

Lessons From the Road

by

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Introduction

I hope by reading this small book you'll pick up one or two tips that will help you manage your business with greater ease. This book was originally written when I was selling Martial Arts Organizer 4 software to the martial arts instruction industry. Since then I've expanded into the dance, gymnastics and yoga industries and renamed the software the Studio Organizer.

Although you'll find references to martial arts schools through out this book, the lessons and concepts shared here are just as important to studio owners in the gymnastics, dance and yoga industries as well.

For years I have been an observer of the martial arts industry. I don't own a martial arts school and I'm not an instructor. But I've been training in one style or another since age 16. I've seen the inside of plenty of dojos in every form imaginable; strip malls, warehouses, college auditoriums, church basements, garages, and multi-level mega gyms. I've done some traveling, and I talk to martial arts school owners on a regular basis. I've seen schools that have had to add more classes or move to a bigger building, and I've seen schools disappear without a trace.

A little background might help. Since 1991, I've been a professional computer programmer. In 1996 I developed customized software for the martial arts instruction industry. From time to time, I'll pack my bags and visit the schools that use my software.

It's a great way to travel. Great people. Great food. We talk shop. I'll do a little hands-on computer training, answer their questions and get feedback and suggestions. Then I'll jump into a class or two and learn something new. Like I said, it's a great way to travel, and train. And the exposure to new environments and new ideas helps me create better software.

In 2005, I spent a month in Australia visiting the schools that use my software and I began noticing trends. When I sit down at the computer with a school owner it only takes a few minutes to get a fairly accurate snapshot of the state of affairs of the school I'm visiting: attendance, tuition, retention, etc.

Mind you, I'm not snooping. When I sit down at the computer with a school owner, he or she is permitting me to analyze what they're doing, and as the person who wrote the

software they're using to manage their business, I can then answer their questions and help them become more productive and efficient.

But in these meetings with school owners, I've always limited my comments to computers. Over the years, visiting martial arts schools has given me a unique vantage point into the industry. Certain trends, observations and opinions began to form in my mind, but I never shared them with anyone. I didn't want to step on anyone's toes. After all, who am I to tell you how to run your business? Although I knew I had something to share, I didn't know how to go about it. Some of the things I thought I wanted to say would not be easy.

Then it dawned on me...

I could be one of your students. Or I could be the guy who walked into your school because I wanted to learn what you had to teach, but didn't sign up. I could also be the student that quit, and you never knew why I stopped attending.

I'm also a computer programmer who creates software for your industry. That means I have to know just about everything about your business, especially those small but important details.

... so I began writing...

Take whatever you wish from this book. I'm simply an observer. These are my observations and opinions. Some of the things you are about to read will directly contradict what industry experts and highly paid consultants will advise you to do. So be it.

My intention in writing this short book is to help you enroll and retain more students, spend less time managing your school, and more time teaching.

Jeff Pagano
February 2011

Chapter 1

Think Like a Dog

If you think that students sign up for classes based on what they've heard from other students, or what you say when they walk through the door, you're in for a surprise.

Allow me to change your perspective for a moment...

Like most animals, dogs have a different view of the world. Their primary sense is smell. Then comes sight. Last is sound. So if a dog wants to know what something is, he'll smell it. If it's something really interesting, he'll smell it a lot.

I've entitled this chapter "Think Like a Dog" because that is what your potential customers do the moment they set foot in your studio. The senses they will use are smell, sight, and sound, in that order.

Imagine the mother of two that's looking for a positive activity for her ten year old daughter and seven year old son. She walks through the door and long before you can utter a word, there are two powerful senses that are already at work: her sense of smell, and her sense of sight.

Is your studio odor free? What do her eyes tell her? You may think, "Mats on the floor, a few punching bags, and mirrors on the walls." No. A mother of two sees the people in your studio. She sees the décor, the color of the walls and the whole environment.

What is the mood of the students? Is the space bright, open and inviting? Or is it dark and musty? Does it seem like things are organized? Efficient? Safe?

Are the bathrooms clean? To a mother of two, "clean" equals "safe." Especially to Americans in this day and age of anti-bacterial everything.

All of this adds up to how she *feels* about your school. Remember, you haven't spoken a word yet. Her senses are smell, sight, and sound, in that order. Will she allow her two children to come to this place two or three times a week and feel good about it?

Regardless of the style you teach, how much you charge, how great your instructors are, or anything you have to say to Mom, her sense of smell and sight can and will subconsciously work against you. Those two senses can over-rule your best sales pitch. She'll listen to you politely as you describe your programs and instructors, take your brochure, then walk out the door. At dinner, she'll tell her husband, "It just didn't feel right to me."

I'm not sure when I came to this realization, but schools that were brimming with students were clean, odor free, well lit and inviting. Schools that struggled were dark and musty – in need of ventilation and paint.

Fortunately, this isn't rocket science, and the good news is you can use these two subconscious senses to your advantage without spending a lot of money, but you will have to invest some time.

The Solution

So, to put it bluntly, if your school smells like a locker room, here's the fix: ventilation and disinfectant. Ventilation ensures perspiration odor is removed from your building. Disinfectant removes what's already settled into the mats.

Perhaps it's time to talk to the landlord about installing a fan or two. Talk to an air conditioning professional and figure out the best way to keep the air moving in your studio in order to keep the environment odor free. Health clubs know the importance of proper ventilation; they spend tens of thousands of dollars on massive heating and cooling systems. If they don't, they know what will happen. It's just a part of doing business.

And maybe it's time to replace those ten year old mats.

Well, those two suggestions alone could cost a lot of money. Or maybe you're in a basement, and you can't add a fan without tearing half the building apart. If that's the case, I have had great results removing odor in my home using an ion generating air purifier, such as the Ionic Breeze by Sharper Image. There are five different models to choose from, and depending on your space, purchasing a couple might not be a bad idea.

If replacing the mats isn't in your budget, why not implement a weekly maintenance program that includes mopping the mats with a quality disinfectant and deodorizer?

In subsequent chapters, I'll provide some suggestions so you can get these chores done without having to do everything yourself and begin to build rapport with your students. (Rapport = Retention)

I have a very specific purpose for belaboring this point: every single school that I've walked into that has an odor problem, also has an enrollment problem. *Every single school.*

Now this isn't something that I decided was true, then went out and found the evidence. Just the opposite in fact. Like many of the observations I will share with you, this one dawned on me slowly. I'm not sure when this came to me, but it was only after visiting many, many schools.

Over and over again I would hear comments such as, "We just can't seem to get past the 60 student mark..." or "We're a small but dedicated group..." In time, the conclusion came to me.

So if this is ringing true to you, take note. *Think like a dog.* Our sense of smell is more subconscious than it is conscious, but now that you know this, it's easy to fix.

Don't let this subconscious sense work against you. Let's move on to sight...

Go to the Mall

Next time you go to the mall, take a good look around. What type of environment has been created? Is it open? Airy? Bright? Spacious? Inviting? Pleasant? Clean?

You bet it is.

That's because mall designers know the importance of creating an inviting atmosphere. They know creating an attractive environment will draw people. Teenagers will want to come and gather and shop.

The esthetics are also important in airports. Newer airports, like the one in Tampa, are designed to comfortably and efficiently move large quantities of people. Compare this to an older airport that's crowded and feels confined.

All this is an exercise in looking at your own space. Is your studio warm and inviting? What's the first thing a person sees when they walk in the door? How does the school look from the parking lot? Or the street if you're a passenger in a car cruising by at 40 mph? All of these things are subconscious factors which can either work for you, or against you.

