



Success

17 Road Signs For Instructors to Heed
on The Martial Arts Road

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0. Introduction

The road to success in running a martial arts school or club is one that is full of dead ends; , slow downs; people driving too slow in the express lanes; and, frankly, many more metaphors that you can likely come up with on your own. Whatever way you look at it the road to running a successful club is constantly under construction. Enclosed are 17 challenges that instructors face when running a martial arts school. The goal is to help you learn through my experience, to save you the pain and problems that I had to face while learning the hard way. Now, clearly, these 17 subjects are not the only challenges that you will face; however, they are among the most common.

As you read, remember that we do what we do because we enjoy it. When encountering unforeseen challenges it is all too easy to lose sight of this. My hope is that you will find in these pages some nuggets of hard-earned wisdom that will smooth a few bumps and maybe even improve the scenery along the way.

1. New Construction

Attitude is the biggest determinant as to whether your school is going to succeed. And attitude runs from the top down. That means you set the tone. For example, if you set a training tone of the U.S. Marine Corps you will quickly be out of business. Look life is tough enough out there in the world and your students are not coming to class to get their chops busted, to be told they are not good enough, or that they are falling short of your expectations. You might instead choose to:

Know every student's name.

No sound is sweeter than their name; know it and use it.

“Remember that a person's name is to that person the sweetest and most important sound in any language.”

- Dale Carnegie

How to Win Friends and Influence People

Leave on a positive

You can help people by pointing out what they need to improve on during class, but at the end of the class, you

New Construction (cont.)

should regularly offer something positive to say to individual students, and of course, use their name when you do.

Set achievable goals

Do not make the only goal “a Black Belt;” instead, set the goals in achievable increments. A few more push-ups, passing a test, etc., allow students to celebrate small successes, and build their confidence.



2. The Dead End Road

“Build it and they will come.” This is the classic line from the movie “Field of Dreams.” Yeah, I loved that movie but that line is the biggest lie ever perpetrated by Hollywood. Well maybe that is an exaggeration, but if you subscribe to the “Field of Dreams” maxim, believing that you have the best thing going and that that alone will be enough, you will be in for trouble. You will be by yourself in your dojo striking the heavy bag while repeating to yourself, “I am not compromising my art; I am not compromising my art.” and figuring out how to pay the power and light. So set yourself up for success – go get yourself some books on marketing and do what they say. A couple of books I think are particularly valuable are:

Starting and Running Your Own Martial Arts School

by Karen Levitz Vactor and Susan Lynn Peterson

The best book on the market of its kind.

The Indie Band Survival Guide.

by Randy Chertkow and Jason Feehan

A different take, from a different industry.

The Dead End Road (cont.)

Small Dojo, Big Profits.

by Michael D. Massie

<http://www.small-doj-big-profits.com/>

While this doesn't fit every situation, it provides good, solid information.



3. Road Work Ahead

You would be surprised at the levels and types of experience you have in your students. If they like you and what you teach (see Topic #1), then they are also likely willing to help you. If you have a graphic designer in your class, the question becomes, “What about our logo?” Architect, “What about our layout, our floor space?” Listen to what they have to say, and listen well. I also suggest you do not act on any suggestions right away. Mull them over for a couple of days, then ask more questions. If you have other friends in the martial arts, call them up ask them what they recommend, what their experience has been. Remember that a successful school balances the desires of your students with your ideas. People have great ideas, listen to them. At the end of the day, the decision on how to proceed is yours. You will be spending more time than anybody else will in your martial arts school. You are taking the risk. You make the choice.



4. Limited Sight Distance

You are far more valuable than you think. You have an advanced degree in the martial arts and you need to act accordingly. People will say in many ways, either explicitly or implicitly, “I do not think the service you provide is worth that much.” (Notice I said “service,” not “you;” it is not personal.) Here are a couple of examples that have happened to me:

“Sorry I am late with my dues, and I was only here for half of the classes last month, so I only paid for those classes I used.”



