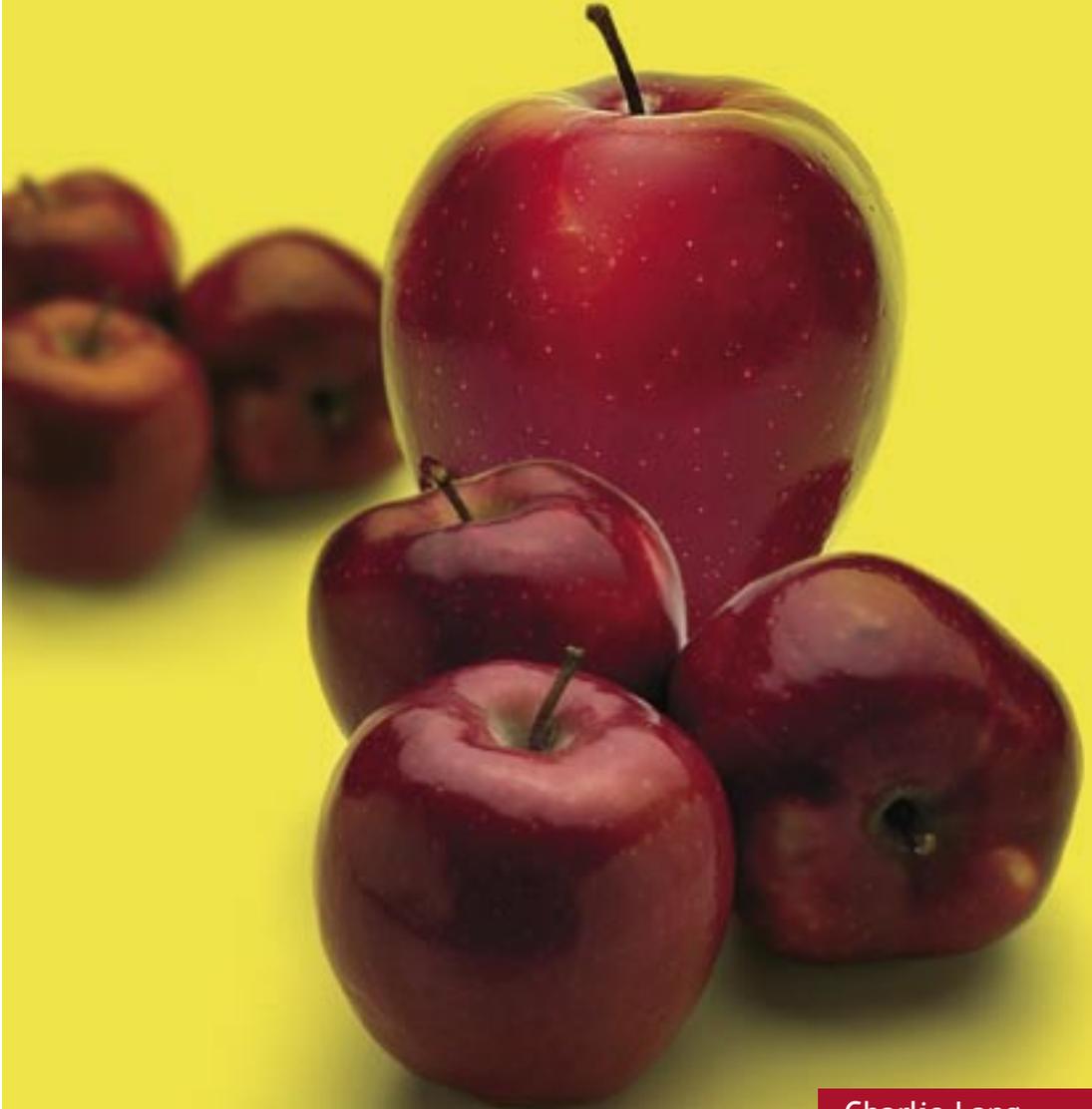


Excerpt (Chapter 9) of  
"The Groupness Factor"

# The Groupness Factor

How to Achieve a **Corporate Success Culture**  
through **First-Class Leadership**



Charlie Lang

## Chapter 9: Tools for Becoming a First-Class Leader

### Karate by PowerPoint

Imagine that you have been asked to participate in a karate kumite (1:1 combat) competition. Imagine further that you were given only 3 months to prepare. Let's assume that you have only heard of karate but never practiced it in any way. You may or may not be a particularly sporty person. You may or may not be fit, flexible, strong, etc. Just imagine the situation as realistically as possible.

