

How to Organize a Successful Seminar

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*"To ASSUME, means you make an 'ass of u and me'" ~ Unknown US Army sergeant, boot camp
1986*

"To see things in the seed, that is genius." ~Lao-Tzu

"To trust is good, to control is better" ~ Stalin

In the past several years I have been worked with several other members of the Bohemia Aikikai to put on over a dozen seminars. Also in that time I have attended several dozen more as a student. I have experienced a lot of successful seminars and a few failures.

Generally, these failures resulted either directly or indirectly from poor prior planning, so I wanted to take this opportunity to write a small article on how to have a successful seminar.

A successful training environment has a lot of moving parts that have to come together smoothly. It should seem like it just flows, a neutral space where nothing is missing and everything is understood, thus it is quite difficult to do. Of all the things that I found that are important for a successful seminar, the single most important component is prior planning.

Prior planning: The first step is to accurately assess the situation and to define your goals and requirements. Answer Who? What? Where? When? How? How much?

Define your goals and base your requirements on these goals. The requirements for a weekend regional seminar with a local teacher in your home dojo are going to be much less involved and complicated than the planning required for a big camp, bringing an international teacher, renting a community sports facility and inviting international students for a week or longer.

Uncertainty is what leaves a sour taste in people's mouths. Reduce uncertainty for everyone involved, including the organizational staff, the teacher, the students attending and

for the representatives of the hosting location. Prior planning and clear assignments of responsibilities for organizing the various parts of the seminar go a long way towards reducing this uncertainty.

Plan ahead and give yourself enough lead time to plan and execute the seminar:

- Depending on the size and complexity, this could be sixty days to six months before the event.
- Make a list of all the resources needed, including the people and their duties and responsibilities. There are lots of little pieces needed to make a seminar successful. Write down everything needed on a checklist and make sure that everything is assigned to a particular person. (See the appendix for a more complete list of materials needed.)

People make it happen ~ The job positions needed and their tasks:

- **General manager:** Responsible for the over all organization of the seminar. The seminar main Point of Contact (POC). The one person assigned to answer questions and help prospective students and the teacher to attend. Include their email address and/or phone number in the advertising.
 - Schedules the camp and lines up resources.
 - Coordinates the staff.
 - Takes care of Sensei.
 - De-conflicts problems and provides quality control.
- **Facilities manager:** Responsible for the training hall, access, cleanliness and all the equipment in the dojo.
- **Camp organizer:** Coordinates all the other materials needed, schedules the recreation and accommodation for Sensei.
- **Financial manager:** Creates and controls the budget, accounts for all money spent and received.
- **Foreign student liaison:** If you expect foreigners, assign a dojo member that speaks their language to assist them. Assists foreign students with information, transportation, accommodation, and anything else required.
- **Accommodation coordinator:** Coordinates accommodation for the students during the seminar.
- **Translator:** Serves as a translator for the Sensei before, during and after training. Make sure you line up translators for the foreign instructor that doesn't speak the local language. If it's a big seminar with many foreign students you need to have a translator into their language during the classes as well.

Planning the financing:

- How much will the seminar cost to host?
- Where will the front money come from? Can you get a sponsor to cover some of the costs?
- Do you need to pay in advance for reservations? Deposit on the dojo? Transportation tickets?
- How much do you need to pay to bring the teacher in and support him or her during the seminar?
- Will the teacher get a salary for teaching or do you just have to cover their costs?
- What will be the costs for:
 - Transportation, gasoline, flight tickets, local transportation, taxis?
 - Telephone calls? Maybe a card mobile phone for the teacher if he/she is from overseas?

- Lodging and food?
- Dojo rental, transportation of tatami?
- Consider giving a discount or include a small gift for an early reservation payment. This can help cover the costs up front and also give you a better assessment of how many students will attend early on.
- How will you price the seminar? Flat rate, one price for all? Student discount? Discount for distant travelers? Discount for early depositors or maybe an included gift (t-shirt, mug or poster?)
- Based on your projected costs, what is your “break even point,” that is how many students do you need attend and at what price to cover all your costs?
- Try to find the “sweet spot” in pricing that allows for maximum participation for the most people while still covering your costs.
- Consider selling souvenirs or even creating a video to offset your expenses, but make sure you clear the latter with the teacher first!
- Finally, if this is a group effort and in the unlikely event you actually make more money than the costs, it might be a good idea to decide what you will do with the excess ahead of time. Buying a bigger present for Sensei, depositing it into the club fund, supplementing or reimbursing certain students that are still in school or coming from far away are all possibilities.

