

Essay – Senior Dan Grading

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How does Taekwon-Do provide leadership qualities for youth?

What do you in your club specifically do to develop leadership and what ideas do you have to develop leadership in your club or the organisation?

We all need guidance and leadership in life – predominantly via parents, teachers, coaches in early development and roles like CEO's, politicians and military style organisations in adult life. Additionally we can develop worthwhile life skills from a mentor or role model – someone admirable for their principles and actions (or deliberate inaction!).

Generally adult leadership models have presumed a position of power and authority to accompany leadership traits. However, the concepts of adult-based leadership may not all be applicable to youth leadership.

How does youth leadership differ from adult leadership? The vast literature related to adult leadership has very little to say about youth leadership. Adult leadership literature tends to focus on issues of authority (voice, influence, and decision-making power). In contrast, youth leadership focuses more on issues of ability (skills, knowledge, and talents).

“Important factors include social and emotional intelligence, the ability to collaborate with others (including problem solving and conflict resolution), the ability to articulate a vision and finally the ability to gain insight or knowledge into the particular subject area. Environmental conditions include having authentic opportunities that enable young people to practise and hone their skills. In terms of action, both the ability to inspire and motivate followers through high expectations and role modelling pave the way to having a good team on which to build youth leadership. This, together with mastery as developed through the ability to persist and endeavour, is critical to any successful youth leader.” (Redmond & Dolan, 2016)

The values that we promote in Taekwon-Do (our tenets) are indeed some of the qualities required for good leadership. But taking aboard these qualities alone doesn't necessarily make a good leader. It guides the student to be a good role model, a moral and virtuous human being – but not necessarily a leader. However provided with the tools and examples, a nurturing environment that empowers them - and opportunity, leaders will emerge (Great Man Theory).ⁱ

Inspiring adolescents to be the better self, citizens, and leaders are some of the practices within Taekwon-Do that can be offered to youth to foster their leadership development.

Southern Cross TKD Academy takes a broad approach to nurturing skill development, emphasising not only the importance of Taekwon-Do tenets but also the family environment, and the support and encouragement that this gives to our students across a broad range of life environments. Once familiar with students from the club and appreciative of the moral expectations that are placed on them, both parents and peers enthusiastically support and encourage students both inside and outside the do jang. The relatively comfortable environment of the do jang becomes a training ground for often less forgiving outside world. The frequent tasks of warm up, instructing lower grades, speaking in front of the class, given a voice in club decisions and direction under the guidance of more senior students provides an excellent introduction to leadership without fear of unjustified criticism or derision.

Previously the club has trialled senior students taking responsibility to guide a small group of student through to the next grade. This provides an authentic training environment to encourage leadership skills. However in practical terms this suffers from problems in continuity. If the instructing student is unable to make each training then the guided students receive their grading information from multiple instructors. And even though the instructing student is supervised the quality of instruction the group receives is not the best possible that the club can provide. So this becomes a compromise of leadership training but at a cost to the instructed group. A more practical approach is to allocate small blocks of training (for example revising step sparring) for developing leaders to instruct rather than the overall responsibility of taking the group from one grading to the next. This is certainly not new, but is a practical way that benefits both developing leaders and provides closer to 1:1 instruction that benefits students without compromising the potential of the student group.

An extension of this idea is to form a 'black belt club' of students with the express purpose of developing their skill sets. Under the supervision of the head instructor students can be encouraged to collaborate with one another to plan and execute these smaller blocks of instruction, taking responsibility within this club to cover absences from training, more detailed instruction explaining technique, application, history etc. This develops practical instructing skills and feelings of self-worth and value within a framework of youth supported collaboration, evaluation and critique, emphasising the importance of role modelling and the ability to inspire, and identifying their own gaps in knowledge.

This idea is somewhat restricted to clubs that have a sufficient number of core youth black belts to form a workable, stable group.

Similarly at a regional, national or even international level this same concept is applicable. We see examples of youth political groups, student representation on school boards, youth taking a recognised role on civic councils, international forums and organisations – where the views, suggestions and opinions of these young leaders are given due recognition in the 'adult' world. There are no barriers to youth representation within our organisation (apart from age restrictions to senior grading levels). However it is daunting for a younger person to adequately voice their opinions in a predominantly adult environment if their leadership skills are not already well advanced.

I believe there is scope within Itkd and ITF for the establishment of youth councils, with the responsibility to represent the views of their peers to a higher level. The established 'adult' organisational structures sometimes lack the inspiration and freedom of thought that is refreshingly optimistic in youth. Adults often dismiss ideas based on the degree of difficulty implementing them as opposed to evaluating the worth of the idea and then determining how best to make it happen! My observations of developing ITF organisations within Africa, and the restriction imposed by global events (e.g. the Covid pandemic) emphasises the need to collaborate widely, building upon experiences and solutions found by ALL students young and old. The establishment of international youth councils fosters cooperation and collaboration on a level that adults may find restrictive due to differences in political, religious or ideological beliefs that dog our adult lives.

The exact nature or purpose for a youth council (e.g. planning an international TKD youth seminar series) is only one side of the coin. The other side is the authentic opportunity to

develop the interpersonal skills and traits to become effective leaders in adult life. It is these individuals, which through strong and sound moral character development and establishment of unyielding standards become worthy role models for a younger generation to aspire to.

But not everyone is born, nor wants to be a leader.

Taekwon-Do does have the opportunity to make a significant impact on the development of youth character though. Attention to behaving and acting as an admirable role model, both within and external to the Taekwon-Do environment as an adult is key to providing our younger members with a template for their own development of honour, integrity, perseverance and purity of spirit. In this manner they also become leaders of the next generation, not necessarily in positions of leadership or authority, but by being recognised as worthy humans to aspire to become like.

¹ Great Man Theory

1. Every great man is born already possessing certain traits that will enable them to rise and lead on instinct
2. The need for them has to be great for these traits to then arise, allowing them to lead¹

Trait Theory

Credibility is a key indicator of leadership – skills characterised by traits e.g. honesty, innovation, inspiration, competency i.e. traits that can be developed

Transformational Leadership

Through the strength of vision and personality leaders are able to inspire followers, to change perceptions and motivations to work towards common goals.

Bibliography

MacNeil, C. (April, 2006). Bridging generations: Applying “adult” leadership theories to youth leadership development. *New Directions for Student Leadership, Vol 2006, Issue 109*, 27-43.

Towards a conceptual model of youth leadership development 2016 *Child & Family Social Work, Volume 21, Issue 3, August 2016* 261-271

Inter relationships between Taekwon-Do activities, youth leadership traits and the Tenets of Taekwon-Do.

