



The Bushido Matrix for Couple Communication

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Abstract

The concept of Japanese Bushido and its seven virtues were introduced by the authors in this article for the practice and application of couple communication. The Bushido Matrix Worksheet (BMW) was created for enhancing couple's awareness and understanding of each other's values and experiences. An activity and a case study to demonstrate the use of the BMW were also included.

Keywords

Japanese Bushido, samurai, couple communication, relationship enhancement, value clarification

Values are not only important in any relationship; but our ability to define and stay true to a set of values contributes greatly to how we feel about ourselves.

When a person makes a decision to marry, there are many factors to consider. Of course, most people choose someone who is physically attractive to them at some level. In addition to the physical attributes that a person may find attractive, it is quite important that we find a person who is compatible with our set of values, standards, and the way in which we conduct ourselves. In every long-term relationship, there are times when turmoil will occur. Over the years, it is the common values that are more likely to sustain us through difficult times than anything else.

When each of us is young, at some point we look into the mirror and imagine what kind of person we will be when we are an adult. As adults there can be times we may find that we are comfortable with whom we have become, but quite often there can be occasions when we find we are quite far away from the person we imagined we would be when we looked into that mirror during our childhood so long ago.

When we are out of touch with our basic core set of values, it can affect all facets of our life including our work, our choices as to how we spend our leisure time, our finances, our spirituality, our parenting, and how we treat our spouses as well as ourselves. This can cause discomfort and a dissonance or feeling of being stuck.

Quite often we get so busy that we forget to take the time to define what our value system actually consists of or we may find that even though we do have values that we proclaim are important to us, that we have gotten far away from those basic principles and values. We may find that our words and our actions do not match. When our values and actions are incongruent with one another, it can be a source of great personal discomfort and adversely affect our relationships with our significant others.

In ancient days as early as the ninth century, samurai warriors developed the Bushido code. This code was a set of values that guided the behavior and decisions of the samurai who served the Japanese emperor. This set of values to a large extent became their way of life. The values that the samurai held most dear were to be trustworthy and honest. Living a life filled with honor and pride in one's own conduct rather than the pursuit of material riches was the reward the samurai sought most. In this article, we will explore how couples can use the ancient values espoused in the code of the Bushido, the way of the samurai, to enhance and strengthen their marriage and commitment to one another.

Bushido and the Samurai

Bushido comes from a combination of two words. "Bushi" means "warrior" and "do" means "way"; to simplify it, the word means "the way of the warrior" (Gaskin & Hawkins, 1994). It is a way of preserving peace through the use of force. From the 9th till 12th centuries in Japan, the warrior class was known as samurai or bushi. Samurai were part of the Japanese feudal system, similar to the knights in Europe of the middle age. Samurai lived frugal lives with no interest in riches and

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material things but rather in honor, respect, and pride. Through carrying out of their virtues, the samurai was able to keep his reputation. The loyalty to the emperor and his feudal lord was unsurpassed. Samurai had no fear of death and would enter any battle against all odds. To die in battle would only bring honor to a samurai's family and to his emperor or lord. Samurai emerged from the provinces of Japan and became the noble ruling class until their decline and abolition in the late 19th century. These warriors were men who lived by Bushido, their way of life (Gaskin & Hawkins; Peterson).

Seven Samurai

The concept and ideology of Bushido and the samurai were introduced to the United States through various epic drama films. *Seven Samurai* and *the Last Samurai* were two of the most popular ones. Winner of the 1954 Venice Film Festival's Silver Lion and having two Oscar nominations, *Seven Samurai* was acknowledged as Kurosawa's and indeed Japan's and World cinema's greatest film (Crogan, 2000). *Seven Samurai* depicted a story about a poor farming village community in the 16th century. Without a feudal landlord, the village was repeatedly raided by a band of outlaws. The villagers decided to hire samurai to protect themselves from the bandits by offering only board and three meals a day as their payment. The first part of the film depicted the villagers' difficulty searching for samurai who were willing to stoop to working for their social inferior. The latter part of the story was about how the seven samurai won the trust of the villagers and led them for the battle with the bandits. Four of the seven samurai sacrificed their lives in the bloody war, but the villagers finally got rid of the bandits and saved their village (Crogan). *Seven Samurai* illustrated the seven core virtues of the Bushido. To fight for justice, to protect the weak and the poor, and to die with honor were values that captured the accent of the film.

