

Today it seems there is a martial arts school on every corner in every city, regardless of size. In some places you find extravagant commercial schools and other places you will find some sensei teaching in their garage or basement. It also seems there are schools closing and opening all the time, many of the ones that close leave their students out in the wind with nowhere to go. In this article we will look at the reason why instructors fail. It will be based on both themselves and the students.

The main reason most good martial art instructors fail is due to the following three factors. Although there are more, these are the primary reasons why I believe they never pull through and end up shut down and out of business.

1. Not a businessman. Although it is true that the martial arts require a sincere desire to pass down knowledge to preserve the system, most instructors have no idea how to manage their funds, nor run a business. Running a business is not rocket science, but it does require the ability to market, conduct public relations and understand the needs of your students. All these things are not usually considered when someone opens a school. Typically a sensei does not want to worry about playing the political role often required when negotiations occur to improve the image of the school. They often are too strict, too discipline and blunt with people in the community as well as the media which cause them to be turned off by the instructor. When it comes to managing their monies most Sensei look at in terms of having extra cash around to invest in their own training or equipment. They often overspend, or do not save any money each month which eventually makes them feel like they are not successful. I have known many good sensei who lost their school because they did not know how to run a business. Although I agree that you are a Sensei first and businessman second, you must understand the etiquette, laws and financial aspects of managing your dojo in order to succeed.

2. Lack of Marketing, or lack of marketing experience. I have personally witnessed the effects of not advertising your dojo. At my dojo we advertise every month. Everything from flyers around town to ads in the newspaper. In order to have a successful marketing campaign you must be consistent. Most Sensei do not know how to market their dojo, nor do they have the skills needed to do so. Marketing takes a lot of time and requires the ability to sell both yourself and your martial arts school. I know many instructors who either do not market their school and/or do not market it correctly. Their marketing is focused typically on how "great" they are and not on what they offer or the benefits of their program. The reason most dojos do not focus on the benefits when they market is because they are afraid they will not fulfill those for the students since they just want "teach" the martial arts. Then you have the exact opposite ones who market only the benefits promising great changes in their students in as little time as "1 month". It is true that students will show an enormous amount of change in the first month, but to truly develop the student needs to establish and work on positive habits to gain the lifetime benefit from martial arts. A one month or three month program does not develop anything in the student except a quick change and they end up losing students when the student reverts to their previous stages and they are not willing to work on helping that student. (You typically see this in large commercial studios that convince you to sign a three to five year agreement and then enforce it no matter what.)

3. The Sensei can ruin the school. In the years I have been training I have witnessed many black belts who were good instructors lose their students quickly. They are overly harsh and critical of the students and expect black belt abilities from even white belts. When the students cannot produce, or are not naturally gifted for the arts, they typically give up on them and ignore them thus catering to the better, or easier ones to teach. This type of attitude, although it is tradition gives way to ruining a school. I was not the most talented student at the dojo, nor "gifted" in anyway, but had my sensei given up on me then I would not be teaching today nor won the world championships. The other reason a Sensei can ruin a school is that they do not PRACTICE WHAT THEY TEACH, or do not have the experience to teach. I cannot count on all my fingers and toes, even if I do it 10 times the number of "Newbie" black belts that run out and begin teaching the martial arts just because they earned a black belt. A black belt does not make you a good instructor...training under a good sensei does. Just because you are a champion does not mean your students will be. Many great champions in the martial arts cannot teach at all. In our system you must be at least a 3rd degree black belt with a minimum of 8 years of training

in our system to run your own school. All others must teach underneath me or Master Bowers to make sure they understand the importance and proper way to do so. There are also many good sensei out there who tell their students to live their lives by the martial art virtues yet they smoke, drink heavily and often get into trouble or just have a bad attitude. These instructors make legitimate instructor's jobs tougher since most people that train under them often never return the arts after they quit. It is a shame but to live your life as a martial arts instructor requires a lot of personal sacrifice and the ability to lead by example. There are no shortcuts here and most Sensei never consider this when opening a school, even if they are an excellent instructor.

Now, let's look at why good schools can fail because of people and/or society. This is a tough subject and will vary from location to location but some societal concepts are prevalent everywhere you go.

