



The Effective Organization

February 2009

Zen and the Art of Leadership

In the movie, "First Knight," Richard Gere's Lancelot explains to a young man the secrets of becoming a master swordsman: study your opponent, know how to recognize the moment of victory or defeat and wait for it, and not care whether you live or die. At the last, the young man stares at Lancelot in shock. In the modern sport of fencing, a master fencer will say almost the same thing: the secret to winning is to learn how, and when, to not care.

This is doubtless counter-intuitive: the key to living is to not care if you live or die? The key to winning is to not care if you win or lose? Paradoxically, when an athlete cares too deeply about the outcome, they start to judge each action. In combat or competition, that judgment can lead to doubt or fear of failure. Doubt or fear lead to mistakes which lead to defeat. Only by developing his skill and confidence to the point that he believes the outcome is not in doubt can the swordsman successfully not care. However, the swordsman who never doubts himself will never develop that level of skill. When preparing, the swordsman must care deeply and passionately; once swords are drawn, it is time to not care. He must have the patience to create

the moment of victory, recognize it when it comes, and then strike without fear or hesitation.

Oddly enough, a leader is in the same position as the master swordsman: the leader who cares too much chokes his team; the leader who cares too little does not prepare. Like the swordsman, to maximize his chances of success, the leader must learn how, and when, to not care whether they succeed or fail. This is no easy task. Teams regularly suffer from leaders who allow the fear of failure to guide their actions and who, therefore, never allow the team to operate at its highest levels. Recently, I heard a leader state that he would not provide his team with clear guidelines for a project, preferring that they check with him at each step, "to avoid problems." He couldn't understand why they were so "unmotivated." In fact, they were highly motivated: motivated to avoid the constant stream of criticism they received. And the leader? His primary motivation appeared to be fear of losing status if things weren't perfect.

Unlike a swordfight, however, the team's project is not over within minutes. Instead, a project can last weeks, months, or even years.

Upcoming Events

Interviewing to Beat the Downturn
Feb 24th through the MIT Club of Boston.

Corporate Culture and Innovation: A Two-Edged Sword April 15th at the [Infotec Technology Conference](#).

For more information, please visit www.7stepsahead.com.

Publications

["The Seven Habits of Pointy-Haired Bosses"](#)

["Boiling the Frog"](#)

["Zen and the Art of Leadership"](#)

["Talent Magnet: The key to attracting the right staff is to look inward."](#)



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It is neither possible, nor feasible, for a leader to not care about the team's progress during that entire period. Instead, the leader must learn to constantly shift from caring to not caring: she must understand her team, know how they work, and understand which role to take to best enable the team to operate at peak performance.

So how does a leader learn to not care? Here are some tips:

- Clearly define the team's objectives and communicate those objectives as vividly as you can. Make sure everyone knows what victory looks like. Get people excited.
- Provide people with the information they need to evaluate their own progress. Get out of the loop.
- Encourage constructive argument. No conflict is as bad as too much conflict. Team members must be able to question and disagree with one another or work quality suffers.
- Understand what victory and defeat look like, and how you'll know if you're in danger.
- Make providing feedback and progress reports to you as easy and unobtrusive as possible. Minimize things that interrupt people's daily routines.
- Work with the team to establish regular checkpoints or milestones

that will enable you to detect problems early. Build in room for errors or unexpected problems. Don't worry if you don't know what's going on every minute or even every day.

- Analyze, evaluate, and adjust, not judge and punish. Understand why a milestone wasn't met and adjust resources accordingly. If people are afraid to make mistakes, they won't be creative.
- Revise the vision as you progress and more details come into focus.
- Give up power. As your team matures, they'll want to do more. Delegate whatever you can. If you've prepared correctly, the more you demonstrate trust, the more they will live up to it.

Build your team. Make them worthy of your trust and you worthy of theirs. Know what victory and defeat look like. Turn the team loose. Don't care if you succeed or fail.

The results just may surprise you.

About 7 Steps Ahead



Stephen R. Balzac is a consultant, professional speaker and president of 7 Steps Ahead, specializing in helping businesses increase revenue and grow their client base.

Steve has over twenty years of experience in the high tech industry and is the former Director of Operations for Silicon Genetics, in Redwood City, CA.

He serves on the boards of the New England Society of Applied Psychology (NESAP) and the Society of Professional Consultants (SPC). Steve is a member of the Operations Committee of the American Judo & Jujitsu Federation. No stranger to the challenges of achieving peak performance under competitive and stressful conditions, he holds a fourth degree black belt in jujitsu and is a former nationally ranked competitive fencer. Steve is an adjunct professor of Industrial/Organizational Psychology and has been a guest lecturer at MIT and WPI.

Building effective development organizations, improving team morale, focus, and enthusiasm, developing effective communications between team members, reducing employee turnover, helping businesses identify and attain strategic targets, and applying sport psychology techniques to business have been some of his most successful projects.

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