





Art of LEADERSHIP

In simple terms, *aikido* is the most recently developed and revolutionary martial art in existence. Steven Seagal used it to kick butt and pack theaters with action-adventure fans. Increasing numbers of people practice its techniques as a non-aggressive means of self-protection, while others are drawn to its promises of relaxation, inner calm and stress release.

Of equal note is that the art also provides the fundamental ideas behind some of the most cutting-edge leadership training available.

APPLYING AIKIDO PRINCIPLES TO BUSINESS

STORY AND ILLUSTRATIONS BY
JOHN MCMAHON



Sure, aikido is a martial art, but a closer look reveals that it's a philosophy and a way of life which integrates our physical, emotional, social and spiritual selves. In fact, its principles—because they're based on discipline, self-control, mental focus and harmonious relationships—are most useful when applied to the day-to-day situations found in the home, school and office.

It's little wonder, then, that aikido is becoming a way to breathe new life into an aging business model. For example, with chapter headings such as "If at First You Don't Succeed, Surrender" and "Do Only What Is Easy, Effortless and Enjoyable," authors Michael Ray and Rochelle Myers use aikido as a metaphor for thriving in the business world. Their book, *Creativity in Business*, is based on their groundbreaking Stanford University course and contains many precepts from the gentle art.

So what's all the excitement about? How can this self-defense system from Japan tell us anything we don't already know about effective leadership and management?

Before Westerners can answer that question, they have to reshape the way they look at conflict. It requires a paradigm shift, to use the phrase coined by Thomas Kuhn to describe revolutions such as Newtonian science and Einstein's physics. For one thing, it's about exploring ourselves, how we move through the

world and how we interact with others. Our interactions with others can be quite revealing with respect to how we view ourselves and our reality. These insights occur when we're in a state of genuine awareness. We have to be in a frame of mind that's sufficiently quiet and calm to perceive these lessons as they present themselves.

Business Model

Practicing aikido externalizes the inward journey in many ways. One of them is through repetitious practice with different partners.

Aikido is the most non-martial of the

martial arts. In fact, its essence lies not in the expression of physical confrontation but in respectful interaction between partners. The training involves repetition of the physical techniques that facilitate the integration of mind, body and spirit. The training partner is called the *uke*. An attack from the uke isn't stopped; it's redirected and controlled. Of course, to use such techniques properly requires excellent timing and relaxation, as well as constantly balancing our center of gravity as we exert our own energy.

OK, so the person being attacked harmonizes with the uke, violence is neutralized and nobody gets hurt. Fine. But how does that apply to business? Probably the most fundamental quality of aikido is the extension of our unique energy and life force, or what the Japanese call *ki*. The development of *ki* strengthens the ability to take action on good ideas. It supplies the energy required to do what matters most and combines it with the focus to follow through to completion.

We all have the natural ability to utilize this force to move successfully through life. Unfortunately, many of us continue aimlessly along and are overshadowed psychologically and physically because we're not aware of our own abilities. This condition, this lack of a focused existence, can lead to a downward spiral as our negativity gets reinforced by society and our own self-concept. The principle of *ki* brings natural strength and hidden abilities to the surface so we can





ity, technical skill or IQ. A leader's presence and way of being ultimately inspire employees. People who work with such leaders sense immediately the purposeful nature of having a vision and steadfastly moving toward it. For example, one of the more advanced practices of aikido involves facing several attackers at once while striving to remain centered.

use them. Our ki is strengthened through discipline and regular training.

Ki development allows us to convert weakness into strength, bolster our self-confidence and increase our spiritual energy. By finding and disciplining our weak points, our capacity and *raison d'être* will be discovered. We'll know we're using our ki because we'll feel constantly energized and even excited. Action, when it's done from this state of being, returns the energy it takes. But it's not a one-to-one correspondence. The relationship between energy used and energy replaced is more exponential.

The person acting from a position of strong ki feels sustained like a free-flowing Krebs cycle. So if it takes one part energy to perform a task, the person's

It's not unlike a corporate setting in which several people approach an executive simultaneously and engage him.

A leader who remains centered has the ability to set aside emotional responses so he can deal effectively with conflict in uncomfortable situations. This isn't a tip or technique that's learned immediately; it's a matter of gradual and accumulative learning. The world constantly engages and distracts the spirit from the body's center. Being centered on who we are requires regular exercise, and aikido provides a way to do that.

Management Secrets

Aikido brings us face to face with the questions of who we are and who

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life force will return the energy used many times over.

Personal power and energy are vital to effective leadership. Being a leader is no longer denoted by a position of author-

we want to become. Through practice, we develop clarity and an increased openness to learning. One of the leading organizations for the development of higher standards for personal and profes-

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Solutions for Success



sional excellence, ethics and education is the Rancho Strozzi Institute. Integrating Eastern and Western disciplines including aikido, it specializes in working with government, military and corporate clientele. The founders of the institute are Dr. Richard Heckler Strozzi and his wife, Ariana Strozzi. Richard is a black belt in aikido and the author of several books, including *Anatomy of Change*.

