

Followership: The Kohai Method

by Bruce Costa

If you read this column regularly, you know that I own a karate school in Perkasi, PA, in Upper Bucks County. Every day I deal with aspects of the huge amount of mystique surrounding martial arts. They seem to grant special powers to those who practice them. The truth is, martial arts teach us to understand, appreciate and implement what's already within us.

I can reveal for you, here and now, one of the most powerful tools that we teach. It can be learned and deployed regardless of age or strength. When students demonstrate this tool, I become immediately aware of their capacity to excel. It is a specific implementation of humility common in the east and too uncommon in the west. Use it, and you'll discover wonders both in the world outside and the world within you.

The Kohai Method

One of the strengths (and, as would be argued in the context of other conversations, weaknesses) of the Japanese, traditionally, is their exceptional ability to follow leaders. Followership, if you will, is generally not a glorious or talked about practice, but is as appropriate for study and as necessary for success as leadership skills are. Harvard Business Review and other noteworthy venues have published theses on the concept. In America, we often see the consequences of a lack of followership. It's gotten so bad that rather than feeling grateful for receiving information, we can feel offended for not having had that information in the first place. You may have had the experience of trying to get across a point that you know to be accurate and beneficial to your listener, often a young adult, only to be confronted with, "I know!"



Followership is the daily course for the karate student, or *karateka*. It is the *karateka's* viewpoint that the *sensei*, or teacher, honors him by taking the time to teach. In fact, the *kohai*, or junior student, bows in deference to all *sempai*, or

students senior to him. Conveniently, colored belts are worn in karate class, and we even line up according to ranking, so that the experience of all students is made plain to one another. This enables us to know, at a glance, who is sempai, and who is kohai. The kohai's task is to listen and absorb. It is disrespectful to question one's sempai, and certainly one's sensei.

While questioned learning and critical thinking are common practices in America, and have led to a generally more innovative society, I believe that on a personal level there are times in which kohai-type thinking is not only appropriate, but is the attitude resulting in the fastest, most productive, and most thorough learning experience. I try to do this whenever I am exposed to something new. By judging the lessons, as an American would, I would limit absorption, depriving myself of the maximum knowledge available to me from the instructor who, once again, is honoring me with his teaching.

There was one occasion when I was proud to have done this well. It was during a corporate fishing trip, of all things, fifteen years ago. I worked in the marketing department of a Manhattan publishing company. It was our department head's idea to create a bonding experience by getting a half dozen of us office-dwellers into cabins on a Canadian lake. While I love grand, natural places, my beliefs in minimizing harm gave me little experience in fishing. But I was also a pragmatic if hypocritical carnivore. I understood that hunting brings respectable skill and is a valuable service. I was the low man on the office totem pole, and was the odd-man out when the two-man cabins were chosen. It was my place, therefore, to be assigned to a cabin with the one guy coming from another branch of the company.

That one guy, Carl, was an accomplished writer from the editorial department. I had been reading his work since I was a teenager, and his reputation as a fisherman seemed to be worthy of equal respect to that which I'd long paid him as a writer and artist. He was eager for the chance to bag a notoriously challenging Canadian Muskellunge, or "muskie." The opportunity to learn from him as he went after his particular version of a great white whale more than countered any trepidation I had. Once I decide to learn something, I want the full experience. So, it was kohai time. (Besides, on the infinitesimal chance that I actually caught a fish, I figured I could risk the wrath of my colleagues by throwing it back.)

Carl responded to my enthusiasm as I helped him load all his gear into the cabin. As a good kohai would, I wanted to do as he did, from dawn to dusk and beyond. The first night, while my coworkers spent social time, I learned about

reels and lures, how the latter are designed, the reasoning behind them, how to rig and tie them, and techniques in using them. And then, the following morning before dawn, while everybody else slept, I learned to cast from the dock. Carl taught me many aspects of the use of different rods, and we pretended the dock was a boat as he had me draw an engaged fish away from obstacles.

“Muskie’s aren’t just strong, they’re smart,” he said. “They’ll wrap your line around the anchor chain and snap it before you know they’re onto you.” I promise you that—and I’m sure even Carl would think I’m crazy for this—if it weren’t cold, raining, and early, it wouldn’t have been as enjoyable an experience. We didn’t even catch any fish! But you know, this fact was utterly irrelevant to me. I was already at maximum absorption. I had a blast seeing the reels and lures behave exactly as Carl said they would. Heck, if I were a fish, I would have bit one.

We spent many hours on a nice boat with a local guide. On the final day, everyone had caught a fish but me. Carl had nabbed a few pickerel, but to his frustration got nowhere near his coveted muskie. Near the end of the day my line went taught and my rod bent severely. Carl knew immediately that I had nabbed a muskie. I offered him the rod, but he refused, insisting that since I had sunk the hook, the catch, and the struggle that would come with it, were rightfully mine.

I strained, heaved, and drew the huge fish near enough to the boat for all to see him. Carl shouted orders and expletives at me like a cauliflower-eared manager would from the corner of a boxing ring. The muskie was at least three feet long, yet darted about like a minnow. The next thing I knew my rump hit the deck hard as Carl unsympathetically threw up his hands. In a flash, the Muskie had wrapped my line around the anchor chain and was gone.

I admit that I felt envy that night as everyone at the dinner table enjoyed their catch but me. Sure, I would like to have caught a fish at some point during the trip. The irony had not escaped me that I was the only guy to put myself through all of that learning and was then the only guy that didn’t boat a fish. But given the chance, I’d do the same thing all over again. It was a permeating lesson in humility, our relationship with the planet, lots of other cosmic stuff and, oh yeah: fishing. Besides, I have the best darn “The One That Got Away” story of them all. I could swear that muskie was white and had little harpoons sticking out of it...

Thank you, Sensei Carl.

I hope my story offers a clear analogy to your own life experience. A kohai sensibility is of enormous value to anyone who considers himself a student, as the vast majority of us should. Consider your work life. Seldom does a company

not bear the mark of its principal, and your capacity to be aligned with the sensibilities of that principal will directly contribute to your success in the company. If you're a worker in the McCain or Obama campaign, for example, anyone who listens to the news could suggest the philosophy appropriate to your daily work. But an employer's sensibilities may also emerge subtly, as in the extra care a gift shop owner may take to select products that will cater to a specific clientele, or perhaps in the instillment of a required method of customer service at a help-desk call center. Whatever the case, an employee's contextual position in such a company will remain securely compatible by getting in tune with the owner's psyche. And the kohai method of followership provides what I've found to be the best procedure for achieving this. It works as well for a son, granddaughter, traveller, graduate assistant, or learner of any type.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that you abandon your own intuition or sensitivity. In fact, you'll undoubtedly find yourself subordinate to someone who is far from worthy of such attention at some time or another. That's okay. As a kohai, you're not abandoning yourself. Indeed, I would argue that this practice is highly self-directed in its allowance for maximum information absorption. And you can always disagree later. Good listening skills are essential for learning, and skepticism interferes with such open minded listening.

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"When I was a boy of fourteen, my father was so ignorant I could hardly stand to have the old man around. But, when I got to be twenty-one, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years." —Mark Twain

The wisest mind has something yet to learn.
— George Santayana