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9 Locations / 15 Instructors

8 Dan Essay

The Ways to Retain Taekwondo Instructors

The topic of instructor retention is and has been a major focus of my taekwondo life. I began teaching early in my journey. My instructor at the time (GM Young Soo Do now deceased) encouraged me to teach. I enjoyed teaching, of course, and I was good at it. I was good because I studied my instructor closely. He was charismatic, very capable, and driven with passion for the art.

He was Korean and exotic and very colorful. He was a Kukkiwon 7 Dan when I met him and eventually obtained 9 Dan. His students were drawn to him and proud to be in his school!

My perspective regarding the personal attributes and characteristics of a successful school leader's ability to retain students, comes primarily from my observations of my instructor coupled with the realities of the 21st Century. I say that because other martial arts like Jiu Jitsu have grown in popularity in the United States where I live!

Additionally, the sport of MMA (Mixed Martial Arts) has become very big in the United States. Taekwondo Instructors and school owners have seen major changes in the composition of students. For example, many schools see less adults and more kids or youth in their classes. I have 2 sons and a grandson all are Kukkiwon Black Belts as is my wife Judith Kirby, a 4th Dan and co-owner of the school.

Many instructors see children as beneficial, obviously, for a successful school. Daytime programs especially summer programs can be very important for the survival of schools! But adults are very important as well, especially if a school owner needs instructors or assistant instructors faster than waiting for the children to get old enough to teach etc. And adults can also coach at competitions and act as transportation and supervision for the youth at the academy.

I have raised my kids in the art of taekwondo, and I know what it takes to keep them interested. I have run my school in Pennsylvania / USA for 25 years. All of my instructors come from my student base. My instructors have been with me anywhere from 10 to 20 years.

So, the following are some key elements that I consider to be essential for instructor retention!

- Practice what you preach / exemplify what you teach
- Talk about your past and how important your TKD journey is to you
- Show strength, passion and compassion along with caring and trustworthiness
- Describe the benefits and differences between TKD and other arts
- Be capable of enough technique and demonstrate regularly
- Illustrate the impact on lives that TKD instructors can have
- Instill loyalty or commitment to the school through future focus
- Develop the desire to advance within the instructor base (Pay?)
- Achieve the rank and position (over time) that instructors respect and expect
- Stay fit and capable (if possible, God willing) as you age in TKD
- Demonstrate the 5 tenants of Tae Kwon Do every day
- Emphasize lifestyle stability and choose geography wisely
- The concept I call “the notion of perfection”
- Treat your instructor’s family with appropriate care
- Be careful of special treatment regarding instructors

Practice what you preach / exemplify what you teach:

Frankly I feel your students should admire you to some extent. Students should want to emulate you or try to be as good, or as effective at TKD (and in life) as you are...some day! For these things to be true, an instructor can’t ask students to behave or carry themselves as citizens one way but act differently in their own personal lives!

For me, I have the added benefit of being a parent for 43 years now. And I had my kids and family in class with me! I want my kids to admire me. I want my wife to admire me (as I admire her). For these things to be true I MUST lead by example. I can’t make mistakes regarding character and principles etc. Similarly, instructors MUST do the same things they ask students to do regarding TKD and even the way they carry and conduct themselves at home and in public.

Instructors are generally adults or close to adult age. Instructors are often developed in the school from white belt on. In my case, many of my staff / instructors are 4th dan and a few are higher. This means that they have spent a good deal of their lives with me every week over many years. This means that they are watching me age and grow older as they grow and age as well. Instructors will not stay if they think that you say one thing and do another. They can see you in real time, they watch closely. They are looking to see if you know what you are talking about. They are also looking to see if what you teach will last the test of time.

TKD instructors in the USA are constantly bombarded with every conceivable martial art or self-defense information. It can be difficult for school owners to overcome. If instructors see the TKD school as only a training place, then they may leave or stray looking for something else! But if the instructor sees the TKD

school as a tool to help them in many aspects of life including fitness and self-defense then maybe they will stay! And if they believe the school owner is or can be a sort of mentor, then again, they may stay.

Successful application of this topic when added to the rest of the bullet items mentioned earlier – can ensure that as a school owner...you've done everything possible to retain instructors and if they leave it's not because you made mistakes or failed to try to retain them. Instead, it may just be unavoidable, but it is the exception and not the norm!

