



Harmony in difference

Columnist: Mandy Lamkin, Enrich Australia director

A famous Japanese swordsman by the name of Tsukahara Bokuden described his style as ‘no hands fighting’. His 15th century contemporaries recognised this as the acme of skill, as to defeat an opponent without using the sword was to give life or create something positive; whereas to defeat them with the sword caused destruction.

It is a way of thinking about conflict resolution almost unheard of in our culture – while we may have a sword at hand, there may be good reasons to choose not to use it.

Samurai embraced such philosophies because they made them fearless in adversity. The practice commonly referred to now as Zen trained them to act quickly and decisively; it kept them focused on their ultimate goal. Knowing how these principles can produce similar results for us will also give us insight into a cultural dynamic that most Australian business people know nothing about, even though they deal daily with people who use them across Asia.

An exponent of this approach is Sydney barrister Derek Minus, an expert mediator and arbitrator who is also a fifth degree black belt in the Japanese martial art of aikido. “Too often I see people on the road to litigation readying themselves to kill or crush their opponents. But like the guerrilla warrior, the elusive antagonist is not necessarily the weaker opponent. They may be weak but they may also be feigning weakness,” Minus says.

“In the West we respect strength, as in force of arms, whereas in the East the culture admires harmony and equanimity. For them superiority is not rigidity but aliveness and the ability to respond flexibly in the moment to stresses.”

The idea that military strategies can, as a separate concept, somehow be applied to business is primarily a western distinction of what, to an Asian way of thinking, is simply the natural relationship or transposition of concepts. Chinese military commander Sun Tzu’s sixth century book, *The Art of War*, is

one of the oldest and most revered writings on military strategy. It recognises strategic positioning is not planning in the sense of working through a to-do list; rather it requires immediate, appropriate responses to changing conditions. While planning works well in controlled circumstances, in a competitive environment competing plans collide, creating unexpected situations. Tzu sums it up: “So it is said that if you know your enemies and know yourself, you can win a thousand battles without a single loss.”

Minus further clarifies: “Sun Tzu’s famous aphorism of the need to know yourself and your opponent is not intellectualisation based on superior research, but knowing by truly accepting the opponent’s point of view.”

A survey carried out in Hong Kong in 1999 found *The Art of War* was widely used in local business management and strategic planning. We also know it was used as recently as the Vietnam War by Vietcong officers and, upon earlier translation into other languages, influenced Napoleon. It also inspired General Douglas MacArthur and more recent United States leaders in their planning of Operation Desert Storm, although it is difficult to see any obvious influence in their tactics.

“Much is written in the West about leadership. But the style in the East is about ‘followership’ – often coined as ‘go with the flow,’” Minus says.

But he’s not talking about passive surrender here. “Rather than resolving the dispute by overcoming other’s objections by argument or force of arms, you go with the other’s idea until the point is reached when it naturally collapses and returns. In this way there is never a conflict,” Minus says.

The western style of debate means we are always poised to deliver our reply, even before our opponents have finished their statement. In this way, according to Minus, we are locked in a constant adversarial contest. This is best exemplified by our legal system, which has historically promoted the contest between opponents. But even here, he says,

things are changing. “As courts decry ‘trial by ambush’ we are moving away from the idea of the glorious victor of the courtroom battle. Disputants are also realising that success at one level may be overturned by a higher court. As the years drag on and expenses mount up, rather than there being a winner and a loser, both parties are often damaged through the process of the conflict,” Minus says.

While our courts are now adopting new techniques of mediation, for centuries in the East the aim has been to find common ground between the parties and to reconcile their differences – to find the harmony in difference. “The starting point for this process is first the realisation that we need to accept – accept that the other party has the right to a different view, that the other party’s view is right for them, that we do not need to prove that their view is wrong in order for there to be agreement,” Minus says.

Applying all this wisdom is where words stop and positive steps are taken to relate to it. The first is opening to the possibility of an alternative view of the dynamics of conflict. Then, to get on closer terms with this potential, we can reflect on some basic questions:

- Does the strong opponent need to demonstrate his strength by cutting down the weak?
- Is the opponent that walks (or runs) away really displaying weakness?
- Are you able to give up your opinion long enough to truly follow another’s point of view?
- Who has the real strength?

To grasp the ‘no hands’ approach there are a range of books on the subject, or you can try classes in martial arts such as aikido, which is one of the most popular for its practical and accessible style. It’s also good physical exercise and clears the mind. A teacher experienced in guided Zen meditation will also help to demystify the rich simplicity it encompasses, without pressure to change your lifestyle. «

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