

Conceptual Model for Employee Training as an Extension of Traditional Martial Arts Scaffolding

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Abstract

This paper introduces a conceptual framework for the structuring of employee training within the context of American Kenpo. This framework is referred to as Kenpo-style Training. Conceptual parallels are drawn from the long-standing management models of Arnold's Triangle and Structured Decision-Making. The model proposes a three-stage approach to employee capability: Fixed Response, What-if Analysis, and Formulation

Keywords: Management, Training, Kenpo, Karate, Decision Making, Curriculum, Scaffolding



Available online
www.bmdynamics.com
ISSN: 2047-7031

INTRODUCTION

It is a given that new employees must be trained at their job (Herzberg, 1968). This training is a conceptually complex process (Hollingsworth, 1996, Cozens et al., 1997, Lee et al., 2013), resulting in vastly different outcomes depending on an undetermined number of factors (Martocchio, 1997). As a result, it is important to consistently seek new metaphors for approaching the process of employee training (Nietzsche, 1883, Bendegem, 2000, Sims, 2003). One method of consideration would involve considering one culmination of eastern martial tradition: American Kenpo. This paper presents a conceptual model that distills a basic principle of the teaching of modern martial arts and applies it to employee training.

Kenpo-style Training emphasizes a three-stage approach to skill mastery (Parker, 1987). In Phase 1, Fixed Response, the student is expected to master a rote series of moves. In Phase 2, What-if Analysis, the student is expected to be able to provide minor adjustments to the moves to complement a wide variety of situations. In Phase 3, Formulation, the student is expected to be able to use the rote series of moves and subsequent adaptability as a base for a broader and more comprehensive ability to respond to new situations.

BRIEF HISTORY OF KENPO

American Kenpo (Also known as Kenpo Karate or Parker's Kenpo) is a style of martial arts developed by Ed Parker from 1954 to 1990 (Williams, 1999). Parker's intention was to provide a more western-accessible structure for Kenpo. Kenpo itself is a broad category of martial art with conflicting origins, ostensibly deriving from Okinawan traditions, Japanese Karate, and Shao Lin Kung Fu and developed in the 1940's ("Shorinji Kempo", 2013).

Kenpo literally means "Fist Method" and represents a counter to the traditional Karate ("empty hand") technique. The symbolism includes the initial presumption that a fighter's main weapons ought to be their body, but it differs from some karate traditions by placing a much higher emphasis on the resolving conflict directly through pragmatic means. American Kenpo attempts to follow two conceptualizations of representing the body as a weapon, characterizing the student as "weapon" and the opponent as "target" (Parker, 1960).

This style of martial arts then, has as its ultimate goal the development of a mindset in the student such that a series of well-practiced movements will result in a free-form adaptation to surrounding external stimuli (Parker, 1987). In other words, "reaction can beat action if the target reached last is the first thing moved" (attributed to Ed Parker in Lacerte, 2010). However, there is a fundamental problem with this

goal, and that is the inability to teach beginning students how to move with practiced ease, at full speed, and with an ability to improvise to situations.

Kenpo solves this problem by including the traditional dichotomy between hard and soft styles. In a hard style series of moves, the moves are large, brisk, and rigid. This rigidity helps the process of teaching by providing a fixed set of metrics for identifying when a student is performing correctly. However, a rigid mindset is incapable of adapting to new situations and would fail in most real-life situations.

The solution, in American Kenpo, is the application of a three-stage process of learning for any given series of moves (Parker, 1987). In the first stage (Fixed Response), the student is expected to rigidly copy the exact movements demonstrated by an expert and progression to Black Belt implies that they have a basic understanding of how to complete any of a fixed set of movement sequences. In the process, they are also expected to move to the second stage (What-if Analysis) and begin asking “what-if” questions. These questions imply not just understanding the rigid series of moves, but the understanding that the move cannot work the same way every time within the vagaries of real-world circumstances. Finally, they are expected to progress to the third stage (Formulation): from a fixed knowledge of the moves to understanding the fluidity and allowing adaptation, combination of sequences, and application to new situations they have not encountered before.

KENPO-STYLE CONCEPTUAL MODEL FOR INUSTRY EDUCATION

Employee skill training has always been a complex process. When the expert teaches the novice how to perform a task, it is necessarily in terms of what the novice already knows (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). This means that the beginning of the process needs to be in rote memorization, such as the location of buttons on a point-of-sale terminal (POS), specific steps to resolve simple customer complaints, or how to prepare materials in the method determined by the expert.

Over time, a novice is expected to not just master the things they have been shown, but to be able to extrapolate to similar problems (Petrou et al., 2018). For example, the buttons on a POS may change during a sale or as new stock is added and removed. The employee should be able to solve not just simple and common customer complaints, but also to understand how to modify the solution to address variations in the common problems (Chen et al., 2013). Alternately, the employee should be able to improve on the methods within their specific purview to suit their style of working condition, becoming more effective or efficient over time.

