



LEADERSHIP IN MARTIAL ARTS

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Introduction

In the following paper I will introduce and cover four common forms of leadership – autocratic, bureaucratic, democratic, and laissez-faire; describe their purpose in a martial arts setting; and finally discuss the importance of instructors understanding, and being competent, in more than one style.

Types of Leadership

An easy way of visualising the differences between autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership is a scale depicting where authority/decision-making lies:



Laissez-Faire*

The diagram above provides a simple idea of the differences between autocratic, democratic, and laissez-faire leadership styles. The first obvious observation is that bureaucratic leadership is missing off the spectrum – to put it simply, bureaucratic leadership would never involve interaction between the top and bottom of the hierarchy. Thus, no input from the leader to the individual or vice-versa.

The most important aspect of leadership to be understood is the fact that there is no one superior, or perfect style of leadership; instead one must be able to take aspects of all styles based on the situation and change where necessary. A common model used to help understand the best style for a situation is John Adair's 'action-centred leadership model'; which will be covered later in this paper.

Autocratic

Autocratic, sometimes referred to as authoritarian, leadership can be simply described as the leader having all the power. An autocratic leader would be the person who makes all the decisions based on their ideas and judgements, subordinates are therefore left out of the decision-making process and are expected to follow instructions without discussion.

Autocratic leadership at its most extreme entails absolutely no input from subordinates, who instead must carry out any orders as and when they are received. This form of autocratic leadership is most suited to situations that require immediate action, as a leader can quickly and effectively issue orders as they are required. For example, if there was a fire then the leader would have to make sure that everyone is evacuated as quickly as possible; discussion would be unnecessary and risks damage and injury. On the other hand, if a leader and their team were tasked with something that allowed time for discussion yet the leader choose instead to go fully autocratic – the leader would quickly find themselves very unpopular, and could miss out on good ideas from other teammates.

On the other side of the spectrum, an autocratic leader may take input, ideas, or

criticisms from members of the team however, the final decision still comes down to the leader. This form of leadership is particularly effective if a member of the team is more knowledgeable in a certain area than the leader; after hearing a plan, or part of a plan from members of the team the leader should then lead the team as if the plan were their own. Team members are happier under a leader who they believe listens to them, and so this is especially helpful for those who are just beginning as a leader. However, some people in a team may see this as an opportunity to undermine the leader. Thus, it is imperative to always stand out as **the** leader when giving the team more chance to get involved in decision making.

Bureaucratic

Bureaucratic leadership can be simply defined as a rigid set of rules, protocols, duties, etc. Those in charge lay down rigid rules and regulations for certain events, then when an event occurs a subordinate will act exactly as the higher up wants them to act without the need to be told every time.

This form of leadership helps team members to feel there is a structure to what is going on, no matter who is in charge. Similarly, those who are just learning to lead may find it easier being able to follow certain protocols as they learn more about themselves and how they best lead. A downside to this is that it requires a lot of prior work and planning to be put in, as well as making sure that any rules/protocols set in place are rigid, well-defined, necessary, and are maintained or changed as time sees fit. On top of this, there may be events that are not covered within the rules laid out, thus forcing the leader to adopt a different style to handle any situations that occur.

Democratic

Democratic leadership is the opposite of autocratic – the team holds more power than the leader, this would mean in a full democracy every person would hold an equal amount of power and dispute would be resolved by majority votes from everyone in the team. A true democracy is different to the parliamentary system we see in our country; rather than having groups of people represented by an elected official, every person gets a vote. Subordinates in a democratic leadership team have more power and input that they would have in an autocratic system. Therefore, the 'leader' may simply be there to facilitate votes and team decisions. Democratic leadership allows a whole team to be involved in any decision-making process, this obviously come with its own perks and drawbacks. The democratic decision-making process is much longer than an autocratic one, as it requires votes to be held (and any accompanying discussions). If a team is faced with an issue that does not have to be solved quickly, a democratic leader would allow everyone to have a say, providing an arguably fairer outcome. However, should a decision need to be reached quickly, a democratic leader could provide unnecessary hassle. In an emergency, democratic leadership is almost always the worst form of leadership to take.

