

Systema and Leadership

*One Tool to Enhance Foundational Leadership
Competencies*

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Systema, Leadership, and Engineering

In addition to their technical and analytical expertise, engineers require the ability to work effectively in team environments. Their colleagues are often a diverse set of individuals with different backgrounds, objectives and perspectives. In order for teams to achieve their full potential, team members should possess an understanding of self-leadership, as well as the leadership of others.

The author believes that engineers are in a unique position to serve in a leadership capacity. As an example, systems engineers are trained to utilize a holistic problem solving approach that bridges technical and social concerns. Given their capacity to facilitate progress on both fronts, they are in an excellent position to provide direction to the team and facilitate

communications between different disciplines. The development of leadership skills is therefore a key requirement for an engineer's continued growth.

The author suggests that a martial art known as Systema may help develop some of the individual's core skills, and that these skills are transferable to the demands of leadership. Systema can be described as "a complete set of concepts and training components that enhance one's life" (Vasiliev, 2003). Its unique learning methodology based on challenging drills and exercises pose unique intrapersonal and interpersonal situations. Engineers may benefit from this kinaesthetic training by demonstrating increased resiliency to stress, a positive learning attitude, and adaptability in their communication style depending on their audience. Skeptical readers should not be mistaken: leadership attributes take time to develop. The use of martial arts as a leadership development tool is a long-term approach that demands consistency, reflection, and patience.

The value of martial arts training lies in its ability to provide students an environment to train intrapersonal skills. There appears to be few opportunities where adults can continue this personal development without formalized educational sessions. In particular, intrapersonal competencies (i.e., self development) are among the most difficult to train, but are critical for strong leadership abilities.

Defining Leadership: A Competency Framework

The definition of leadership, from the author's perspective, can be difficult to clearly describe. Literature suggests that "there is no reasonable agreement on what traits or behaviours are leadership traits or behaviours" (Barker, 2004). However, there is ongoing research by personality expert and leadership theorist Robert Hogan that suggests that some key

competencies can be identified. This article draws primarily on Hogan's work to help clarify what leadership may entail.

Hogan and Warrenfeltz, in their paper on the modern manager (Hogan and Warrenfeltz, 2003), suggest a model (hereafter referred to as 'the HW model') that encompasses the majority of competency models developed thus far. Hogan, in a paper with Kaiser, notes that these competencies are supported by meta-analytic evidence; they are highly relevant to occupational performance (Hogan and Kaiser, 2005). This model includes four major categories, each of which is made up of subcomponents (Hogan and Kaiser, 2005):

1. The Intrapersonal Domain
2. The Interpersonal Domain
3. The Business Domain
4. The Leadership Domain

Briefly, these domains are skills that are progressively developed (i.e., intrapersonal skills likely developed in preteen years, interpersonal skills developed in teen years, etc.) and these domains are organized in terms of increasing trainability (i.e., the intrapersonal domain is hardest to train, while the leadership domain is easiest) .

Intrapersonal competencies are associated with self-control, self-esteem and attitudes toward rules and procedures. On the other hand, interpersonal competencies involve role-play skills. Individuals highly competent in the interpersonal domain are skilled at predicting how others respond, managing

Text adapted from Hogan and Warrenfeltz, with the order of domains altered from the original order.

It should be noted that Hogan and Kaiser place the leadership domain as the last domain competency, while Hogan and Warrenfeltz placed the business domain as the last competency. This article utilizes the order presented by Hogan and Kaiser in accordance with their assertion that leadership domain is the last skill to be developed.

expectations, and tailoring their actions to achieve the desired effect. The business domain typically involves skills specific to one's profession, and is therefore not addressed by martial arts training. Finally, the leadership domain involves a variety of skills related to recruitment, motivating others, and persistence. This article will focus on the applicability of martial arts to the first two domains: intrapersonal and interpersonal.

Systema as an Intrapersonal and Self Awareness Development Tool

Systema is unique compared to other sports or martial arts because the freedom in its drill based learning system allows students to alter the parameters of their own learning. In doing so, this makes intrapersonal and interpersonal skill development a central aspect of training. In addition to learning the objective of the training drill, students are also learning how to train.

