

Inspired Leadership Through Deep Mastery

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***Business success depends on the spirit of the leaders,
the way in which they source their power,
and their willingness to be guided.***

Imagine an international sales executive who changes companies and finds himself alienated from his new executive team. The friction surfaces at a conference where his CEO is present, and he is given 90 days to turn the situation around. By chance the conference includes a presentation of Aikido, the unique martial art of peace, as a metaphor for servant leadership and change mastery.

Impressed by the Aikido approach, he asks the presenter for coaching regarding his crisis. Without knowing it, the executive embarks on his own inner journey as he and his coach begin to study how Aikido applies to transformational leadership. What ensues is an inquiry into his own heart and a discovery of the power of a loving spirit.

He begins monthly coaching sessions and starts a daily practice of centering. He commits to looking for ways to blend with people whenever possible. In three months his executive team reports he's done a 180 degree turn to a harmonious style of leadership. They coalesce around him and, for the first time in the company's history, fully unify the Pacific region. Through discovery of the power of non-resistance he is not only able to maintain his center in the whirlwind of international business but even transforms some strained family relationships into a new and lasting unity at home.

In the second year the executive and his team increase Pacific sales to unprecedented levels, and he reports a new degree of ease even as he assumes more strategic levels of accountability. Five years later he is hired as president of a \$3 billion company based in Japan.

This is a true story. This executive has been successfully practicing the principles of Aikido since 1987 without ever getting on the training mat.

Self-Transformation

In the same way that self organizing systems dissolve their borders and regenerate new ones at the next level of order in relationship to their

environment, leaders can sit calmly in the center of the cyclone of change and constantly dissolve and recreate the borders of their company's identity (cultural vision, organizational structure, goals and operating practices) in relationship to the business environment.

Leaders who wish to guide their companies through such major changes, must first demonstrate a willingness to lead themselves through their own transformation. Leaders need to inquire into their own limitations and address their own growth needs in an ongoing manner if they expect their people to provide sustainable organizational change. It is the integrity of this personal commitment to deep mastery by the leader that inspires a willingness to change in others.

In our personal mastery coaching, we use Aikido to help people see themselves and their environments in new ways. The purpose of Aikido is to protect one's attacker from harm. It translates as the way (do) of harmonizing (ai) with the energy or spirit of the universe (ki). Although rooted in centuries of traditional warrior practices, Aikido's founder, Morihei Ueshiba, based his unique art on the principle of harmonious reconciliation of conflict. Rather than fighting with or opposing an attacker, one centers into presence, blends with the energy of an attack, and leads it to a peaceful resolution by safely spiraling the attacker to the ground.

A Powerful Metaphor

Aikido's emphasis on deep presence, intuitive sensing, and relational harmony provides the business world with a powerful metaphor for servant leadership, team development, and peak performance under pressure. In practice, Aikido helps people to develop the ability to transform change from a struggle to a dance. Through kinetic exercises emphasizing balance, vitality, and flexibility, we provide a direct physical experience of change as a source of effortless power. The experiential nature of this learning bypasses deep-set, conditioned views and helps people see the world anew. This ability is the essence of generating breakthrough performance.

Here are additional stories of how such breakthrough performance has come about:

A Case of Phenomenal Growth

At a large, computer chip manufacturer, a start-up team was floundering in its efforts to create the entrepreneurial culture needed to produce the smooth and timely manufacture of its new product. Team members, representing several departments across the company, had begun the endeavor by playing "poker,"

that is, by holding their cards close to themselves and bluffing regarding schedule commitments. At one point the resulting confusion actually stopped the manufacturing line.

The team leader invited us to help with the situation; our involvement brought ongoing team building that included Aikido exercises emphasizing integrity and the power of blending. This experiential learning increased the team's valuing of cooperation and enabled members to be open and honest with one another for the duration of the project.

We also enabled this entrepreneurial team to develop an internal culture that could withstand the external pressures of its surrounding environment. Once the early breakdowns had occurred, the parent company's senior executives, using a more traditional management approach, increased the intensity of their project monitoring, wanting to advise on every move. In addition, mid-way through the project, success was assured by a very large customer commitment, but ironically, this sale brought with it huge demands and a need to interact well with yet another established company culture different than their own.