So the next time you walk into your school, try to imagine what our mother of two sees for the very first time. How does it *feel*? Dark, small studios seem confining. If you have a small studio, light colored walls and mirrors will help create the illusion of more space and light.

Since you're probably not an interior designer or a civil engineer, here are a few suggestions:

1) **Copy what works.** Go out and visit the mall and other schools. Go to a dance or gymnastics school and see what they're doing. See something you like? Copy it.

2) **Barter.** As a school owner you have a very unique advantage. No matter what skill or trade you might need, you have a student or a parent who can help you get the job done. And if you put together a fair exchange, you could redesign your school for just the cost of materials. But here's where some school owners stumble: you have to *ask for help*. More on this later.

3) **Make it a team project.** How can you take this task and make it into something that your students will enjoy and take pride in? By asking for volunteers. Students who are connected to you and your school will gladly contribute to your success. Contributing instills a sense of pride, accomplishment and self worth.

Maybe your environment is already top notch and nothing comes to mind that needs to be changed. Your school is attractive and odor free. You feel you're already making a positive subconscious impression. Great!

If not, take control of these two subconscious senses, smell and sight, and turn them to your advantage.

the Intimidation Factor

To continue the ‘Think Like a Dog’ concept, let me mention one more subconscious perception you may or may not be aware of.

Dogs sense authority. They know who’s in charge, simply by the presence of the other animal or person. People also sense who you are, again, even before a word has been spoken. Call it intuition.

Here’s my point: before the mother of two even walks through the front door, it’s entirely possible she is predisposed to be just a *little bit intimidated* by you, simply because you’re a martial arts expert, or a dance pro, have phenomenal flexibility, whatever...

You’ve experienced this before. Remember, this preconceived notion has nothing to do with you; it may already exist in the person’s mind before they walk into your studio.

This intimidation can work against you, and knowing it’s there, you can eliminate it almost immediately. The first thing you can do is simply be aware that this may be occurring. A very helpful technique taught to me by a wise friend is this: when you first meet someone, think “I have something to offer you.” Don’t say it, *think* it.

Give it a try. Just as dogs and bees are said to sense fear, I believe there is more at work in how we perceive the world than the five senses we have names for.

A True Story

When I was in college I took martial arts classes for two semesters. I received college credit and it fulfilled the physical fitness requirement for my degree. The instructor, Rick, had a school on the other side of town, and he knew by teaching at the college he could attract more students to his school.

With this particular style of instruction, students at higher ranks would do conditioning to toughen wrists, forearms, shins, etc. One afternoon Rick came to class and told this story:

Yesterday he was all by himself at his dojo, banging away on his shins with a wooden cane to toughen them up. In walks a middle aged woman with a junior high aged boy. She sees Rick, sees the cane, and sees that Rick is pounding his shins with the cane. A second or two passes before Rick realizes he is no longer alone, but it’s too late. He looks up, sees the woman, sees the boy, and stops beating his shins with the wooden

cane. There's a brief moment of silence as the mother and son look at Rick, and Rick looks back at them. Before he can get up or speak, they turn for the door and are gone.

Chapter 2

What Are You Selling?

Again I'm going to toy with your perspective...

You may think you're selling knowledge or skill or fitness. You may think you're offering self esteem, discipline or leadership. All these are correct. These are some of the *commodities* you sell. But what you're really selling is a *product* and the two are quite different.

Author Michael Gerber speaks of *commodities* versus *products* in his book *The E Myth Revisited*. A commodity is merchandise or a service, but the product is the *feeling* attached to that commodity.

Just about every beer, perfume and soft drink advertisement you'll see has nothing to do with the actual commodity being packaged, shipped, rung up and put in a bag. After all, the commodity is just water with sugar and bubbles.

Instead, what's being advertised – what's being sold – is a *feeling*. Wear this perfume and you'll be sexy. Drink this beer or soda and your life will be fun, exciting, rewarding!

Think about this for a moment. When it's all said and done, people buy *feelings*. We buy clothes, or cars, or haircuts because of the way those products or services make us feel. And we can become addicted to those feelings. Ask any shopaholic.

So let me ask again, what are you selling?

Although you're teaching skills and sharing knowledge, you're not selling either of those. You may have a pro shop, but what keeps students coming back cannot be rung up and placed in a bag.

You're selling the emotions and the state of mind each student walks out the door with each day after class, and for each student that feeling can be different. What are you

giving your students in return for their money? Confidence? A good workout? Stress relief? Peace of mind?

Think about it – do people sign up at a health club so they can push metal bars or dance really fast to music? No! They join the gym so they'll feel better about themselves.

This is an important point because many school owners and instructors think what they're selling is martial arts, or dance or yoga or gymnastics techniques and an environment for honing those skills. Wrong! For many of your kids, your greatest product is a role model or a goal. Your product is a positive, empowering sense of self worth. And it just so happens martial arts techniques are the commodity you deliver to create those feelings.

While I was traveling through Australia, I was on the road for a month straight. I hopped a ride from Sydney to Melbourne where I rode the public transportation all over the city. Later I took a train from Geelong to Adelaide, then flew to the Gold Coast. Then I rented a car and drove the east coast for five days.

For three weeks of the trip I was visiting martial arts schools and learning some amazing new stuff -- Brazilian Jujitsu, Hapkido, Bushido. And I can tell you in all that time, never once did anyone hassle me. At that time my head was so full of new moves, God help anyone that might have tried. The bad guys can see a victim coming a mile away. They can see it in the eyes. Not mine. Now that's something money can't buy. And to tell you the truth, I didn't know I had it, until *after* I had it. That's something you can give every student: *real* confidence. And it's priceless.

Give this some thought: what are your products? Many of them you're already delivering on a daily basis, but you don't even know it. In an ideal world, what products (*feelings*) would you like to offer, but you're currently not? How can you most effectively communicate (sell) these feelings (products) to prospective students?

So how do you attract new students and keep the ones you have? You decide what your product is, and you deliver your product every day, every class. Only you can decide what you will be selling. Some days your product will be different than others – that's great! Variety is essential. (Again, ask any shopaholic.)

As long as you're constantly striving to provide positive, encouraging feelings, students will keep coming back. Prospective students – who are actually just sampling the feelings they get from your instruction – will become students.

It sounds as though you need a degree in psychology, but you don't. Although it's true that every student will be different, because we all have different needs, wants and desires, in time you'll begin to develop a handful of techniques and teaching methods that will become your tool box. Some tools will work for 80% of the people, but others will require special attention, and creative approaches.

Your goal is to do the best you can with the students that walk through your door. And if you understand that the reason people walk out and never come back, or walk in and sign up is because of the *feelings* they experience, you're now viewing your business from a different perspective.

Chapter 3

Expectations and Goals

The fastest way to find out what feelings will satisfy a student is by asking. Whether it's an existing student, or someone who has just walked in off the street – ask!

What is a prospective student's motivation for joining your school or studio? What are her expectations? What goals does she have?

So instead of launching right into your sales pitch, ask questions and let the other person do most of the talking. People love to talk about themselves. As you listen, you'll find plenty of opportunities to mention all the positive benefits (feelings) your school has to offer (services and programs.)

By listening to a prospective student, then responding directly to his emotions and desires, you'll make a great first impression. People who are good listeners are said to be genuine, sincere and 'good conversationalists,' even though it's the other person who does all the talking.

Everyone has a reason for walking through your door. They found your business and came to you. Why? Find out these reasons *first*. Then show this person how you can help fulfill those desires. You'll still end up using all of the material in your sales pitch, but it's not a sales pitch anymore. Instead you're responding, you're having a conversation.