What would you do? You are not permitted to decline participation; you were given only time and some resources to prepare yourself.

Let's look at some options:

- You do nothing, just go into the combat and see how it goes. If you are a fairly fit person and had your share of fights as an adolescent, you might think that this is enough for you to compete.
- You try to learn from a couple of books on karate.
- You go to a karate university where a professor gives a lecture on the different aspects of karate, its history, the effectiveness of certain techniques, etc.
- You go to a training called "Understand Karate in 3 Months." When you reach the classroom, you sit down and listen to the presenter, who uses a PowerPoint presentation to illustrate his points. You are supposed to come for a 1-hour session every week for the next 3 months. All sessions are set in the same format, i.e., an experienced 3rd Dan Sensei (black-belt karate

master) shares his knowledge and wisdom on karate using modern presentation tools.

If you follow any or a combination of these methods, how well will you be able to perform in the competition? Of course, it depends. It depends on your ability to learn using these methods and your talent, as well as your physical condition.

Apart from that, how developed will your technique be? How well will you perform with an opponent? In all of the options above, you never actually practiced what you learned or dealt with the unexpected moves of an opponent.

Perhaps you can already tell where I want to take you with this analogy. Whether you want to learn karate or piano or English or leadership, the principles of learning seem to be pretty much the same.

It is easy to see why, using any of the methods above without actual training, a beginner won't have a good chance to win a karate match. However, in the case of leadership or executive development, these methods seem to be the most widely accepted and applied.

How do sports people learn a sport? How do musicians learn an instrument? Of course, basic theories must be understood first. True learning, however, is acquired through actually practicing skills under expert guidance, usually achieved in a highly interactive and experiential training environment. Top performers get top individualized guidance to assure maximum performance.

Why should it be any different when it comes to leadership development? Because we believe in "natural leaders"? Well, yes, great talent and a conducive upbringing are always helpful. However, natural talents – Tiger Woods, for instance – certainly need their fair share of training and coaching to remain world-class.

Truly effective leadership programs are designed in a way that respects each participant's background and experience, and builds mostly on the strengths of each individual while overcoming any weaknesses that could hold back overall performance. Such workshops are highly experiential, fostering self-learning opportunities. Rather than "role play", they include "real play" whenever possible.

Furthermore, I strongly encourage you to include a follow-up coaching, mentoring or conferencing to assure that the participants don't fall back into their old habits as soon as the seminar is over.

How did you learn what you know about leadership? How is it working for you? What do you need to know in order to decide how you can develop your performance and effectiveness in the best possible way?

## **Learning and development options**

What are the possible options for developing your leadership skills? Figure 7 gives you an overview considering time and cost.

### **1. Learning from books**

**Talent develops in tranquility, character in the full current of human life.**

*- Johann W. v. Goethe*

You are reading a book right now and I trust you have learned something useful from the previous chapters. Will you be able to apply everything you read in this book in real life? How much of what you have learned do you think you can truly implement without any assistance?

It will probably depend on:

- How much you already know
- Your experience in leadership
- Your capability to convert what you learn into actual behavior

While reading books are very useful in expanding our horizon, providing inspiration and developing our intellect, it has limitations in significantly changing our actual behavior.

## **2. Teleclasses and webinars (online learning)**

Teleclasses are very commonly used for coach training but do not seem to be very widely used for management or leadership development.

How does a teleclass work? The facilitator arranges for a conference line, which is accessed by all the teleclass participants using any telephone. The facilitator combines his own presentation and interaction with the participants. Typically, the size of a teleclass is limited to approximately 20 participants to allow sufficient interaction between facilitator and participants. Teleclasses usually last for around 1 to 3 hours.

Webinars could be considered enhanced teleclasses because they provide online presentations and file access aside from the voice communication. This is particularly useful for learning complex technical matters.

The benefits of the teleclasses and webinars are:

- Relatively low cost
- Convenience – participants can join from wherever they are

- Compact learning units – participants can try to apply their new learning immediately after the class

The weaknesses of these concepts are:

- Lack of extensive discussion due to limited time
- Unlike in classroom settings, testing new behaviors in a safe environment is very limited
- Rapport among all participants is difficult to establish if the seminars are isolated events
- Risk of technical problems, especially for webinars

### **3. Mentoring**

In mentoring, usually a more senior leader is available and partly responsible for the development of a manager. This concept works particularly well if the following conditions are met:

- The mentor has high leadership competence.
- The mentor is from a different division that is not too closely linked with the mentee's.
- The mentor has high coaching competence.