A more autocratic democratic leader may act as the person facilitating talks amongst the team, their role being to allow any sides in a decision to speak and provide reasons for their thought (similar to the speaker in the UK parliament). In this example the leader would oversee the leading of the discussion, making sure the team stays on topic, and calling a vote when the time occurs. In a true democracy, the leader would have no more power or sway than any other individual in the team. Their role as leader would simply be to make sure that the ability for the team to come together for decisions is there.

Laissez-Faire

Laissez-Faire, similarly to bureaucratic, is different in the fact that there are no leaders or followers. This form of leadership is completely hands-off, the leader has no say in what the

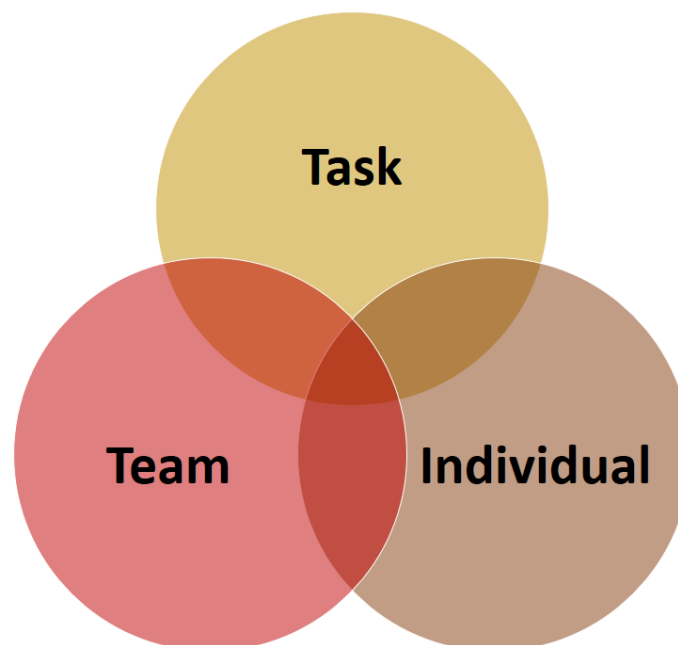
team does but instead tells them what the task is that must be accomplished. Unlike democratic, the team is not in charge but the individual. Rather than every person having a say in any decisions, the individual people in the team instead 'lead' themselves.

Laissez-Faire, whilst not really a form of *leadership* as the leader has no role whatsoever still has its purpose and uses. Laissez-Faire allows for a great amount of individuality and creativity amongst the individual members of a team. Once a task has been set it is then up to individual people to accomplish it as they see fit; this would work well in creative competitions as the 'leader' does not need to get involved.

Action Centred Leadership

Action centred leadership (ACL from now on) is a model on which all forms of leadership can be applied to. It is often demonstrated as a three-way Venn diagram, as shown below. John Adair described leadership as having to focus on three key areas:

- The task
 - Achieving the task
 - The importance of the task
 - The timeframe to complete the task
- The team
 - Developing the team as a whole
 - Looking after the needs of the team
- The individual
 - Developing individual people
 - Looking after individual people



When leading one might become confused by all the different aspects to consider and manage. Adair's model allows leaders to split the task into separate areas of focus, with a perfect leader being able to manage all three. However, there may be times when a leader must prioritise some aspects over others re-evaluate their priorities as time goes on and the situation changes. It must be remembered that while some areas may require more attention

than others, the leader must not simply neglect a certain area (as explained later) lest they fail the task, their team, or certain individuals.