The Training Hall:

- How much space will you need for these many students? You may need to get a bigger place. This may cost more, meaning you need to adjust your costs.
- Check the space before the event. Make sure the lights, electrical plugs and hot water work, the cleanliness of the toilets and showers, and yes, that there is toilet paper.
- Check the security of the changing rooms. Can they be locked? Who has the key? Be sure to advise the students the day of the event if the changing rooms or dojo will be left unsecured and empty during the seminar.
- Is there a separate space for Sensei to change? To shower?
- If it is a big multi sport center, check what other events are scheduled for the same time and try to adjust your schedule if there could be a disruption or conflict. (Cheerleaders with air horns at the regional basketball final on the other side of the wall can be quite disturbing.)
- Is there already tatami there? Great you are lucky. If not where will you get it and how will you get it to and from your site? Have a back up plan for transportation of the tatami. Without it, the show doesn't go on.

Taking care of the teacher (Before, during and after):

- Keep in touch with the teacher periodically before the event.
 - At a minimum, contact Sensei one month, one week and one day before arrival.
 - If there is a schedule change or if you anticipate some problem, let him/her know. Most teachers will be flexible... if they know as soon as possible. (Like last year in Hradec Kralove the power went out, so we took training by candle light! Shishiya Sensei just kept his good nature because we explained the problem to him over lunch, so it was already common knowledge. “Little pain, no damage, both happy”)
- Transportation: How is the teacher traveling? Car? Plane/train?
 - Car? If car, agree ahead of time who meets him and when and where to meet him upon arrival. Make sure he has emergency numbers and addresses, so if there is a problem for him he can contact you and for his family back home to contact him.
 - Plane? How will Sensei get to and from the airport? Who will meet him? Is language a barrier for the teacher? Figure in the costs to/from the airport.
- Accommodation: Teacher and uchi deshi lodging.

- Where will the teacher stay before, during and after the seminar? Who will take care of sensei during each of these periods? Does the teacher know the country and/or the language? If not, plan more help as required.
- If you expect the teacher and guests to site see on their own, consider arranging maps, subway and tram tickets, guide books, and a “Berliz” survival language phrase book. Also a local mobile phone with your and other emergency contact numbers already coded in is a good idea.
- Confirm the accommodation far in advance, then check periodically as the event comes closer. Be sure that if the teacher is going directly to class someone checks into the pension before they release the room!
- Will Sensei have breakfast included in his/her accommodation? If not, plan to provide something to eat in the morning, and perhaps a coffee maker, tea kettle, bottled water and other drinks, or rice cooker for the room. A plant or some flowers are a nice touch too and display a fine attention to detail and caring on your part.
- Who comes with the teacher? Any additional students or uchi deshi? If so you will be responsible to help organize all their needs as well, including transportation, lodging, meals, and, potentially, emergencies and translation. You may or may not be expected to pay for them, so be sure to clear it up with Sensei before hand.
- If the seminar involves training weapons or training aids establish what they are before the teacher arrives, whether the sensei will bring their own, or you will need to provide them and to have them ready in the dojo on the first class.
- It’s common to give a gift to the teacher at the end of the seminar. Be sure to have it prepared ahead of time. If the teacher is Japanese, make sure the wrapping is carefully and artfully done as it’s an important part of their culture. Also for a Japanese teacher money is an acceptable gift, where as western teachers tend to be more comfortable with an object.
- Check with the teacher ahead of time if photographing and/or videoing will be allowed. Some teachers allow both, some only photos, others nothing. Place a sign telling students what is and isn’t allowed (“No Video/Photos” or “Photos Allowed”) at the payment desk at the start of the seminar, to reduce conflicts and repetitive questions.

Good timing and de-conflicting with other seminars:

- Early fall or winter are best for the students here in the Czech Republic, but modify the dates for your situation.
- See who else is having a seminar nearby at the same time and try to avoid conflicting dates where a potential student has to choose between your seminar and another teacher for a similar subject.
- Sometimes this can take several back and forth phone calls or emails with the teacher and the training hall organizer and other groups to find the best date.

