

Developing a Personal Approach to Consulting

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Abstract

In a personal narrative, Po Lindvall, a leading Swedish mental training consultant, describes the route to his discovery of sport psychology and mental training. He discusses the combination of important elements of Eastern and Western philosophies that have been integrated into his work with Olympic athletes and business professionals. Po believes in the value of embracing a learning experience that never ends and living with quality and he discusses how we can accomplish these goals.

Origins of Value

When I was a teenager, I read many books about Zen, Samurais, Bushido and also Western philosophy. My thoughts covered a lot of ground and I questioned the way we are supposed to live: go to school, do our military service (at least in Sweden), work, get a pension and then wait to die. Doesn't sound very interesting, does it? I found other goals: to become a martial arts instructor and to teach people not only a "noble art of self defense" but to help them believe in themselves and be stronger physically and mentally. The one philosophy that attracted my attention from the beginning was that you would never stop learning. You could always improve your skills: physical, technical, teaching, as well as mental skills. A learning experience that never ends...this appealed to my curiosity and was an alternative to the expected lifestyle.

In martial arts there were many things I learned over the years; some were unconsciously learned, others were very clear to me. Three things were strongly evi-

dent. First, the way the martial arts instructor is a role model makes it easy for students to visualize what they want to be able to do technically and hopefully, copy a bushido-like behaviour. Second, goals are very clear. The long-term goal is a black belt and once that is achieved, higher goals or grades are possible. To achieve a black belt, there are short-term goals in terms of belts in different colours. It usually takes approximately half a year between belts. To earn a belt you have to learn and master a set of techniques. At each training session you set daily goals to be able to reach a certain number of repetitions or work on doing a technique better or to have a higher quality performance each time you perform. Integrated goal setting may be a good term for this process.

Finally, before a class, there is usually a short period of Zei-za or sitting Zen meditation. Most schools just do this as a ceremony today so that the meaning is lost, not only in the Western schools but also in China, Japan and Korea. But at the same time, there is much meditation in the prac-

tice itself – moving meditation. Perhaps sport at times is meditation too, but the difference is that Western sport or athletics has not understood the word or the concept, at least not in the same way as in Eastern religion or philosophy.

However, in sport psychology and mental training, there is an understanding of this concept and that is why I felt greatly motivated and enthused to go into this field. Another reason was that I had very good students in my martial arts classes, but they did not make it to the top. They were very good technically, but they did not win big tournaments. This was partially because I did not focus on training them to win; it was not important to me. Actually none of my students competed in the first four or five years that I ran the school. My philosophy was more Eastern than most Easterners at that time. When I wanted to try my own wings in competition, to see what I had learned, I changed my attitude toward competition and decided to let my students compete as well. Perhaps the pressure of the competitive culture was too great? However, I tried to teach my students to understand the meaning of mastering the self not others, mastering change not only focusing on outcome and mastering cooperation with the energy of the opponent not just using brutal force. But I did not have the tools at that time to make things happen the way I wanted.

I felt that mental training and sport psychology were what I needed to find the tools and the knowledge to reach some old goals. Very soon, new goals began to form, goals that were much more related to use of this new knowledge and my new awareness of the unconscious learning I received from martial arts training. I wanted to do what I had done from the start, help people grow as persons and at the same time be better at

what they are doing and feel better about themselves. I only slowly changed focus. I partially changed tools, but I mostly changed clients. In the beginning, it was only martial arts students and today it is athletes in different sports, business managers, company employees and others looking for advice. This transition began in 1980 and has been evolving since then. This has been a great process and making this journey has made my life worth living.

To reach the overall goal of helping people grow, I formulated some smaller goals, the first concerning skills and knowledge. “Talk the talk” is a learning or competence goal. It means learning more from research, experiences working with others and from clients. It means developing my own competence: “To dare is to have the courage to risk and lose something; not to dare is to die a little bit”.

“Walk the talk” is my performance or acting goal. To live what I teach is important in establishing trustworthiness. I think it would be wrong to be able to deliver the services expected of a mental training consultant and not live as I teach. At one of the seminars at the second World Congress of Mental Training and Excellence in Ottawa I asked, “Isn’t the goal in learning how to set goals being able to make the road the goal?” This is how I feel about the process I am living in. It is not an exam or a specific mission that is the goal. It is the process of learning, growing and helping others grow that is the goal – the process in itself. This does not stand in the way of me having goals of specific missions or a high mark on an exam rather it is that the process and specific goals are in better balance. This is also something that I try to teach and I think that those who understand this feel and perform better – at their optimal level. They usually

find strong motivation for what they are doing as well.

