

With it and your business could end up seeing stars

The worlds of martial arts and business may seem poles apart but there are some remarkable similarities. **Oliver Astley** meets an entrepreneur who can help staff deal with their squabbles and even defend themselves should the worst comes to the worst

CONFLICT is ingrained in the very language of business with aggressive marketing, taking a hard line and hostile takeovers. Inevitable as it is, conflict can have a hugely detrimental effect on relationships in the boardroom, with clients or between different departments.

What this means is that a company that struggles to manage friction between people is a company that does not have the discipline to achieve its goals.

This is the thinking that underlies much of what one Derby businessman is trying to achieve with his unique approach to conflict management training.

Mark Wingfield, managing director of MW Sigma, said: "Our conflict management course has been designed to help staff manage difficult situations, where the person they're dealing with has the potential to become extremely aggressive, in a way that is assertive but non-threatening, thus helping to defuse the situation."

However, there is more to Mark's business conflict management training than meets the eye. As a black belt in karate and a self-defence expert, he can also help with the more practical hands-on side of conflict resolution. This allows him to combine his business, his interest in martial arts and his strongly-held personal belief that everyone has the right to defend themselves.

"The Max Self-Defence training deals with the theory of being able to recognise and deal with conflicts in the workplace, how they arise and how

they can be contained, while the practical side helps build confidence and team spirit and gives people basic self-defence techniques for everyday life," said Mark, whose business is based at the i-D Business Centre, off London Road, in Derby.

Mark aims to teach employees of all levels how to communicate, negotiate and defuse potentially volatile and even violent situations. The courses are designed to help people develop active listening skills, body language and understand non-verbal cues. On a basic level, this aids effective communication between staff but also helps recognise potential flashpoints that could lead to friction.

Even though actual physical violence is rare around the water cooler and in the boardroom, the training goes beyond the office to help staff defend themselves effectively with a minimum of force should a situation escalate.

The dual function of this type of training provision has enabled Mark to win a new contract in Manchester with a large organisation employing a wide range of people from different cultures, whose ways of working and dealing with each other has created friction.

"One example would be a German employee who speaks to people in a certain way because it's part of their culture but causes problems with colleagues. Integrating foreign employees into the workforce has also been difficult.

"Furthermore, it is a 24-hour operation in an area that isn't that safe at night and so the practical self-defence side of what we offer is very im-

portant, making the training perfectly adapted to their needs," explained Mark.

A more light-hearted side of the training involves using the physical aspects of self-defence as a release for office staff to let off steam.

"If you've spent all day dealing with tax issues, it is great to be able to punch the bags and deal with their frustration."

Although the conflict management and self-defence side of the business is of growing importance, the initial crux of the MW Sigma was to provide marketing and management solutions using the Six-Sigma methodology, hence the company name.

"Six-Sigma is a strict project management methodology that aims to reduce defects in business processes to 3.4 defects per million opportunities either to improve existing

"The Max Self-Defence training gives people basic self-defence techniques for everyday life."

practices or for new projects.

"How strictly it's applied depends largely on what you want to achieve.

"If you're managing a call centre and only 3.4 calls per million are badly handled, that's perhaps an unrealistic target, but if your hospital is taking out appendixes, that is the kind of target you want to achieve," said Mark.

Six-Sigma incorporates two five-step programmes that are designed to make business processes as efficient and lucrative as possible.

Put crudely, this is achieved through defining, measuring, analysing, improving and controlling all aspects of any given business project.

It is a methodology that has been used to great effect by American plant specialist Caterpillar for whom Mark

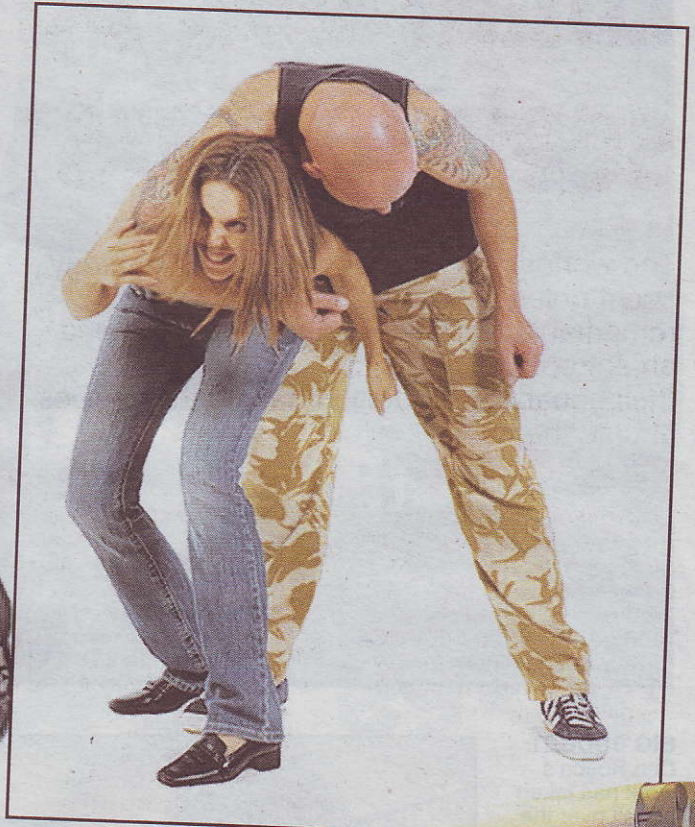
used to work before setting up his company. When the chief executive officer of Caterpillar, Glen Barton, embraced Six-Sigma, he really did it in style.