By actively listening to the expectations and desires of a student, you'll begin to get a feel for the emotions they are going for. A mother of two may just want to kick and punch to burn off calories and stress. A 16 year old boy wants to become a black belt because he admires Jet Li. A nine year old girl wants to spend more time with her best friend. In time, you'll find similarities in the responses you hear, and you'll know how to fit what you offer with what a prospective student wants.

After listening to a prospective student, you may realize you cannot fulfill this person's expectations. That would be good to know in advance. It's best to make that clear before

they sign up. Or perhaps there's another school that will suit them better. Better to have them thank you and walk out the door, than join, become disillusioned, and quit.

Also, to build rapport, show them that you can relate to what they desire or feel. Make it clear that you understand their point of view.

Perhaps they're saying one thing, but you can sense there's something more. Maybe fear is their motivator, but they won't come right out and say it. Here's what you can do: talk about how *you* used to be afraid, or tell a story of how one of your students was helped by their martial arts skills.

Ease this into the conversation...

Take the focus off them, and place it on yourself, or a third party. This way a person can talk about their fear in a neutral, "it's someone else's problem" sort of way. Then show them how you, and others, have moved away from fear. This can be very powerful.

Remember, it's the feelings a person takes home after class that keep them coming back. That's your product. I believe freeing a person from fear is one of the most empowering things you can do.

While I'm on the subject, I believe that instilling fear will backfire on you every time. There's already too much fear in our culture. We're overloaded. If you continually create fear in someone's mind, it will subconsciously be attached to you, and you will quite literally scare that person away from attending class.

Using Your Style to Create Goals

Once you have a feel for what a person is expecting, or hoping to achieve, your greatest asset and most unique selling point is the *style* you teach. Why would I say this knowing there are hundreds of styles of martial arts instruction?

Because the style you teach is *your* style. Out of all the styles out there, you have selected Brazilian Ju-Jitsu because you love it. Or you have chosen to master Jeet Kune Do because you found it to be the most rewarding, or the most intriguing, or the most challenging... or (insert your own feeling here...)

Maybe you teach several styles. Maybe you teach mixed martial arts. It makes no difference. Don't hesitate for a moment to show your students how thrilled you are about the style(s) you teach, and why. Your enthusiasm will be contagious.

Your style is also a *system*. It has ranks and belts and tests. **It's a magnificent goal setting and achieving machine**, and if there's one thing that's sorely lacking in this world of instant gratification, it's the desire to set goals and the determination to achieve them.

Goals are so important, I cannot emphasize them enough. I know I couldn't do the topic justice, nor do I have to because author and lecturer Brian Tracy has written an excellent book, simply titled: *Goals!*

Goals! is well written, it's easy to read (or listen to), and the insights Mr. Tracy shares are so motivating I feel every instructor should learn and share this excellent material.

Your style is a magnificent example of what goals can do. Your style has a methodology for being taught, and that means just about anyone can learn your style. And *you* are the person that will oversee the process. You and your staff will help each student set and achieve goals – that's what you want to communicate to prospects and students alike!

So instead of talking about black belts, talk about the yellow belt, and what that feels like. Tell that person not only what skills will be learned, but how those skills will feel. Then you can talk about orange and brown and black belts, and how those feel. But start small. Start with reasonable, achievable steps.

By providing a series of milestones, attainable goals and a timeline, you're giving that person a clear understanding of how they will progress, and that means they'll be less likely to quit down the road. That means they'll appreciate the journey, instead of becoming frustrated due to lack of progress. Overwhelm them right from the start, and they won't join.

Finally, whenever someone comes to you and confides in you, they're being a little bit vulnerable. Actually, what they're doing is asking for help. They're asking a teacher, a mentor, a guide, a role model, or even a hero to come into their life and help them. That's who you are and whether you like it or not, one of those labels may be attached to you in someone's mind. The next chapter goes into this in detail.

So, if you can find out a person's expectations by asking and listening, show them you understand those expectations, get them excited about how you and your staff and your style of instruction can fulfill those expectations, provide a clear process of achievement with milestones and goals, and promise to be their guide – they'll sign up!

Chapter 4

Be the Big Dog

In the wild, dogs run in packs. Every dog has a rank, and a job. Some care for the young, others hunt. Some guard the pack while others rest. But there's always one dog, or a male/female team that has the job no one else wants. They're the Alphas, and it's their responsibility to lead the pack to food, find shelter, establish territories, and enforce the rules. Ninety nine out of one hundred dogs are born to follow – will gladly follow – because leading the pack is a responsibility that requires a born leader. A pack where the leader is the leader, every dog has a job, and every dog knows his place is a happy pack.

So here, in my opinion, is the trait all successful schools have in common: successful school owners are leaders who create and encourage opportunities for bonding; for instilling in each student a sense that they belong. We are social creatures and one of the greatest feelings you can give to a young student or middle aged mom is that he or she matters and is welcomed and appreciated.

This does not mean that you, personally, must become every student's new best friend. Instead, by creating opportunities for participation and group involvement, those that care to will naturally gravitate to what feels best for them.

The Secret

Maybe you're the person that does everything, and there aren't enough hours in the day. It's your business, your financial risk and benefit, your baby from start to finish, and although there may be a few people, an instructor or two that pitches in from time to time, overall you're owner, boss, chief instructor, computer operator, bill collector, book keeper, janitor, maintenance man, and the list doesn't seem to have an end.

Wouldn't it be great if you could go on vacation for a week and know that things will continue to function smoothly at your school? It's not a pipe dream...

Here's the secret: Delegate!

Be the big dog.

The least stressed-out school owner I've ever met owns six schools. He picks the classes he wants to teach, socializes with his students, spends a lot of time behind the front counter, and even more time in the back office, but he does what he enjoys the most (and is the best at), and his staff and volunteers do the rest.

The owner of a successful school gives others jobs to do, and invests his time and skills where they will be used for their greatest value. That means if what you really love and excel at is teaching, you should be on the mat as much as you possibly can. If you like to organize and work with numbers, you should be in the office. If you like to greet people and sign up new students, you should be at the front desk.

Since you cannot possibly be on the mat, in the office, and at the front desk all at the same time, the solution is to *delegate*. The solution is to ask for help.

If using the computer is something you dread -- don't add this to your list. You've got enough on your list already.

Put your time and energy into the very best use of your skills. You've got a 16 year old computer genius that comes through your door three times a week. She would love to manage your computer system. She would love to contribute. It will give her a sense of pride and self-worth. She'll tell her friends after class, "I'll meet you there in half an hour, I have just a few things to do on the computer."

Everyone needs to feel like they belong. Successful school owners allow their students to contribute in ways that enrich their lives. Kids especially love to help. Even the smallest job will give a student a sense of pride and contribution that is just as important as any lesson you may share in class.

Want to help a shy youngster? Give him a special job that will require him to work with other students or guests. Take him aside and tell him in a confidential tone, "Jimmy, I need your help..." Bend down to his level and say to him, "All the new kids will need help learning to tie their belts. Will you teach them how?" Simple task. Big rewards. One less thing for you to have to do.

Does your school have a greeter? If a new face walks through the door, is there always someone who will jump off the mat to say "Hello," answer their questions, and make them feel welcome?

Do you have an attendance recorder? This is an easy job, but it has to be done right. Instill pride in a student by trusting him with an important responsibility.

Is there a student who would be willing to warm up and stretch the class?

Maybe someone would like to create a newsletter? Or re-design your web site? Or upload test scores? Is there an interior designer who would like to improve your space? Who is willing to help paint on Saturday?

What other small jobs can you give to a volunteer? Sit down and make a list of all the things you are already doing. What can be delegated? How can complex tasks be broken down into smaller, more manageable tasks?

