

Promotion on Principle 3

The solution, of course, is to use strict standards and published requirements through black belt, somewhat looser standards through fifth dan, and exam-free promotions after that. [But...] how strict should pre-black belt standards be and how loose should they become at the early black belt levels?

As martial arts instructors, we can keep up standards by trying to produce a better quality black belt than the school across town. Of course, if the school across town produces a corn flake and calls it a corn chip, this comparative standard would be satisfied even if we produced merely a slightly larger dipping chip.

Alternately, we can look at the largest most successful federations that teach styles close to our own and emulate their exams, perhaps adding a requirement or two to make our students just a little better. But, of what value are a hundred requirements if everyone who takes the exam gets a hundred percent? Requirements themselves don't maintain standards; being willing to fail people who are of poor quality does.

Or, instructors could simply use the exact standards to which they were subjected when they were examining and try to improve the quality for each promotion. This is, after all, the way most new instructors go. It allows the new instructor to receive help from his own instructor or from a parent organization that conforms to the same standards.

What if the teachers don't conform to the same standards as their instructors? Years ago, a couple of gentlemen I trained under, both higher ranked than I, helped me grade one of my student's shodan exam and passed the him when I would have asked him to re-exam in another 3 months. In this case, we were using the same requirements, but my high standards were not maintained.

There is, in fact, no way to set precise standards. There are only consistent examples set exam after exam, student after student, including saying, "Maybe next time" to some. What is important, I think, is not that our standards are stricter than the school across town, the large federations, or the organization that promoted us. Rather, it is important that we understand and attempt to adhere to a principle of promotion. If you, as head instructor, feel that strict, written standards should be followed up through fifth dan, than so be it. If you feel that you should loosen the reins at black belt, than that's fine, too. The method by which you promote is less important than that you (1) patrol your own promotions to assure your standards are consistently what you want them to be, and (2) that you are willing to adjust your methods if they are not.

It is much too easy for an organization, martial arts or military, to relax into the status quo that served the organization well for the last 50 years. In fact, it would feel like sacrilege to abandon it. But the result should always outrank the method—not just the resulting quality of the

student, but also the resulting health of the organization. If an instructor can concentrate on principles of promotion that *set* a standard that students want to follow, than he/she will also come up with a method of *enforcing* those standards.

Thomas Jefferson said, “Every difference of opinion is not a difference of principle.” Promotion on principle is more important than being the toughest dojo within satellite range. It is more important for the health of the dojo, the skills of the student, and the mental wellbeing of the instructor.