

Promotion on Principle 2

I felt that students who were also instructors were adult enough to know what was good for their own development and resourceful enough to plan their own training, seminar attendance, and trips to *hombu* without it being demanded of them because they received a new rank. I felt that their own rational, long-term self-interest would make them want to achieve in a federation that demanded high standards and did not offer rank on any other terms. In other words, I stood on a principle that, although it is still valid in some cases, has proven to be faulty....

It is not that instructors aren't adults; it is that they have learned to be led by their own instructors, and thus to a large extent, find it difficult to determine their own long-term self-interest. As instructors, we know what we know, and we doubt what our students think they know. As a result, in order to maintain quality in an organization, we lead our students, with all good intentions, by spoon-feeding them a little more than we should. Stringent standards like mine are completely reasonable to a certain point, but then they become crutches upon which students depend, just as they have come to depend on the judgment of their instructor.

The old "military method" of promotion (generally out of practice in today's military), in which lower ranked soldiers who show certain skills and character are promoted without an exam or previously published standards, treats that lower ranked person much more like an adult than does the stringent martial arts instructor. In other words, instructors like me, who pride themselves on high and uncompromising standards, treat their students, even their students who are instructors, like children. I certainly would not want to be treated that way as an instructor who was running a school.

But the analogy is not a perfect one. Any military organization that promotes without an exam would still demand that soldiers follow rules and regulations that martial arts instructors would never demand of their students. That military organization knows it cannot treat young recruits as full adults, but it also knows it shouldn't keep worthy recruits in the playpen. Thus should it be with martial arts instructors. Yet, I have also found that students want to be led. They do not want too much freedom anymore than teenagers want too much freedom (even though they act like they have none at all, and rebel against any reasonable restriction).

A practical solution, of course, is to use strict standards and published requirements through black belt, looser standards through fifth dan, and exam-free promotions after that. That leads me to a problem of execution rather than one of principle: how strict should pre-black belt standards be, and how loose should they become at the early black belt levels?

The way in which different instructors and federations answer those questions explains why there are different instructors and federations. To each, his own. Sensei Elmar Schmeisser (7th dan Shotokan) reminded me of the not-so-old saw: that a certain well-known karate

organization “produces the best white belts in the world; they call them fifth dans”. This organization stands for strict standards even up to fifth dan.

However, one of my students also reminded me of the inverse: her previous training in a very popular martial art was “physically taxing, rapidly promoting, but technically undemanding”. This organization symbolizes the rank-mill that represents its broken down water wheel as a high-tech turbine. Is there a middle way?

More about middle-way promotion on principle next time.