Aikido principles helped the team envision itself as a ball (a metaphor for cultural integrity) -- able to respond to pressure by rolling or bouncing but never being crushed or deformed by negative influences of the more powerful organizations.

The results: this product start-up team thrived, increasing their revenue from 20 million a year to 20 million a month within the span of a single year.

On the Telecommunications Fast-Track

In 1985 James Dixon became the start-up president for San Francisco Cellular One, and invited us to coach him and his executive team during the high-paced development of that city's mobile telephone system.

The leadership team made a declaration for extraordinary results. They would build the most complex cellular communication system to date in half the time ever attempted. They also declared for a culture of the heart that would shepherd the health of their families and nurture the human spirit of the organization. They achieved both.

Aikido principles were established as integral to the company's core values from its very beginning. The power of harmonious non-resistance, the practice of personal mastery and the ability to intuitionally lead change became key leadership skills for the executive circle. Once a critical mass of staff were hired, presentations were given to demonstrate how Aikido principles and practices could be used for personal empowerment and creative conflict resolution.

Participants took part in slow-motion exercises to experience the dynamics of center, ground, energy extension, and blending. As a result, personal centering became a highly valued, well-used skill for individual energy mastery, a harmonious attitude became the key dynamic in staff relations and negotiations, and flexibility became the guiding principle for the “fast break” play required in the exploding cellular industry.

James Dixon, now Executive Vice President for Nextel Communications, relates his experiences in the following excerpts from recent interviews we’ve conducted.

Courage & Commitment

“As a start-up president in telecommunications, I was about to enter a very volatile, risky environment in a brand new industry against a major competitor with a substantial head start. I could see the situation really destroying people so I made a specific decision not to go in blindly and lose a lot of people. I decided to protect the people I was going to take into that environment.

That decision involved going to Quantum Edge, an organizational development firm, and saying ‘Okay, let’s construct a culture that will deal with the hostility of the environment in such a way that we don’t unnecessarily hurt people’. They showed me that the principles of Aikido are designed both to give comfort in the face of an attack, and also to protect the attacker. This was an ah-ha! We looked at that. From there we started exploring some of the simple physical Aikido techniques to see how they might apply to business.

We recognized that our competitor was going to do whatever they wanted to do. They had the size and the position to assert themselves in such a way that the one thing we had to be careful of was not to get directly in their way. So, the Aikido principle of *getting off the line of attack* was fairly useful and relevant. *Blending* with the energy, momentum and power of the competitor was also particularly relevant. In fact our competitor was in the marketplace first and had created a certain flow and direction for the cellular industry in its early days. We chose to ride that flow, to blend with it, and to follow its course until it led us to competitive opportunities to shift the flow and choose directions of our own.

As an example, our competitor was producing a fairly substantial amount of advertising for cellular as an entity. What we did was capitalize and benefit from their advertising. They chose to spend a lot of money promoting cellular as a service stimulating market demand. We chose to capitalize on that demand by securing the distribution channels and retail outlets. As a result within nine months of being in the market we had approximately 70% of the market share. We had only hoped to stay in the market and gain 40% share.

We were startled by the outstanding success. I had been worried that we wouldn't ever get a customer, but within a few months we had over 10,000. We went from 15 people within the first six months to about 100 in a year's time. We did a good job of protecting ourselves, myself included, as proved by the number of the start-up team members still in the cellular business today. Many have gone on to be highly successful. Some tell me they still use Aikido principles in their business lives.

Leadership Presence and Power

In the military, they teach command presence such as posture, the ability to move in formation, and the ability to command movement of people with verbal orders. Those are significant and powerful examples of the externalization of presence, command bearing. Uniform, rank and insignia add to creating a picture that somebody else can have confidence in and be effected by in a positive way. In business, the symbols can be the size of the desk, the chair behind you, or the shape or the size of the board room - mechanisms that give people around us a perception that we are powerful. And ultimately that's what the military command bearing is and what the trappings of power and business are. They are all necessary to give the people you are asking to face dangerous situations confidence that your magical power is going to protect them.

Unfortunately this definition of power is only useful to the extent that the parties involved buy into it. It doesn't mean a whole lot to a vendor who isn't motivated. And there isn't any way to get that vendor to respect my rank or power in an organization that that vendor doesn't work for.

