

Business Management Lessons from Aikido

by Jaime G. del Rosario

Teddy, the chairman and CEO of Union-SDS, the country's largest diversified food and consumer products conglomerate, was towelling himself up after a quick shower. Zipping up his gym bag containing his aikido uniform, he warmly greeted his companion, the GM of an architectural and design firm tasked to develop the conglomerate training center in Tagaytay. "Thanks for waiting for me to finish my aikido session, Jeff. As you know, it's my only relief from the sanity of our crazy business."

"No problem, Teddy. I'd always wanted to know what aikido was all about. So rather than wait at the Shang lobby, watching the class was a much better alternative. Good thing you texted me as to your workout location."

"You might want to try it out. Sensei Abe is a good teacher. And he's got a good assistant teacher in sempai Carla." Teddy motioned to the two people at the other end of the room.

"I presume 'sensei' means master and 'sempai' means his apprentice?"

"Pretty close to that, yes." Teddy signed the attendance sheet before waving goodbye to the sensei. "It's also a great calorie burner. Almost the same burn as ballroom dancing. Not to mention you need pretty much the same kind of grace to be good at it. Now, don't take it from me, Jeff. Remember, this is only my sixth lesson and everyone here is a relative veteran compared to me. Even the eight-year old twins whom you saw."

"I don't know. You looked half-decent out there on the mat. Was it easy to pick it up? I mean, how did you do on the first session?"

"Thank you, Jeff. And, no, it wasn't easy. That back roll has been tough – took me three sessions to get the hang of it. And sensei hasn't thought it timely to teach me the front roll yet. You know, what those stunt men do in the movies. But everyone else here does it eyes closed – and with only one hand. I can't wait to learn it. I think sensei Abe is afraid that at my age, I might break my neck on the first try."

Teddy continued. "I have to confess – at first, I thought I had made a mistake enrolling, that this aikido was a waste of time. We probably spend 10 to 20 minutes just practicing the footwork - the ukuriyashi, sugiyashi, ayumiyashi, and the tenkan. Hey, I've memorized the labels already. But then sensei Abe kept drilling it into our heads that all subsequent techniques depended on those four footwork variations. So I guess it's alright to get those down to auto mode."

"I was watching the last half-hour. It started to get interesting when you got into those attack-defend positions. I was pretty impressed with that knee-into-the-armpit and bring-him-down routine."

Teddy pressed the elevator down button. "Oh, the ai hanmi ikyo? Cool, wasn't it? And I got the hang of that pretty quickly too. Or how about that bending-the-attacker's-elbow and pushing-him-backwards-and-down? That was the jaku shihonage. That's a pretty cool move as well. Without patting myself on the back too much, I must say that I've come a long way in six sessions. Believe it or not, except for me and that 65 year old that I keep getting partnered with, everyone here is below 25. I do need to watch it though. When I take the nage or defender role, I sometime wind up doing the move too abruptly or forcefully and I wind up using more force than necessary. A teenager can take it in stride but my 65-year old partner or I could get bruises and muscle pain awfully quickly."

"So you'll continue with the sessions then, Teddy?" Jeff asked, as they went inside the elevator car.

"I hope to. This shouldn't be a three-month wonder. I've set a goal for myself – to get a black belt in five years and be the oldest person to take this up and get the belt. Creaking bones and all."

"And as you earlier mentioned – it's good exercise for you. Certainly looks like it beats my golf any day."

"Actually, Jeff, that's not the only reason I want to stick with aikido." Teddy asked his car to be paged.

"Oh. What other reason then?" Jeff asked.

"It's my mini MBA."

Jeff did a double-take. “Excuse me?”

“You heard it. I get management lessons from the classes. Lessons that I put to good use in Union-SDS.”

“I hear you but I’m not sure I already follow you.”

“Every session, sensei Abe will give advice and instructions. To him, they relate only to aikido. To me, they have applicability to the game of business and the art of management. For example, one of the key philosophies of aikido is never confront force directly. For one, it could hurt you. Also, the bigger person usually wins. Aikido is about sidestepping the force and putting the person off-balance. And the off-balanced person, no matter how large, is no match for another. Here’s how I applied the lesson quite recently - the competition lowered their prices dramatically. Did we follow, that is, did we meet them head-on? No, because to follow them would have bled us both dry. And we’d probably have run out of air ahead of them. Instead, we provided an additional layer of services at no extra cost. And with that, we’ve kept the competition off-balance.”

“That’s right. You did.”

“Or how about when sensei Abe contrasts aikido with karate or taekwondo? With those two, you spend too much energy in nervous tension, bobbing up and down, doing the Bruce Lee shuffle. But all for no apparent benefit. Just anxious positioning. Aikido teaches you to keep still, react quickly, and move with balance and precision. No wasted motion. Sensei Abe told me that the oldest living grand master once visited Manila. He was already 78 years old then. In an unforgettable exhibition in Megamall, the old man supposedly asked for 20 strong burly athletic males from the audience in their late teens and early 20s. He promised them a prize – I think it was a collector’s samurai sword – if anyone could take a dull-edged eight-inch knife and, standing just a foot away from the master attempt to hit him in one quick short thrust. They could aim at his neck, his arm, his chest, his tummy, anywhere on the torso. Underhand or overhand. As fast as they possibly could.”

“And?”

“I guess it’s obvious – sensei Abe wouldn’t be telling us the story if it didn’t have a good ending. No one won the sword. Each one of the twenty lunged and got the knife taken from him in one split-second motion. And it didn’t matter that number 20 saw how the 19 others failed. He still failed.”

“Wow!”

“There’s a lot of other management lessons for the taking. For example, the human body has certain weaknesses that allow a savvy practitioner to take advantage with minimal effort. Either eight-year old can break my grip easily and, with deft pressure on my fingers, force me to roll to the ground. Resisting would lead to a broken bone – mine, not theirs.”

“That seems to echo Sun-Tzu – know your opponent’s weakness.”

“Exactly. And sometimes, sensei Abe can be funny without meaning to. Last session, he said – when you pinned someone to the ground, do you keep him pinned? No. Especially if he’s big, pin your attacker down and then run away. Because . . .”

“. . . you live to fight another day,” Jeff continued, with a smile.

“By golly, you’ve got it,” acknowledged Teddy. “And a lot more lessons, Jeff. Like – ‘practice makes perfect’. The sensei would have us do the drills until we react without thinking of the move mechanics. Or like – ‘never expose yourself’. Which is why the aikido ready position is the way it is – none of this boxing stance. There are no vital organs exposed to a possible kick by the enraged attacker.”

Teddy’s Ford TownCar pulled up the driveway. “Probably the most important lesson relate to my ambition – you have to be serious, maintain the discipline, keep the focus if you desire to improve and advance. Otherwise, it’s just play. And that could be fatal.” Teddy paused. “See you at the Shang lobby in 3 minutes then, Jeff.”