

Developing Leadership Ability in Taekwon-Do Students

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Introduction

I would like to begin by saying that it is my belief that the idea that Taekwon-Do provides leadership qualities to youth is something of a false premise.

The distinction I make in this case is between leadership skills and leadership qualities; with skills being the techniques of leadership, and leadership qualities being a combination of possessing the skills and having a desire to use them.

I do believe however that Taekwon-Do provides excellent opportunities to develop leadership skills.

In this essay I would like to explore the following ideas:

- Essential leadership skills and how we as instructors can awaken the motivation to apply them.
- How this plays out in a small club with very few seniors
- Different approaches taken for students with differing skill and motivation levels
- Some ideas for better serving our coloured belts at a national level

Leadership Skills and Motivation

Both leadership skills and desire are a spectrum and we all fit somewhere along those lines.

Someone with low skills but a high desire may rise to a leadership position but would be ineffectual, and conversely, someone with high skills but low desire may never step into the role.

Leadership skills can be taught, and the dojang is an excellent environment to learn and apply them in a practical setting.

However, the desire to use these skills is more nuanced.

Some students naturally seem more comfortable taking charge of large groups.

Others may be great one on one or with small groups but lack confidence in front of larger groups.

Many have likely not given it any thought at all, and there will be some who are not inclined towards leadership positions whatsoever.

For those students who show a clear interest the obvious methods are available. Get them to be a team captain, or teach the lower grade students, or be responsible for some aspect of club life.

For students who shy away from the spotlight or freeze up when put in charge of a group, more subtle approaches can be taken.

For example, we can disguise a task for a particular student by getting the whole class to perform it e.g. pairing up seniors and juniors to teach fundamental movements, or we can use the student as an example during exercises or the reference pace for patterns.

The idea behind this is to get the student to use their verbal and non-verbal communication skills without putting them under the pressure of performing in front of everyone.

Hopefully with some success and positive feedback the student will feel more confident putting themselves forward to use the skills more overtly.

As instructors, we can provide encouragement, guidance, and help build their confidence but ultimately the student needs to have that internal motivation to step into that role.

As far as what skills to teach to make an effective leader, there is a lot of differing advice about what constitutes “essential leadership skills”, but during my research I have come across three key components:

1. **Awareness** – particularly self-awareness, understanding your own strengths and limitations, but also awareness of the strengths and limitations of the people around you.
2. **Communication** – how well you convey ideas to someone, tailoring your approach to different audiences, giving constructive feedback, and active listening all fall under communication skills necessary for effective leadership.
3. **Learning agility** – Learning agility involves learning from mistakes, asking insightful questions, and being open to feedback. It includes learning a new skill quickly, taking advantage of opportunities to learn, and responding well to new situations. For senior leaders, learning agility is also about inspiring learning in others and creating a culture of learning throughout the organization.

Small Club Environments

Club culture and composition plays a large part in the approach to promoting leadership. Naturally, the focus tends to be on black belt students as we expect them to have a certain amount of technical knowledge and maturity and to in turn use that knowledge to mentor other students. For clubs with a healthy number of black belts this generally works and there are plenty of options to promote leadership development.

Some clubs are well organised and have their own leadership program in place, other make use of courses like the recent 1st-3rd dan symposium.

But having many black belts doesn't always mean they are the automatic choice. I've often seen clubs where the ones displaying the most potential are still in the coloured belt ranks.

My club is almost entirely coloured belts. I have one actively training black belt and their work frequently has them out of town for months at a time.

It is also a fairly small club with the students spread out over the gup grades.

The downside to this is that I often have to rely on lower grade adults and higher grade adolescents during times that it is necessary to split the class. This also means that I need to be careful with the scope of those lessons, so the students are still receiving beneficial instruction.

The plus side, however, is that they have had more opportunity to develop as leaders within our club than they would have if they were overshadowed by black belts. An added benefit is that the more they succeed in this the more reassurance I have that I am teaching them well and that they are taking it onboard.

This also ties into my belief that teaching something to someone else is the fastest way to improve your own understanding of it.

Developing Potential Leaders: Case Studies

Previously, I hadn't given much direct thought to developing leadership abilities and was more focused on having confident helpers when needed.

Writing this essay has given me the chance to reflect on what I have been doing and how I can improve going forward.

I've used this opportunity to look more closely at the students I regularly call upon, assess where their strengths and weakness are, and look at what the next steps are to further them on their leadership journey.

As mentioned above, each student is going to have a different level of inclination towards being a leader, and their individual personalities are going to be a factor as well.

Being a small club, I'm privileged enough that a personal approach can be taken with each student who shows potential.

Promising Youngster

Female Green Stripe - Preteens

This young lady largely inspired my approach to this essay.

One night while I was busy with a couple of seniors at the start of class, I noticed she had gathered the juniors together and had them warming up with a game.

I observed a couple of things that stood out to me:

Firstly, no one had asked her to do this.

She gets involved in class regularly, but this was the first time she had taken initiative to organise an activity. This was very encouraging.

Secondly, they were inventing a game.

At first, I thought she was just explaining the rules to a game the others didn't know but soon realised that she wasn't dictating rules. Instead, she was coordinating the others, making sure the quiet ones spoke up, so they collectively invented a new game.