He compares the art of leadership to athletics. Becoming a good athlete requires training and practice. "Just like swimming, the art of leadership is trained and practiced in order to produce a level of embodiment that book reading cannot accomplish," he says.

He goes on to talk about how managers and leaders quickly find themselves pushed to the extreme levels of their competence. That forces them to realize they don't know everything and don't have all the answers. Such a situation often promotes the need for training. Part of being a leader is moving forward into action without being attached to the results. Once a leader moves away from this attachment, he moves away from fear and trepidation and into the mystery of an authentic self.

explains that while the institute may change the language (less discussion of ki and being centered), it uses physical partner practice as a metaphor to build a new competency. One of the benefits is increasing a person's ability to adjust the energy level of a response. The response comes from a place not of mood or emotion but of awareness—of self, of the situation and of others.

Mooney describes how one of Rancho Strozzi's corporate clients has achieved amazing results from practicing with the *jo* (medium-length staff). Before important meetings, the team members assemble in the parking lot to perform movements with the *jo* and to coordinate them with one another. For a team to be strong, individuals must have power. In this case, power is defined as being able to take effective action.

Seize the Moment

It all boils down to character and how much it's been developed, because it's the core of who we've become that moves us in a direction. It forms the contours of our face, our posture, the way we move through a room, and it has

An important spiritual-psychological level of existence permeates all we do. Mark Mooney, vice president of public programs at Rancho Strozzi, emphasizes the importance of building a centered presence by becoming more aware of ourselves and others.

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tremendous bearing on how we interact with other people.

Integrating all these aspects into a single presence requires training. Through incremental practice, we can train ourselves to do. Few people actually do what they're supposed to. The most productive members of any enterprise are those that seize the initiative and move into action. Again, on the strictly physical level, aikido practitioners repeat their techniques again and again with different partners. Even beginners are encouraged to respond immediately and move as fluidly as possible, despite the fact that they may not have the entire body movement figured out. In life and business, many variables determine the success or failure of an endeavor, but often the chance to succeed comes to the one who recognizes the important thing to be done and then does it.

To take action demands effort and an exertion of energy, or *ki*. It's easy to extend *ki* when the action is enjoyable. In fact, psychologists have pointed out that we expend more energy when playing than when working, yet we return from an afternoon of recreation with a renewed sense of self and a fresh reservoir of vitality. It's all about the way we perceive action. It's about how we decide to move our mind. Procrastination comes from wanting to avoid the pain of having to do an unpleasant task. *Aikidoka* learn to extend their *ki* under all circumstances.

Mind and Body

Personal energy is only half the challenge of becoming what Richard Strozzi refers to as the "embodied leader." The other half is how we move our bodies. We've spent our lives training our minds how to think and our bodies how to move. There are even certain teachings in which mind and body are dealt with separately. Some people get so caught up in their mental terrain that they forget about their bodies entirely.

The development of *ki* involves constantly moving toward the unification of mind and body. *Aikidoka* learn to enjoy the challenge of mind-body coordination under the pressure of an attack, mean-

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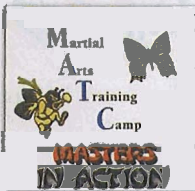
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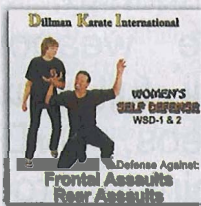
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ing the movement performed by the uke so the *tori* (person performing the technique) can respond. It's interesting to note that aikido is the only martial art practiced with full contact. Injuries seldom occur because from the first day of training, students learn to respect their partner's energy and respond accordingly and with the highest regard for each other's safety and well-being.

The art's name translates as "way of harmony." All its methods, both mental and physical, are based on powerful

we have no thoughts of the past and no worries about the future. There's only the moment moving forward. Successful aikido free sparring demands this kind of mental agility.

As managers and leaders, we become more effective if our minds are not locked in a mental tug of war with issues of the past and concern for future outcomes. The no-mind state allows us to deal with the moment from a more authentic and true self—in essence, our center. We're simply awake and completely in the moment as it unfolds. Maintaining this attitude requires practice and meditation. It's about not being afraid to examine anything and everything, including our own agendas. A customer can tell if we genuinely understand and care about his perspective.

Motivating people is the challenge every manager and leader faces. Aikido founder Morihei Uyeshiba once said to his students, "The secret of aikido is not in how you move your feet; it is how you move your mind." The mind always leads the



body. Unless managers lead a person's mind, they'll never be able to gain willing cooperation.

Unifying mind and body, which is the aim of aikido, sharpens our awareness of how to read people and promotes human relations. Extending positive ki is a matter of daily practice because the energy we extend becomes a part of our daily expression to others as well as to ourselves. Positive ki extension creates circumstances that enable us to enjoy our work on deeper levels and do our best in all things.

Sensitivity is about awareness. It's about relying on the immediate experience of the present. It's about freeing the conscious self by having a state of no mind. The no-mind concept refers to a universal consciousness in which

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