In December 2000, the Caterpillar senior management team were assembled in Illinois to hear about the new plan to drive the business forward. The doors of the meeting room burst open and a team of karate experts burst in and proceeded to break blocks and demonstrate a range of explosive skills. Only then did Glen appear, dressed in a karate suit with a black belt to introduce the Six-Sigma project management methodology.

"He had been impressed with what General Electric had achieved with Six-Sigma and wanted the company to be more aggressive. It had been turning over around \$20bn for the previous few years and was maintaining that level without making much progress. After a few years of implementing the Six-Sigma method, the company had doubled turnover to \$40bn," said Mark.

While working for Caterpillar, Mark gained a black belt in the application of Six-Sigma,





as the measure of expertise in the system corresponds loosely to gradings in martial arts. This made him perhaps the only businessman in the city to hold both a black belt in karate and in project management methodology. It is, as Mark concedes, less useful if you are being mugged but does prove a boon for any business whose accountants are starting to get lairy.

"I'm delighted with the success of Max Self-defence. Our

"How strictly it's applied depends largely on what you want to achieve."

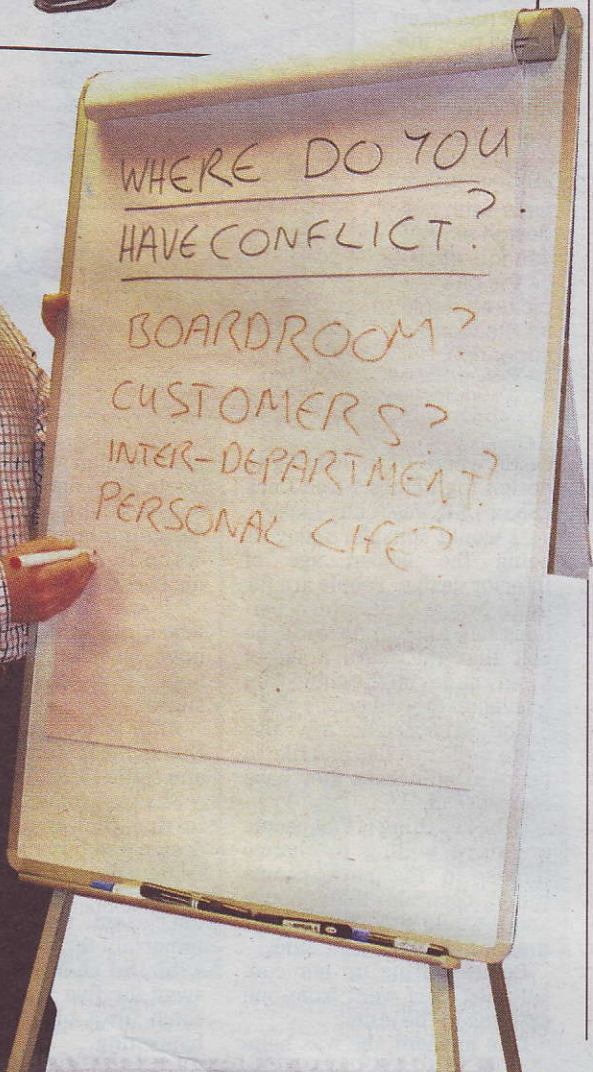
customers have a wide variety of objectives which range from helping to motivate staff, giving them assertiveness training or just giving them skills that will help them to feel more confident and safe in a wide variety of situations both at work, at home or when they're out and about," said Mark.

The relationship between martial arts and project management may seem slightly obscure but high-volume busi-

nesses producing millions of units are akin to someone who practises karate for many years. Martial arts training is about discipline, repetition and refinement. A martial arts expert with a high level of skill will still continue to practise the same movements and punches that a complete beginner will learn during their first lesson.

Having the discipline to continually refine and perfect processes whether you are making engineering components, performing operations or answering the telephone in a call centre is the mark of a successful business.

It is remarkable how well the Max Self-Defence fits in with MW Sigma, demonstrating that an interest in conflict can contribute to a harmonious business.



MONDAY

I LIKE to talk about getting up and never waking up. I clock any minute very motivated. I week on Sunday and start things about home is that you at least worry about graduating design from University, various grant companies. I needed money to make my started Vivid. At 10am, I started business call with admin. I brief my team objectives. I usually end presentation.

TUESDAY

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