As an example, for partner-based drills, students can vary the resistance, speed, and sophistication of the drill to suit the comfort level of themselves and their partner. This requires students to be sensitive on multiple levels. First, students must assess their own skill compared to their partner(s), and adjust accordingly to maximize learning from the drill. Secondly, students must also assess their own self-control and emotional stability, as well as their partners. Both intra- and interpersonal competencies are required to make these assessments. Given the foundational status of these competencies in the HW model, martial arts training becomes transferable to work and/or social environments. This article discusses five concepts that may describe why Systema offers these benefits:

1. Immediate Feedback
2. Identity and Reputation

3. Normalization of Attitudes
4. Open Class Structure
5. Non Competitive Environment

Immediate Feedback Regulates Proper Training Attitudes

Partner drills can also improve one's capacity for self-awareness through immediate feedback. Pryor, a behavioural biologist, notes that the immediacy of feedback in a training session is critical to reinforcing correct behaviour (Pryor, 1999). In the author's experience, feedback sessions in corporate environments often occur in the form of annual performance reviews. While annual feedback offers important workplace feedback, the author believes that the immediate feedback provided in martial arts training has a complementary role. In cases where negative emotional states overtake a person, immediate feedback allows them to recognize their thoughts and behaviour, thereby allowing them to develop corrective strategies.

In Systema, feedback from training partners on one's emotional state is often encouraged and provided immediately because it is instantly visible in the student's performance in the drill. For example, training can become unsafe as soon as tempers flare; movements become unreasonably forceful and/or inappropriately fast. Discouraged students do not make an effort to learn, or appear uninterested, compromising the abilities of their training partner to benefit from the training drills as well. Therefore, it is in the interests of all students to keep each other in an optimal "learning zone", where their martial art skills and intrapersonal competencies are challenged, but not excessively.

Bridging Students' Identity with their Reputation

The discussion of self awareness can be expanded with the concept of identity versus reputation. When students receive feedback from their training partners, it helps them contrast their identity—how they think about themselves—with their reputation—how others think about them (Hogan and Kaiser, 2005). This is important to leadership skills because Hogan and Warrenfeltz note that “self-ratings of leadership performance are poorly correlated with actual leadership performance”.

Systema training allows students to easily discuss when deviations from a calm and stable psyche are detected (i.e., loss of self-control or impacts on self-esteem). If these deviations can be detected during Systema classes, it is argued that these same deviations will be detected in the workplace. In other words, workplace stressors can trigger the same loss of self-control or self-esteem as a training drill and, if detected by colleagues, has the potential to damage the individual's reputation.

As an example, Systema training requires students to develop responses congruent with their partners' in terms of speed and power. If a training partner performs the drill with a low amount of force and speed, the student must respond in kind. However, this is only possible when students operate with a calm mind. Students who are stressed by the training drill are more likely to respond quickly and forcefully to an imagined level of threat rather than what the situation requires.

Hogan and Kaiser have summarized literature on implicit leadership theories which discuss what characteristics people look for in their leaders (Hogan and Kaiser, 2005). Four key themes were identified:

Integrity: “Can we trust you not to abuse the privilege of authority?”

Decisiveness: Making good decisions in a timely way.

Competence: “Expertise is needed for legitimacy and respect from the team”.

Vision: Explaining the purpose, meaning and significance of the team’s undertakings; clarifies roles and goals.

In a professional setting, it is reasonable to expect that team members require each other to make competent decisions, and be trustworthy, by possessing competence and integrity. The author suspects that failure to maintain stable intrapersonal competencies is likely to compromise an individual’s trustworthiness as viewed by their colleagues, and may also impair their ability to make competent decisions. Therefore, Systema training offers students a means to become aware of discrepancies between identity and reputation through immediate feedback. Furthermore, this is also an exercise in tactfully providing useful feedback to others, and learning when it is appropriate to do so.

Normalizing Students’ Attitudes

Previous sections have discussed the relevance of partner-based training drills to maintain intrapersonal stability and develop coping mechanisms. However, Systema training is not limited to stabilizing a student’s existing mindset. It may change students’ attitudes to enhance learning. For example, Hogan and Warrenfeltz note that:

Curiously, it is the people with average self confidence who are easiest to educate. They are self critical and willing to believe negative feedback, but they have enough self-confidence to be willing to try new ways of thinking and behaving. They will listen to criticism and feedback and internalize it.

Students that have excessive or minimal self-confidence tend to plateau in their training skill and must become aware of these attitudes in order to progress. Self-confidence in this case serves only as an example. Decisiveness and risk averseness are also attributes that are important to normalize in martial arts contexts.

As indicated above, students that normalize their behaviour are able to achieve their training goals more efficiently. Systema's use of immediate and varied feedback helps students identify erroneous attitudes faster than other approaches. Individuals that are overconfident can easily, in the span of a split second, be humbled by a beginner. Similarly, individuals who lack confidence in their abilities can astound themselves when they properly apply principles of leverage and weight. In both cases, students are more likely to move into an optimal learning zone.