This leads to the final stage of employee training where the employee is both capable and empowered to handle new situations (Camps et al., 2015). They may be able to ring up customers whose purchase is outside of the scope of the strict POS layout. They may be elevated to the position where they use their understanding of the common and simple problems to be able to research and solve novel customer problems. Or, they may be given the responsibility of developing, improving, and assessing the methodology they were previously performing by rote.

The result of this progression is a conceptual model of employee training that closely mirrors the American Kenpo method of portraying student learning into three stages. This method works well in martial arts, because it does not classify each student into a single category. Instead, they are able to progress in each individual sequence of Kenpo moves. This same severability should be applied to employee training (Zimmerman, 2016), such that an employee whose responsibilities include all three examples above should be recognized in different stages of mastery based on their experience, exposure, or innate skillset.

TIERED MODEL OF DECISION MAKING

There is a long-standing conceptual model of decision making that exists within the structure of organizational design, known as the Anthony Triangle (Anthony, 1965). A martial variant of this model breaks decision making roles into three categories: Operational, Tactical, and Strategic level decisions (Davis, 1979, Shivakumar, 2014). The intent is to distinguish between both the scope and the timeframe of decisions. Operational decisions are made within the context of moment to moment, or day to day operations, largely affecting primarily the decision maker. Tactical decisions are made within the context of planning for the short-term future (depending on the industry, perhaps a few days to a few weeks), and affect a small number of people beyond the decision maker. Strategic decisions are made with a long-term time frame (months or years, depending on the industry) and affect a large number of people beyond the decision maker.

Considering Anthony's Triangle regarding the proposed conceptual model of Kenpo-style employee training produces an analogue series of categories, although on a smaller scale. The Fixed Response stage employee is making operational decision on the level of "how do I follow instructions in this situation?" The What-if Analysis stage employee is making tactical decisions on the level of "how can the instructions I know be modified to address the current situation?" The Formulation stage employee can solve problems in real time, based on an abundance of experience, using a fluid understanding of the situation.

This corollary establishes the proposed conceptual model within the framework of existing conceptual models. It is a smaller scale, individually oriented refactor of the existing framework. The Operational, Tactical, Strategic Decision-Making model is an oversimplification of real-world practices that is more properly a scale rather than a series of rigid categories. This also works well as an analogue to the proposed conceptual model by acknowledging that not all roles exclusively act within specific categories.

STRUCTURED PROBLEMS MODEL

Another existing model is the Structured/Unstructured problems model (Dijkstra, Dahl, & Hoare, 1972, Mintzberg, Raisinghani, Theoret, 1976). Rather than framing the model within the context of the decision maker, this model is framed around the decision itself. The model presents a structured problem as a narrowly defined problem domain with a fixed solution domain such that the correct solution for any problem is easily verified. An unstructured problem is an infinitely large problem domain with an infinitely large solution domain such that the correctness of any solution is not demonstrable.

In practice, this model is effective at classifying problems only with the presupposition that there is a continuum and those definitions are the extreme points of the continuum. Problems in the middle are more likely to have some variation of a relatively narrow problem domain, a very large solution domain, with a readily available ability to demonstrate the effectiveness of any given solution. However, there is a specific category within this framework of the semi-structured problem (Lakshmanan et al. 2015). A semi-structured problem has an infinitely large problem domain, an infinitely large solution domain such that the correctness of any solution is not demonstrable, save that operational constraints are imposed to limit the size of the problem and solution domains and artificial metrics are introduced to provide upper bounds on the inability of any given solution.

The structured/unstructured continuum is loosely correlated with the Operational, Tactical, Strategic decision-making model (Livani, 2013). Operational decision makers are largely tasked with solving structured problems and Strategic decision makers largely face unstructured problems. The semi-structured problem is frequently presented to the tactical decision makers who can perform a large variety of solutions, but most are prohibited by organizational policy or directive.

In the proposed Kenpo-style of employee instruction, it would be analogous to say that the Fixed Response stage employee should be tasked with solving structured problems, the What-if Analysis stage employee should be tasked with solving semi-structured problem given an appropriate constraint set, and the Formulation stage employee is capable of addressing unstructured problems.

CONCLUSION

The proposed conceptual model for employee training is therefore that all employees begin by learning problem solving in the manner of the Fixed Response level of Kenpo training. They are trained in specific tasks with a specific set of steps to gain a solution. Once the employee has mastered the routine of Fixed Response problem solving, they should be expected to move into What-if Analysis. They should be prepared to handle variations on problem solving, or to begin to address the limited problem domains constrained for them by their trainer or supervisor. Finally, the employee should be expected to move into Formulation problem solving. In this stage, they have gained the experience to be able to solve new, unstructured problems with relatively the same expertise they previously were able to solve structured problems.

It is expected that with the prevalence of level-based, martial arts-styled grading systems for tasks such as Project Management, there is room for a methodology that presents employee training in a similar light. Regardless of the metaphor used in presenting the material (for example, "leveling up" as a video game metaphor is likely no more or less relatable than achieve belt colors), employee training management developers should experiment with developing a model that expects a continual improvement in employee skill and problem solving ability and is consistently pushing them to eventually attain a Formulation stage mastery of their duties.

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