Task

John Adair describes the task as defining the activity (the task), identifying the resources, planning, setting standards, etc. In one sentence, the task is the goal the leader is trying to reach with the available resources and people. When considering whether to prioritise the task the leader must consider both how important it is that the task is completed, the quality it must be completed to, and any time pressures for the task. For example, if a task is merely optional and has no effect complete or incomplete then the leader can prioritise their team and the individual needs much more. On the other hand, if a leader were dealing with a vitally important task with a short time frame (for example the containment efforts follow the Chernobyl incident) then safety of the team and the individual is less important provided the task is completed properly.

Team

The team side of leadership involves establishing standards of performance and behaviour the team must follow, maintaining discipline and focus, resolving group conflicts, etc. A large part of leadership is managing the relationship amongst your team, as well as how your team presents itself to others outside of it. Especially in a martial art setting it is important to make sure that certain groups are living up to the correct standards set for them, as well as motivating them towards the aims and objectives set out before them. Looking after the team does not involve the separate members of the team in this area, but the group as a whole

Individual

Unlike the team side of ACL, the individual refers to each member of the team – the leader must understand them as a person with skills, difficulties, fears, and likes. In an activity the role of the leader is to look after each individual under them, as well as pushing them to do the best that they can do. For example, if a certain member within a team is particularly good at counting through the forms, whilst another hates it; the role of the leader would be to know these individual preferences and allow people to do what it is they want to do. Equally, a leader should know their team well enough to be both be able to push a person out of their comfort zone so that they may learn whilst also understanding when to stop. In order to best act on this area, it is best for a leader to speak to those in their team outside the bounds of the club. Whilst preparing before, or after, a class a leader can use this time to speak to those under them in order to find out more about that individual. Not only will it make leading them easier once you understand what they like, and don't like; the individual will also be more willing to follow the leader that has showed they care about **them**, not just the team or task.

Context in a Martial Art Setting

Now that I have discussed the most common forms of leadership, as well as Adair's ACL, I will now discuss how they can be utilised in a martial art class.

Action Centred Leadership

Within Tang Soo Do there are many opportunities for students to demonstrate their teaching and leadership ability, whether that be in small groups of 2 or 3 as students begin their instructor training, or when students take the whole class as they approach the dan grades.

At every stage, the instructor must first decide what the focus of their task will be, how they plan to improve the team, as well as how they will look after and push the individual members of a team. To help visualise this easier I will look at two different examples, the first being a revision session with a small group of senior belts, the second being instructing the full class.

Within a small group of seniors, the task I want to achieve is making sure their standards are at the levels we expect from their belt and due to the fact that they are senior belts the task should not be incredibly difficult, or incredibly vital (unless it is near a grading). The team needs will be similar in making sure that they understand their target clearly, and I make sure that they stay on track to achieving their target. In this instance the importance of understanding the individual is shown – different people learn in different ways, so as the instructor I must make sure I know what different people need from me to get the most out of that session. A common mistake to make is applying your own learning style on others; I only learn under authority so when I first led I too led and taught with authority, but especially in Witham Tang Soo Do, I learnt that was not always the most effective method. As the session goes on the leader must re-evaluate the 3 areas, and whether they must prioritise one area more than another as situations occur. A common example is that before a grading people can get quite nervous and thus require softer leading techniques, it is the role of the leader to recognise if a member of their team is feeling uncomfortable or distraught and deal with it accordingly.

When instructing the class, a different set of leadership qualities and skills are required. One key difference is making sure not to get too involved. A common mistake among people when first taking a larger group (like the class) is that they focus too much on the individual; as the main instructor, your priority should shift more to the team as it would be almost impossible to focus on every single individual. A model often used to help with this is called 'Heli view' – Heli view means that (like a helicopter) a leader should be both metaphorically and literally far enough away to see the big picture whilst still metaphorically and literally close enough to still lead. In the case of a class, this would be utilising senior belts to either take small groups or help individuals whilst the leader continues to focus on the whole class, the big picture.

