TITLE

The Leaders of Bushido: A Study of the Leadership Practices of Black Belt Martial Artists

RESEARCHER

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OBJECTIVE

The purpose of this study was to investigate how black belt martial artists have developed their leadership skills.

METHODOLOGY

Black belt practitioners from the 144 karate and taekwondo schools in Los Angeles Country were contacted about participating in the study and 145 usable surveys were returned. The typical respondent was male (88%), a karate practitioner (59%), between 31-40 years old (35%), with about an equal distribution of between 5-10 years of training (37%) and 11-20 years (34%), and held a first degree black belt (44%). Each respondent completed the Leadership Practices Inventory.

KEY FINDINGS

Enabling Others to Act was the leadership behavior reported as most frequently engaged in, followed by Encourage, Model, Challenge, and Inspire. Compared to the Kouzes Posner normative database, martial artists scored somewhat lower on Inspire and somewhat higher on Encourage, with relatively no differences on the other three leadership practices. The martial artists’ score were all in the moderate range on the normative database, and in the same rank order as reported on the normative database.

No differences were found on any of the five leadership practices on the basis of respondent gender. Age did differentiate on the five practices with the older the respondent, generally the higher the frequency score; this same pattern was generally true as respondents’ years of training and degree of black belt increased (especially for Model and Inspire). No leadership differences were found based on the style of martial art among the respondents.
The author concludes:

The results from this study indicate that martial arts training does not in fact provide supplemental leadership training for more frequent behaviors of effective leadership. It also implies that martial artists are not necessarily better or more effective leaders compared to those who do not train in the martial arts...This goes to suggest that despite the fact that black belt martial artists, especially if they are instructors, have a unique setting in which to display their positive leadership characteristics, they are actually no different in terms of possession of effective leadership practices, than an average individual who does not participate in any form of martial arts training or instruction (pp. 112-113).

Kouzes and Posner’s (2002) theory of leadership development as a learned skill-set proved true in this research. The number of years of training and the degree of black belt obtained (because it takes longer to obtain a higher degree black belt) all correlate with the age and an elongated period of time. Therefore, it can be assumed that the longer one has lived their life, the more advanced leadership skill-set they will possess. The results indicated that there was a positive relationship between the number of years of training, the practitioner’s age, and the degree of the black belt obtained with an increase in frequency of the leadership practices. The older the practitioner, the higher their scores; the longer the years of training, the higher their scores; and the higher degree of black belt they had, the higher their scores (although this was only true for two out of the five leadership practices) (p. 114).

Leadership development training could be extremely beneficial for black belt martial artists and especially to those who are dojo operators or head of martial arts organizations. Due to the continuous increase of popularity of the martial arts, practitioners are increasing consistently, as well as different martial arts organizations that stem from different styles and schools. In order to keep an organization alive and effective, it is pertinent for their leaders to have the right skill-set needed in order to maintain positive productivity and continued positive growth. Incorporating an effective leadership development program as part of their martial arts training, particularly to the black belts who instruct and come in contact with the younger generation who are our future leaders, will ensure development of positive leadership practices that are beneficial to everyone involved, as well as for themselves (p. 115).