Compare the relaxed multi-school owner (the big dog), to the stressed-out, does-everything-himself lone wolf. The lone wolf starts each afternoon running. He's already behind before he even unlocks the front door. He's got to open the place up, gather the mail on the floor, start the computer, clean the bathrooms, check the answering machine, respond to emails, unpack and price recently arrived inventory, and the list never ends. The days are never long enough. Long after everyone is gone, he's recording attendance on the computer. Sound familiar?

Now you may be thinking, "I understand the concept of delegating, but I can't be watching over a dozen people's shoulders to be sure they're doing what they're supposed to be doing." Good point.

The solution is to document, and delegate even further. That means write out exactly what each task is, and how it is to be performed. And assign each task to a trusted volunteer or staff member who in turn assigns tasks to students and is responsible for seeing that it gets done. The volunteers are managed by your staff, and you manage your staff.

If you think about this, you're probably already doing this to some extent. By creating small, easy to perform jobs you can create many bonding opportunities. You're creating many opportunities for positive involvement, and positive emotions about your school.

By breaking down tasks into small jobs, if a student quits or doesn't want the job anymore, re-training a new student is no problem, and students who prove themselves in small matters get moved up to bigger and better responsibilities. At some point, you may want to hire a volunteer, or barter tuition for services.

For those jobs that no one really wants to do, like cleaning the bathrooms, you might want to keep those chores on your own list, or assign them to paid staff members.

Naturally, you don't want to offend a student or parent, so use discretion. But honestly, what parent wouldn't be silently pleased to know their teenage son – who won't even clean his room – is cleaning the parking lot once a week at your school?

Put this concept into practice and watch it work. Again, this is not a concept that formed in my mind, and then I found the evidence. Just the opposite. Only in time did I realize school owners that seemed to be less stressed had many people performing simple tasks. Success has shown them they cannot do everything themselves!

One leader, a few captains, many students chipping in...

Allowing others to help you has many benefits. First of all, your school will run much, much more efficiently when everyone has a job, and does it with enthusiasm.

Next, you'll take an *immense* amount of pressure off of yourself when you are no longer of the mindset that you must do everything yourself. Also, by asking for help you're showing leadership with humility. Finally, working together with your students off the mat only deepens the bond between your students, you and your school.

Just Ask

But here's the sticking point for many school owners: you have to *ask for help!*

This can be the deal breaker for some. There are all sorts of lame excuses; pride, embarrassment, trust, "there's no one to ask..." Nonsense!

You are only one person. At some point you'll have to trust someone to help you. If trust is an issue, take a good hard look at this.

What it all boils down to is, if you're not delegating, you're not leading. And leadership is an essential element of who you are and how your students feel about your school.

The health of every school, corporation, religion or government is determined by its leadership. Don't think for a second you can take a pass on this one. Either you're leading, or your pack is wandering around wondering where its next meal is coming from.

Delegating is an essential component of leadership, and strong leadership encourages students to want to contribute to your success.

Contributing = Bonding = Retention.

But not all bonding requires contributing. Here are some suggestions:

Extra Curricular Activities

You probably already know that extra-curricular activities such as movie night, sleepovers, and team demonstrations at the mall are great ways to encourage students and staff to get to know one another.

I'd bet one of your staff members has a big screen TV and would love to host movie night or some other activity that allows people to gather and socialize outside of the four walls of your school.

Seminars with guest speakers will not only bring in extra revenue, they also provide variety and entertainment.

Of course, cook outs and camping trips are always great fun.

I know of several schools that offer a summer camp for kids. Parents love this! And you don't even have to go someplace special or keep the kids overnight. That would be great, but perhaps you could just keep the kids busy and fed during the day.

Community involvement can be as simple as picking up trash at the local park. It seems local governments don't have the money for such things any more, and it will certainly make a favorable impression on the local residents.

If you'd like your school to help out in the community, but nothing comes to mind, ask your students for suggestions. They are sure to know of a simple but rewarding project a small group could tackle in a just a few hours.

It's all about instilling a sense of participation and pride.

Chapter 5

Kids Programs

This chapter is intended for martial arts school owners.

This is going to be a short chapter because all I really know about kids programs is: START ONE! (Sorry, didn't mean to shout.)

I'm not a school owner, and this isn't something I've discussed in detail with schools I've visited, but from what I've seen, schools that cater to kids are gold mines!

I'm not kidding, if you don't have an after school program, get online and research or buy the teaching materials. Find instructors who love kids! Then get the word out. Don't be shy about contacting the local schools; be sure they have your phone number. In-school demonstrations are great fun too.

Demand for after school programs is very high. Parents need a safe, positive environment for their latch key kids. Sure, your after school program is day care by another name, and you'll have to deal with issues that arise because not every child really wants to be there, but here's where keeping things positive, and being aware of the *feelings* of your students is going to reap big rewards.

Happy kids talk to their parents, and parents talk to other parents. Next thing you know you've got friends of students signing up, and the parents of students enrolling in your evening adult classes. And kids become teenagers, and teenagers become adults. We're talking years of income, and it all starts with a children's after school program.

Then, when summer rolls around, and all the kids go on vacation, you can take a vacation. Or you can offer a series of summer camps – just to give the parents a break– then take a vacation yourself. As soon as school starts again, your after school program will be hopping again.

There are several “how to teach kids” DVD's and seminars, but I haven't done any research into this, so I cannot make any recommendations.

Chapter 6

Computers

Let's move on to another secret successful school owners know: First impressions matter. When you present a professional image this shows students and prospects that you know what you're doing and that you have a structure and a plan for fulfilling your promises. It says you are intelligent, dedicated, organized, and focused on success.

This is where computer software comes into the picture. What's even more important than putting computers to work for you, is letting students and parents *see* the computer at work. By doing so, you help create a positive visual impression.

There are many software packages designed specifically for the martial arts instruction industry. They are all going to do basically the same thing, so find the price, features and design that works best for you. Do your research. Computer software is a tool. Find the tool that's right for you.

As usual, in this chapter I'm going to take a completely different approach than you might expect. I'm not going to talk about software features or technology – I'm going to talk about *you*.

The question is not should a computer be in your school, the question is you should be in charge of the computer?

Here's a quick exercise:

Go out into the garage and get a nail gun. Load it up with nails, and go stand next to your car and take the following test.

Are computers not really your thing?
Do computers intimidate you? Frustrate you?
Make you feel stupid?

If you answered “yes” to any of the above questions, fire a nail into the front left tire of your car.

Do you have a computer “mentor” that can provide training, troubleshoot problems, and offer advice?

If you answered “no,” step over to the passenger side, and put a nail in the front right tire.

When you purchase a new software program, do you explore the documentation, or do you just wing it?

If you wing it the rear right tire gets a nail.

Finally, when was the last time your computer had any type of service, or the operating system was cleaned up, or the hard drive defragmented? What about backing up? Checked for viruses? Are software updates installed regularly?

If your answer to any of the above questions is “Don’t know...” squeeze off another nail into the rear left tire.

How many nails do you have in your tires? Four? One?

Now I want you to get in your car, and drive it from Chicago to Los Angeles.

Well, that’s just crazy! This whole line of questioning is crazy! Who in their right mind would pick up a nail gun and ruin four perfectly good tires then expect to make a cross country trip?!

The answer is no one. No one would do such a thing, of course.

I’m being dramatic in order to make this point:

Novice computer users shouldn’t expect to manage their business using a computer any more than a person would expect to drive from Chicago to Los Angeles in a car that has a nail in each tire. That would be crazy.

The solution?

If computers aren’t your thing, give the job to someone else. Delegate!

There is absolutely no shame in this. I tell this to school owners all the time, “You’re a martial arts/dance/yoga/gymnastics instructor. You’ve already got enough on your plate. Don’t add the unnecessary pressure of trying to do something that’s outside of your comfort zone.”

