

SPIRAL IMPACT

The Power to Get it Done with Grace

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***Communication
creates movement;
Stillness fosters clarity;
To be moving and clear...
This is true power.***

—KAREN VALENCIC

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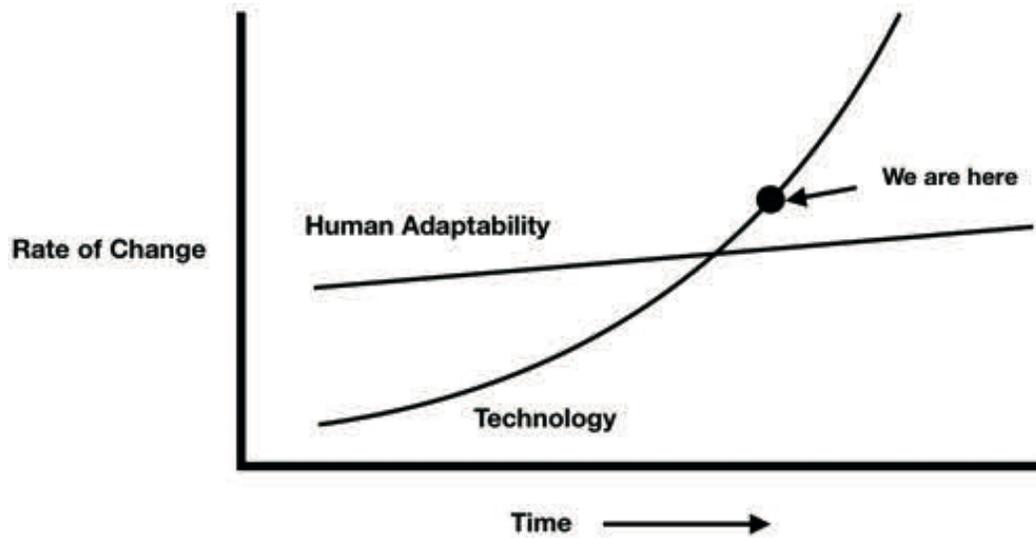
FOREWORD

THE MODERN WORLD RADICALLY SHIFTED in 2007 when the iPhone, YouTube, Twitter, Kindle, Watson (Artificial Intelligence), and my own Spiral Impact were launched, along with many other social platforms and technologies. Thirteen years later, it's hard to imagine life before them. The modern world of technology continues to exponentially speed up as Moore's Law so eloquently predicted in 1965. (Moore predicted processing power would double the speed of technology every two years.) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Moore%27s_law, n.d.)

“So, what does that matter?” you may be thinking as you read this book about human performance and communication.

It matters because humans' ability to adapt is lagging way behind the continual technological advances. While many of you don't need a graph to realize this, I was struck by this dramatic comparison of human adaptability and technology over time from Thomas Friedman's book, *Thank You for Being Late*. Friedman shares a graph by Astro Teller, CEO of Google X's “Moonshot Factory” (Friedman, 2016):

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As you can see, we are beyond the crossing point, and this lag opens Pandora's Box for destructive conflict, burnout, and division. Our individual ability to bring forth our true power, master the art of conflict, and foster collaboration and civility all greatly impact our individual sense of freedom and engagement in our lives.

I've labeled this updated version of Spiral Impact, the Black Belt edition because, contrary to most people's belief that it signifies an endpoint, a black belt signifies a new beginning, a new level of mastery after many years of practice. Preparing for a black belt test demands an accelerated and dedicated focus and practice. I believe this is true for human performance as well. The personal and professional advantages for this are where freedom and satisfaction are found.

Just like a Black Belt in the art I represent, *aikido*, there aren't short cuts. It's not a weekend course that you give lip service to. It requires consistent practice and a willingness to surrender old ways of doing

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things. The concepts in this book are simple and entirely worth the investment of your attention and time. This book is filled with nuggets to help you master conflict and feel more freedom and control in your life.