The Last Samurai

The Last Samurai was a more recent American epic drama directed by Edward Zwick in 2003, with Tom Cruise as Nathan Algren, the main character (la pointe, n.d.). Set in Japan during the 1870s, the *Last Samurai* told the tale of Captain Nathan Algren, a cynical veteran of the American Civil war, who was hired by the emperor of Japan to train the imperial army in the art of modern warfare. The emperor's advisors planned to eradicate a group of rebellious traditionalist samurai warriors in preparation for more Westernized and trade-friendly government policies. During the battle with the samurai, Algren was captured by the samurai but was later awakened through the learning and the practice of the samurai's traditions and code of honor. At the end, Algren gave up supporting the new Westernized Japanese government and joined the last samurai in battle in preserving the old Bushido samurai way of life. The story placed Algren in the struggle between two eras in Japan and two worlds with only his own conscious and his innate sense of honor being his guide (la pointe).

The Seven Virtues of Bushido

Bushido, the way of the samurai, was not written down until the 19th century and was based on certain "house codes" of various feudal lords (Gaskin & Hawkins, 1994). Bushido described a unique Japanese code of conduct adhered to by the samurai. Bushido emphasized virtues such as loyalty, respect, and self-sacrifice. The actual code of Bushido was passed on verbally from one generation of samurai to another, but over time, seven or eight chief virtues emerged and became the written form of Bushido (Nitobe, 2005; Nitobe & Lucas, 1979). In this article, we put our emphasis on seven core virtues; they were justice (義, *gi*), courage (勇, *yū*), benevolence (仁, *jin*), politeness (禮, *rei*), honesty (誠, *makoto*), honor (名譽, *meiyo*), and loyalty (忠義, *chūgi*) (Nitobe, 2005; Oriental Outpost, n.d.). This was the set of virtues that the samurai of Japan and the ancient warriors in Asia had to live and die by. The following gives definitions and descriptions of these virtues:

Justice/Rectitude/Right Decision (義, *gi*)

This character also means righteousness, morality, and the right conduct (Oriental Outpost, n.d.) This is the most essential teaching and principle of the samurai (Nitobe, 2005; Nitobe & Lucas, 1979). It expects all samurai to strictly follow the ethical principle by doing the right thing. A famous samurai defined it as a power of declaration: "Rectitude is the power of deciding upon a certain course of conduct in accordance with reason, without wavering to die when it is right to die, to strike when to strike is right" (Nitobe, 2005, p. 14). Doing the right thing or making the right decision sometimes is not an easy thing to practice since there seems to be more and more gray area in life. On the other hand, no matter the outcome or result, one does not lose face if they withhold proper justice. This character also means loyalty to friends or groups you belong to. In other words, you will make the right decision and be fair to those you are loyal to. This first virtue for the samurai is to follow what is ethically or morally correct. It is a challenge in society where people tend to let loose of their responsibilities.

Courage/Bravery (勇, *yū*)

This character can be translated as bravery, fearlessness, or daring in Chinese, Japanese, and Korean cultures (Oriental Outpost, n.d.). It challenges samurai to act courageously despite the circumstances. To be brave also means that the samurai has to practice his perseverance and, at the same time, that the samurai is expected to be physically and emotionally strong (Nitobe, 2005; Nitobe & Lucas, 1979). Courage is not worthy to be counted unless it is exercised in the cause of righteousness. True courage, according to Bushido, is to live when it is right to live and to die when it is right to die. In other words, courage is doing what is right and appropriate and often times, it takes a lot of courage to act on what is right.

