

American Kamikaze

"A great pleasure is doing in life what people say you cannot do."

Walter Bagehot

In June of 1987, a big challenge found me. I was given the opportunity to go through "Hell Camp," a modern day kamikaze management school in Japan. I was chosen out of approximately 1000 consultants who also wanted the chance to study Japanese management techniques. Apparently I met all the qualifying criteria because of the consulting I had done previously in Japan, my martial arts background and more importantly, the fact that I had created the Walk on Fire program. I guess they thought if I could do that then I would be game to do just about anything -- even Hell Camp.

I was hired by a consulting firm who had seen the 60 Minutes profile on the school. They wanted to know if a Westerner could meet the challenge and if the training could be adapted to the American culture. They were interested in marketing the school in the United States but before they approached the school to negotiate a business arrangement they needed to have some questions answered.

Hell Camp was one of the hardest things I ever have set out to do. The experience taught me a great deal about behavioral learning patterns and goal achievement strategies.

Hell Camp

The school's real name is Kanrisha Yosei Gakko, which means training school for managers. It enjoys the reputation of being Japan's #1 management school and its diploma is equivalent to that of a MBA. This challenging training is nicknamed *jigoku gashuku* or Hell Camp, which I found to be quite appropriate.

To date, more than 100,000 students have graduated from Hell Camp. The course highlights five main areas: speaking, writing, reading, problem solving and action taking. The market for the school is mid-level managers who train 17 hours per day for 13 consecutive days

and oftentimes longer. The course is designed to return these managers back to their jobs with a kamikaze type attitude of loyalty for their company and fellow workers.

I went to Japan without speaking a word of Japanese. I thought they would teach the training in English. Wrong! I did not find out until later when I attended instructor training school, that the teachers I had, did indeed speak English, yet they never let me know it during the initial 13 day basic training. I had to utilize what I now consider to be a valuable tool for change psychology, "fake it until you make it!" Yes, fake it until you make it. Now, I am not implying to be other than yourself or to make false pretenses. I am merely suggesting that you can emulate a desired behavior long enough to own the new behavior. Actually my preferred way of saying fake it until you make it is "become that which you seek."

I arrived at Hell Camp with one skill in my bag that I could rely upon to give me the greatest chance for success - the ability to adapt to the environment by letting go of myself in order to drop into a different behavior. Basically, I acted as if I really was a Japanese kamikaze warrior.

Completion vs. Competition

The kamikaze warrior attitude and the Japanese society is easy for me to understand now, having gone through the course. I learned that the Japanese people are using the very same principles today that have prevailed throughout their history. They demonstrate an incredible persistence toward completing rather than competing and believe they must fail many times before they succeed. Their sense of competition is built around the benefit to the group verses the benefit to the individual. Saving face within the group is top priority.

Students are given ribbons on the first day of the training. Some journalists have referred to these ribbons as "ribbons of shame," however, this is really not the case. These ribbons represent the fourteen tests which each student must pass in order to graduate. The tests include: 12.5 mile and 25 mile night hikes in the mountains, memorization and presentation of three long speeches, problem solving of management type situations, physical exercises and more. Each time a student passes a test, the corresponding ribbon is removed.

Once the test is passed, all written materials and notes are confiscated. At any time thereafter, the student can be given a pop quiz. If the student fails the quiz, he or she will regain the ribbon.

The pace of the training is set to stretch each individual's ability to maximum capacity. Official testing begins on Day 4 and covers the lessons taught over the first few days. New material is introduced daily, so if a student falls behind in passing the tests, they will be struggling to process more information than is usually manageable. It is not uncommon for a student to be memorizing two speeches and sets of solutions to several problems at the same time.

Each day begins early, starting with a wake up call at 4:00 a.m. Morning class formation is at 5:00 a.m. and everyone participates in group calisthenics and singing exercises. The 200 plus students are divided into smaller classes of 15. There are two instructors per class and all activities are done collectively as a group; eating, bathing, studying, etc. Everyone must obey the traditional rules of extreme courtesy at all times otherwise the entire group will be penalized. Students are kept occupied with training and testing until late at night.

The relationship between the student's company and Hell Camp is very close. At the end of the day, each student is required to write a report to submit to their employer. This report details how the student will use the day's training when they return to work. Prior to the student's arrival, the school receives an employee training profile from their company. This profile gives the instructor information that will assist them in training the new student. Every other day the instructor in charge must call the student's employer to evaluate and document their progress. Since the student's nightly reports assess their own personal performance it is easy for both the instructor and employer to discern if the student is actually demonstrating what they are reporting. These types of checks and balances not only are supported by company and country, they are required.

On the second day of the course all students are tasked to complete a strenuous 20 kilometer (about 12.5 miles) night hike into the mountains equipped only with a flashlight and a crudely sketched map. We were sent out in pairs. My partner was a Japanese man named

Nakai. He was in his early thirties, married and the father of two children. Nakai, had been recently hired by 7-11 and needed to graduate from this training in order to secure a management position.

Nakai and I began our hike around dusk at 5:30 p.m. and returned early the next morning at 3:30 a.m. We lost our way and became disoriented for quite some time. However, it was clearly understood between us that neither of us would quit. It was also apparent that we would support each other, no matter what happened. He spoke no English and on the second day my Japanese was extremely limited but we found ways to communicate with each other in spite of this.

The instructors, when detailing the night hike assignment, had placed no emphasis on being the first to return, no special considerations or rewards of any kind. However, there was great incentive for completing. Not completing the exercise meant the team would have to repeat the challenge the following night. Everyone was seriously committed to completing the test the first time out.