Dale Carnegie and the military are good examples of training programs that focus on how to be a leader. They all address how you act, but none of those programs ever address the essence of who you are or where you come from. They all address how you translate power to somebody else, but nobody ever asks questions like, 'How do you find courage? Where does it come from? Where in you can you find it?' The military taught me how you can act like a powerful leader. Aikido taught me how to source the power of leadership.

Communication, Caring, Community

Aikido's greatest value has been it's effect on my management style. The second most significant impact is how that effects the people around me. I have been fortunate to have many of the same great people follow me to different situations. I have moved a dozen families coast to coast to pursue one opportunity, McCaw Cellular Communications, and then back to the other coast in pursuit of a new one, Nextel. These people moved from a very rich, safe environment with an industry leader into a high risk, start-up situation. The same great people keep

showing up because of the harmonious atmosphere that we strive to create through the application of Aikido principles in our interactions.

Throughout the last ten years we used a series of off-site strategic development meetings for all the managers. We sat in a circle and used dialogue to talk about what was going on and what was mission critical, and we also used those sessions as a forum to demonstrate and introduce Aikido practices. Aikido provided a great visual reference for how we saw our opportunity to take advantage of our competitor's size and strength and the risks of getting into a head-on confrontation.

My direct reports began to implicitly understand the essence of Aikido through my demonstration. I didn't intend to teach it in any way. Eventually we brought the physical practices in to directly convey the principles of Aikido to the management team. For instance, we'd take time to do an Aikido demonstration in the context of a management team meeting. Then we took real business problems and physically constructed the factors bearing on the issue and the people involved. By being able to physically represent it and apply Aikido principles, we found answers; powerful, typically very simple solutions, readily available inside the team members. Aikido became the secret weapon of the organization, an approach in which we all had confidence.

Once the basic Aikido principles were physically established, there was a team language transfer, such as the language around "blending and centering." That transfer enabled people to take each other to a different level, increase their presence, go beyond a limit or heal a relationship. The demonstrations and exercises added concepts to the common reference of experience. The quality of our interactions seeped into the culture, and people became more confident in applying the Aikido principles. They may not have known that they were keying off a principle, but you could see it happening.

Inspired leadership has the quality of a master sitting at the center of the cyclone; *my willingness to not know what to do allowed others to create what needed to be done*. There is power in silence, and from that place, one question out of the silence can move something with very little effort. Maximum shift from minimal effort. My direct reports followed my modeling by being willing to "not know" when they found themselves in tough situations. This really gave people a chance to take more and more power in the organization and ultimately, to produce extraordinary results.

Challenge, Crisis, Risk

The Aikido training we experienced in *multiple person attacks* was particularly useful in establishing a successful way to deal with the overwhelming number of priorities and crises--a substantial competitor, new market issues, regulatory

challenges, partnership conflicts, hiring lots of people in a short time, and many deadlines. The multiple attack approach is to be aware of all attacks at all times, but to deal with them one at a time.

Aikido is the most singularly valuable adjunct to basic business and leadership skills that I know. It allows me to enjoy situations that in the past would have been painful or debilitating because the pressures were too great or the fears too strong. For example, I was with the senior management team of an early cellular firm in October 1987. There were about 10 or 12 of us in a team meeting the day of the stock market crash. Since our stock was young and volatile, it fell dramatically. Through the course of the day we continued to do business. Every 15 minutes or so, the CFO would check the market and tell us what's going on. We were bombarded with phone calls, messages, pages, faxes--everything you can imagine under the circumstances. As the situation got worse, the CFO started to smile, even though he had lost \$20 to \$30 million in personal wealth that day. I had only lost a few thousand, but to me, it was my whole wealth because all I understood was the loss associated with it.

By the end of the day, our CFO had moved forward on three major acquisitions. I could only perceive the loss and the pain, and was all but frozen by this distraction. He, who seemingly was losing more, saw the opportunity and immediately took advantage. In his mind, it was a buying opportunity, not a disaster. He showed me the ability to assess a situation by perception, move beyond the obvious feeling of threat and danger, and take remarkable advantage of a situation to which others were reacting negatively.

Another example happened last summer when we tested our telecommunications system for the first time with a group of financial analyst customers on line with us. It was a nervy move with high risk due to the publicity that would ensue. And our team really felt the pressure because of a series of setbacks and last-minute efforts to bring off this demonstration conference call. When we got into the middle of the conference call with the financial analysts from all over the country simultaneously on line, the call dropped. It was the worst of our fears come true. I could not have imagined a more threatening situation.