Benevolence (仁, *jin*)

A samurai is not solely a warrior depending on his military strength. A samurai should also possess the virtues of forgiveness, love, empathy and mercy, and affection for others (Nitobe, 2005; Nitobe & Lucas, 1979). This character means being kind and loving to those who are close to you and honoring those who are of your senior. This concept also expands to include caring for people in general. Benevolence is believed to come out of our empathy and mercy for others. An old Chinese example for benevolence is the feelings and response one experiences when he sees someone fall into a well. The human nature to offer immediate care and empathy is brought out from this situation. Benevolence has to combine with politeness in order to see the actual effect (Nitobe, 2005; Nitobe & Lucas, 1979).

Politeness/Respect (禮, *rei*)

This character can also be translated as good manners, rite, worship, or an expression of gratitude (Oriental Outpost, n.d.). The gallant manner of a samurai and being courteous and respectful with others in different situations and occasions are part of this virtue. Treating others with dignity and honoring the rules of family as well as the laws of the nation can also be an expression of politeness (Nitobe, 2005; Nitobe & Lucas, 1979). More importantly, the emphasis is on being sensitive and caring to others. In other words, the emphasis is on respecting others so that you will be respected. It should be implemented in everything in society or everyday action. It is not something casual but has to be reviewed heavily since politeness affects people and the morale of society. Politeness is not on a superficial level but on a deeper level, being kind and being respectful to others so as to maintain harmony in relationships (Nitobe, 2005; Nitobe & Lucas, 1979).

Honesty/Sincerity (誠, *makoto*)

This character means truth, faith, fidelity, sincerity, trust, and confidence (Oriental Outpost, n.d.). A samurai is expected to be honest and sincere at all times despite their circumstances. At the same time, a samurai is asked to flee from any temptations from businessmen plotting deceptive schemes (Nitobe, 2005; Nitobe & Lucas, 1979). Honesty and sincerity are the beginning and the end of all things, and honesty and sincerity give meaning to everything. The sincere word coming from the mouth of the samurai carries such weight that it becomes a promise that will be fulfilled without a written pledge. Honesty and sincerity create relationships that are trustworthy.

Honor (名譽, *meiyo*)

This virtue stresses on human dignity and the awareness of one's values and principles. A samurai can sacrifice everything in exchange of honor (Nitobe, 2005; Nitobe & Lucas, 1979). Honor is believed to be closely bound up with strong family consciousness and even prenatal influence. Honor, the opposite of shame, is what a samurai strives for, and he refuses to

compromise his character by any slight humiliation. This virtue also includes the characteristics of discernment and patience and meekness. This is about having or earning the respect of others and about having a reputation. It is more the status of being worthy of honor and it is not to be confused with doing honorable things.

Loyalty/Faithfulness/Devoted (忠義, *chūgi*)

These characters also contain the ideas of being faithful, devoted, true, and obedient (Oriental Outpost, n.d.). Of all, this virtue is utmost important. It describes the relationships among samurai and others in various situations (Nitobe, 2005; Nitobe & Lucas, 1979). Being loyal to one's mission and one's master is the ultimate creed for a samurai to follow. The economic crisis has brought us to a new reality. There is very minimal organizational loyalty in Corporate America and even in our government. However, strict loyalty to one's master or feudal lord is the code to every samurai. "Till death do us part" can precisely depict the loyalty of a samurai to his emperor.

Activity: Utilizing the Bushido Matrix Worksheet (BMW)

The authors have created the BMW for self-reflection and couple communication (see Appendix A). It can also be utilized in any group setting for couples to generate opportunities for self-disclosure and sharing. The BMW acts as a visual aid for readers to examine these seven virtues and how each of these virtues actually applies in our daily living and relationship building. The authors believe that practicing these Bushido virtues can ultimately enhance intra- and interpersonal relationship, beginning with personal awareness and extending to couple awareness.

The seven Bushido virtues are listed on the vertical dimension of the matrix of the BMW, whereas the horizontal axis features the following five reflective questions:

1. How was this virtue modeled for you as a child/adolescence and who modeled for you?
2. On a scale of 1–10, 1 being *low* and 10 being *high*, rate yourself on any three of the virtues you consider as most significant in your life. When/how in your life, apart from your current relationship, have you demonstrated some of these virtues?
3. In previous significant relationships, cite two or three examples of when any of these virtues were violated and/or compromised? (Write the actual number of the experience after giving the examples.)
4. Give examples of when/how you and your partner demonstrate this virtues in your relationship?
5. Choose two or three of these virtues you consider important for improving your current relationship. How are you going to do it?