Advertising: Use every avenue to advertise:

- A poster sent out by email, and a web site is needed. Make your poster available for download on your web site and make it in MS Word or Adobe pdf format, as these are the most common. Also optimize your poster, especially if it has pictures or graphics! No one likes to get a huge file (over 300 kbs.) Over a dial up connection!
- There are several US, European, international and regional martial arts event calendars on the internet, be sure to list your event on all that you can.
- Prepare email address lists in advance to focus your advertising on the customers you want to attract. Did you get a poster from a particular dojo organizer in a MA style similar to yours by email? Copy off the address list (if it’s visible) and store it for future use.
- Poster details:

- Be sure to include the four "W's" - "Who?, What?, Where?, When? What is needed? (Weapons, sleeping bags, etc.)" and "How Much (money)?" (...and sometimes "Why" ... why this teacher, this subject or style...?)
- This means at a minimum dojo address, seminar schedule, date and times, costs, accommodation possibilities.
- Also a map if the location is hard to find, or if people are coming from outside of town.
- In English we say "A picture is worth a 1000 words" Get a photograph of the teacher and include it on the poster and the web site.
- A few days before the event, remember to send out a "reminder" email to remind people that they can still come at the last minute. (Many people do not make up their minds whether to go to a seminar or not until a day or two before the event.)
- Will you or will someone else you coordinate with have another seminar soon? Be sure to prepare and bring posters for your next event to distribute at the seminar.
- Will you have a souvenir gift for the attending students or will you sell t-shirts to commemorate the event? If so you need to get the design together and decide on the number, in what sizes, where to have them printed, and when you want them ready for pickup. (When they are ready, pack them in your seminar box.)

Gather all your materials and pack up ahead of time:

- When Sensei hits ground, you will be too busy taking care of the teacher to be searching for your support materials. Get a suitcase or foot locker to keep all your seminar materials in one place.
- Tape a packing list on the inside lid of the case and be sure to restock your materials before the next seminar.

Organize the dojo:

- Before the Event: ("6x's P" : "Prior Planning Prevents Piss-Poor Performance")
 - Assign a member of the seminar planning group to be responsible for the dojo, its access, organization, cleaning and maintenance.
 - Confirm the space far in advance, then check periodically as the event comes closer.
 - Include a large pad of paper and fat pen to write and post notices
 - Arrange for keys and be sure to have a name and mobile phone number for the key holder(s). If students are sleeping in the dojo over night, be sure to arrange access after normal hours.
 - Plan on extra trash during the seminar and have a disposal plan, including trash bags and access to the dumpster.
 - Plan for more cars and parking.
 - What will you have for a kamiza? Simple or elaborate? At a minimum you need your school teacher's picture and a stand to put it on. In addition maybe a weapons rack, a flower, calligraphy or flags.
 - Plan on having all personnel assigned, plus the materials and equipment for your traffic control and money collection point.
 - Minimum staff for collecting money is two individuals. One to record the student details and make out the entrance card, while the second collects the money and makes change, but three or more will greatly speed up the operation, especially on the first day. You will also need a third if you want to check that students have admittance cards, in addition to collecting money.
 - Make admittance cards ahead of time for the students name and dates of attendance

- Make a payment roster, with name, date, how much paid, and perhaps address, phone number and email address for contacting students in the future. Print several copies and keep them in your seminar box.
- They will need a desk and chairs, preferably just in front of the dojo doorway into the training hall.
- Have a cash box and some currency for change.
- Have a cork board next to the desk to post notices, such as the schedule of classes, locations of the restaurants, any special events, names of the key holders, names and mobile phones of the organizing members, medical emergency numbers, and any other important or changing information.
- Consider handing out a simple feedback form and ask the students to hand it back in at the end of the seminar, but be prepared to have a thick skin and try to take the criticisms objectively!
- Plan on visitors and consider inviting the news media if appropriate.

Plan the After Hours Recreation:

- After the training what do you want to do? Students and teachers like to mix, talk, discuss the topic and get to know each other. Planning normally includes some place and time to let this happen, usually over a meal.
 - This can vary from virtually every meal to a single planned party. Plan the space requirements and number of seats accordingly.
 - It doesn't have to be complicated or fancy. It's better to book a pub that everyone can afford instead of something more elaborate and expensive. It does have to reserved in advance so there is enough space for everyone that wants to attend; it has to be close and easy to get to for everyone, even those without automobiles.
 - Within 10 minute walking distance is preferred.
 - If you plan a group party or picnic with food and drink, be sure to figure the costs and organization into your planning.
 - You will need to make a separate list for these materials and get a separate person to organize it.
 - Decide ahead of time how attendees will pay and if you will collect it ahead of time, or wait and see who shows up.
 - Confirm the location in advance and, if it's outside, have a rain plan.
 - Sometimes costs are prohibitive for students to attend the social gatherings. Try to arrange it in such a way that even if they choose not to eat the meal, they can still come to sit for a drink and chat with Sensei.