“I want to only come on Thursday nights. Can I just pay for those?”

If you say anything other than, “No, I am sorry; we do not bill that way. You will need to pay the flat rate like everybody else,” you are selling yourself short. Look, at the end of the day most people do not understand or appreciate what they are doing in a martial arts school. They are confusing value with price, a common mistake. Do not allow their lack of appreciation for the difference between value and price let you sell yourself short.

5. Winding Road

You don't have a business plan? You say you do have a business plan, and it is all in your head?" If you do not have a business plan or just claim to have one in your head, then you will fail. If it is not written down, it is not real. Moreover, if it is not real, it won't have the power it needs to have to inform your day-to-day operations. Simply the act of writing a business plan makes you think about what needs to happen, and how it is going to happen. It need not be complicated. You can find templates for business plans on the web that will serve you well, or you can use the ones in your MS Word package or MS Excel program.

Even if you are working out of a YMCA or church basement, you need a business plan.

Once you create it, remember, you need to actually use it. Take it out and review it monthly. Look to see if your numbers (students, revenue and expenses) are what you projected then to be. I know it sounds like Business 101, but it is just that, Business 101. You practice the karate basics in class; practice the business basics as well.



6. Danger

“Hey, what kind of karate school is yours?”

“We are members of the KokushiRyuKaiDai.”

....Oooohh, sorry, you just failed. Try again.

Not setting the tone of your school is a danger to your success. Can you describe your school in twelve words or less? If you are a tough-as-nails school you might want to say, “We adhere to strict and demanding standards and our students take great pride in their achievements.” If yours is a competition-focused school, an example might sound like; “We strive for excellence and demonstrate that at many tournaments every year.” You need to be able to describe your school so that somebody that does not have a clue one will understand what you are about when it comes to the teaching of the arts.

Decide what your school is and practice that statement so you can say it well.

When people are looking for a school or club they have ideas, and assumptions of what they want, but often cannot clearly express them. Your clear description will help them better grasp the essence of your school.

Danger (cont.)

Here are some examples:

“We are a small neighborhood school, training in the classic art of...” = (Local Control)

“We are associated with (insert organizations) and we follow those international guidelines.”
= (World Wide Association)

“We are eclectic in our teaching and training. We use the best of all arts to bring out the best in our students = (Modern)

These types of statements allow you to attract the right people and filter out the rest as students that are poorly matched to your school will not stay.



7. Narrow Road

You need to see where you are going. Are you going to teach adults? Kids? Both? Women, or Men, or both? In my area, there is a dojo just for women, and their “women only” focus works fine for them. The benefits of this focus are knowing exactly what their target is and being able to keep an eye on that target. In this instance of a. While other schools have come and gone, this female-only karate school has quietly chugged away, teaching karate for more than twenty years. Your focus needs to be both demographic and geographic in nature. Are you going to be the local neighborhood club? Alternatively, are you going to be that destination martial arts school that people will go out of their way to attend? Are you going to be in the church basement, or are you going to be in the corner at the strip mall? And, if so, who are the kinds of people you want to come to the location you envision? You need to write your target into the business plan, and it needs to be reflected in your name or your tag line as well. In this case, narrowing your target means sharpening your focus, and that is a good thing to do on the road.



8. Loose Gravel



Clutter in the training space is death. No matter how small or large your school is, clutter is a killer. It presents a disordered space and nobody wants to train in that environment. At the end of the training session, leave your dojo uncluttered – nothing in the windows; no empty water bottles, trash, or brooms leaning on the wall; no pads; and no tape lying around. When you are not at the dojo that is the time when people come and check out your school. On the web, we call them lurkers. In the real world, we call them window shoppers. When you get window-shopped by potential students, they peek in the windows and from what they see make a decision whether they are going to take the next step – to actually contact you, or step into the dojo to see what your martial arts school is all about. Make sure your impression is of a clean and orderly operation.