The challenge for the mentor is to keep a neutral position so that his own bias doesn't interfere with the development of the mentee. Also, to be truly effective, the mentor must not only give advice, but must be able to stimulate the mentee's own thinking, granting him more ownership of his learning. This increases the probability of subsequent behavioral changes.

## 4. Training

Leadership training is usually done via 1- to 3-day workshops and aims at helping attendees develop their leadership skills.

I experienced and conducted many professional development trainings aimed at improving soft skills such as leadership skills, presentation skills, speaking skills, sales skills, etc. After such training sessions, participants frequently leave these trainings all hyped up. They learned a few new skills, have the chance to apply them in a safe environment, and are determined to put into practice what seems appropriate to them.

However, if you check on these participants a few weeks later, you will find that only less than a fifth of what was taught was actually put into practice and became a truly new behavior. Considering the rather high cost of these courses and the time off work, this seems to be a very disappointing result. It's no wonder then that more and more HR managers start doubting the ROI of soft-skills training.

Being aware of this problem, an increasing number of training providers suggest one to two follow-up trainings, which certainly help to improve the effectiveness of formal training. However, the problem with this approach is that the trainees usually have different backgrounds, experiences, knowledge, etc. and face different situations in their work. The larger the group, the less possible it is to take these variances into consideration. As a consequence, I strongly recommend to my clients that they should combine training with an individual follow-up coaching, which might be slightly more expensive, but markedly increases the effectiveness of the training program. If the group involved is very large, I suggest a train-the-coach program to reduce the total cost of the program while maintaining its effectiveness.

## 5. Internal and external coaching

**Executive coaches are not for the meek. They're for people who value unambiguous feedback. All coaches have one thing in common, it's that they are ruthlessly results-oriented.**

*- FAST COMPANY Magazine*

How is internal coaching different from mentoring? The key differences are:

- The internal coach received formal coaching training.
- The internal coach is usually not in a line management position.
- The internal coach's main job involves coaching.

These lead to a number of advantages of internal coaching:

- Less risk of bias
- Higher coaching competency – masterful coaching requires a lot of experience and practice
- Easier attainment of a high level of confidentiality and trust
- Usually more frequent coaching sessions than with a mentor

The same advantages are achieved with an external coach. In fact, for an external coach it is even easier to avoid bias and have a very open communication. Also, the fact that an external coach is not part of the organization gives him the advantage of seeing things better

from an outsider's perspective, which is frequently necessary in leadership coaching.

However, because hiring an external coach is relatively more expensive, coaching sessions with external coaches are usually fewer than with internal coaches. On the other hand, training and maintaining internal coaches usually require a certain company size to make it economical.

## **6. Universities and business schools**

Fortunately, more and more universities and business schools recognize the need for leadership education and integrate lectures on leadership in their curriculum. This means that in the future, it will be possible to have more people who are better prepared for leadership roles.

Is it worthwhile to go back to university to acquire an additional degree or diploma for formal leadership education? I believe that this way of learning is quite time- and money-consuming, and I suggest it only for people who would feel good about getting another formal degree or diploma. So far, industries have not made formal leadership education a condition for employment or promotion.

## **7. Trial and error**

I learned a huge chunk of my leadership skills through trial and error. So now that I've been there and had the chance to acquire skills through other methods, I can identify the major pitfalls of relying solely on experience. I *do not* recommend this method of learning because:

- Until the leader reaches a sufficient level of competence, there will be many negative and costly consequences of having an inefficient leader.

- Relying on trial and error often leads to massive frustration of both the leader and the group members.
- Relying on trial and error can destroy a well-functioning organization and create a lot of dis-groupness.

Let me illustrate this using one of my previous client's experiences. The previous leader of an international team left his company and was replaced by a new manager from outside the organization. During his 8 years with the company, the former international team manager achieved considerable growth within his area of influence and left a well-functioning international team with a strong constructive groupness as his legacy.

The new international team manager tried to put the old manager's achievements in a bad light by exaggerating small problems that still existed after the previous manager left. He felt that the previous manager was too relaxed with his international country managers and introduced new rules and regulations for better control. As a consequence, the country managers, all rather senior and experienced leaders, felt disempowered and demotivated under the new manager's leadership and started to spend a lot of time calling and emailing each other to complain about what was going on. This was dis-groupness par excellence! Some of them even decided to leave the company out of frustration with the new leadership style.