This was also encouraging, as it shows her getting everyone involved and invested in the task, putting their success first rather than an egocentric approach of "I'm the boss so listen to me" which is more common with younger students.

As an experiment, I didn't make any mention of what I had observed, just to see what she did.

She continued for four weeks without any encouragement.

I've since let her know how impressed I am and have been getting her to occasionally supervise our main class white belts or assist with the mini kids class.

One weakness I've noticed is that she is very pleased when accepting praise but seems overly disappointed with negative criticism, even when framed positively.

The plan for the next 12 months is to get her more comfortable taking larger groups, as well as getting her to recognise that feedback is a good thing that helps us improve.

I'm also encouraging her to look for opportunities at school where she can refine her communication skills.

Low Leadership Motivation

Female Blue belt - late 20s

This student is a good example of someone who does not want to be a leader. She is reluctant to volunteer for anything that puts a spotlight on her.

She is on her own journey at the moment developing her TKD skills.

She can be a perfectionist which sometimes leads to frustration when her body isn't doing what her brain is telling it to.

That frustration can also flow into working with students who aren't quite getting it.

Despite this, in small groups with a subject she is comfortable with she communicates well, offers insightful feedback, and is able to keep on task unsupervised.

It's when she is heading a larger group that she becomes flustered.

She is also good about quietly letting a disruptive student know to cut it out and pay attention.

The plan for the future here is to build confidence in her own abilities by more frequent use with small groups and gradually get her used to instructing larger groups.

Part of that strategy will also involve pointing her out as an example during class so instead of leading from the front; she can lead from within the group which will hopefully help her feel more comfortable.

High Leadership Motivation

Male Blue belt - Early Teens

In this example we have the opposite end of the spectrum.

This gentleman definitely has the drive to be a leader. He has let me know his goal is to one day be an instructor and has been pursuing positions on the student council at his school.

He's quite good at managing small groups for a time but is quickly led off task. He has a very gentle manner which makes him struggle a bit with being firm when necessary.

He can, however, turn on the maturity when talking with adults so the capability is right there below the surface and we just need to increase the confidence so he feels he can hold that responsibility and authority with his peers.

The plan is to give him more formal responsibility at club and allow him to grow into the role and become comfortable with it.

Given time I think he will become a very good instructor.

Personal Growth

Male Blue belt - Early Teens

This young man has noticeably grown into a potential leader in our club.

He has been with the club for a long time and over the last two years has had a big improvement in his focus and maturity.

In particular, I'm impressed with how he communicates with different audiences. With mini kids he keeps instructions short and clear, and with adults he is confident and not intimidated explaining things to people 2 or 3 times his age.

His knowledge is about what you would expect for a blue belt and when he comes across a gap in that knowledge, he seeks out an answer rather than trying to make something up.

He is still a little hesitant to lead large groups but is doing well with small groups so far.

The next steps for this student are to start taking a more formal role in class to give him some responsibility and allow him to stretch his skills to working with larger groups. We also need to enrol him in the next available instructor's induction course.

The Natural Leader

Female Red belt - Early 40s

This student came to me as what you would call "a natural leader".

She was looking for ways to be helpful and involved before she even signed up to train.

As her technical knowledge of Taekwon-Do has increased, it has allowed her to step into more roles of responsibility and let her leadership skills shine.

While not the most technically able student, she is diligent about understanding the how and why, not just for her own benefit, but so she ensures that she is passing along correct information. She is also great at asking insightful questions. This shows good learning agility as she is actively seeking the knowledge to fill the gaps. This also overlaps with self-awareness as she sees where her gaps are and recognises that her strengths lay in understanding things at more than just a surface level.

Her communication skills are excellent as well. On any given night she will be instructing the mini kids' class, with students as young as four years old, liaising with parents, and respectfully making sure I haven't forgotten any notices. Each of these requires a different approach and she navigates it flawlessly.

She also took the initiative in setting up, and maintaining, our club group chat which has really helped boost our club's sense of belonging.

This student runs our mini kids class with almost complete autonomy, and it is growing fast. Once the class reaches the right size, the next steps will be to put together a team of assistant instructors and have her start passing along the above skills to help them become effective leaders.

Promoting Leadership Nationwide

As students there are many doors that open to us once we reach the black belt ranks, including opportunities to step into leadership positions.

Aside from the Instructor Induction Course there aren't any clear pathways to those positions.

While our coloured belt students are well served when it comes to the martial skills there is a gap in providing a course for the soft skills which would better prepare them for those positions once the doors open to them.

With the current structure we focus on the long-term students with the goal of developing strong senior members within our organisation.

The unfortunate reality is that many students either don't reach or leave soon after achieving black belt.

While they may never throw a punch or kick again, they are certain to run into situations where leadership skills will be valuable to them.

Offering leadership courses to lower grades would provide a tangible skill for the students who leave and could help highlight a pathway for the students who stay instead of athletic success.

Summary

Overall, Taekwon-Do is a fantastic vector for learning leadership skills and putting them into practise, although the will to use them does ultimately come down to the individual.

Our black belt students have many options for expanding their leadership skills. I think there is a benefit in offering a course like the recent symposium for our coloured belt members to allow early opportunities for development and provide another pathway for students that aren't focused on the sporting side of Taekwon-Do.