Why waste hours of your time frustrating yourself, when you could be teaching? Or doing something else which makes the best use of your skills?

Once again, the concept of *feelings* rears its ugly head. If you were to honestly evaluate your feelings about using a computer, would you be negative, neutral or positive? If you’re in the negative zone, take a pass on being in charge of the computer. Do you know someone that just *loves* computers? That’s the person you want running the thing.

This is Your Brain

If you have negative feelings about computers, this does not mean you can’t learn to use a computer. You can. You just need some help, but how do you find the right person? I’ll tell you how. Read *This is Your Brain*. It’s another free eBook from www.StudioOrganizer.com.

I can’t tell you how many times I’ve heard someone say they won’t use the Internet because at some point in the past their computer became infected with a virus.

This is **fear**.

The fact of the matter is you can safely use the Internet. Millions of people do so every day. But once you’ve been burned you can either equip yourself with knowledge and anti-virus software, or you can succumb to fear.

If you’re afraid to turn off the computer because you don’t know if your data will be there tomorrow or if you’ve banned the Internet from your life because last year a virus ate everything, take back your computer! Read *This is Your Brain*.

I wrote this article years ago, but it’s still as relevant today as the day it was written. *This is Your Brain* describes how we learn, how we stop ourselves from learning, what computer-phobia really is, how to overcome it, and how to find the right person to become your personal computer guru. So do yourself a favor -- don’t go it alone.

If you don’t, you’re likely to fall prey to...

the Seven Deadly Sins of Computing

I began using computers in college in 1987. I became a professional programmer in 1991, and since that time I've made my living programming and providing technical support. I even worked for IBM for a short spell, so in an effort to spare you unnecessary pain and suffering, I now give you the Seven Deadly Sins of Computing, and although the majority of this is written for novice users, these mistakes could happen to anyone.

Don't Back Up

I mention this first, because it's the most important. And I mention it all the time to my customers. But still, once every few months I'll get an email from some poor school owner who informs me their hard drive has crashed and they've lost everything.

Many, many users don't back up their data, and eventually they learn a painful lesson; computers crash, hard drives fail, and power surges can toast a circuit board in a millisecond. With no back up, you've lost everything in the blink of an eye.

Last month, one poor fellow had the saddest "I didn't backup" story I've ever heard. He came into his school one afternoon only to find his computer was gone! No, it hadn't been stolen, it had been repossessed – by his wife – who was divorcing him.

He lost everything.

Backing up is easy. Don't know how? Check the documentation or ask your computer guru. And always backup to an external source and *take it home* with you.

Don't Delegate.

I've already belabored this point, but it's all too common. If using a computer is a frightening chore, if you already have a zillion and one things to do, if sitting at the computer feels like test day and you didn't study – delegate this job to someone who will love it.

If you're perfectly comfortable using a computer, but the thought of spending hours entering all of your inventory makes you cringe – delegate.

The only thing more frustrating than trying to do everything yourself, is trying to do things outside of your comfort zone or skill level.

You can't say, "There's no one to ask..." You have a classroom full of people to ask. If you choose not to, the word for that is *pride*. Again, read *This is Your Brain* for everything you need to know about finding your own personal computer guru.

If you feel you cannot *trust* someone with the sensitive nature of your data, this is a software issue. The good computer software will allow you to password protect sensitive data, and limit or deny access to certain screens.

So do your research, and find the right software solution for your needs. It is not necessary to get in over your head, or go it alone simply because you have security concerns. You're more vulnerable if you don't know what you're doing, and you don't delegate this responsibility.

Don't Read the Documentation

Regardless of how well designed your software may be, the only way to truly understand how it was *designed* to be used is to read the documentation. Skipping the user manual, tutorials and help files means you'll have to guess. Guessing can get you pretty far, but the fastest, most efficient way to get up to speed on any software package is to read the docs.

Experienced computer users fall into this trap as frequently as novices. But I'll tell you a little secret: for years I had a client that used to call me every time he had a question. He was a great guy, but computers weren't his thing. That's okay. We had a mutually beneficial relationship; he knew his limitations, and he paid me to overcome them. One day, he was complimenting me to his secretary, telling her what I genius I was. I laughingly replied, "No John, I just read the manual." His reply was brilliant, "Like I said – genius!"

Read the manual. It pays!

Don't Install Updates

Updates fix bugs and add new features. Sometimes updates contain new bugs, but that's rare. If a software developer is offering you free updates that means he *wants* you to have bug free, feature rich software.

I once had an Information Technology expert tell me he always stayed one update behind. That's crazy! And he's got it backwards...

Computer software will have bugs. Updates are how those bugs get fixed. It can be the other way around, but what if there are no bugs in the update? By not updating, this IT expert is choosing *not* to fix bugs or implement new features. He's saying the glass is half empty. I'm saying the glass is half full.

Skipping updates is like driving around with a tire that has a slow leak. You can keep putting air in that tire or you can patch it and fix the leak.

More often than not, updates don't get installed because the user doesn't know how to install them. Find the right person to manage your computer, and *always* install each and every update.

Don't Ask Questions

Let's say you had a "no questions asked" policy in your classes. That is, no one is allowed to ask any questions. Well, you'd be looking at an empty studio in no time. So please don't take a "no questions asked" approach with computer software.

There's no such thing as a stupid question. The only stupid question is the one you don't ask. Don't let pride, embarrassment, or anything else prevent you from becoming more productive. If you have questions about how to use your software, ask technical support or your computer guru. But by all means ask. Even if you feel silly. Ask.

If you don't have a computer guru that can sit down at your computer, point to your screen and touch your keyboard, you're going to need one. Sooner or later, there is no substitute for hands on, right by your side instruction and troubleshooting.

Telephone support is a poor, poor substitute for hands on training. Why? Using a computer is a *visual* activity. A telephone is an auditory device. Have you ever tried to explain how to perform a side kick over the telephone? Again, please read *This is Your Brain* for more on this topic.

Don't Follow Through

Okay, let's say you've asked your questions, and the response you get is more questions, or perhaps there are specific steps to be performed. Always answer the questions, complete the steps or follow the instructions provided. If you don't know how, ask for help.

When I provide tech support, I frequently have to ask detailed questions in order to find the source of the problem or to point the user to the correct solution.

The most common question I will ask is, “What are the specific steps are you performing?”

It’s a fair enough question, but inevitably some users elect not to answer. So if you’re conversing with tech support, always be sure to follow their instructions and/or provide the additional information requested. Be as specific as possible and always follow through until the problem is resolved. Asking and answering questions is a normal part of finding solutions.

There’s one thing that I’ve learned as a computer programmer:

Everything is fixable!

Whatever the problem is, I can say this with complete confidence – it’s fixable!

It’s just a matter of gathering enough information to locate the source of the problem. Unfortunately it’s the users who don’t follow through who will be the ones who will become...

The Frustrated Computer User

It doesn’t happen very often, but about once a year I’ll have a customer who is very frustrated and very upset because they’re experiencing difficulty using their computer.

The frustrated user will complain bitterly about the hours they’ve wasted, and they tend to shift blame. The three *real* reasons users become frustrated are:

1. The User Needs Computer Training

A computer is a tool. You can use it to manage your business. Before attempting to use any tool, it’s important to know how to use it properly. Frustrated users are quite often untrained users. They’re in over their head. They’re trying to manage their business using a tool they don’t understand how to use properly. And to make matters worse, they don’t have a computer guru to provide hands on training and troubleshooting.

The Solution: Read the free eBook *This is Your Brain*. Find a computer mentor. Get hands on training and have a readily available source for personalized help.