The book's subtitle *The Power to Get It Done with Grace* is standing the test of time. You may think Power and Grace in the same sentence are contradictory, partly because you may have been led to believe something different about power.

With three decades of consistent practice in *aikido*, I know that understanding the difference between power and force is a key to getting out of struggle, both on the mat and in your life.

The first time I witnessed an *aikido* demonstration, it profoundly revealed how to generate True Power, as opposed to using force, to realize one's purpose. Since that first demonstration, I have moved and fallen and spiraled my way through layers of learning.

When I began my *aikido* practice, I felt somewhat like a shrinking violet. When there were differences of perspective or intensity of emotion, I'd vacillate between withdrawing and passive-aggressively fighting. Both choices caused me to feel at the mercy of whoever or whatever held "power." Rarely did I leave the interaction feeling good and certainly not powerful.

As a young engineer I saw these dynamics play out daily in my corporate job. I wondered: What if people could come to work and honorably engage with True Power? What if we could be heard by, and value, each

other? What if I, personally, could put self-doubt away and teach others to do the same? The workplace could become a positive growth environment instead of a battlefield of ego.

That is when I decided to shift careers and apply both the blending, or *ai*, and the energy, or *ki*, experienced in *aikido*, eventually creating the Spiral Impact method for generating True Power and mastering conflict, both for individuals and teams.

While learning is a never-ending spiral, I pause now to share three things I've learned about True Power and how it relates to teams and the people responsible for leading them.

1. POWER AND FORCE ARE OFTEN CONFUSED

Power is rotational; force is a straight line. Force only works when you are in a dominant position whether physically, emotionally, or positionally. Using force usually produces a short-term gain with a long-term loss.

Unfortunately, sometimes people in “positions of power” will use force to maintain or fulfill their purpose. Force divides and diminishes people. Anyone who has felt marginalized by a government, a boss, a co-worker, or a spouse knows this full well. Examples of force are: “telling” instead of “asking,” deciding without consulting, and withholding key information. Force results in a push-pull interaction and may either be externally expressed or internally felt.

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By contrast, True Power engages by creating positive connection through clear intent, inquiry, and acknowledgment. Power moves *with* rather than *against*.

2. POWER IS NOT ABOUT SIZE OR POSITION

As a woman I can't usually use force in *aikido* because I don't have the muscle strength to compel my stronger male partners to move. But this is an advantage, as it requires me to find leverage through my center and connection. If I were stronger, I might be tempted to use force and ultimately do harm to myself or my opponent.

The same is true in everyday life—with centering, inquiry, and clear honorable intent you create leverage. This generates True Power which can dissipate destructive force.

When rotational movement happens around a calm center, that is power. Think of a hurricane: The more defined and calm the eye, the more power it wields. It is this spiraling power of a hurricane — the same spiraling power I experience in *aikido* — that informs and extends my Spiral Impact Method.

Today, there is a trend toward teaching mindfulness and emotional intelligence in business. This is exciting to see because both require a strong *center*. These practices complement each other. Centering aligns the mind, the emotions, and the gut (instinct) for clarity.

3. TRUE POWER TAKES LESS EFFORT

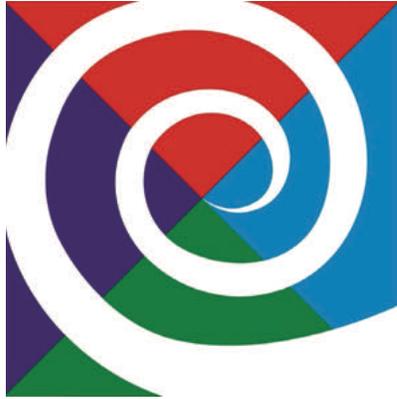
As the world rapidly changes, agility and resilience are essential survival skills, and they are integral to *aikido* (on the mat) and the gift of applying the Spiral Impact method (in life). True Power minimizes resistance for increased momentum. When you ‘move with’ and spiral there is no resistance and momentum is released! Accomplish more, effortlessly—it is magical.

