

Contracts and Commitment

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When martial arts schools first started, they were informal clubs. You paid a contribution for the rent. Then that had to be formalized so that the contribution was not voluntary. Overhead had to be paid every month so the clubs charged monthly dues. Then someone realized that students were getting a service and a service contract was not inappropriate.

You could sign up for a green belt contract that would guarantee you a green belt in, let's say, 1-year as long as you attended an average of twice per week. If you took longer, tuition was free until you earned your rank. You could do the same with a 2-year brown belt contract or a 3-year black belt contract. This guaranteed the school some financial security and kept the student motivated—after all, if you had money at stake, you attended even when you weren't really up to it. If you did not attend, well, a contract is a contract. The school held its end of the bargain — sorry, no refunds.

Because students often broke contracts and became angered at not being able to legally stop payments, contracts got a bad name even though the student, in the vast majority of cases, was legally in the wrong. The student found out that the study of martial arts was not what they had expected both instructionally and financially.

Now schools were faced with a dilemma. If they gave up contracts, they would give up security; but, if they did not give up contracts, they might have to lower standards to keep students “achieving” and thus keep them motivated to attend. Forget the green and brown belt contracts. Let's go for a minimum of a black belt contract. Then, let's work out a plan to keep students committed! The plan would have many positive and some negative aspects: (1) we'll keep telling the student how good he is (positive) and gradually sign him up to longer or more expensive contracts (negative); (2) we'll encourage the student to take frequent exams at higher and higher prices (negative), but with more and more fanfare (positive); (3) we'll contact the student often to let him know we care (positive); and (4) we'll get him to black belt and talk him into opening up a franchise (negative). The positives and negatives are admittedly subjective, but I am basing my judgment on the following standard: if it enhances the student either in terms of physical skill or personal development, it is positive. If it enhances the school at the expense of the student, it is negative. Every technique used by a school to encourage student commitment may be valuable both to the school and to the student, but ultimately the student has to see the benefits of the commitment itself!

Commitment has become a lost art in today's world. People move residences, change jobs, and dissolve marriages more like Dilettantes of Life than Students of Life Mastery. In order to operate your life to your own best self-interest you need to understand the value of commitment. Implicit in this statement is that you refrain from casually entering long-term commitments; but, once you do enter, you give it your all. Just as when you were a baby, you did not give up on walking despite the fact that you fell on your diaper more times than

mommy could count. A commitment means that the job will be completed if not sooner then later, if not easily then with effort, if not for its rewards then for the rewards of knowing you can stick with it when so few can even take the first step.

A martial arts school should expect commitment from its students, but only after a relatively long and low-risk period of trial and acclimation. The school should extend itself to help acclimate students who, in turn, will extend themselves to strengthen the school.

Next week, we reveal how the student unconsciously influences the school.