2. *Skipped the Documentation or Help*

Frustrated users tend to skip the instructions. They think they're saving time. They're guessing. Unfortunately this is a very fast path to frustration and a huge time thief.

The Solution: Managing a business is no small task. Businesses require an investment of both money and time. Invest the time! Read the manuals.

3. *Software Issue or Hardware Malfunctioning*

Frustrated users *may* be experiencing a hardware or software malfunction, but if they don't have a computer guru to solve these problems they keep trying the same steps over and over again with the same frustrating results.

Or they might be trying to do something the software was not designed to do, or their printer driver software is corrupted, or their computer's operating system has taken a turn for the worst and needs expert service.

Unfortunately the frustrated user will spend hours trying to fix the problem they are experiencing without getting a professional involved. Unresolved problems remain unresolved.

The Solution: Ask for help. Get a pro involved.

Remember the Ten Minute Rule: if something doesn't make sense or is not working as it should don't spend more than 10 minutes trying to make it work -- ask your computer guru for help!

Questions, but no Answers

Frustrated users are very difficult to help. They tend *not* to follow instructions, read links, or provide specific details.

Whenever I encounter a frustrated user I reply to their email with specific instructions. These may include getting a professional involved. The frustrated user doesn't follow those instructions, follow advice, or get expert help.

I might include links to helpful information, but they're not read. They're in so much of a hurry they run right past the solution.

Whenever I encounter a frustrated user I reply to their email with a plea for details, details, details. In order to troubleshoot computer problems *specific* information is

required. I'll ask specific questions that are absolutely essential to understanding the problem, but I won't get answers. They might tell me "I followed the instructions" "it didn't work" or "my computer crashes" but the majority is venting, frustration and complaining. In many cases I've repeatedly asked the same questions in several emails, but I never receive a specific response.

Sometimes the response is "it takes too much time." That's false, they haven't tried.

Sometimes I get no reply at all. I've lost a customer. They blame me.

Sometimes I get a helpful response and we work together toward the solution.

Sometimes I get a few additional details, but not the specific information I've requested to troubleshoot the problem.

Sometimes I get a frustrated "I've told you everything you need to know" reply.

In just about every case my specific instructions for troubleshooting the problem are not followed. What are the *exact* steps being performed? Have updates been installed? Is this user in over their head? Has computer expert been called in to troubleshoot, repair and train?

In the end the frustrated user gives up with great animosity, buys a different software package and repeats the cycle. Only now they've become infected with a "nothing works, all software is terrible, no one helps me" mindset.

The first sign of trouble creates panic and the cycle repeats: Trouble. Panic. Frustration. Blame. Give up. Repeat.

Ouch! I hate it when this happens. Oh how I wish I could help these people understand they are creating a hopeless situation. The solution is to slow down and take the time to work with technical support.

I believe some people get so emotional because they put too much pressure on themselves by rushing, taking shortcuts, and trying to do too much on their own. **Pride** prevents them from getting training and asking for help. Frustration leads to anger and finger pointing.

Complaining, derogatory language and quitting are completely unnecessary. Being offensive or adversarial only spreads the poison. Blaming others is silly.

I've been working with computers since 1986 and there's one thing I know – Everything is Fixable! *Everything*.

Please don't give up! Ask for help, get training, find a computer mentor, and keep asking questions until each problem is solved. Those that give up have quit one question short of the answer.

* * * * *

Whew!

OK, thanks for letting me get that off my chest. I really do want to empower people when it comes to computers. These are tough things to say, but they needed to be said.

So after all this negative talk about computers, should you even bother to put one in your school? Yes! Absolutely!

Do this:

Read the instructions.

Ask for help before frustration sets in.

Be specific.

Answer questions asked.

Do what tech support asks you to do.

Perform the recommended computer maintenance; install updates & repair corruption.

Get a computer professional involved.

Computer software is a tool. The right tool used by the right person will save you time and help you make money. The right tool used by the wrong person will cost you both time and money.

Play it smart. Get the tool, but put it in the right person's hands.

Chapter 7

Pet Peeves

I've been studying martial arts, off and on, for about three decades now. My very first instructor was a black belt by the name of Ron Cox. We went to Clearwater High together in Clearwater, Florida. He had an Everlast bag in his garage and a couple of pairs of gloves and foot guards. My most recent foray into martial arts was learning BJJ in a garage with thin mats on a cement floor. In between, I couldn't even count the number of schools, gyms, garages, strip malls, basements, or warehouses I've trained in.

I say all of this to make the following point: I'm not trying to be a snob.

Everything doesn't have to be 'just so' in order for me to be happy. But there are just a few things that I know for certain I don't like, and I'm going to tell you about them now.

These are my opinions. More importantly, these are my opinions as a *student*.

Testing Fees

I never did understand testing fees. Especially if the test was being administered by my regular instructors. If a grand master was coming from far away, that was more palatable, but I still resented them. I've always felt it was odd to have to pay someone to prove they've taught me what I'm paying them to teach me.

This is a true story...

I talk to martial arts school owners every day. One day I called a prospective customer to follow up. He said the transmission in his wife's car just fell to pieces, so he was broke. "Oh, that's a bummer!" I replied. "Yeah, so I guess it's time for a belt test," was his response. I cringed, but I also knew he wasn't kidding.

Fortunately, the concept of test fees is fading as the market place becomes more competitive. If you charge test fees, ask your students this, "On an emotional level, are

test fees positive, neutral, or negative?” And you can guess what I’m going to say next – if it doesn’t go home as a positive feeling, it doesn’t belong.

Ambiguous Test Dates

I like to know the date or requirements which must be fulfilled in order to test for my next belt. I’ve trained with some instructors that test when they feel a student is ready, and that’s about all the information they’ll share. It’s a big mystery...

If there is no date, and no clear requirements, there is no clear goal. This directly contradicts everything in Chapters 2 and 3. This leads to discontentment, and discontentment leads to dissatisfaction, and dissatisfaction leads to dropping out.

“Black Belt” Schools

Here’s a topic that’s sure to raise some eyebrows...

Not everyone wants to become, or should be expected to become a black belt.

Experts and consultants have written slogans I’ve seen on the walls of many, many school owners. They’ll tell you becoming a black belt school and aggressively pushing long term contracts on your students will guarantee your financial success. I disagree.

My opinion is this: I already have enough businesses that are trying to lock me into commitments and contracts. Health clubs, cell phone companies, internet service providers...

I know it’s a sales tactic, and its purpose is to guarantee the company a steady income. I know it’s not for my benefit, it’s for theirs. I know this, so I’m on my guard. I am predisposed to say “No” even if it’s something I want or need. I am predisposed to look elsewhere to find the service without the contract.

It also means once the contract is signed, they can do a poor job delivering the service, but I’m stuck, because I signed a contract.

Now regarding martial arts schools, since I don’t believe everyone wants to become, or should be expected to become a black belt, I don’t think you’re creating a win-win situation by insisting upon such a thing. That’s putting your goals and desires ahead of those of your students.

It's my opinion this will backfire on you. Especially if all a person has to do is attend X number or classes, (and pay X number of dollars) and they'll have a black belt.

I've also seen some pretty one-sided black belt contracts. (I actually read those contracts.) In one case, I walked out of a school I was going to join, but the contract was horrible, and the school owner a little too insistent.

If a student signs a contract, then, for whatever reason chooses not to fulfill that contract, as a school owner you can now, legally, turn that person over to a collection agency, or file a law suit. In other words, you can *compel* this person to do as you wish. Is this really what you want? Do you really want to create this type of *feeling*? Is this the message you want going out into the community about you and your school? Absolutely not.

Here's what I recommend instead...

