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Martial Arts: The Essence of Project Management

By Quang Ton

The Chinese People have many longstanding traditions, some of which incorporate techniques and concepts applied in project management. Two of these, Hung Gar, a form of Kung Fu, and the Lion Dance, a traditional costumed dance form, will be used to draw parallels with modern project management.

Hung Gar is a Martial Art form originated from the Shaolin Temple in the southern part of China. Practitioners of Hung Gar must go through rigorous training and conditioning to improve themselves both physically and mentally. Not surprisingly, project management concepts are applied throughout the training regimen in order to improve the likelihood of successful results.

The discussion below presents a brief description of some of the similarities between the two disciplines.

Developing Team Building...



Hung Gar includes both hard and soft moves. In order to synchronize them effectively, it is imperative that individuals work in tandem with their partners and perform the correct moves at all times. Each participant's ability to consistently repeat the motions of each move helps enable smooth transitions from one movement to another. Coordinating the pace of motions with one's partner is important to maintain harmony and reduce the chance of serious injury.

Delivering Results on Time with Quality...

The "Lion Dance" was originally performed as a form of entertainment. It was sometimes used to pass secret messages between groups. It has been used for nearly two-thousand years to chase away the evil spirits, and bring good luck and prosperity for the coming year. During special events (Chinese New Year, Wedding, etc...), many martial art schools are in a position where their practitioners are required to demonstrate their skills in front of a variety of spectators.



The dance itself not only requires a great deal of skill to execute well, but is quite grueling. The martial artist participants usually carry the Lion costume during the entire 15 to 30 minute show. In addition, they must compete for the prized red envelopes containing lucky money, by performing spectacular moves to impress the audience while moving in strict accordance with the drummer's patterns and tempo.

Managing Human Resources...



The Master (or SiFu) orchestrates the progression of the entire show. He/she makes sure that all equipment and performers necessary for the show are available and ready, gathers the students when it's time for them to perform, and makes sure that the students are rested appropriately during execution of the dance. This is not unlike a project manager ensuring the proper allocation of resources and managing the team schedule and execution of tasks for his/her particular



project. The identification and coordination of the work flow activities are important in both cases in order to clearly analyze the critical path and manage the projects.

Considering Diversity and Individual Skills...

The students may start with different abilities and skills and their progression may vary throughout their training. The SiFu designs the training for each student helping them overcome their weaknesses and enhance their strengths. Males and females are trained somewhat differently due to their differing anatomies and physiognomies and different forms



may be selected as appropriate for students with different physiological characteristics.

Similarly, a project manager selects and assigns individuals to specific tasks based on their skills and in some cases, their physiological characteristics.

Advancing competencies as series of projects...

Martial Arts training is a never ending process. Individuals learn using step-by-step programs that evolve as their skills improve over time. The students are conditioned and prepared for a show or competition and once the required skill level for that performance is reached, they start another cycle of development. This process is very similar to the project management steps of initiation, planning, execution, controlling, and closing.



Promoting the 'Management by Objectives' concept ...

Nowadays, Karate and Taekwondo use a system based on belt colors to grade and indicate the seniority of their practitioners. The students are graded according to their mastery of techniques, their creativity and their ability to adapt to higher-level opponents (this is particularly true for advanced students). These assessments could be thought of as the project management equivalent of Key Performance Indexes (KPIs).

Progressing in Constraint Environments ...



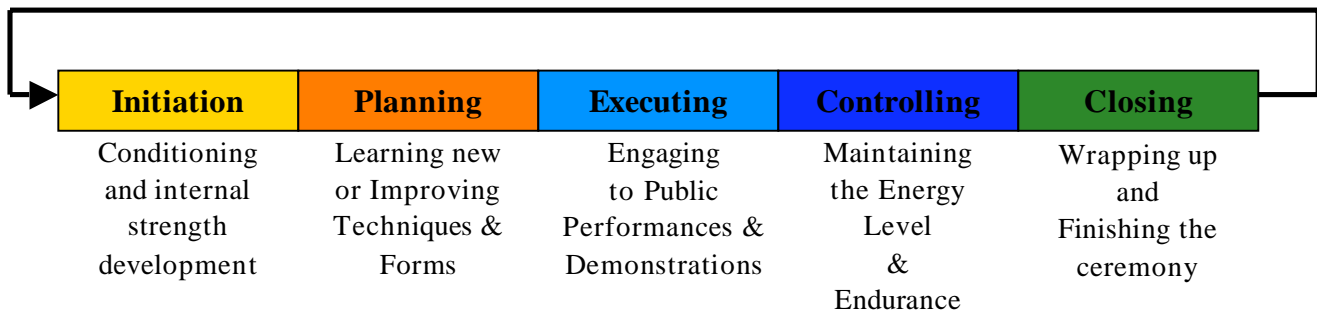
Martial Arts performances like business projects are often done in different environments. The unknown risks presented by these different environments can be quite complex and challenging. During a show, for example, performers might have to deal with various physical obstacles (chairs, tables, audience members, etc.) or inclement weather (cold, rain, etc.). The weekly Martial Arts practices provide instruction in ways to deal with various contingencies that the students might encounter during their performances.



During performances, risks are monitored and addressed during the show (project) in real time.

Utilizing the appropriate tools...

A project manager has many tools and techniques available to help develop project requirements, execute the project, and deliver the final product while balancing the triple constraints of quality, time and cost. In a similar way, the martial artist selects the appropriate tools (weapons, costumes) and techniques needed to prevail in a competition or perform the celebratory Lion Dance.



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Quang Ton has been practicing Martial Arts since the age of 16. He started with Shotokan Karate, migrated for a short period of time to Taekwondo and Judo, then pursue his passion with Capoeira (Afro-Brazilian martial art) and Việt Võ Đạo before stabilizing his foundation with Hung Gar—Shaolin Kung Fu. He also holds a Masters degree in Engineering and is a certified Project Management Professional (PMP), a Certified Information Security Manager (CISM), a Certified Associate Business Manager (CABM) and has a Foundation certificate in Information Technology Infrastructure Library (ITIL). From a professional aspect, he is currently the Service Manager for Schlumberger Oilfield Services where he utilizes his skills in project management and service management to improve service quality and reach operational excellence. Quang Ton can be contacted at pmi.qton@yahoo.com.