

**Business Secrets of the Samurai**  
Manage Like a Samurai and Watch Your Business Prosper  
By Tim Cotroneo

You might think that a business manager, whose leadership style is based in martial arts, would be quick to lead by intimidation. For Robert St. Louis, a Vice President of Operations with a 5<sup>th</sup> degree Black Belt in Kobudo, nothing could be further from the truth.

As a manager, St. Louis is a believer in leading as a Samurai warrior in its most literal sense. “The term Samurai means, “To serve.” If I’m serving, as well as leading others, then I’m doing my job,” St. Louis said.



*Robert St. Louis is a VP of Operations for a medical components manufacturer in St. Paul, MN*

St. Louis, 45, is a soft-spoken executive for a medical components manufacturer in St. Paul, MN. This native of Milwaukee, WI, began learning martial arts as an 11-year old. “My baseball coach told me that I needed to find another sport. It was shortly after his blunt assessment of my baseball ability that I began observing a martial arts instructor through the window of a karate school. I was in awe of his control and grace. I’ve been involved in the martial arts ever since,” St. Louis said.

### Teaching others – the highest honor

In 1990, after studying for seven years in Japan, St. Louis began teaching martial arts himself. It's in the teaching of others that St. Louis is most passionate. St. Louis sees teaching as the highest measurement of a person's legacy and an obligation he holds dear as a manager.

St. Louis recalled how one of his young karate students articulated what he tries to accomplish on a day-to-day basis. "One of my students, a 12-year old girl, gave me a plaque with a quote that really touched me. It stated, "What nobler profession, or more valuable to the state, than that of the man who instructs the rising generation."



St. Louis is a 5<sup>th</sup> Degree Black Belt in Kobudo

Continual learning and an awareness of what's going on around you are as essential to business as they are martial arts. St. Louis shared how the book *The Art of War* encourages one to look beyond that which is staring you in the face. Look at your situation from every angle. "Working the periphery of an organization can pay big dividends. There is always more to a problem than the most obvious. One can make progress by gaining support on the perimeter of an issue or a company," St. Louis said.

### Confrontation is a last resort

Martial arts teachings reveals that the extreme amount of energy exuded in *confrontation* often is the least fruitful option. In business, St. Louis reminds people to always be aware that a partner, client, or adversary, is seeking a "what's in it for them" resolution. St. Louis also contends that if someone is presenting an idea that is only good for one side, it's wise to clarify any potential pitfall to this option that may occur down the road. Think about the vision of where you want to be in the future. "If we work together, what can we accomplish?" St. Louis said.

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### **Dealing with Adversity – Practice Makes Perfect**

When St. Louis teaches business seminars, he leans heavily on the teachings he learned growing up. In the movie *The Karate Kid* the master instructed the student to practice one move over and over again. Through this kind of practice, one learns patience. Patience not only allows us to refine our skills, but understand ourselves.

“When a company arrives at this point of understanding, that’s when a paradigm shift can occur,” St. Louis noted. When one has refined a technique to its maximum point and results aren’t improving, it’s time to move on to another way, or a better way, of doing things.

“It is through the process of refinement that we strengthen the spirit of the employee, so that their skill can be called upon reflexively. Ultimately, this method of skill refinement produces an intense and positive result. The type of martial arts I teach is called Kobudo. At its best, Kobudo produces a type of spirit or energy. In business, it’s exciting when you can overcome adversity and actually feel the energy in your organization,” St. Louis said.



St. Louis is seen here with his 17<sup>th</sup> century Samurai sword.

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In any business situation, it helps to have confidence in the person or company you're doing business with. This confidence comes about through practice. By repeatedly demonstrating positive results, others gain confidence in your ability. When the key decision agents have confidence in you, they are relaxed and can act quickly.

### **Empowerment in the work place**

Martial arts should not be rigid. When practiced correctly, it's about flow, grace, and dynamic energy. St. Louis believes that a good manager, as well as one's work environment, should be open and dynamic. A good work environment is all about maximizing people, equipment, and what the organization is centered around.

"If our company is using all of its strengths, then I should be able to create an environment where others can excel. As a manager I have two choices: Either I am draining the energy of my people, or am I getting them excited about the opportunities presented here. I need to have people feeling involved. Involvement is the key to empowerment," St. Louis said.

*Tell me and I will forget; Show me and I may remember; involve me and I will understand.* Chinese proverb

### **Lead with the future in mind**

For St. Louis, conversations about martial arts or business regularly come back to teaching. He revels in what he's learned from his martial arts master instructors. His eyes light up when he speaks of a protégé who has been promoted four times in the past two years. He humbly acknowledges those who have shared quotes, insights, and encouragement that he can pass along to others. It's all about giving back and continuing a legacy that has inspired him since he was 11-years old.

St. Louis summed up how he's married his martial arts training into the business principles that guide him today. "If I teach one person and they teach one person, the art continues in a very subtle and gentle way."

Gentle is the last word you'd expect as a guidepost from a 5<sup>th</sup> degree black belt. Then again, Robert St. Louis would smile if you said he's not what you expected. Just as there is a Yin for every Yang; a Samurai will tell you it's wise to expect the unexpected.

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