The managing director who employed the new international team manager made a classic mistake. He led the new manager in exactly the same way as the previous manager: with very little supervision right from Day 1. He did not even elicit feedback from some key subordinates of the new manager to check his acceptance. Hence, unknown to the managing director, the situation became increasingly difficult.

Unfortunately, this process was unduly disguised by an improving economy, hence the financial results did not reflect the internal problems of the team.

When I was called in, the situation had already escalated. My task was to help the international team manager achieve better teamwork with his country managers. There were a number of difficulties I needed to overcome:

- It was not the international team manager who suggested an executive coach – it was the HR director who became aware of the difficult situation.

**Solution:** I needed to make the international team manager willing to work with me.

- The international team manager had great deficiencies in leadership skills and traits, in particular. His level of integrity required considerable development if we were to achieve a true permission to lead his team. When I was called in, that permission was completely lost.

**Solution:** The new international team manager needed much fast-track development to become a reasonably good leader.

- It was necessary to involve the country managers in the change process. Only when the international team manager indicated his commitment to undergo true change and self-development was it appropriate to get the country managers into the boat. They had to understand that their cooperation and support was needed to help their boss change.

**Solution:** We organized a couple of group workshops to align the ideas of the international team manager with those

of the country managers so that a common direction could be established.

After I saw the degree of entanglement of this case, I set some clear conditions before I could commit to this difficult project:

- The international team manager should be willing to cooperate.
- There should be symbolic back-up from the managing director.
- There should be sufficient time and budget to help the new team manager develop the necessary competencies.
- The country managers should be involved in the process.

How could this company have fared better, avoided damage and achieved better financial results? The choice this company made was certainly not ideal for this kind of important leadership position. From the company's point of view, the new manager seemed to be a good choice as he was very eligible for the job, that is, he had a good education (MBA from a renowned business school) and relevant industry experience. What was not sufficiently considered was the candidate's suitability for this kind of leadership position. Also, little importance was given to the cultural fit of this manager.

Aside from paying more attention on the soft factors during recruitment, a good mentoring or coaching program during the start-up period would have revealed these deficiencies, and appropriate action could have been taken before too much damage was created.

I am aware of the difficulties involved in finding the right talent for leadership positions. It is not a sin to employ people who are not ideally suited to a position, but it is a grave error to ignore the possible consequences and not to provide appropriate start-up support for new executives. Not only would a professional program help speed up

the productivity of the new leader, but it would also reveal the true capacity of the new executive and areas that need development. How did you learn what you know about leadership? How is it working for you? What do you need to know in order to decide how you can develop your performance and effectiveness in the best possible way?

# The Groupness Factor

## How to Achieve a Corporate Success Culture through First-Class Leadership

Have you ever wondered:

- Why some leaders are more successful than others?
- Why people who were once friends kill each other in a civil war?
- Why people stick to organizations despite better opportunities elsewhere?

Charlie Lang, a former senior executive and now one of the leadership experts in Asia, discovered the groupness factor in early 2004. Through his expertise and wisdom as an executive coach and mentor, Charlie recognized the power of this entirely natural but almost unknown factor, and how first-class leaders intuitively use it.

This groundbreaking book aims at helping leaders understand how they can fully and consciously make use of this influential factor to achieve first-class leadership for outstanding business results.

**"A great guide for building collaborative leadership in today's rapidly changing world."**

- Marshall Goldsmith, considered by Forbes to be one of the five most-respected executive coaches, is co-editor or author of 19 books, including *The Leader of the Future and Coaching for Leadership*.

**"I enjoyed the book and the anecdotal style. There are lots of suggestions and distinctions that leaders will find useful. *The Groupness Factor* may well create a stimulus for them to look at themselves, their behavior and quality of leadership."**

- Mick Bennett, former Regional Manager of Hewitt's Asia-Pacific operation, is co-author of *Leadership and Talent in Asia: How the Best Employers Deliver Extraordinary Performance*.

**"The groupness factor is a very useful concept for anyone leading groups of people. The book provides new insight into why groups do what they do, with practical tips for using groupness to create effective teams."**

- Angela Spaxman is the Founding President of the Hong Kong Coaching Community, Director of Spaxman Limited and a practicing Career and Management Coach.