Try this approach: "I'm not going to promise you a black belt. First, I'm going to make you the best yellow belt you can be. But it's going to be work, and you'll have to earn it. Then comes red, green, purple, brown, and when you're ready – black belt.

"All the way, I'm going to push you and challenge you, use all my years of teaching experience. I'll support you and encourage you. When you get discouraged and can't find your way to class, I'll give you a call, and we'll talk about it. I'll teach you, and you'll teach me too."

This is an emotional appeal.

Or, another approach is to say, "When you receive your purple belt, you'll be *eligible* for our exclusive Black Belt club." You're now dangling a carrot in front of them, not pushing a contract in their face.

Instruction

I've had so many great martial arts instructors, I couldn't even begin to describe what makes a great instructor. Even if I didn't connect with a particular teacher, every instructor I've ever had has taught me, inspired me, and challenged me.

I'm not a school owner or instructor myself, so it's not my intention to tell you how to teach, or what to teach. Instead, here are a few pointers from a student's point of view that you may find useful.

Watch the Time

1 hour = 1 hour. If you are always starting late, or ending late, you're going to lose those students who have tight schedules to keep.

For example, if Mom has to pick up Jimmy from karate class, then rush over to the dance studio and pick up daughter Sally, if you run ten minutes late, Sally's standing on the curb for 10 extra minutes. Guess what? Mom will eventually get fed up and veto martial arts class. Jimmy will be playing soccer next year because the coach ends practice on time.

Watch Your Students

Especially when giving complex drills, turn around and face your students as much as possible. Sometimes you can't, but after you've demonstrated the moves, move to the back of the class and watch. (By the way, why is it that the least experienced are placed the farthest from the instructor? Tradition, right?)

Look for good eye contact from your students, and if you don't get it, go stand in front of that student. Let her know it's important she understands that you're there to help, to teach *her*. Eye contact is a powerful way of connecting with your students. Look for it, or make it happen.

Slow Down, Less is More

Trying to fit too much information into a short period of time can be frustrating to students, especially the slow learners. I'm not a slow learner, but I like to feel like I've mastered an arm bar before I move on. This is especially true for skills that are later combined into sequences. So if you're teaching an escape to submission sequence, give everyone enough time to learn the escape before moving on.

If it seems as though you frequently have to rush at the end of the lesson to complete the sequence, it's time to shorten the lesson plans. Maybe break the sequence in half and drill it over multiple days.

I like this approach, because for me...

Repetition = Skill

I like to repeat new skills over and over and over again until they're reflexive. Depending on the skill, this may take some time.

We all know the concept of muscle memory. I once heard an instructor say it takes 1600 repetitions for a reaction or skill to become an automatic reflex.

When I was in college, one of my teachers taught us at first a new skill is Unknown, then it's Unnatural, with practice it becomes Understood, and through *repetition* it becomes Unconscious.

Chapter 8

Why Students Quit

I want you to take a moment right now to remember the *best* thing that's ever happened in your life. The one that divided your life in half. Your life was one way, then this happened, and now your life is completely different. It could be the day you received achieved a great goal. Or your wedding. Or the birth of your first child. Relive this event for a moment...

What happens when you take your mind to this place? This event? You may see things in your mind's eye, you may hear words that were spoken, but above all else, you cherish this memory because of how you *felt!* And remembering and reliving the best thing that ever happened in your life brings those feelings back to you, doesn't it?

My point is this: *our emotions vastly overpower all of our other senses.*

So why do students quit? Maybe they're moving out of town, or the new job is too far away for them to make it to class. Or a new baby has joined the family. Those are things you can do nothing about. Wish them well.

But if a student's *feelings* about coming to class have shifted from positive enthusiasm, to neutral, to negative, they will quit. And their feelings could have absolutely nothing to do with you or your school.

So how do you prevent students from quitting? You continually strive to create positive, empowering emotions. Give them a job. Call them when they miss class. Continue to expand your skills so you have more to offer. Be a positive person – someone they will admire and want to be around.

Of course, you know if a student's attendance is slipping he's losing interest, but long before that begins, here are a couple of tell tale clues: becoming less social in class, closed body language, and lack of eye contact with instructors.

Why do students quit? Negative *feelings!* What negative feelings? Ask!

If you've got a teenager that says, "I can't afford it anymore," and you suspect there's something more, respond with, "I hear you... but I'd really like to have you keep coming around. Let's work out a deal. I'll trade you classes, if you'll mop the mats after class, wash the windows once a week, and make sure the bathrooms are in order."

If this student really wants to stay, he'll bite, and you'll both win. He continues training, and now has a job he can take pride in. That means you've created a bond, and there's less work for you to do, and your school will be clean and presentable.

If he's just using money as an excuse, you'll know. He'll stutter a few weak excuses. Dig deeper if you can. Were his expectations not met? (What were his expectations when he started?) Have his goals changed? (Or were goals not really formulated and encouraged?) Did he feel as though he belonged? (Or was group involvement and contribution not encouraged?) Was he disappointed in the leadership? Bored? No longer challenged? Intimidated? Bullied?

The point is, there are obvious, easily understandable reasons for students leaving your school (new job, new baby, moving out of town), then there are unknowns. Was there some event which caused this student's emotional barometer to slide from positive to neutral to negative? Find the source of that feeling, and you'll be able to correct it, or at the very least, part as friends and be a bit wiser.

A True Story

When I was in my early thirties I attended a well known martial arts school in St. Petersburg, Florida. I enjoyed the classes, and found both of the primary instructors to be excellent teachers. The last day I attended class was the day I received my green belt.

The day of the test I had arrived early and changed hurriedly. I knew all the kicks, punches, grabs and escapes I was going to be tested on, but the green belt kata was unlike anything I'd previously learned in this style, and I was nervous. There was a lot of footwork that had to be done precisely or you could end up facing the wrong direction in the end. I stood in front of the mirror and practiced the entire kata four or five times.

Class was about to start, but I decided to quickly run through the whole thing one more time, but I wanted to try it with my eyes closed. I knew I could do it. I was concentrating deeply, moving very precisely, when all of a sudden a sharp, hard blow struck me in the butt.

Because it was testing day, the room was full of parents and friends, and immediately after the blow landed I heard a ripple of nervous laughter from the spectators.

To say I was surprised would be an understatement. Annoyed wasn't the right word either. I opened my eyes and saw a ten year old boy grinning at me. He had nailed me with a full force roundhouse, right on my backside.

Without even thinking, I took him by the arm and asked, "Where are your parents?" His grin disappeared instantly, and he pointed to a middle aged couple in the front row. I marched him directly to his parents and said, "That is *not* appropriate behavior!"

The room was completely silent.

The parents said nothing. Not to me, not to the child. I turned my back, and the instructor started the class immediately. Clearly, there was a tension in the room for some time.

After class (I passed the belt test) I was changing into my street clothes, and one of the other adult students approached me. In a low voice he said, "That kid really needs to be straightened out... you didn't see it, but you were the second person he kicked before class."

"You're kidding," I said.

"No, and both instructors saw it. But you're the only one who did anything," then he added, "That kid's been a problem ever since his parents signed him up."

"Both instructors saw the first person get kicked?" "Yeap."

"And said nothing?" "Yeap."

I said goodbye to my friend and walked through the studio. The mother of the boy glared at me as I left. For the next couple of weeks I was too 'busy' to make it to class.

Two weeks later I received a phone call from one of the instructors I had pretty good rapport with. He apologized for the incident but he made it clear the parents were spending a lot of money at the school, so nothing was ever said to the child that had struck myself and another student.

As it turns out, I never found my way back to class...