Talk about your past and how important your TKD journey is to you:

In my opinion and based on my experience, students are more likely to become instructors when they have a deep understanding of your TKD past and journey! Students who believe the journey you had as a school owner was rewarding and life changing - will want to possibly experience the same thing. In the beginning students are looking for some evidence that you are legitimate and worth their time and commitment!

The more that students know about your journey as the chief instructor of your school the more they can attach themselves to the story and legacy. The legacy relates to your prior instructor(s), current mentors and instructors and how they can become part of the continuing story. As students become instructors, they become just as proud and protective of the continuing academy and its heritage. Your heritage obviously becomes their heritage. Instructors stay with their TKD family as long as they can. That said, school owners/operators need to allow instructors to form a name for themselves based on their personal strengths.

Instructors need to feel that they can express their art within the walls of the school while respecting senior instructors including school operators. Using your past experiences as the chief instructor of the school you can ensure instructors that they are in good and wise hands. They see the success of the school. They see the interactions you have with students and parents, and they can relate your past...to that success!

Additionally, by telling your story they get a sense of loyalty therein! They will hopefully want to behave the same way regarding their feelings about your school! They become loyal to the entire heritage of your academy even the roots of your school. If you've had the benefit of being taught by a Korean master or Grandmaster like I was then, of course telling stories about your training in the past is especially interesting to your staff Instructors!

Show strength, passion and compassion along with caring and trustworthiness:

This is a fascinating topic! Instructors often copy their instructor's methods and approach to teaching. They react favorably to strength because obviously they want to feel strong themselves, especially as relates to self-defense. By strength I mean mental strength and as much physical strength as possible.

The passion they seek relates to your passion as the school operator toward TKD and teaching it! When you have passion about any work or business you are involved in...everything is better for everyone

involved! Passion is what helps you stay motivated and that passion will spill over to your instructors. That passion will ensure that everyone including your instructors stay motivated.

Your compassion as the chief instructor at the school will be seen by everyone over time. Your compassion will set the tone for your instructors. This compassion is most present and witnessed when teaching students who struggle or are even handicapped or have other hurdles to overcome that can seem to be too much and they end up quitting. By demonstrating practical and logical compassion with students...your instructors will try to replicate that attribute and ultimately will manifest itself with instructors that admire you as the leader in the school. That admiration will also prompt them to stay longer than they otherwise might in the absence of compassion!

As a caring leader and chief instructor, you will be rewarded for your caring ways with students and instructors who care about you and your school and business. Instructors will stay to see what comes next and they will often teach their own children similarly!

Trustworthiness is obviously paramount for a school operator or chief instructor! If your instructors feel they can trust you they will stick around much longer. If your instructors see you as someone who can be trusted, they will understand that they need to be trustworthy as well. Instructors will be less likely to lie or navigate to undermine the school in favor of their own interests or ambitions. They will see trustworthiness as a basic requirement for any good instructor!

Describe the benefits and differences between TKD and other arts:

In the USA today people can train in any martial art they desire. There is a school around every corner. It used to be that TKD attracted kids more than other sports. However, these days BJJ and other grappling arts are becoming much more effective at attracting and retaining kids. Parents often sit observing their kids training and inevitably ask when their kids will get to grapple or wrestle for lack of a better term.

As TKD instructors it is imperative that we demonstrate and illustrate through communication and dialogue that TKD is bigger and more impactful than a simple fighting sport would be.

Fortunately, the founders of TKD inevitably would use the art to promote the need for cultural enhancements and societal benefits through the practice of TKD. The art would become a way for the people of South Korea to enrich their citizens cultural growth and enable TKD instructors to spread the word about their culture and society around the globe. TKD became a sort of ambassador to the rest of the world for the people of South Korea. This is incredibly evident in the fact that poomsae has meanings, or that the very color of the uniform has meaning, or that the belt or color of belt has meaning, the tenants of TKD etc.

Instructors can see that this training is deeper and crosses over into everyday life and daily challenges. Instructors can embellish a bit when teaching students with more expansive application almost to the level of what is now called life-coaching in other venues. Instructors can mentor and share life experiences and they like that. They like coaching people and helping people to this degree. I feel very comfortable saying that TKD is unique in this way and instructors know that. Additionally, because TKD does not venture into religion...everyone is welcome!

Furthermore, TKD is extremely beneficial regarding health and fitness! It seems that many of the mixed martial arts competition displays are returning to striking, instructors are more likely to stay at the school if they believe that the sport/art of TKD really works and is effective in today's world. If they believe in the benefits of TKD they will commit fully to teaching it!