As I tie my black belt, I feel honored that it was passed on to me from two of my teachers. Without their dedication to practice and sharing what they’ve learned about the true nature of power, I would not be where I am today. Much appreciation to Tom Crum, who introduced me to *aikido* in that first demonstration. And to my home dojo teachers George Bevins, Joe Lavelle, and David Johnson and all the others with whom I’ve trained over the years.

In practical terms, I’d like you to think about what “black belt” you are working toward. It’s that thing you want to master. And recognize there is no end to your practice. Receiving a black belt is actually a beginning to the next level. As you’ll see soon the spiral goes on indefinitely. At the point of this writing I approach my third *aikido* black belt test. Each one, from my experience, becomes more relaxed and fun, even as it becomes more challenging.

Let’s roll!

Karen



SECTION 1

INTRODUCTION

MOMENTUM INTERRUPTED

“KEEP MOVING AND BEND YOUR KNEES.” These words echo in my head whenever I begin to struggle. Moving naturally reduces resistance and bending knees lowers your center of gravity for stability and flexibility.

In the early days of my martial arts practice, I would frequently feel overwhelmed by my big, sweaty opponents. If I suddenly appeared immobilized by my opponent’s greater strength, my teacher’s voice in the background would ring out, “Keep moving and bend your knees.”

The martial art *aikido* mimics life. Movement gives us energy and creativity; struggle and fear make us feel stuck. The choices you make either create or stop momentum, both on the *aikido* practice mat and in life and work. “Keep moving and bend your knees” in everyday life means be flexible and ask questions for continuous learning.

I was initially drawn to study *aikido* from a desire to be strong, clear, and balanced, particularly in challenging situations. As a project engineer, I frequently felt frustrated and disempowered when our project team disagreed on how to proceed. When I worked in manufacturing, the pressure created by balancing quality with keeping

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the production line moving was overwhelming at times. The dollars lost for every minute the line shut down were huge. And having my office across the hall from the union office didn't create a peaceful sanctuary to recharge in! I felt anything but balanced.

Escaping these circumstances to have children didn't lighten the stress. Taking care of a colicky infant who cried endlessly for six months was probably one of the most challenging times of my life. I wanted to be in command of my life rather than allowing circumstances to control me. *Aikido* practice develops body, mind, and spirit. As one becomes proficient in *aikido*, the skills easily transfer to all aspects of life. An increased ability to deal with conflict and influence outcomes is also a wonderful benefit.

Practice on the mat typically consists of one person providing the energy, or attack, and the other person learning to respond. In life, potential attackers or opponents may be:

Differences between people, when

- “They” just won't see things your way
- You are at an impasse in a negotiation

Demands on your time, when you

- Are over-committed
- Are feeling burned out
- Can't say “no” to others' requests
- Feel a loss of motivation before a large project is finished

MOMENTUM INTERRUPTED

Disappointments, when

- Potential clients or employers keep saying “no”
- You don’t have something you want
- Unwanted change happens

Each of these scenarios has the potential to interrupt your momentum to get “it,” your desired outcome, done. Using the core concepts from *aikido*, you can accomplish your “it” with power and grace. Grace in this context is beauty, finesse, and style.

In *aikido* you learn that power comes from connecting with and moving in the same direction as your opponent’s attack. Therefore,

Strength comes from position, not force.

The intention of *aikido* is to protect both the attacker’s life as well as your own. When practiced correctly, there is no struggle or conflict; all life is nurtured and protected. I believe mastering these principles is the path not only to creating and sustaining momentum but ultimately to freedom.

The problem is, differences, demands, and disappointments often create conflict. People tend to have one of five desires about conflict.

