

Dojo Family vs. Dojo Culture

Frequently, martial artists say that their dojo/dojang/kwoon is like a family. It is close-knit and mutually supporting. Obviously, there is at least one dominant parental figure with many brothers and sisters, some “younger”, some “older”. I could easily devote an essay to detailing the analogy and expressing its many benefits. But the idea of “family” itself suggests benefits only to those who equate a supportive and nourishing environment with “family”. Don’t forget that street gangs are alternative families and their supportive environment is not always nourishing. I doubt whether we feel that the benefits of membership in a street gang outweigh its deficits. Cults are also alternative families. The “Manson Family” in the late 1960s and the Rev. Jim Jones’s “Jonestown Commune” in the 1970s, Rev. Sun Myung Moon’s “Moonies” in the 1980s, and David Koresh’s “Branch Davidians” in the 1990s were alternative families. “Family” is usually a good thing, but one has to understand the specific family to know for sure.

Seldom discussed when someone refers to his/her martial arts school as a family is the family culture. Sometimes the culture of a business, a university, or any sort of group activity develops without its leader’s intention. At other times its leader forged it as consciously as a coach creates the culture for his team.

Many martial arts schools have a very simple culture: We help each other to achieve our individual goals. Few schools, no matter the art, no matter the quality of the instruction therein, would not hold this fundamental cultural condition. The students’ goals are usually set by ranks and the curricula needed to earn the ranks. **Varying greatly between schools, however, is the depth and quality of the instruction and the standards by which the leader, or representatives of the leader, awards rank to the student.** These two items create important elements of a school’s culture.

Often people ask me why I am so reserved at awarding rank to students. The pat answer is, of course, that my standards are high. However, there is an underlying explanation that I have found difficult to express until recently. It is simply that I want to develop a culture in the school of people who are not only physically skilled martial artists, not only have a great deal of mental knowledge about what they are learning, but also have a high level of Rational Grit ([see earlier article](#)).

When a student arrives at the dojo door, an instructor does not know if he is talented, coordinated, smart, dedicated, or simply trying to get in from the cold. Martial arts teachers are charged with taking this student and others, who may be dissimilar in many attributes, up the rank scale (see previous articles [Naturally Talented](#), [Naturally Talented 2](#), and [Motivational Maps](#)). Only one quality will serve to bring a student with a coordination problem, or one who is slow in memorizing kata sequence, or is out-of-shape, toward his goal of holding a high rank, being competent at self-defense, or even being competent at representing his art. That quality is having the mental toughness to forge ahead even though the road is rough and shrouded in fog.

No instructor, however, filters for that quality. Rather, some of us create an environment that both challenges and supports in order to *encourage* that quality. Cultures of schools are formed by traditions, to be sure, but they are also formed by what leaders accept and encourage under their purview.

A school's high standard does a student no good if the culture of that school makes it easy for the student to drop out when the road gets rougher. If the school is populated by young jocks looking for a challenge, then strict expectations with little support may be appropriate. If middle-aged office workers looking to stay in shape and learn self-defense populate the school, then more support and less severity may be appropriate. In either case, however, to get the student to his/her goal, the dojo must not be simply any old family, but a family with a culture that **both challenges and supports** in order to keep the student working, learning, and dedicated.