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The Karate Kid Approach to Leadership Development

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“First learn stand. Then learn fly.” — Mr. Miyagi (Avildsen, 1984, 1:17:7)

In the 1984 iconic film *The Karate Kid*, Daniel LaRusso, a teenager that had just moved to California from New Jersey, struggles to adjust to his new surroundings. He eventually forms a bond with a building maintenance man, Mr. Miyagi, and learns not only karate techniques, but also life lessons as Mr. Miyagi becomes an important mentor/father figure in Daniel's life.

Throughout their mentorship journey together, Daniel often becomes frustrated when he doesn't see the importance or big picture of the tasks being assigned to him by Mr. Miyagi. Daniel is only focused on the short-term goal of acquiring specific technique to use on his nemesis. He doesn't acknowledge the developmental journey or long-term mastery that Mr. Miyagi insists upon. This

movie highlights the importance of mastering each stage of development for long-term proficiency. This is also true in context of the military. Leadership skills and positional competence must be mastered before pursuing the next rank in order to ensure the U.S. Army is developing qualified leaders ready for the future fight.

Focus on the Right Things

Initially, Daniel focuses on the wrong things in his desire to learn karate. He asks Mr. Miyagi about superficial things such as his belt rank and awards. Mr. Miyagi, like any good leader, focuses on the process, the operational approach, developing people the proper way, and the mission at hand.



(U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Brandon Banzhaf taken April 8, 2019)
 U.S. Army Sgt. Jordan Gary, a team leader with 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Armored Division, coaches a Soldier during a training exercise at Orogrande, New Mexico, April 8, 2019.

Like Daniel at the beginning of his journey, new leaders may not yet have the experience, tools, or knowledge to handle multiple complex tasks and problems. They may not have a structured operational approach to help them assess the mission, concepts, key tasks, and actions required to be successful (Department of the Army, 2019b; c). Without the proper training and tools it can cause leaders, and their subordinates, to become frustrated and impatient. According to retired Army Col. Jim Greer:

“Training and leader development are two military functions that go hand in hand. It is of little use to have personnel and units that are well trained if they are not also well led; conversely, the best leader can accomplish little with poorly trained troops (2018, para. 33).”

Be Patient and Put in the Effort

In one of the most memorable scenes of the movie, Mr. Miyagi tells Daniel to show him “sand the floor,” “wax on-wax off,” and “paint the fence.” Daniel reluctantly goes through the motions while Mr. Miyagi refines his technique. Then, unexpectedly, he unleashes a barrage of punches and kicks that Daniel defends using the proper techniques he was taught.

This scene illustrates lessons coming together between a leader and a subordinate after long hours, patience, and hard work. This development process is necessary at each rank as the Army grants more responsibility to the progressing Soldier. This approach is also reinforced by time in service and grade requirements in the promotion system affording dwell time to gain experience (Department of Army, 2019a).

Grow at Each Level

In order to have success at increasing levels of leadership, a Soldier must have experiences to draw from. “Judg-

ment becomes more refined as commanders become more experienced” (Department of the Army, 2019c, p. 2-6).

Best-selling author Malcom Gladwell discusses his famous progression pillar, the 10,000 hour rule, in his book, *Outliers* (Gladwell, 2008). He argues that people are not experts in a skill or field until they have put forth 10,000 hours honing their craft. This requires several years of study and experience in order to ensure mastery is achieved. So it is important Soldiers learn as much as possible at each station and rank before climbing the ladder. If one does not master each position, they might not have gained the experience necessary to make the complex decisions required of senior-level leadership.

Trust the Process

Throughout the first half of the film, Daniel is frustrated easily, either by lack of progress in his training, or not believing he has the ability to overcome his challenges.

The author Carol Dweck describes this type of fixed mindset in her book *Mindsets: A View from Two Eras*. She explains that among other things, somebody with a fixed mindset believes they are not able to develop and covers up their insecurities or shortcomings by focusing their attention outward deflecting by not taking ownership of their own development (Dweck & Yeager, 2019). On the opposite spectrum, a person with a growth mindset embraces the attitude that through determined effort one can grow, develop, and learn (Dweck & Yeager, 2019).

In the latter half of the movie, Daniel embraces an attitude change and embraces the development process and begins believing in himself. Like Daniel, Soldiers will have much more long-term success if they also embrace mastering not only their position and tasks, but also the leadership skills appropriate to their level. This develops positive relationships in both subordinates and superiors, and also gains “...trust by showing motivation and a learning attitude during training” (Department of the Army, 2020, p. 5-3).



Newly arrived U.S. Army initial entry trainees with 2nd Battalion, 60th Infantry Regiment receive their first introduction to military discipline at Fort Jackson, South Carolina, April 26, 2020. (U.S. Army photo by Saskia Gabriel)

Conclusion: How to Be the Best Around

In a rapidly evolving world, future Army leaders must spend their 10,000 hours focused on the right things. They must have patience and develop their growth mindset. They

must gain experience at each new leadership level and have the right positive attitude. It is through proper preparation that the U.S. Army will produce leaders ready to adapt and overcome any future obstacles and challenges. ■

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