1. People are not interested in paying a fair price but rather on the cheapest price they can get now a days. A fair price for training in martial arts is around \$70 per month on an average (2006). This amount is nothing compared to the benefits a person, or their child will receive from training under a good instructor. They would rather go to the local YMCA or a parks program that charges around \$20-\$30 a month for unqualified instruction. It is true that there are some quality programs from the Y or Parks n Rec, but they are few and far between. In our area there are several schools. The good ones charge anywhere from \$59 to \$99 a month for training for a beginner, but there are a couple that charge around \$20-\$30. I based my opinions on the number of years and the success of a school rather than the price...which is how I do everything when I purchase a product and/or service. If I go to a car dealer and the salesman has only been there a few months, I always ask for the senior sales associate. When shopping for a lawyer or doctor I never go to the cheapest place because that is exactly what I will get...cheap service that often ends in disaster. Martial arts are not different in this aspect. It is worth the the extra \$30-\$40 per month to make sure you get the best, most qualified training for your child. Always ask the instructor about their references. Many instructor have little or none when you ask. (You may also want to verify them).

2. People believe in rank, titles and other items that we, as martial artists know do not make you a good instructor. This is a touchy subject both in and out of the martial arts. Black belt rankings in the martial arts are supposed to stand for the the person's abilities as a black belt. Originally anything higher than 3rd degree denoted the person was a successful instructor and contributor to the martial arts. This is not true any longer since many schools will promote people if they are willing to pay for this rank and there are associations everywhere that will give you a certificate of rank for a fee. I know several people who carry the title of "Master" in the martial arts, yet they cannot even perform the simplest of techniques correctly. I also know of several people in the arts that are ranked 4th degree or above that have only been in the martial arts a few years. In the beginning the black belt was looked at like graduating from high school, ready to go to college. A 3rd degree was kind of like attaining a two year degree from a college. The 4th degree was like getting your master's in a chosen field. A 6th degree was like graduating from graduate school and the 7th and 8th degrees were like attaining your doctorate in a particular field. Add all these up and it would mean that you spent at least 8 years as a black belt to get your 5th degree. This is not the case anymore and I am afraid it will never be again. If we, as martial artists want to be seen as professionals in our field we must establish and maintain a commonality about the higher ranks of black belt. It is a shame that people do not know nor understand the amount of training a true master will go through to be able to claim that title and teach others. The truest form of mastery comes when one understands they are not a master at all, but rather a lifelong student of the martial arts.

3. People want everything their way and do not care about making the personal sacrifices nor giving effort to learn the martial arts. Although this is not true about every student you will have, this is true about many of the people out there today. We live in a society that requires little effort to attain things anymore. You want a burger and fries right now...simply go to McDonalds. You say you want a black belt? Then be ready to work your butt off to get it. There are no shortcuts in a real martial arts school. The shortcuts are replaced by standards, etiquette and requirements that must be met. In our dojo school age students must have a "C" average or above to attain a black belt. Anything else will not do.

This is a policy that has caused me many problems since I have students who are very good at martial arts but can not test because of that one single little "D" on their grade card. Parents yell and scream, students get discouraged and they all want me to change, or make an exception for them but that will never happen. I expect the best from my black belts and demand the most commitment from them to preserving our art. If I bend a policy to allow them to earn the black belt then I am setting them up for failure and this is something I am not willing to do. I will not sacrifice the integrity of either my art nor myself to "give" someone a black belt. There are many schools out there that do "modify" their requirements to accommodate parents and kids, and eventually they find themselves failing because society sees this and labels them as a sell out or rather a school that preaches benefits but still gives in to pressure. Why do they fail...it is because people are hypocritical when it comes to understanding what it takes to earn a black belt. They say they will work hard, train hard and do what it takes but when it comes down to it they just want it fast and on their terms. Many sensei give in and find themselves in quandary because they can not understand why their black belts miss classes or do not attend functions of the school to show their support. It is their own fault and they need to establish these rules at white belt, which they do not.

There are many more reasons why good schools fail but I have highlighted a few of them here. In all the years I have taught the arts one thing still remains...you can either teach or train...there is no grey area in martial arts. It is black or white, positive or negative, yes or no. This is what makes training in the martial arts so great. You either accomplish or you fail. Learning from your failures will help you to achieve but if you FAIL to pick a good school because of price then you have failed already.