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1. **MANAGE OR RESOLVE CONFLICT**—Conflict management or resolution is a popular topic in the performance improvement industry. These words imply a need to get rid of conflict or control it in some way.
2. **LOVE CONFLICT**—Some people delight in creating conflict, then watching the chaos that ensues. Often, this disengages others in significant ways.
3. **HATE CONFLICT AND AVOID IT AT ALL COSTS**—Many people fall into this category and many TV sitcoms are based upon people avoiding conflict. In the real world, it's anything but funny. The cost of doing this can be astronomical emotionally, physically, and financially.
4. **BELIEVE THEY HAVE NO CONFLICT**—Frequently people in authority positions have this belief. Often, they may not recognize (or want to recognize) the conflict happening around them.
5. **MASTER CONFLICT**—A few, rare individuals have the expectation that there will be conflict and embody the principles to embrace it, explore differences, and remove resistance. Conflict mastery requires not only that you acknowledge conflict's existence but also that you allow it to act as a catalyst for making healthy change, strengthening relationships, and creating innovation.

MOMENTUM INTERRUPTED

This is living the Spiral Impact Method! When you master conflict, you are on the path to freedom.

The concepts in this book come from 29 years of *aikido* practice and 28 years of helping people work together in a variety of circumstances. A great deal of my work has focused on conflict. Because conflict often keeps our desired outcome, our “it,” out of reach, I’d like to address conflict here. Mishandled conflict often slows down and even stops momentum. Conflict is inevitable, natural and necessary for innovation, so mastering it is crucial for anyone wanting to be truly free. If that sounds a little daunting, remember that *mastery* doesn’t equate to *perfection*. In his book, *Mastery: The Keys to Success and Long-Term Fulfillment*, George Leonard¹ gives us this encouragement:

“Mastery is not perfection, but rather a journey and the true master must be willing to try and fail and try again.”

Let’s begin with an exploration of what conflict really is.

¹ Leonard, 1991

CONFLICT DEFINED

WHEN I ASK PEOPLE WHAT CONFLICT IS, most of the time they respond with, “A difference in opinion.” Conflict is not a difference in opinion; it is how we respond to a difference in opinion.

Differences are a good thing. In organizations if everyone agreed on everything, progress would stagnate. If we agreed on everything in relationships, they would be boring. We need differences to innovate and grow. For example, the difference between the tech-obsessed person and the tech-resistant person is a healthy difference. As the two share their different comfort levels and needs about technology, they both grow. The tech-obsessed person may learn he needs to adjust his ideas to fit the softer relationship needs of the company, and the tech-resistant person may learn he needs to grow in his comfort level with technology.

A difference becomes a conflict when you choose to push against the difference. The word *conflict* is derived from the Latin root words *com*, meaning *together*, and *fligere*, meaning *to strike*. So conflict means *to strike together*. Conflict can be experienced as creative tension or destructive tension. In the above example, destructive conflict could happen if the tech-obsessed person forces a point of view that

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technology is the answer to everything, and the tech-resistant person dismisses technology as a waste of time. When either person takes the position that he is right and the other is wrong, and then pushes his point of view beyond the comfort level of the other person, conflict becomes destructive.

Let's explore another example: Two people may have different opinions about how to grill chicken. One person may see this as merely interesting—a difference. Another person may choose to make the difference a big issue arguing that his way is right. A third observer may say nothing but feel internal conflict over his friends' arguing. A discussion, even an intense one, over how to grill chicken may or may not become destructive conflict for the two friends. Likewise, the third friend observing may or may not be bothered by the exchange.

The chicken example illustrates beautifully how conflict is an art. People experience a common event or circumstance and perceive it very differently based on their background, knowledge, and personality type.

People choose to turn differences into conflict for many reasons: past unresolved issues between those involved, learned behavior patterns, insecurity, or fear. Regardless of the reason, recognizing the behavior is the first step to changing it.

Take a moment and try this: Make a fist with each of your hands. Now push them together.