9.Mile Posts

If you follow mile posts, you know exactly how far you have traveled. If you follow your heart, time and distance can be distorted. Often people who open a martial arts school follow their heart and do not know their numbers. Here is a little secret: if you know your numbers—the amount of students you have and the basic income and expenses – only then can you follow your heart. You need to have measurable results; without these real numbers, your judgment becomes distorted. Allowing our heart to cloud our judgment is a normal human trait; it is this infusement of the personal into the very real numbers that characterize the bottom line of running a martial arts school. Know your mile posts and use them.



10. Two-Way Road

“We are a traditional school; we pretty much keep to ourselves.”

“Yeah, and it was hard to find you, too.”

Look, nothing gives you a stronger presence in the community than a demonstration by you and your students – real people doing real martial arts. That is just how I started judo. Somebody gave me a card at a demonstration; five years later, I was up on the very same stage doing a demonstration with others. That was five years of dues, tournaments, and help around the dojo, just because they had a demonstration. A demonstration does not compromise your integrity or your school, nor does getting out there and putting a face to your school. I drove by this one dojo a couple of times and the window shades were always drawn. I did a Google search because I was, well, nosy. Their website touted their strengths and then stated, “We are currently not accepting new students.” I drove by about a year later; the space was for rent. Get out in the community, seek an opportunity to show your stuff, and remove the mystery. Students are your lifeblood. Never forget you are in the people business.



11. Use Extreme Caution!

Most people do not care about the dojo and I caution you to remember that. I don't mean to say that people are cold-hearted, it is more that they are not emotionally connected to it the way you are. Often the martial arts are simply a pastime, a fun diversion until something else comes along. Most people do not catch the fire; simply put, the martial arts is not for everybody. Be glad that they came in and trained for awhile; be glad that they had a good experience and will recommend you to others; be glad that they got what they needed, whatever level that may be; and be glad their life is better for coming in and training with the club. The martial arts take the four Ds: dedication, discipline, determination and desire. That last one, desire, I think is the most elusive of the qualities. Use extreme caution when building expectations about what people will and will not do when it comes to the arts.



12. Scenic Byway

Have you every heard a radio personality, a disk jockey, be down and depressed on the air? Probably not. People are tuning into that radio station to have fun, listen to music, and get the weather and traffic. It takes a split second for a listener to be turned off by a less-than-fun disk jockey. They will click through the stations until they find an upbeat, fun-to-be-with personality. Even when a Las Vegas entertainer has had a bad day, you will never know it; they will never let you know. You paid for a fun show and a good dinner and that is just what you are going to get. You need to be the same way when you are in front of your class. You need to be the disk jockey or the Las Vegas entertainer in that you never let you students know how your day went. They are looking for a release from their day and you have a responsibility to give them a great training experience by not being a negative, or depressing, influence.



13. Soft Shoulder

We all have bills to pay, and in tough times, some of your students may decide that dojo dues are just one thing too much to deal with. Remember, at the core of our business is relationships. If somebody's household is in a financial pinch, give them a break; make a deal. Shave some money off the fee and set a limit. "I am glad you said something about your financial situation, let's do this: I can knock 10% off of the dojo fee for the next three months. Would that be helpful?"



And, because it is important to have a specific beginning and end to the offer, you want to add, "So we will start this month with XX amount and on November 1st we will go back to the regular rate, OK?" Then, put that away and don't bring it up again, and of course don't share it with others either. Again, the business of running a dojo is not simply about collecting dues, it's about building relationships and, ultimately, just being a decent human being.

Now am I recommending that you go against the comments in section #4? Yes, I am. However, it is important you temper your decisions with situational information – hey, it is an art, right?

14. Utility Workers Ahead

There is an old saying, “The graveyard is full of indispensable people.” And that means that the dojo isn’t going to burn down if you are not at class. Instructors get sick, and have important family moments. Identify a few students that you think are ready to lead class when those unavoidable conflicts arise. Then, when you need them, set them up for success. Leave a written lesson plan and an opening and closing checklist so the class is carefully structured with a beginning, middle, and end.