To summarise, no matter the size of the instructed party, the leader must make sure to actively think about the needs of the task, team, and individual as well as, if necessary, prioritise areas as the situation demands. A helping mnemonic to remember when planning and running a class to make sure that ACL is followed is **PICSIE**

- **Plan** – Decide what it is needs done, and what needs the leaders focus
- **Initiate** – Brief the team
- **Control** – Maintain standards, and ensure progress
- **Support** – Be aware of and look after individual needs
- **Inform** – Clarify needs and provide feedback on progress
- **Evaluate** – Consider if all is running well, or if a new plan is necessary

Leadership Styles

In martial arts, as anything, different styles of leadership have different effects and utilities. I will discuss each of the four styles and provide examples of when they would and would not work.

Autocratic/Democratic

Most new instructors will immediately go for an autocratic style of leadership; it is easy, they think they are always right, and it is fast. Autocratic leadership does have its place in martial arts, both in and out of teaching. The primary case autocratic leadership is good is during any kind of emergency. Due to the nature of martial arts, there is an increased risk of injury compared to other sports; should there be an injury the leader must take control of the situation to decide the best course of action. In this scenario, autocratic leadership is the only form suitable as the leader needs to focus on making sure a first aider sees the injured individual, as well as making sure no other accidents can happen by making the area safe immediately. Should an emergency like that be left to a democratic leader, it would have to involve the slow decision-making process of everyone voting on the appropriate course of action. Also, whilst teaching a group of lower belts, an autocratic leader is necessary. Should the instructor begin asking questions to those they are meant to be teaching, they will quickly lose the respect of said people; equally it would make teaching very difficult if all decisions were down to a vote of all parties.

However, autocratic leaders will often leave everyone else out of the decision making process; so in a community meeting such as an AGM an autocratic leader would accomplish very little, whilst annoying everyone else. Even if the autocratic leader took other people's ideas into thought before deciding, many people would still be left frustrated and feeling as if they never really had a choice. This is where a democratic leader would be most appropriate. The democratic leader take into account the wants of all individuals, making sure that no party feel left out in group decision making.

To summarise, an autocratic leader is best suited to decisions that have a short timeframe or require immediate attention. However, if a decision is not required for a long time, then an autocratic leader would simply annoy the other members of the team by taking away their ability to choose. This is where a democratic leader would be most suited, they make sure that all parties are heard, and a common consensus can be reached in decision that affect the whole club.

Bureaucratic

Bureaucratic leadership is a good way to set rules and regulations for other instructors if the leader is unable to attend a certain class. Equally, should the leader delegate a group of students to another instructor, the rules and procedures laid out in a bureaucratic leadership would both help the other instructor know what and how to teach if they are unsure but it also makes sure that the other instructor teaches to the standard required by the leader.

However, this leadership style doesn't allow much input from either the leader or the team, and if done poorly could lead to people getting bored or not being encouraged to be intuitive. Equally, if no rules are in place for freak accidents/one off events then there may be no specified leader to deal with the situation, or the leader would require a different form of leadership.

Laissez-Faire

Laissez-faire leadership allows individual people to express themselves without guidance from a leader, this form of leadership has uses both in and outside of the club. Laissez-faire leadership is useful for training sessions between a group of equally qualified individuals such as senior training sessions or practises. In a relaxed environment such as a practise session no leader is required therefore whomever is the 'leader' leads via Laissez-faire. On top of this Laissez-faire is useful in situations such as club wide creative competitions. Whilst an instructor/leader may set the challenge, they will have little to no input in the individual output of each person who enters.

In summary, this leadership style involves no leading so as long as the leader proposes a goal, that is laissez-faire.

Conclusion

In the past few pages, I have listed reasons why different leadership style can and can not be used in different situations, a good leader/instructor must have the ability to change their leadership style depending on the situation. Whilst it is only human to have a favourite style, or a style the leader is personally best at, as long as the leader can demonstrate proficiency in more than one style, their career as a leader and instructor will be filled with success.