



SOPHIA ASSOCIATES

Awakening Leadership Within

Aikido for Leaders

Whether you have taken martial arts classes or not, you have probably heard of Aikido, The Art of Peace. Aikido is a Japanese martial art developed by Morihei Ueshiba between the 1920's and 1960's. The essence of Aikido is non-resistance. The art focuses on harmonizing with one's opponent and guiding the force of an attack to a peaceful reconciliation. It is also a martial art whose tradition has emphasized the moral and spiritual aspects of this art, placing great weight on the development of harmony and peace. "The Way of Harmony with the Spirit" is one way that "Aikido" may be translated into English.

Watching Aikido one notices that there is a dance or rhythm to the movement, two opponents blending together more than clashing. One notices that emphasis is placed on aligning with the rhythm and intent of the opponent in order to co-create an innovative outcome. It is an art that contains conflict and harmony in the same space. Practitioners seek to integrate mind, body and spirit into harmonious relationship and intuitive breakthrough action.

I admit readily that I do not practice Aikido (although it is something I would like to explore.) Yet I couldn't help viewing this practice as a metaphor for an alternative way of being in business and leadership. Our western approach tends to be focused on aggression and winning at one another's expense.

What if instead of viewing our competitors as opponents we must defeat, we saw them, as the opponent is seen in Aikido, as worthy training partners who are challenging us to transcend our limits and develop our skills?

I wonder if we wouldn't be more successful if we focused on the harmony in our businesses instead of the conflict. What if we chose to focus on the value we offer our customers, employees and stakeholders? I speculate that we would be far less reactive and far more creative if we could stay attentive to who we are and what we do well.

To watch Aikido is to watch movement and energy flow around a still center, requiring minimal physical effort of the practitioner. It means being still within while moving decisively without – a complete paradox that can only be embraced when one considers that the movement is dependent on the stillness for power. What does that mean for leadership? Can you lead well when you feel "off-center"? Are your best decisions made when you feel tired or overwhelmed? Are you prone to react, without considering the long term, if you feel threatened?

Even as one opponent approaches there is a preparedness, a deep inner calm, that is already in place. Do you know yourself that well? What lies at the core of your leadership and business? When confronted with difficult decisions, are you well grounded in your integrity so that you make the ethical decision over the easy one?

Maintaining strategic agility is critical for the success of your business. Being too attached to your past success may impede the creativity needed for your future. Don't be so attached to past knowledge that it blinds you to future possibilities. If

your company's culture is arrogant, not willing to stand in what is called "beginners mind", then learning anything new will be impossible and innovation will be unreachable. You will not be prepared to "see" if you think you already "know".

What is Aikido for leaders? Maintaining a stable core in yourself and in your business focused on the value that you offer and in the values that you hold. From that place, movement is minimal yet powerful because there is little vacillation. Stay curious and get comfortable with ambiguity. Keep learning and encourage others to do so. When met with the unexpected, you will be prepared and able to move with the situation that confronts you, using the force of what approaches to leverage you to success. Maintain your personal resiliency. As the leader of your organization, your wellbeing is linked to the wellbeing of the organization. Cultivate this in yourself and in others. Know yourself. Ask others for feedback and take time for reflection. Knowing yourself will support your preparation for meeting challenges and contribute to the stillness of mind that promotes thoughtful decisions.

Morihei Ueshiba, also known as O'Sensei (Great Teacher), looked at the concept of the Warrior as follows: "The Way of a Warrior is to establish harmony." "The Way of a Warrior is based on humanity, love, and sincerity; the heart of martial valor is true bravery, wisdom, love, and friendship." He viewed Aikido as a way to harmonize with "the movement of the universe." By applying to leadership the tenets of Aikido we may also arrive at a harmony that moves with the flow of the world instead of in opposition to it.

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