There are various ways to utilize the BMW; the authors suggest one practical model here. First, you are invited to look over these

seven Bushido virtues and gain a good understanding of them. Survey the questions on the BMW and spend as much time as needed to answer the questions independently without the presence of your partner. When you and your partner are both ready, you are asked to share your findings with each other. Practice active listening while doing this exercise and record the communication exercise if it deems appropriate for later reference.

A Case Study of an American Husband and an Asian Wife

David and Mei-Ling, a married couple, were chosen for this case study. David grew up in the southern part of the United States and Mei-Ling was born and raised in Taiwan. David has had no prior knowledge of Bushido virtues, whereas Mei-Ling grew up and learned the Bushido virtues through her family. This couple was selected for the interview to compare their Western and Eastern perspectives. First, the interviewer introduced the BMW model and explained the seven Bushido virtues to the couple. Then, the couple spent time answering the five questions individually from the matrix worksheet. Finally, they engaged in a 1-hr interview process. The following is the outcome of the interview:

1. How was this virtue modeled for you as a child/adolescence and who modeled for you?

Mei-Ling: All seven virtues are the foundation of my family. My parents were raised in Japanese culture. My dad was raised in the Japanese military. The daily life of our family is like of military training. I am very familiar with what we should do by these seven virtues. My parents modeled these virtues to me and my siblings and my dad reinforced these virtues in the family. He makes his decisions according to what he believes is ethically or morally correct, regardless what people around him think or do. For example, he is a civil engineer working for the government in Taiwan. In our culture, when a business wants the job, bribery happens. My father refuses to make a deal like that even though everybody does that. He really demonstrated honesty and loyalty to us through his work ethics.

David: What I want to talk about is loyalty and faithfulness. That was my mother. She was really dedicated to us, three kids, to the extent she held three jobs to pay for the things we needed. She worked everyday all seven days, at nights even. She was an uneducated and inexperienced worker so she accepted any kind of low paying jobs. At night, she worked as an office cleaning person and then on the weekends, she cleaned peoples' houses. She had the humility to be able to do that while most people were too proud to do that. Also, she had a lot of mercy and charity because she would give to people who had more than us. She would give to the extent that her kids started complaining. She would even take the toys that I just got for Christmas to the boys who were poorer than us.

2. On a scale of 1–10, 1 being *low* and 10 being *high*, rate yourself on any three of the virtues you consider as most significant

in your life. When/how in your life, apart from your current relationship, have you demonstrated some of these virtues?

David: I would give justice 8, honesty 9, and loyalty 10. As far as justice, I did a job for a coach to fix the porch of his house. I did not charge him like a welder would charge. I worked on the project a couple of days and I only charged a 150 dollars. I have a belief that your character is very important in relationships and the quality of any type of relationships begins and ends with the understanding of the truth of that relationship. Once characters were established on honesty or dishonesty which determines the success of the relationship, so the more honest you are, the more committed you will be to that person. Even it is bad for me to say, if I feel it is honest for me to say, I say it. For example, I am worried for my sister health. It is hard for me to be honest with her about her weight. I have to be blunt sometimes to tell her that. I believe everybody is committed to something. It is either we are totally committed or not committed at all. Loyalty is important in many aspects of my life and family is the most important. We have to be loyal to our family, to God, and our coworkers as well. It is a commitment to be a part of their lives. I try to put as much me as possible to every situation. Loyalty to me is being there for someone to count on you. That's what I've been doing for my family.

Mei-Ling: For bravery and courage, I rate 8. I rate honesty 9, loyalty and faithfulness I rate them 10. Regarding honesty, it does not matter what you do. If you are dishonest, later on, it will come back to you. It will impact your family, your career, and people around you, and therefore, I try to be honest. At work some colleagues invite me to be a part of their research and be the coauthors of the writing projects. I make sure I will do my part to get it done. Otherwise, I carry the credit but I have not done anything. I would not feel good about it because it is dishonest.