People experience a common event or circumstance and perceive it very differently based on their background, knowledge, and personality type.

CONFLICT DEFINED

Imagine this same tension pushing against another person, an event, a thing, or yourself.

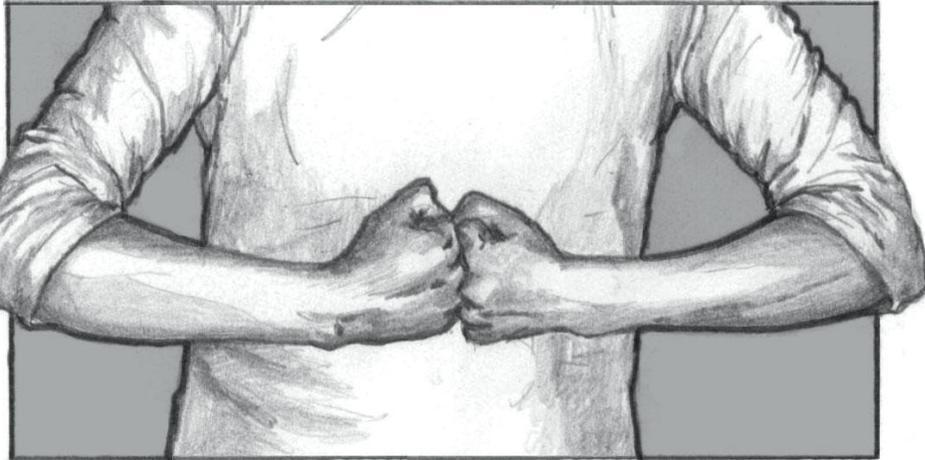


FIGURE 1: *Pushing Tension*

A certain amount of tension is creative, causing you to “move off being stuck” and find solutions. This is good. However, each person has a limit to the amount of tension he can handle before the tension becomes destructive conflict, felt internally and/or expressed externally.

When people feel pushed in any way, they almost always push back. This is Newton’s Third Law: For every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Identifying whether you are productively pushing or destructively *forcing* is crucial to mastering conflict and maintaining momentum. When you increase the push or force beyond a person’s tolerance you may:

- Cause the other person to resist more, resulting in destructive conflict

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- Shut the other person down mentally, emotionally, or physically
- Cause yourself to burn out or collapse

The secret to truly mastering conflict is to understand and honor the different people involved in the process. Recognizing how much tension or pushing is productive, given the people involved, is key to mastering conflict.

DESTRUCTIVE CONFLICT

Pushes too hard, too fast, or too long

The intention is to control, make wrong, or destroy

CONFLICT MASTERY

Pushes just right for the people involved

The intention to is engage for positive outcome and innovation

In *aikido* practice, conflict is required. Sensitivity to how much physical power your practice partner can take is crucial to helping her learn. As she develops her skills, the more physical intensity she can handle.

Only one of the people involved in the conflict must make a different choice to create movement rather than an impasse. This is also true for many of my clients, as illustrated by the following story.

At wit's end, Hank called me for advice. He felt defeated and bewildered. Hank's agency provides educational materials for health clinics. Providing the information contained in the materials is a standard state requirement. Hank's service saves the clinic's resources they would otherwise need to purchase to create their

CONFLICT DEFINED

own materials. Yet, the first two meetings with clinic staff were like a battle. Why were these people so resistant?

After asking Hank a series of questions, I had a sense the people may have felt Hank was “pushing” his agenda. Even though they needed and wanted the materials, they felt pushed and were subtly pushing back.

I suggested he go back in with the intention of learning all he could about them, asking questions rather than giving them solutions. Before he met with them, he was also to do some deep breathing and relax a little.

Hank reported back that his next meeting felt almost too easy. He had asked questions and listened. His customers were then very open to what he had to offer. Hank’s changed approach changed their response. He got his desired outcome.

