



Episode 475 — Traditional Training vs Successful Business | whistlekickMartialArtsRadio.com



Jeremy Lesniak:

How's it going you're tuned in to whistlekick martial arts radio episode 475. Today, we're talking about the balance and sometimes conflict between traditional training and running a successful martial arts business. I'm Jeremy Lesniak, host for this show and founder here at whistlekick. What do we do at whistlekick? Everything we do here is in support of the traditional martial arts. If you want to see everything we do, visit whistlekick.com. That's our online home. It's the place to find our store and if you check out the stuff in our store which is constantly changing and you find something you like, you can make a purchase and save some money. Show some support, some love for the show. Use the code `PODCAST15`. That will save you 15% off everything in there. This show, martial arts radio, has its own website and that is whistlekickmartialartsradio.com. We bring you this show twice a week and the goal of this show and of whistlekick overall, it's all under the heading of connecting, educating and entertaining traditional martial artists throughout the world. If you want to help the show and the work that we do here, there are tons of ways you can do that. You can make a purchase, of course, share an episode, follow us on social media, tell a friend, grab a book. We've got books at Amazon. Leave a review or anywhere that seems to make sense or support us on Patreon. If you think the new shows that we're releasing are worth 63 cents apiece, not to mention, all of the back episodes you already get access to; then consider supporting us at \$5 a month. You visit Patreon.com/whistlekick, you can sign up there and if you do, we're going to give you even more content because that's just how we do it here.



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One of the more polarizing subjects in martial arts, when you talk about teaching is whether or not teaching should be done for money and we've tackled that subject on this show a number of times but one of the nuances that come in with that conversation that we haven't talked about much is the idea of running a successful martial arts school while maintaining traditional martial arts values and training.

Some schools do both. Some choose one or the other. Some schools decide you know what, it's really hard to make a traditional school into a financial success so I'm going to focus on the training and have very low cost or even free instruction. Of course, there are other schools who focus on the financial side, they compromise what they feel even is appropriate martial arts training under the idea of well, if the school isn't here, I can't even help them at all. I can't contribute to their growth so I'd rather help them a little less but be able to stick around and keep them coming in.

I'll tell you what. I'm going to be the first person to tell you there is no right answer here. This is far too complicated but what we're going to do today, we're going to explore some of the things that are in conflict here, some of the ideas that might lead you leaning in one way or the other but my hope is that you'll at least consider that there is plenty of opportunity for doing both.

When we think about traditional training, we think about really high quality instructions and maintaining standards for the students participating. Some of those standards might be really high, might be really low but when we think about a modern successful business, we're thinking about making money, being profitable, the ability to grow, maybe have multiple locations and when both of these are done well; you can make an impact and because of the financial success have the ability to increase the number of people you're impacting and it's an interesting intersection, these two concepts.

Here's an example where it gets interesting. Students pay to attend martial arts classes but they are often expected, even required, to help with it. Maybe with assistant teaching and why is that done? Well, if you are an instructor, you know that people learn a lot from teaching. There are some schools who need that help because they can't handle the number of students that they have so is this idea in balance or is this favoring the school? I'll tell you what, I've even seen it favoring the student because sometimes that student that is being asked to teach is terrible. It's a balancing act. Some schools have you do even more. Maintaining the cleanliness of the school or being expected to solo teach. Maybe there's a rotation for Saturday classes that the school owner is not involved in and some of the higher ranks rotate through or maybe one person just has that class. That's their class. If we look at things outside of martial arts, it would be expected that that person would be paid but within martial arts, we tend to do things a little differently.

Why are these ideas in conflict? These traditional values versus money because it requires a ton of hard work and trust because either side, the students or the teachers can lose sight of what's important. As students, we have to trust our instructors. We have to have faith that they have our best interest at heart and to treat us with respect. If we don't trust that, we don't show up and as instructors, we have to trust students. We have to trust that they value what we do and they're going to contribute to the



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group education and they're going to show up and they're going to pay. Without all of those elements, a school falls apart.

Yeah, there are schools out there that take advantage of their students. Schools where money is such a priority that things fall apart. I've attended some of these schools. I didn't last long. At these schools, students are expected to do everything for the instructor simply because they are their instructor and then, on the other end of the spectrum, and I would argue, just as bad in some cases, there are schools that do none of that. Classes might be free or low cost and the instructor does all of the work. Now, in both cases, these schools are lacking. There are holes in everyone's education because of these extreme polarizations in the way the schools run.