Be capable of enough technique and demonstrate regularly:

I personally feel that if you are blessed with good health that you should lead by example regarding fitness and capability! Instructors like to see some degree of capability from the chief instructor or school operator. The realities of life are such that with age comes potentially less flexibility or any one of several things associated with simply getting older especially for high dan leaders who are getting older. But always try to stay reasonably capable and demonstrate whenever it seems appropriate.

Instructors will stay with you longer if they don't feel you've completely let yourself go to the point that it seems that you don't care as much as you did when you were younger etc.

Illustrate the impact on lives that TKD instructors can have:

It is important to repeatedly highlight stories told to you by parents and students regarding the ways that TKD has positively affected their lives. As a school operator you will inevitably have students telling you stories about how important you are in their lives. Parents will feel as though you are like a third parent or something like that.

By conveying to your instructors what these students are telling you combined with what students and parents are telling them as to their importance and the arts importance...they will become fully invested in what I call their "body of work" as instructors.

I have the benefit of having taken many pictures in my life throughout my journey, so I can show them my students 30 years ago and those same students still doing TKD today etc.

Instructors will stay with you if they believe they are making a difference in a positive way and that your school is where they want to continue to do that work! Too often instructors will leave your school to either join another school or to open their own school. And starting their own school may be something they will someday want to do and that's not to say you can't be involved in that.

But for now they need to feel that they can build their body of work teaching and mentoring at your school because they feel you are very good at what you do, you are successful, you are still teaching them in big and small ways and that they get to teach and mentor at your school and it feels rewarding to them!

Instill loyalty or commitment to the school through future focus:

I am always talking to instructors about future events at the school, or things I want to do with them, to keep them interested. I will discuss upcoming demos and demo teams. We have team jackets with different colors that signify how many years or how many black belt graduation/demo team events they have participated in. We like to have everyone know that you've done many years and that the more you do, the more we memorialize it.

I want instructors to feel that it's not the same thing year after year and that not only can they teach and mentor but obviously they can develop their own demo material or anything that keeps them interested. Too often school owners steal the show or won't let black belt instructors participate in demos or events, in ways that make the instructors feel special. By always discussing ways to improve the school or upcoming events, instructors stay interested longer. They want to participate. They wouldn't miss next year's events for the world.

They plan vacations and family events around the school's annual events and calendar! We discuss future goals regarding fitness or ways we can train together as instructors so that instructors get to be students again. Too often instructors are always teaching and not participating in class training as a student. By planning instructor training events...these instructors get to sweat and work hard like they did when they were coming up in the school. This training brings back memories for these instructors, and they sort of get to stay young!

If you don't discuss the future and things the future holds in the academy, instructors will possibly get bored or lose motivation. Then they will begin to stray mentally from the school and often begin to think about leaving or doing something else that seems more exciting!

Future focus is imperative to keep instructors motivated and interested. Rank advancement or some other perceived interest alone won't do it.

Develop the desire to advance within the instructor base (Pay?):

As a school operator I am always trying to develop the desire for rank advancement in the school. I want everyone including instructors to want to advance.

I especially want instructors to advance! In our school we have 2nd Dan through 5th Dan instructors! We reward instructors at times by indicating that if they are heavily involved in teaching and supporting the school then we will consider testing them for advancement in the minimum required time or some other benefit!

I try to discuss my different advancements and my personal journey. Instructors see how the students and instructors treat me because of my rank, or said a better way, because I simply never quit. I am an example of longevity at the school. I want my instructors to want to prove to themselves that they too can move up the ranks and earn these benchmarks like I did!

Generally, if we have an instructor teaching that is 3rd or 4th Dan...we try to pay them for the hours that they teach. It's not a lot of money but it's something. We do not have any full-time instructors. All our

instructors have other jobs. Some are business owners, schoolteachers, business professionals, college students etc.

Additionally, if an instructor teaches and is heavily involved in the academy, we do not have them pay for their TKD at the school.

We make sure that instructors do not feel that they are being taken advantage of. We want them to feel respected, and we want them to feel that they are treated fairly!

Achieve the rank and position (over time) that instructors respect and expect:

Fortunately, or unfortunately depending on how you want to look at this topic...in the USA people want to know what rank you are or how long you've been teaching/training. This is especially true for many (not all) instructors!

