructors.

Unfortunately, over time, we dwindled down to two clubs. But we've proven the concept.

CENTRALISED ADMINISTRATION SERVICE

Taking the concept of an external administrator one step further, this could also be offered as a service at a national level. Either for brand new clubs, or new instructors at an existing club.

Again, the idea is to take the administrative burden off the new instructor, while they come to grips with instructing itself.

I suggest offering it as a free service for a specified length of time, after which the administrative burden would either be passed back to the club, or the service becomes a paid service.

The organisation would have to fund a person to take on this role or find a volunteer. They could be funded, at least partially, through those people who choose to continue with the paid service.

CONCLUSION

Taekwon-Do comes with a built-in leadership development program. With the way classes are instructed, the tenets of Taekwon-Do, the graduated grading structure, and the implied understanding that as you progress through the art you will be asked to do more and more, we are developing leaders naturally without even realising it.

However, there are things we can be doing to encourage our youth in particular to develop their organisation and leadership skills.

The first step is to stop giving all these jobs to the adults! Teenagers are extremely capable if given clear guidelines and solid supervision. They can organise events, run classes, do administration, contribute to committees. They just need to be given the opportunity.

At a national level, there's a big gap in the way we encourage people to become instructors. It is as it's always been... we wait for someone to put up their hand (or be coerced into it), without giving them much opportunity to develop the required skills along the way.