

# Taekwon-Do and Human Resource Management: Common Themes

by Carlo Martinelli

## ABSTRACT

*The aim of this thesis is to highlight the similarities between Taekwon-Do and Human Resource Management (HRM) as a profession. It is my belief that some of the key areas of HRM benefit Taekwon-Do decision makers, being them instructors, team captains, coaches or even board members. The dissertation contains a personal reflection on the topic based on my practical experience and does not presume to be shared by all readers. However, I feel that some readers may find the relationship between Taekwon-Do and a HRM stimulating.*

## INTRODUCTION

This thesis serves no other purpose than to be a personal reflection on how working in Human Resource Management (HRM) has benefitted me as a Taekwon-Do practitioner.

This is an introspective exercise and does not claim nor expect that everyone else share the same experience or opinion. In fact, another HRM professional practicing Taekwon-Do might feel completely different from what I experience.

Regardless, it is my belief that there are a number of HRM disciplines and practices helpful to Taekwon-Do practitioners and instructors. I will limit

this thesis to analysing 11 elements that bring together Taekwon-Do and HRM: attraction, onboarding, retention, development, coaching, engagement, recognition, leadership, ethics, conflict resolution and separation. I will now discuss each of these aspects in more details.

## **Attraction**

An important element for any Taekwon-Do school is to attract new students. Although an instructor should be led by motives higher than making money, it is hard for a school to survive unless economically viable. Under this respect, students in a Taekwon-Do school become customers.

Whilst attraction in HRM is concerned with attracting the best talent available on the market rather than customers, the principles of attraction are very similar. Advertising, utilising referral programmes, host an event in order to promote the school, offer free demonstrations and making the most of social media are all tools that are used both by Taekwon-Do schools to attract students and companies to attract new recruits (Taylor, 2018).

When I opened my first Taekwon-Do club, I faced the challenge of not having a student-base from which to start. I believe that HRM gave me ideas and tools useful to increase the number of students attending classes.

## **Onboarding**

One of the key challenges HRM is facing now is to create a great onboarding experience for new team members. This is especially true for



those industries with a stigma of hard-work and poor-paid-jobs such as hospitality and retail (Robson, 2009).

A Taekwon-Do school faces the same challenge when attempts to retain new students through the initial period of their training, when they may feel awkward with new movements and techniques as well as coping with additional financial expenditure and adapting to a new sport regime. Regardless of the initial enthusiasm that Taekwon-Do provides, it is not uncommon for students to give up thinking that Taekwon-Do is not for them, it is too hard or too demanding. Often, it is the result of the failure on the part of the instructor to take account of the different level and ability of students. Sometimes, the worst instructor or coach is a person who finds Taekwon-Do easy because they do not appreciate the difficulties a student faces.

Tips such as clearly articulating what Taekwon-Do involves and what the expectations are; and giving direction about the expected progresses and challenges of the first months can help the student gaining perspective on what they are doing. Making sure students know the instructors in the school and other senior grades and giving them context about organisations and championships will ensure they do not feel lost. Promptly providing the tools to use, including dobok and pads, will make the difference from a poor and an excellent onboarding.

## **Retention**

Successful attraction and onboarding are not sufficient for a long term sustainable Taekwon-Do school. It is desirable to retain students for a long period of time, so that they can progress through kup grades and degrees and also provide a constant income to the instructor. Losing

students could be a sign that there is something wrong. For example, the quality of teaching is poor, the venue is located in a difficult to reach area or classes are overpriced.

HRM professionals, who are concerned with employee retention and turnover, make all these considerations on a daily basis. Multiple factors drive retention and different people deem different things as important to them. If there is one secret regarding retention, the secret is personalisation. For example, someone belonging to a newer generation may need some involvement with technology (school website, access to online Taekwon-Do tutorials, socials), need to get to be knows more on a personal level, promote continuing education through seminars, be given more freedoms, make them feel independent, etc. (Rigoni & Adkins, 2016).

## **Development**

The Taekwon-Do curriculum offers and excellent opportunity to progress in a structured way through kup grades and degrees. This structure allows the student to progress their Taekwon-Do skills systematically.

This is, in a sense, quite similar to what companies do when they prepare career plans for their talented employees, providing a structure and appropriate milestones that fit career goals, aspiration and skillset (Hirsh, 2015).