Here is a little tip: have the checklist and the lesson plan already done and in a form you can e-mail to your stand-in instructor. Make sure they also know where class information materials or dojo brochures are; you know, what you would give to a prospective student, because the one night you are not there will be the night someone will decide to stop by and see what your class is all about. A little bit of preparation goes a long way to making for a successful absence.



15. One-Lane Bridge



A small dojo is just fine. A friend of mine has a small dojo. His students kept claiming that they needed more room. So my friend hung a heavy bag in the middle of the dojo and claimed it was part of special training for the month. Now, his students worked on that heavy bag for the entire month. They built drills around it and worked hard. At the end of the month, he took the bag down and everybody commented on how much room they had in the dojo...point made. Before you decide you need to move to get more space, look at two things: your business plan and your numbers (see #5 and #9). Are you ready to incur a greater expense and take that risk based on your student base? Maybe you just need to add another class session instead of moving into a bigger space. Go back and read #8 in light of this story; see if it changes your mind about what you think you need to do.

16. Rest Area

When you learn of a student's personal success or celebratory moment in their life, if you have their permission, share it with the dojo. Now, we all post tournament wins and that is good, but what about new jobs, promotions, or births? Yeah, I bring them up in class sometimes. I'll mention these moments or victories at the beginning or at the end of class with a little announcement. Share others' success. It is not just a good idea; it is a great thing to do.



17. Wrong Way

The Board of Directors for my dojo is me; the board meetings take place in the mornings when I shave. Most dojo are like this, and I have to admit that I am not inclined to form a board and have meetings – yadda, yadda, quack, quack – the last thing the world needs is another committee meeting. However, that does not mean that I don't listen to what others have to say. I have changed some of my teaching methods because of suggestions from students, and in one instance, from a parent. How does this happen? I make a real effort to talk to people and listen. This gives them the confidence to make a suggestion. I like these suggestions; it means they are taking interest in the class and that is good. Of course, I don't take every suggestion, or use every idea, but I always thank them and tell them I will think about it, and I do think about their ideas. Now, this approach is very different from the way I was taught. Back when I was beginning in the arts, I would never have thought to make a suggestion to my sensei about a better way to run class or organize an aspect of the dojo. However, it is a different time. Adjust.



About the Author

Kris Wilder, is the head instructor, and owner of West Seattle Karate Academy. Kris started practicing the martial arts at the age of fifteen. Over the years, he has earned black belt rankings in three styles, Goju-Ryu karate (5th dan), Tae Kwon Do (2nd dan), and Judo (1st dan), in which he has competed in senior nationals and international tournaments.

A co-host of Martial-Secrets.com a biweekly podcast, with his frequent Co-author Lawrence Kane, covering a wide subjects regarding martial arts, self protection, and with a little humor. Kris host, Life and Martial Arts, a monthly podcast that deals with deeper subjects spanning, life, self-actualization, action, and contemplation. Kris teaches seminars worldwide, focusing on growing a persons technique and their understanding whatever their art maybe.

Kris also serves as a National Representative for the University of New Mexico's Institute of Traditional Martial Arts. He is also a member of The Order of St. Francis, The Order of Saint Francis (OSF) is one of many active Apostolic Christian Orders.

Books

- The Little Black Book of Violence: What Every Young Man Needs to Know About Fighting □
- The Way of Kata: A Comprehensive Guide for Deciphering Martial Applications □
- The Way to Black Belt: A Comprehensive Guide to Rapid, Rock-Solid Results □
- The Way of Sanchin Kata: The Application of Power □
- The Way of Martial Arts for Kids
- Lessons from the Dojo Floor
- How to Win a Fight, A Guide to Avoid and Surviving Violence □

Video

- 121 Killer Appz Fighting Applications From Goju-Ryu Karate
- Sanchin Kata (YMAA karate) Three Battles Karate Kata

Co-authored with Lawrence Kane