Instructors benefit from high ranking Kukkiwon certified school operators! Instructors find it easy to follow someone who's been there and done that as we say in the US. Students in the school find it fascinating that a person can stick with something like TKD for a long time...In-fact for a lifetime if possible! Achieving high Dan rank as a school operator lets everyone see your commitment. We are always saying that TKD is a way of life. We are telling people that they can push themselves and not give up! There is no better way to demonstrate that these things are true than by sticking with TKD and testing for advancement as a school operator in real time as they watch!

When school owners pursue rank and advancement it motivates instructors to do the same. Hopefully they will stay at your school longer as they advance like you. By having the rank you can advance your students to their next rank and they know that. The need to find another instructor to advance them does not exist!

Stay fit and capable (if possible, God willing) as you age in TKD:

One of the best ways to keep instructors is to be the living example of the health and wellbeing that TKD can provide for instructors!

When school operators/chief instructors stay fit and refrain from unhealthy habits, instructors feel that you do what you say others should do regarding fitness. Instructors are aging with you obviously and they will be very interested in reaping the same benefits that you have. Instructors will try to follow your lead and, in many cases, try to surpass you.

They are also teaching like you are and, in many ways, they have students that look up to them to set the example. If a school owner is blessed with good health but let's themselves go...the instructors (and many students) will begin to look away from you as the chief instructor, and they will focus on your more capable and more fit instructors to set the example. This can be very detrimental to your school

over time. If you intend to continue to operate your school for many years, then you will need to stay in shape if you are blessed enough to do so!

In fact, staying in front of your instructors or working to keep up as you age (especially after 60 yrs) should be a source of motivation that benefits you immensely!

Demonstrate the 5 tenants of Tae Kwon Do every day:

Instructors may wonder (especially in the early years) whether the 5 tenants of TKD are practical or practicable today.

As the leader of the school you need to remember the 5 tenants and exemplify them in real life.

Courtesy is something instructors will need to see as an attribute that you possess. When school operators and chief instructors open doors for people, shake hands in a friendly way, listen to people as they speak and so on...you as the leader not only appear courteous but also humble to some extent. As the chief instructor deals with the daily business of running a school, it would be easy to slip and become less courteous with time. Periodically checking yourself is great and will keep you where you need to be. Instructors will not necessarily be courteous to students if they don't see you doing the same!

Integrity is something that will get stronger with time. Integrity will be important for your instructors as well. If an instructor is getting into fights or acting badly in their personal lives but then acting perfect in class as they teach, students will eventually find out. Integrity comes from trust and proven actions over time. Ethical behavior, honesty, knowing right from wrong, all these things are very important. And again, many martial art sports today do not touch on these things in training!

Perseverance is clearly going to be a necessary attribute of instructors. Instructors demonstrate perseverance every day by simply showing up to class and pushing on. Instructors will need to articulate this tenant frequently because it is a necessary attribute for students as well. This tenant will help all in their everyday life. Goal attainment is impossible without perseverance!

Self-control is extremely important. Lack of self-control can lead to the destruction of one's life. Instructors must be able to control their emotions and demonstrate to students that this is a big one! Instructors may develop an ego over time because of their accomplishments and this can lead to prideful actions that include the thinking that they can do anything they want. They need to exemplify self-control every day!

The indomitable spirit is something that school operators can demonstrate to instructors by letting them see that you stand by your convictions and morals even in the face of adversity. Deeper than perseverance, the indomitable spirit is even seen by instructors as you deal with the complexities of your own personal TKD career, the school operations, the parents and

students' thoughts and concerns, the complexities of your personal life. The indomitable spirit seen in you will be arguably the most compelling and impactful thing that instructors and students see! This tenacity seen in you will motivate and inspire people in every facet of your life especially with your instructors because they will want to have the same strength!

Emphasize lifestyle stability and choose geography wisely:

For those of us who have advanced through the TKD ranks, we know that the best times or the best results occurred when we had stability in our lives and even lived at the same place or close by the school that we trained at.

Once we move our residence or something happens in our lives that is disruptive or very distracting, we can find it difficult to show up at class every week. I regularly emphasize to instructors how things like losing your job, getting a divorce, or getting in trouble at a bar or public place, or adopting bad habits etc., can derail your TKD journey and have you missing classes and avoiding your responsibilities as instructors.

I have this discussion not by telling them they shouldn't do these things but by illustrating how I had to consider these things as I was moving through my TKD journey. I had to be very stable and predictable for the most part as it relates to my TKD journey and responsibilities. I have been running a school for a long time. Nearly all my instructors are still with me and the school.

This same approach goes for students in general. Students, especially young ones, benefit from the understanding that they need to stay away from anything that might derail their TKD goals! That doesn't mean they can't be spontaneous, hardly, it just means that major disruptions to your life will often result in disruptions for you in your TKD career.