“Walk the walk” is an outcome goal in a way. It means that the “talk” - the affirmations and imagery have been integrated into behaviour. Training has been effective when desired habits have been established, when you no longer need to think about how or what you are doing - your “autopilot” is programmed and actions are on track. This is important for me in building trust because if I do something myself that does not correlate with what I teach or say, my actions will override my spoken message. As the saying goes, “A picture is worth a thousand words” which can be translated into, “Our actions say more than a thousand words”.

I consider myself a guide who clients might meet on their journey. They have to make all the decisions about of what they feel is the right way for them to go. I hope to influence them to try various kinds of tools. They then learn how to use them and which are most effective for them. I try to be open to all aspects of experience we discuss and show respect for their experience and thoughts. Some clients like more help and advice. Others merely want someone to try their views on and provide feedback. I ask questions to have them formulate their own thoughts and to make them more aware of what they are doing when they are doing their best. Last but not least, I want to learn from them myself.

“Leading Stars”

I think that it is important to consciously formulate the basic values we want to live by. This is something that I have been focusing on as a consultant in business. In fact, this is usually the first exercise I will go through with a management group or team in a company. As an individual, I think that it is also important that we think

about and consciously formulate our values and not only those we live by but also those we would want to live by, if there is a difference between those. If there is, that gives us a good clue of what to work on in our personal development. I call these values “leading stars”. There should not be many, just three or four, but then you can define them in a way that they mean more to you personally than the words alone imply.

My personal and consulting values are the same; I could not be one person privately and someone else professionally. Of course I can have different roles in different situations or groups, but I need to remain true to myself in order to keep my self respect and be trustworthy.

The values I choose to live by are openness and respect. Openness includes honesty, flexibility, a willingness to listen to others (even those I may not at first respect), trust in my intuition and the guts to follow the flow. In valuing respect, I aim to show others this quality and to continue to work on my self respect. This will increase by me living by my values, philosophies, visions and goals. Striving for these aims will earn me respect because of what I am doing and for who I am.

Quality of Life

“Life quality creates success” is the vision I try to live and work by. Quality is a trendy word in business today, but I think in the quest for quality, quality of life is set to the side. Many people today are suffering from stress, lack of motivation or are looking for a meaning in what they are doing. The quest for owning the most expensive “toys” at the end of one’s life or making the biggest profit has to be questioned or the environment, mother earth, will suffer greatly. This ethic relates to consulting with athletes as well. Is it worth anything to be faster and

faster? When do athletes reach the point where they have forgotten about the fun they had when they began in their sport? Can sports be more than just sports? Can they be a way to grow as a person and learn to understand ourselves better? I think they can and I think that Western sport has much to learn from the philosophies and the way goals are selected in the martial arts.

In the martial arts, practice is from the beginning focused on learning and mastering a technique and not in winning over an opponent but over yourself. I think that the biggest problem that we face in the West is the culture of competition and competitiveness which sport fosters. I especially question popular sport because of the message that is sent through the media. I feel that the most important contribution I can make is to get people to be more cooperative in their thinking and behaviour.

We need to change our culture into a cooperative one. In my work with local companies and athletes, I try and make them aware of outcome oriented goals and help them see another way. The funny thing is that they usually do better when they let go of the “being better than others” attitude and focus on the task. I like this paradox – when you stop seeing winning as everything and focus on doing your best, you start to have the best results of your life and many times you even end up actually winning! (This sentence in itself has a strange kind of double message in it because the winning stands out as important in the end after all. Well...you can't win them all!)

Focusing on the task and keeping the fun in what you are doing have two positive aspects. You will be better at what you do, thus resulting in better quality in the process or in what you produce. But they also result in better quality of life through having more

fun and being better motivated. I think it works in both sport and business.

“The Inner Helicopter”

My philosophy is to “Do the right thing in the right way”. At times you discover that you are doing a lot of things, but do they really matter or get you where you want? We need to see the big or holistic perspective to be able to decide what is important and which way we should take. I think we need to take a ride in our “inner helicopter” to get a view from above almost daily, so that we do not get a chance to forget where we are going but also come to understand why...or see good reasons why we have chosen the road we are travelling at the moment. If we do this, I think we have a better chance to see if we made a wrong turn or even when it is time to make a transition in life. At the same time, this “helicopter ride” may be a good way to evaluate what we have done, to get things in perspective and see how we can improve our actions - to do what we have chosen to be the right thing to do, the right way.

To be better at that, I have a daily overall or awareness goal. Every day I want to learn something new and really understand what I have learned. The “helicopter ride” idea must have grown out of this philosophy. The purpose behind this goal is that I do not want a good learning experience to be wasted. Many times you learned a good lesson but too soon it was forgotten in the multitude of information and experience that followed. We need to think over and evaluate what we learn and experience to really be aware of it. This can have two effects. First, it ensures that potential learning does not get lost on the way. But also we may see something more than we did at first. We might reach the goal of understanding what we really learned and that can be something other than what we first thought.