While the technical team tried to reestablish the call, I felt immense pressure--as if I was facing an attacker with a live sword. In response, I went through a very brief process of composing myself and reverted to my Aikido training. I didn't mentally review my training; I simply reverted to what my body had been trained to do on the mat. My body remembered how to dissipate the energy, how to continue to breathe deeply, and how to stay focused on the task at hand.

The call was reconnected and proceeded extremely well. Afterward we received excellent marks technically-- and surprisingly high praise for how well the

management team handled the crisis; ‘They seemed unflappable . . . they didn’t even blink in the face of potential disaster.’

There was a small window of time when I had to be highly effective in the midst of chaos. In that moment, something automatically kicked in. Not a mental process; frankly, the words would have taken too long. I didn’t consciously order myself to do it, but I did let myself do it by surrendering to the Aikido practices deeply embedded in my body. It was very similar to being in command in a combat situation. There are moments when you just have to have it together. I am sure that the Aikido practices, the very basic practices, trigger a natural ability that is within us all.

This capability is frequently an area of unconscious competence. I think there are people who in certain situations handle pressure really well but they don’t know how they do it. They can’t coach their team in doing it and they can’t necessarily apply it to other situations. For instance, they might be good with financial issues at work, but then argue about money with their wives and kids. Or, they are good with decision-making pressure, but not good with communication pressure. Aikido gives us the process by which we become consciously competent so we can transfer that competence to the areas of life lacking in it.

For people who have to face pressure day in and day out or who choose a life full of stress and conflict, Aikido gives us a practice that will allow us to handle those situations with grace and effectiveness. All too often we see the outcomes of business pressure in early death, stress-related illnesses, family breakups, and nervous breakdowns. Aikido gave me an alternative to that. If you do nothing more than utilize Aikido as a method to detoxify and rejuvenate your psyche after the strenuous strains of corporate battle, then that would be the most compelling reason to include its principles in a personal practice.”

A Dynamic Culture

Whalen and Company, a global, construction management firm, has as its motto: “We build people by building things.” When new employees join the company they receive a mirror (to find the source for solutions), a magic wand (to create breakthroughs), and a copy of the Tao Te Ching, the well known treatise on life and leadership based, like Aikido, on the path of least resistance.

Early coaching in Aikido deeply influenced the development of Dan Whalen’s unique and highly successful Taoist leadership style:

“Aikido has helped me see the practicality of ‘going with the flow’. I’ve found being centered and grounded in the present to be particularly useful. It’s helped us listen better with all of our senses, speak clearer with all of our being, and

embrace and resolve relational imbalances. Its increased our confidence in our intrinsic knowledge and helped us find extra energy in critical situations.”

Aikido principles have helped Whalen and Company align to the special needs of its project teams, subject to the extreme pressures of high speed telecommunications construction. In each city marked for system development, the Whalen team is tasked with land acquisition, zoning, tower construction and switch installation. Each subsequent project team is chartered with breaking the build-out record achieved by the team before it. In addition, to reach success on time, each team is required to effectively interface with at least four other companies throughout their project run. Whalen holds retreats for everyone on the project where Aikido principles are established as a physical metaphor for all the companies to insure the harmonious relations and energy mastery so necessary to project fulfillment.

Whalen and Company is thriving in a tough, competitive environment. In eight years Whalen has developed into the largest player in its field, growing from 1 to 250 employees. They are now recognized as the premier provider in the industry worldwide.

Conclusion

The breakthroughs resulting from the application of Aikido to business contexts are just beginning to emerge. The founder of Aikido sums up this far-reaching potential:

“Aikido is not a technique to fight with or defeat the enemy.

It is the way to reconcile the world and make human beings one family.

The secret of Aikido is to harmonize ourselves with the movement of the universe and bring ourselves into accord with the universe itself.”

--Morihei Ueshiba, O'Sensei

Chris Thorsen and Richard Moon, principle partners at Quantum Edge, have spent the last 30 years studying and teaching applications of Aikido principles in more than 50 major corporations. Since 1993 they have been using Aikido as a metaphor for conflict resolution in peace-building efforts on the island of Cyprus and in Bosnia. For more information see Quantumedge.org or E-mail: ct@quantumedge.org.