Geography and demographics can be very impactful for a school. Many schools don't have the ability to do research on local population data like average age, income, etc. Most don't fully understand entrenched and existing martial arts schools in the area in which they want to open or run a school. This is to be expected. Geographic realities like poverty or crime can obviously affect the school because instructors (and students) may be waiting for the opportunity to move away. If this is the case, then instructors will inevitably leave as will students.

The concept I call "the notion of perfection"

Finally, what I call the Notion of Perfection!

My students have actually given me a plaque inscribed with a quote they would get from me. The exact quote is "cave to the notion of perfection".

I learned this the hard way but basically it comes from my early days as an instructor when I would say when I would bark at a student or perhaps be a little abrasive. Later I would say to myself "what do they expect I'm not perfect, I'm only human".

Later I would say to myself..."Steve, cave to the notion of perfection". In other words, instead of letting myself off the hook, I should understand that being NEARLY perfect as a mentor and instructor is very

doable with practice and diligence! Striving for perfection alone will improve everything. To further drive the point home to instructors I would say that there are different levels of value that you provide to others in different roles:

As a parent you may try to be all things to all people (in your family).

As an employee you may try to be some things to some people (at work).

As a son or daughter, you may try to be all things to some people.

As an instructor and mentor, you may find yourself trying to be all things to all people, similar to a parent and obviously you can't maintain that sort of thing. I want instructors to strive for perfection and to understand that there is a scope to their responsibility that allows them to possibly get close to perfection in the way that they teach and mentor. They teach Tae Kwon Do and they have every tool at their disposal through the school and the educational foundations already established within the art and sport! By expecting the best from themselves as they teach TKD, they will undoubtedly reap the benefits of that effort in every aspect of their personal lives!

Treat your instructor's family with appropriate care:

Anyone who operates a martial arts school knows how important it is to make sure the family of your instructor don't feel as though their family member (your instructor) is being treated poorly.

If you make the mistake of turning the wife, husband, significant other, partner against you, it will be nearly impossible to retain that instructor over time if the issue is not addressed. And even if the issue is addressed it may still be too late to repair the relationship.

Instructors are often time away from their family when they are teaching at your school. Instructors often times have full-time jobs or other important responsibilities. If your instructor has young children that are at home after school while they are at the school teaching, then someone is home taking care of them. Usually, it's the spouse of an instructor that has to do homework with the kids or make dinner for them while their spouse (your instructor) is at class teaching TKD for you.

And frankly, it is not unusual for an instructor to prefer to be at the school teaching rather than at home doing the harder work of parenting. If the spouse at home begins to think the instructor cares more about you and your school, then they can begin to resent you.

I make sure that I ask how the other person in the relationship at home is doing. If I sense that the relationship is strained by the TKD commitment they are involved in at my school then I find ways to give that instructor more time with family, so I don't lose the instructor or worse by possibly hurting their relationship! It is critical to make sure that the family of my instructor is feeling comfortable with the TKD commitment they are involved with at my school. It is also the

responsibility of the instructor to convey to their family that they are doing the work at the school because they want to and that they are driven to do that work.

I know that if the family believes that teaching at my school makes their family members very happy then they tend to be much more tolerant of the time away from their family member because they are teaching at the school.

Be careful of special treatment regarding instructors:

I try to make sure that I treat instructors based on the time they've been with me, perhaps the rank, and the level of commitment they have toward the school.

I don't talk about instructors behind their back with other instructors unless an instructor has been designated as a lead instructor or supervisor at some level. Instructors will think you are talking about them with other instructors if you are talking to them about other instructors!

That said, if I feel an instructor is probably not going to make it as an instructor because they don't get along with the other instructors then I may ask the other instructors if they are having difficulty getting along with the instructor in question. This is no different in many ways with running any other business. I'll also try to coach the instructors in question to see how they are doing and to help in any way I can to make things better!

In Summary:

It takes a lot to retain Tae Kwon Do instructors and we all know how difficult it can be! Our instructors are obviously family to us. We have spent many years together. Our instructors are kind and strong. They will say Sir or Ma'am continuously when interacting with each other, students, and me. I answer Sir or Ma'am as they do. I feel I had a great life so far with TKD and I hope to be blessed with many more years God willing! I know that our career together has affected us in so many positive ways that I can't list them all but I do know that I owe my life to Tae Kwon Do and for me it is home!