Therefore, the rapid cycles of trial and error in the drill-based process, along with the inherent variation from new training partners, provides students a high likelihood of receiving humbling or motivating feedback. With practice, advanced students become well-versed in identifying these characteristics and are able to provide the necessary encouragement or corrective feedback to normalize their partner's learning attitude.

The Benefits of an Open Class Structure

To complement adaptive partner-based drills, typical Systema classes utilize an open structure to enhance development of intra- and interpersonal competencies. When students are not segregated by weight, experience or gender, students have the opportunity to work with a wide range of people, just as engineers are likely to encounter in the workplace. This tends to promote an atmosphere of learning, and frees senior students from the burden of defending a higher belt or rank

against newer students. In fact, this structure even allows newcomers to teach senior students new ideas and concepts, which can promote an attitude of humility.

Therefore, students not only benefit from working against a realistic mix of students at different levels of skill, strength, size and weight, but also of different temperaments. Students must:

1. Maintain interpersonal interactions without compromising intrapersonal competencies. This is inherently difficult when the training drill is challenging.
2. Rapidly adopt new behavioural strategies when their roles are exchanged with their training partners during a training drill.
3. Adapt again when they encounter a new training partner, both in terms of physical differences (e.g. size, strength, flexibility), skill differences (e.g. accommodating differences in ability to maximize learning from the drill) and intra/interpersonal differences of the new partner (e.g. expectations of speed and force, resilience to stress, emotional state).

This process of adaptation occurs frequently in each Systema class, and is perhaps a form of high speed adaptation training that can develop interpersonal competencies.

The operating principle behind these drills is that they allow all students to share and understand each other's experiences. By exchanging roles in a training drill, it is possible to know what others might have felt because one will experience similar conditions. This role-play ability is the basis of the interpersonal domain in the HW model. As the drills can often utilize games where students must challenge each other, the role-play characteristics of interpersonal competencies are reinforced. Students test hypotheses regarding their partner's

reactions, and adjust their own behaviour accordingly. Again, this demands focus and self-control in order to be effective.

Rarely in real-world circumstances do team members exchange roles or positions in the workplace, nor would it be feasible. However, the practice of this skill in a martial arts setting may have value in developing the groundwork for interpersonal skill. The transferability of these interactions to the workplace is believed to be a useful avenue to consider.

Non Competitive Environment

One key point in the Systema learning methodology is the absence of competition in training. Systema training focuses on overcoming fear and maintaining a calm, stable psyche. Students study the effects of breathing, tension and relaxation, body awareness, movement, and massage on the psychology of themselves and others. Students usually do not wear protective gear (e.g. gloves, pads), but instead learn to train within their abilities. Determining one's abilities is sometimes a lesson in itself. These choices strengthen an atmosphere of self-development and self-reflection. The absence of protective equipment requires students to deliver strikes with precision and care. The focus on breathing, tension, and emotions forces students to look inward rather than outward.

Competition can reverse some of these training characteristics. Aggressiveness is often a desirable trait when striving to win, but can lead to carelessness and injuries. In some cases, scaring others is encouraged as it allows competitors to gain a competitive psychological advantage. Jealousy and pride can appear more easily as wins and losses are accrued. Ultimately, a holistic humanitarian perspective is lost when practitioners endeavour to become special individuals. In essence, the strong defeat the weak, rather than help the weak become stronger. This has a detrimental effect on an individual's ability to lead. Leaders should strive to develop a cooperative

atmosphere built on trust. Each team member should feel safe to share their experience with the team and develop their strengths. Competitive workplace environments may result in strained workplace relationships, and a lack of effective communication between team members.

Therefore, Systema classes are a useful model for individuals to develop positive learning and working relationships. The open class structure, non-competitive environment, and sensitivity demanded of oneself and others allows students to gain a martial arts perspective of cooperation and self-development. Overcoming the stressors presented in Systema training offers students a means to apply the same intrapersonal tools to stressors outside the gym, because these core competencies are applicable in all aspects of life.

Conclusion

Systema training offers an approach where students have the opportunity to continuously increase their threshold to stress while maintaining intrapersonal characteristics such as emotional stability and self-control. As a student improves their self-control and gains awareness of incongruities between their identity and reputation through feedback from their training partners, they cement the foundational skills of leadership and further protect their reputation by engendering trust.

Continued practice in Systema may increase the speed with which students can adapt to new interpersonal demands. This has direct developmental benefits to foundational leadership attributes in the form of interpersonal competencies. In the end, these skills will develop the fundamental building blocks for an effective and trusted leader. [ELR

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