Verification for the hiking test was controlled by having each team find three well hidden checkpoints along the course. Identification markers for each pair of hikers had to be deposited inside the checkpoint container. Periodically, the instructors would venture out onto the course to monitor each team's advancement.

When we finally made our way back to camp, we relaxed and drank our well deserved beers. To my surprise, Nakai removed his shoes and showed me two very bloody and badly blistered feet. Not once during the hike had he complained; not the slightest whimper of discomfort. He truly had the kamikaze essence to continue to the very end, no matter what.

A few hours later at the morning formation, both the triumphs and the tragedies resulting from the preceding test could be seen on the faces of the students. The hike was so exhausting that no one had the energy to complain about what or how they were being tested. I remember standing there with my fellow classmates feeling such an overwhelming collective sense of unity.

Tear Down vs. Build Up

At the point when I began to understand how to beat the system, the system would change. The more they changed the rules, the more I changed with the rules. I recall that I had prepared well for the first oral test, a twelve page speech on the importance of having a good breakfast. I had memorized the material completely and felt fully prepared. Passing this speech would mean more time to prepare for the next examination. The chart on the board told me that I needed only 60 points out of a possible 100 to pass.

Upon entering the designated room, I went through the proper ritual of bowing and begging to be tested. This was always the hardest part of testing. Facing the stoic examiner was like facing an executioner. Failing to perform the bowing and begging ritual in exact sequence meant the student and fellow classmates both would be penalized.

The examiner granted me the privilege of being tested. I ceremoniously bowed, thanked him graciously, composed myself and began reciting my speech. Since this was the first major examination, I was nervous but confident that I knew the material well. By the close of the speech I felt completely satisfied that I had passed, probably with 100 points. What a great feeling! I shouted *Ijo* (that's all) and bowed to the examiner. He bowed in return and said, "Your score, 8 points." Not 80, or even 18 just 8 points. How could I improve on what I truly felt was my best?

I sought reassurance from my instructor and classmates but found none. No where could I find help in discovering what I did wrong. There was absolutely no critique available, just those 8 lousy points.

Feedback vs. No Feedback

It slowly dawned on me that *no feedback is feedback*. I went searching for some kind of support telling me that I did a good job or that it was a practical joke. However, no one spoke English so no one could tell me how I might improve my performance. Since I could not get someone to tell me how to improve, what was I forced to do? I had to figure it out for myself.

Then it occurred to me to use the one skill I was truly masterful at – 'be that which you seek.' I was invited to attend this school because I had demonstrated on several occasions that I could 'model' behaviors and replicate those behaviors with superior results. I needed to 'step into the behavior' of being Japanese, NOT American. I symbolically unzipped my American persona, like it was a body suit, stepped out of it and hung it on a hanger in the locker. I remember thinking, "Ted, I will be back for you when I am done here." As the locker door closed I took a deep breath, turned around and became a Japanese student – body, mind, and spirit. Like an actor getting into the character of a role, I started to believe that I was a Japanese employee sent to Hell Camp, just like all the others in the training. I began to walk, nod and gesture just like everyone else.

I also began observing with greater acuity, the behaviors of the other students being tested. During study and practice sessions, I centered all of my concentration on how instructors coached students. I learned that little attention was given to the actual content. All the coaching was directed on the student's behavior. The instructors were subtly teaching the students how to non-verbally negotiate with the examiners. This was the main emphasis of their teachings. It did not matter if the student believed what they were saying; it only mattered that they could convince the examiners that they did. I was good at that.

On Day 13, I awoke with only two ribbons. During the morning formation, the instructor removed one of my ribbons for demonstrating proper conduct. The only ribbon remaining represented a formidable speech memorization test. I had been warned that few people have passed the final examination on their first attempt. By this point, I was physically, mentally and emotionally exhausted. I had paced the training much like a tri-athlete. I felt like it was the last event, the marathon, and I was only one mile away from the finish line and I was determined to win – or die trying.

My instructor summoned me to go to the cafeteria to be tested. This was a rare moment, the time walking by myself from the training room to the testing area. Private time was not something I had had for quite awhile. I walked slowly and gathered my thoughts, psyching myself up for this, my final mile.

I must admit it was difficult to wait for my name to be called. By this time, I just wanted to be done with it. However, I decided to pay attention and concentrate on what was happening. I listened as five other students recited their speeches, four of whom failed miserably with scores ranging between 8 and 16 out of a possible 100. A score of 50 was necessary to pass. Finally, my name was called. Watching the others gave me some insight as to what the examiner wanted. I snapped to attention and went through all the proper courtesy and protocol for testing. The examiner started his stop watch and nodded for me to begin. For eight full minutes I delivered my speech as loud as I could, completely oblivious to the increasing number of onlookers entering the hall.

To this day, I do not remember what I said. All I remember about the speech was when the examiner stood up, applauded my efforts and said, "Your score, 50 points."

I passed! People came rushing forward to congratulate me. I felt completely spent. There was no gold medal; no champagne being poured over my head. My reward was that I did not have to do the speech again and that was good enough for me. My body began to calm down as the reality of the situation took hold. I had won! My goal had been achieved. At that point I was no different than my fellow classmates. I was truly a modern day kamikaze. I totally understood how and why that training worked during WWII.

During the evening graduation ceremonies, I stood with the other ten who had passed that day as well. We drank sake together, hugged, and appreciated how much we had learned about ourselves and each other.

I was invited to attend the Instructor's Training and stayed at the school for three more months before returning home to the United States. As I re-adapted back into my old American 'mindsets' and patterns, many of the things I had learned in Hell Camp became even more clear to me. Now, many years later, I continue to discover useful and practical insights from my experience.