With the money-focused school, the students don't learn how to become wonderful instructors even if they're wonderful students because the instructor doesn't model that type of behavior. If you want to see how a martial art student is going to grow up, look at their instructor. The longer they spend with their instructor, the more likely they are to become that person but in the free school, the instructor often has other priorities because they've got bills to pay, they have food or mortgage or rent. Because of that, they don't invest as much as they want to because they can't afford to. I've seen schools like this and I follow some of them on Facebook and maybe you train at or run one of them and you have to stay late at work and you suddenly have to cancel classes.

How often do you do that before people find another school or worse yet, stop training all together? Now, there is an intersection. There is an overlap and if you want to be really nerdy, you can think of it like a Venn diagram. A place where there are traditional martial arts values being taught at a high level but with a successful business format.

Now, it's difficult to describe what that intersection looks like because it can be so different and I've known schools like this that do it well and there isn't a whole lot that they have in common. I've seen them in big cities and small towns. I've seen them from all martial arts styles, part-time and full-time schools. Very small student bases and very large. Why? Because different lifestyles require different amounts of money and different instructors expect different things from their students.

A great instructor knows when to choose which thing in conflict is more important. Here's an example. Let's say a student is late paying, there are a lot of ways you can handle that but a great instructor find out why the student is late, has a conversation with them before they make a decision and they have to make a decision because what if you just let it go? If the student's taking advantage of the instructor, letting that go, not having a conversation with them, reinforces bad behavior. If our job as martial art instructors is to help guide our students, that's not helpful. It might be a good lesson, in this case, to tell them, you know what? Until you aren't willing to pay, you can't come back but what if they just lost their job? Maybe training is the most stable part of their lives. Maybe it's the thing that they need now more than ever. Maybe the instructor says you know what? Next month's on me.



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Of all the values that are necessary for a martial arts instructor trying to balance these two ideas: business success and quality traditional training, there are 3 things, I think, that are absolutely critical: Integrity, empathy and compassion. Integrity to construct and maintain high standards. Empathy to understand how others are integrating into these standards and compassion to know when an adjustment of the standards or the conduct is appropriate.

I've trained with a lot of instructors in many, many schools and for most of them, this is a really difficult balance. I know it was for me when I had a school. It was a little easier because I didn't need the money. I had a fulltime job. Was I making a bunch of money at that? No, so, I still appreciated the money. It still helped. I was right out of college and I had bills to pay but if people were late paying, which happened, I wasn't going to get thrown out on the street, wasn't going to lose my car, none of that stuff so I had it a little bit easier but I feel like it's easier to learn how to do these things today because there's so many more resources.

There are books and podcasts and videos and monthly programs and seminars on how to run a martial arts school successfully and still maintain those things that are important to you and I hope that more martial arts schools learn how to be financially successful because that allows them to help more people and if you know anything about me and if you know anything about me, you know that one of the main goals for whistlekick is that we help martial arts grow throughout the world, meaning more people are training. More successful martial arts schools lead to more marketing and better retention and thus, more people training. So, this is absolutely something that interests me.

Now, if you're a school owner and you're listening to this, I hope I haven't offended you because that's not my goal. My goal is that you take stock of where you're at and where on this spectrum or this Venn diagram your school falls. If you feel like you're too focused on money and you want to raise the standards, you can do that. If you feel like you've got that quality instruction and you're just not financially successful and you're not sure where to go, you can do that too. There's a way forward for everyone and while I can't speak to every possible situation here on this show, there are a couple things to keep in mind.

First of all, think before you act. Don't just walk in one day and say, you know, class has been free and starting tomorrow, they're a \$100 a month because you'll be left with very few students, if any, and by the same token, don't walk in a say, you know what, here's our new curriculum and belt standards and it used to take 3 to 4 years to earn a blackbelt, now it's going to be 9 because you're going to be left with very few, if any, students. Start slow, plan and get help. Talk to other people, talk to other martial arts schools. Maybe hire a consultant. There's lots of ways you can do this but it starts with wanting to change and then, taking baby steps just like in our training.

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