The Taekwon-Do instructor, like the HRM professional, should ensure that the steps to achieve the next level are knows and understood by students, so that they have something to look forward when they practice. I believe that development opportunities are to be encouraged as much as possible, and it is narrow-minded to restrict



training opportunities for example because a different group, National Association, Taekwon-Do organisation or martial art offer them.

## **Coaching**

Coaching plays a key part in HRM, as most of the modern business-partnering model is based on a coaching approach when dealing with managers and employees alike. In business, coaching aims to produce optimal performance and improvement (Haden, 2013). Similarly, instructors need to be able to coach their students, pushing them to fulfil their potential as Taekwon-Do practitioners.

The role of a coach is of paramount importance especially in the life of an athlete. My last 7 years as one of the coaches of the England National Team taught me so much about how to bring the best out of competitors. Coaching should be essentially non-directive, focus on improving performance of an individual or team, help to pair individual and team objectives, provide opportunity to assess strengths and development areas.

I was in fact positively surprised this year whilst I was studying my Level 2 Coaching Qualification and Level 3 Personal Trainer qualifications to realise how closely the principles learned in that course matched those applicable in HRM.

## **Engagement**

An engaged workforce is healthier, happier, more fulfilled and motivated. Engaged employees will achieve greater organisational results and stay with the company for longer (Holbeche & Matthews,



2012). Instructors should aim at achieving the same results with their students.

There are several important principles in HRM that can leverage engagement in a Taekwon-Do school. For example, instructor and coaches should motivate, empower and support students and athletes throughout their journey. They should encourage students and athletes to voice their opinions so they feel part of the decision making process. Also, they should foster a strong integrity that states the tenets of Taekwon-Do, ensuring that values are reflected in the actual culture in the school. However, it should be noted that coaching and instructing are different and the qualities of one are not necessarily always applicable to the other.

Referring back to my experience as coach of the England Taekwon-Do National Team, I perceive the extent to which there is a two-way relationship, with engagement and performance influencing each other. So more engaged competitors will go on to perform better, and an improvement in performance will also lead to more engaged athletes.

## **Recognition**

Employees need to be frequently and timely recognised for their accomplishments and contribution to the successful achievement of company goals (Kuczarski & Kuczarski, 2019). Similarly, instructors and coaches should ensure that students and athletes are recognised for their efforts and achievements when they accomplish something remarkable in Taekwon-Do. For example, when they pass a grading, or



when they win a competition, or simply when they successfully learn a new movement or pattern.

To practice Taekwon-Do just to achieve external recognition would be against the principles of Taekwon-Do and therefore not to be pursued. This raises the issue of intrinsic versus extrinsic reasons for doing something and there is much work in the coaching realm that covers this aspect. Arguably, the most important is the intrinsic rationale for pursuing a particular purpose. However, it is undeniable that recognition fuels humans and both athletes and students benefit from appropriate recognition when they perform well.

## **Leadership**

A company need great leaders, someone that can inspire employees and channel efforts to the achievement of important business objectives. An excellent leader needs to have the ability to understand people's motivation and leverage it to achieve a common goal (Watkins, 2012). Instructors, coaches, or team captains should display a similar skillset.

A team of competitors will need a strong leader who leads them to victory. Similarly, students will be looking at the instructor to embody leadership skills, such as confidence, as they seek someone who can lead them through their Taekwon-Do journey. A coach should also have remarkable leadership skills, as athletes need to be guided and supported throughout the preparation phase and the competition itself to increase their chances to succeed.

## **Ethics**

Ethics matters to any profession and sport. HRM is particularly concerned with ethics and moral principles and in many companies it is the guardian of the code of conduct and ultimately of ethical behaviour (Leigh, 2013). Important ITF initiatives such as the Do course give a very solid framework for understanding what ethics look like in Taekwon-Do and how Taekwon-Do practitioners should apply courtesy, integrity, perseverance, self-control and indomitable spirit at all time. The study of the Do, the tenets of Taekwon-Do and its moral culture help the practitioner to behave appropriately as athletes and human beings.

It should be noted that many large organisations would not have ethics and related matters located in HRM but in a separate unit. For example in England we address this by utilising, in many organisations, the Nolan principles. They also form part of the ITF England statutes and ordinances which all members are expected to follow.

Whilst HRM is not necessary for the study of Taekwon-Do, HR professional are particularly accustomed to face ethical dilemmas. HRM teaches that decisions often involve trade-offs between different needs or priorities. Being aware of and understanding the outcomes of alternative courses of action will enable Taekwon-Do practitioners to make sound judgements.