Chapter 9

Why Schools Fail

Martial arts schools go out of business for the same reason any other business closes its doors. They run out of money.

That's brilliant, I know. To think I spent seven years in college just to be able to share that little nugget of wisdom with you. It's a good thing you didn't spend a lot of money on this book, huh?

In all honestly, I've never had a conversation with a school owner about going out of business. I've never owned a school. And I've been very fortunate in that I've never worked for, or had a business that failed.

So what I'm about to talk about once again falls into the category of observation and opinion. Take from this what you will.

Starting Up

"I just thought I was going to be teaching class... I had no idea there was so much involved in running the business..."

I talk to school owners on a regular basis, and this is the one comment I hear again and again from new owners. These are people who are pursuing a dream. One day they may be able to quit their day job and teach full time, or perhaps that's what they've just done.

I think the difference between success and failure has to do with the depth of your vision, and the depth of your pockets. Let me tell you a true story about a young black belt who wanted to open a school.

Steve was 19, a black belt, and had been teaching for a year or more at the school he attended. He was an enthusiastic contributor and a natural teacher. Very quickly he had become one of his master's most trusted instructors. He earned a small wage, continued to train under his master, and dreamed of one day branching out on his own.

I trained under Steve, and his master, and found both to be excellent teachers.

From time to time I would attend yoga classes in a neighboring town, and I got to know the owner of the yoga studio. As soon as he found out I was a martial artist, he asked me to teach. He had a beautiful studio in a good location, and the floor was already padded. He really wanted to offer martial arts. He was very enthusiastic.

I had to tell him no, but then Steve immediately came to mind. I told the yoga studio owner that Steve was an excellent teacher, and he even came to town once a week to teach Hapkido and BJJ in a garage. This could be a great match, I thought.

I gave the studio owner Steve's phone number, then called Steve that afternoon. He was thrilled! Within a week the two arranged a meeting and classes were set to begin at the studio within the month. Myself, and several other students who attended classes in the garage agreed the yoga studio would be a vast improvement, so there was already a handful of students interested in attending Steve's classes at the yoga studio.

The studio owner began putting up fliers, and talking to parents about the new martial arts classes, and it seemed Steve's dream was about to come true.

Well, almost. I don't know the financial particulars of the arrangement, but even before classes started Steve was talking about money – specifically his lack of money. He was having transportation issues. Since he couldn't always rely on friends, he needed to buy a vehicle, and once he did, it required repairs. He wasn't counting on that. To make matters worse, the cost of auto insurance for a 19 year old male is outrageous!

He'd purchased an old truck, and it got terrible gas mileage. Out of nowhere, Steve had all these unexpected expenses. Some weeks he wasn't even sure he had enough gas money to make it into town to teach class.

Soon he was counting heads (and dollars in his head) at every class. Within a month, he began to wonder out loud to his friends if he could afford to continue... maybe next week more people would show up...

Throughout all of this, a few new faces would trickle into his classes, and the quality of his instruction was just as good as ever. I left town for the summer, and by the time I returned, there were no martial arts classes at the yoga studio.

I don't know what happened, exactly. But what I suspect happened was Steve went into this with a week by week outlook. Statistically 50% of all small businesses fail within a

year. There's another statistic that says most businesses don't turn a profit for two years. That doesn't have to be true for every business, but I believe the reason 50% of businesses fail is because they don't have the vision, or the cash, to get past the all work – no profit phase.

This is where, once again, I feel compelled to mention Brian Tracy's excellent book *Goals!* Or perhaps you're familiar with the DVD and book, *The Secret* which is about visualizing and creating your future. Both of these teachings point toward cultivating a purposeful, positive intention for manifesting the things we desire.

But the mental aspect is only half the battle. In order to endure the first year, you've got to have enough money in the bank to pay the rent and keep the lights on. This is basic Business 101.

In the town I live in, there have been a few restaurants that have only lasted a few months before going out of business. "Who in their right mind would open a restaurant for a couple of months?" I often wondered. "Don't they know it's going to take at least a year, maybe two, to cover their initial expenses and advertising in order to build a clientele, and then begin to make a profit?"

It's my observation that startup schools aren't making it because their environment is subconsciously working against them (Chapter 1), they think they're selling skills when in fact they should be selling a *product* (Chapter 2), and they have no clue about expectations and goals (Chapter 3).

In order to open their doors, they spend everything they have, or borrow heavily, but they don't have a deep enough vision, and they don't have deep enough pockets. Poor planning, combined with naïve optimism leads to maxed out credit cards.

Getting a financial backer, or partnering with another instructor may be something to investigate *before* you invest your life savings, rather than after you're in dire straits. (A wise person once said, "Desperation is the worst cologne.")

Another misconception that I hear a lot is, "There's not a lot of money in teaching." I beg to differ. I know many school owners who earn six figure incomes. There are hundreds of school owners that have two, three, six or eight schools. There are individuals who have franchises all over the country.

Don't limit your potential. Money may not be the #1 motivator. That's understood. But money is not evil either.

If you want to contribute to the community, if you want to help your students and your community, you'll have far more success if you have the funds to advertise and reach those people than if you're struggling to pay the rent each month.

If you need help in this area, read (or listen to) *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* by Robert Kiyosaki. He coins a term: "financial literacy" and his teachings have completely changed how I perceive my business, my home, and my financial future.

Beyond the Startup

Perhaps you've been in business for several years now. You're beyond the startup phase, but enrollment isn't what you'd like it to be, or worse, it's slipping.

If this is the case, let me ask you, are you leading? Delegating? Helping your students set and achieve goals? Are you creating bonding opportunities for your students? Are you organized? Is your school odor free and attractive? Family friendly? Do you have a kids program?

Or are you a one person operation with no outside support? Do you still sit at the computer night after night recording attendance and hate it? Go back and read the first few chapters in this book. No man is an island. Don't go it alone!

Finally, if sales are slow you may be tempted to lower your rates. That's what conventional wisdom dictates, and in this economy it may be necessary. But it's not your only option. Lowering your rates also lowers the perceived value of your goods and services. You may attract a more cost conscious clientele, but as soon as they find a better deal, they'll be gone.

So while adjusting your pricing because the economy is in the tank is one thing to consider, you can also increase the *value* of what you offer. What extras can you offer your students that they will appreciate but won't cost a lot of money? Some schools include a free uniform, 12 months for the price of 11, or discounts at the pro shop as incentives.

Here's what I did with my software business: I reduced the price of the software, I offered installment payments, and I added new features. I specifically tackled features that were very difficult to program, but frequently requested.

What can you add to your business? What can you use as 'loss leaders?' That's an item you can give away in order to sweeten the deal. The words 'free,' 'discounted' or 'exclusive' are music to consumers ears.

Chapter 10

Read!

The very last piece of advice I'd like to share seems sort of silly if you've made it this far, but it's something I've just recently re-learned. If knowledge is power, reading is the key to all knowledge.

Let me encourage you to re-discover the benefits of reading. Turn off the television. Find a book – anything that's of interest to you – and make reading a habit once again.

Reading expands your universe. Reading makes you more interesting. Reading will help you become a better teacher and a more interesting conversationalist.

If you're not sure where to start, pick up Brian Tracy's *Goals!*

Even if you're not a dog lover, I recommend *Caesar's Way* by Caesar Milan. He's the Dog Whisper on the National Geographic channel.

If you have more than one school or business, and you'd like to expand operations, open another location, or learn how to delegate, check out *The eMyth Revisited* by Michael Gerber.

If you would like to understand finances better, read *Rich Dad, Poor Dad* by Robert Kiyosaki.

And of course, I would recommend reading the teachings of the masters of your art.

Even better, encourage your students to read. Start a lending library at your school.