When change or disappointment happens, you can struggle internally or “keep moving and bend your knees,” as in the next example:

It was a very long night flying back from South America. Sleeping in a foreign airport made us all a little on edge by the time we landed in Dallas at 5:30 AM.

Two women from NYC were anxious about returning on time for appointments scheduled that day. As we deplaned, we all scrambled toward the flight schedule to learn the status of our connections. The two NYC travelers learned their flight was canceled. One

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woman sat down full of despair, totally debilitated by the news. The other woman immediately began to scan the other airlines' flights. She saw another flight to New York, which was scheduled to arrive earlier than their original flight. She moved quickly to secure a seat on the flight, and away she went. She kept moving and bent her knees. She got "it" done with grace—and even included the other woman in her solution.

The way you choose to interact with people can create a lot of conflict and unnecessary work for yourself. "Keep moving and bend your knees" applies here as well.

Ingrid felt invincible; she was a smart, capable person. She knew how to "get it done." The trouble for her employer was that she had no grace in her style. Her way was the right way; she shut down and disempowered others in the organization. She was in command and control, giving little respect to most of the people she worked with. She did, however, get small project results, which made her valuable to the organization.

Mid-career she was awarded responsibility for a multi-million-dollar global project. This was the opportunity of a lifetime. Her superiors knew she had the knowledge needed for the project. They also knew and were concerned about her ability to lead effectively; they knew Ingrid's command and control style could potentially alienate the project team.

Ingrid and I spent quite a bit of time building communication skills at the onset of the project. She began to see the importance

CONFLICT DEFINED

of everyone's working together. When I demonstrated the concept of "keep moving and bend your knees," she literally experienced, through the aikido movement, how much easier it was to work with people rather than constantly direct and control them. She ultimately saw the value of leading by bringing out the best in people rather than shutting them down. As I facilitated several team development sessions, Ingrid enjoyed the team interaction and reaped the benefits of a group working together. She verbalized she was relieved to have the cooperative support of the team, rather than having to follow every detail herself.

A few months passed, and I met again with Ingrid. She told me everything was going well if she kept a constant watch over everyone. Seeing my face drop, with wide eyes she sighed, "I'm still trying to command and control, aren't I?" The pressure to succeed had caused her to resort to old behavior, which was paralyzing and, again, alienating the team. Her behavior was also draining her energy and time. She needed to shift back to "keep moving and bend her knees" to keep the team engaged. We created a strategy that included ongoing coaching and daily reminders, both visual and auditory, to keep her on track.

Ingrid's project was ultimately successful. When last we talked, she was taking on an even larger leadership role in the organization.

I've learned over the years that whenever I feel stuck or like I'm pushing, I "keep moving and bend my knees." This is how to create the power to get it done with grace.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF AIKIDO

Aikido is a fairly new martial art. It was created in the mid-twentieth century by a Japanese man named Morihei Ueshiba. Mr. Ueshiba, also referred to as O Sensei or “Great Teacher,” is considered by many people to be one of the finest martial artists of all time. He studied and mastered many different martial arts. O Sensei created a new and somewhat radical martial arts philosophy that became aikido. Unlike most other martial arts, aikido reflects O Sensei’s desire to experience conflict in a way that honors, rather than destroys, life.

Aikido is not a defensive martial art. It is an art of self-development. Learning to maintain your sense of self and power while simultaneously honoring the other person is a difficult task. Learning the art of aikido requires many years of practice. Occasionally, people use the term “verbal aikido.” Aikido cannot be done verbally. The art requires integration of body/mind/spirit to truly be effective.

The intention of this book is to apply the concepts of aikido to everyday life.

To see a couple of great aikido videos go to:

www.karenvalencic.com/resources/

To learn more about *aikido*, specifically, I suggest the following books:

Principles of Aikido by Mitsugi Saotome

Aikido and the Harmony of Nature by Mitsugi Saotome