## **Mediation and conflict resolution**

HRM can equip Taekwon-Do practitioners with the skills needed to resolve conflicts amongst students, competitors and more in general those who have a dispute or argument against each other. For example, there are instances where students have arguments with each other,



competitors disagree with coaches or instructors argue on the proximity of their schools. Whilst ethics, courtesy and integrity should be ruling relationships, conflict still arises among people. Integrity plays a major part in human relationships and conflict resolution, as you can be courteous but lacking integrity and I would always argue that I would want someone to address issues with integrity and ideally courtesy but never a person who was courteous but lacked integrity.

HRM makes clear that conflict can occur in any relationship and is best dealt with early at source (Lewis, 2015). If left unchecked, it can fester and escalate, potentially leading to bigger grievance and worse consequences. HRM encompasses informal and formal methods of resolving conflict such as facilitated discussion, internal and external mediation, arbitration and grievance/disciplinary that can be applied to conflict resolution in Taekwon-Do.

Mentioning an example from my experience, when I opened up my first Taekwon-Do school, I have experienced friction from an instructor who was already teaching not too far from the area where I had established by club. As the issue was raised formally, I was glad that there was a mechanism in place within ITF England to deal with it. I will not make comments on where courtesy and integrity sit in all this.

## **Separation**

All Taekwon-Do school have students leaving. This may happen for a number of reasons: money, commitments, relocation, etc. These reasons are somehow natural, involuntary, and instructor cannot control them. However, also other motives can lead a student to leave. For instance, someone may leave because the quality of the teaching was poor, or

because the training facilities are unsafe or inadequate. These reasons fall under the control of the instructor, who should promptly take action to address them. In the same way that a company conduct exit feedback interviews and surveys with their leavers, it is key for the instructor to find out why students leave.

Understanding the reason why employees depart the business enables the company to improve their retention rate and ultimately being more profitable and successful (Fox, 2014). A Taekwon-Do school will benefit in the same way. By understanding what can be changed and improved, the instructor will prevent students from leaving and ultimately will cater for more satisfied students that will commit for longer. It should be noted that this does not always work unless exit interviews are held by independent people. In fact, people may tell you what you want to hear or use it as an opportunity to tell you everything that is wrong.

## **CONCLUSION**

To conclude, it is my belief that there are similarities between Taekwon-Do and HRM. I think that people can be better Taekwon-Do practitioners by applying some of the principles typical of HRM. Surely, HRM is not the only way to achieve it. However, HRM is my profession and this thesis shows how HRM has benefitted me as a Taekwon-Do practitioner. It is my hope that some readers will find the similarities between a martial art and a profession significant and interesting. Riding a philosophical impetus, some may start thinking deeper at their professions and notice how, in the contemporary world, borders are blurred. As Taekwon-Do practitioners, we should be humble enough to recognise that we can learn from others outside the Taekwon-Do environment and also

recognise that times change in that we need to adapt to continue to survive.

Carlo Martinelli

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**

Fox, A. (2014) "Keep your top talent: the return of retention". *HR Magazine*, vol. 59, n. 4, April, pp. 31-32, 34-35, 38-40.

Haden, S. (2013) *It's not about the coach: getting the most from coaching in business, life and sport*. Hants: Business Books.

HIRSH, W. (2015) *HR essentials: effective talent and succession management: a framework for thinking about your own approach*. Brighton: Institute for Employment Studies.

Holbeche, L. and Matthews, G. (2012) *Engaged: unleashing your organization's potential through employee engagement*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

KUCZMARSKI, S. and KUCZMARSKI, T. (2019) "How rewards fuel or fail innovation", *Strategic HR Review*, vol. 18, n. 1, pp. 8-12.

Leigh, A. (2013) *Ethical leadership*. London: Kogan Page.

Lewis, C. (2015) *How to master workplace and employment mediation*. London: Bloomsbury.

Rigoni, B. and Adkins, A. (2016) "What millennials want from a new job", *Harvard Business Review*, 11 May.

Robson, F. (2009) *Effective inductions*. CIPD toolkit. London: Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development.



Taylor, S. (2018) *Resourcing and talent management*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed. London: CIPD and Kogan Page.

Watkins, M.D. (2012) "How managers become leaders", *Harvard Business Review*, vol. 90, n. 6, June, pp. 65-72.