Emergencies and medical:

Plan ahead for accidents. Even at the best seminars, even with high ranking students, accidents can and do happen.

- Know the location of the closest hospital, and have an adequate first aid kit available.
- Have a phone number for the emergency service written down and available.
- If you have trained medical professionals among the staff or students, identify them early on, so if something happens, you can call on them.
- In Western countries, be sure to prepare a release form, and have students sign it prior to training.

Get supporters early:

- Finally, get some key students and leaders of other dojos to commit to coming and their students will follow.

Ready, Set... Go! ~ The First Day of the event:

- Put up posters in the neighborhood and along the main intersections with arrows pointing to the training. (Be sure to include tape and string in your list of materials.)
- Set up the traffic control and payment early. You need the collection team to control admittance of students and to record their payments. Set up the desk for payment and traffic control. Be sure to have a poster and payment schedule posted.
 - Have students fill out the payment at time of entry and give them an entrance card to serve as their ticket in before each class.
 - Have an accounting each day and ensure there is a secure place to store the cash box each evening.
- Set up the kamiza and have the training materials in their proper place.
- Take out the trash regularly, check the locker rooms and make sure students that are sleeping over in the dojo clean up after themselves.
- Have bottled water ready for Sensei
- Make sure the first aid kit is handy and that your team and the teacher knows its location.
- Introduce the seminar staff to the students. This lets everyone know who does what and who they can talk to get their questions answered and reduces the load on the general manager.

Closure and follow up. ("All that ends well, goes well"):

- Unfortunately, this is usually when all the careful planning starts to break down. Human natures being what it is, when the seminar is over and everyone is tired, things sometimes "fall through the cracks", so this is the time to be the most careful and focus on attention to detail.
 - Make sure you understand what you need to do when you leave and what the standards are. Do you need to clean up or is there a janitorial staff?
 - Who locks up? Who transports the teacher, tatami, kamiza, etc?
 - Do a final accounting. Did you break even or make money? Good. If not, it's time to look carefully at what you could do better or how you can cut costs next time.
 - Meet for a drink with your team a couple of days after the event. Get their feedback about what went well and what needs to be improved. Also contact key students that attended and get their opinions.
 - Did you collect the email addresses I mentioned to you? Good, now email everyone and thank them for coming! At the same time you give them your contact info and your web site address, so in the future they will look there for your upcoming events.
 - Post the photos or videos on your web page and, when it's ready for prime time, send out an email to everyone so they can remember all the fun they had.

I hope this helps and have a fun seminar!

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"Saru mo ki kara ochiru."

(Even monkeys fall from trees)

Appendix A: List of potential materials and resources needed

- Airline or train tickets, local transportation
- Hotel reservations or accommodation for teacher and students
- Dojo or training hall
- Email lists and web advertising
- Keys for access and security of dojo, changing rooms, equipment storage
- Tatami (for falling arts)
- Restaurant reservations for all meals
- Posters
- T-Shirts or other souvenir gift
- Tram/metro tickets
- Mobile phone and contact info for teacher
- Maps (For students and for Sensei)
- Pens, paper
- Tape, string, rope
- Desk or table, chairs
- Cash box and spare change
- Admittance cards
- Attendance sign-in roster
- Feedback form
- Training aids and training weapons
- Kamiza – stand or small table, cloth, flowers, pictures, flags, string for hanging
- Party materials
- Cleaning supplies – brooms and mops, paper towels for accidents
- Toilet paper
- Bottled drinking water
- First aid kit
- Garbage bags
- Guide book, language phrase book
- Traffic signs
- “No photos/ videos” sign, if appropriate
- Coffee pot, tea kettle, snacks, drinks for Sensei’s accommodation
- Photos for web site

Appendix B: List of Potential Tasks by Job Position.

- General manager
- Facilities manager
- Camp organizer
- Financial manager
- Foreign student liaison
- Accommodation coordinator