I believe loyalty and faithfulness is the foundation of our lives. It also related to my relationship with God. Being loyal means I have to listen to God or my inner voice. I have failed many times when I ignored those simple instructions on human relationships. I practice loyalty at work. I do not know what I can do or cannot do with my job, but I just do my best whenever I am assigned to a certain task. I do this because of my belief of being loyal to the institution I work for.

The last one is bravery and courage that I rate 8. I did a lot of crazy things based on my judgment of being right or wrong. For example, I would honk the car in front of me if the driver throws trash out of the car window. I realized it could be dangerous and risky sometimes but somehow I take the courage to do it.

3. In previous significant relationships, cite two or three examples of when any of these virtues were violated and/or compromised? (Write the actual number of the experience after giving the examples.)

David: My father and I had a really head nose relationship. When he divorced my mother and abandoned his children, he was very disloyal, first to my mother because he had affairs and then to us, kids. He just couldn't commit to his family. I see the loyalty is being violated. I rate the divorce

of my parents as a 2. I am grateful for my current family that we are loyal to one another. We are working on our relationship under God's guidance. Although the divorce of my parents was a negative experience, I learned from it and turned it around to make it something positive to my current family.

Mei-Ling: From the past experience, my husband and I had some disagreement about some issues of being morally correct or not. I think it might have related to justice or making the right decision. For example, the way I dressed is alright to me many times but was unacceptable to him. We have different opinions about the moral issues and that became a concern in the past. We have learned how to compromise to make it acceptable to him and so I will not feel offended. As important as it is with honesty, I do feel it is difficult sometimes to maintain that because my culture also teaches me to be polite and keep harmony in relationships. For example, I am concerned about his health and I think his health is the treasure of our family. I want to be honest with him about his health but I don't know how to approach him and to let him know politely that he has got to lose weight to keep healthy. So either I can joke about his size or I can be serious about his size or I can just be blunt to say that you have to lose weight. I am trying to figure out a way to be polite and not hurt his feelings.

4. Give examples of when/how you and your partner demonstrate this virtues in your relationship?

David: I am not saying this against my wife but I just want to tell her the truth. I believe that she has lost her loyalty and faithfulness to me as a person and also to our marriage when she felt resigned and decided to let go of working on the relationship last year. I am just very grateful today to be able to say that God guided her to walk on different direction and thankfully we are working today under God's guidance to recommit to each other.

My wife and I are committed to winning all the battles that threaten our marriage and our family as a whole. We have to be givers more than takers. Our loyalty, honesty, and faithfulness to God and each other must be like the binders of our lives. We have to use these traits in order to hold our family together.

In the past, my wife and I have big problem with being polite to each other. We got better on that. Now we are working on the children's part. They are not being polite to each other or to us. We are trying to relate our ideas to them. You hear the old saying "seeing is believing." They see us being polite to each other. It starts to have an impact on them. Recently, I saw our girls having conflicts with their mom. To me, it bothered me and hurt my feelings. I called a family meeting in the living room and expressed my concern. As a family, we discussed how to improve our relationships with one another in the future. We finally hugged each other and forgave each other.

Mei-Ling: It is also about the courage and honesty. He apologized to our kids that he did not become a good example for them in the past. It took courage for a father to tell them that. I am really proud of him for being able to apply several virtues. I am the type of person who does not say no to people. Overtime I have found out I am overloaded. I have learned to use my courage and honesty to say no and it has been working in the past few months. Politeness is about being sensitive but I've found myself being sensitive to others but

not to myself. So applying courage and honesty helped me to be "polite" to myself. In other words, I can take the courage and honesty to say no to others so that I can be polite to myself and others as well. This also applies to my relationship with my husband and I feel a lot better about our relationship.

5. Choose two or three of these virtues you consider important for improving your current relationship. How are you going to do it?

Mei-Ling: In the past, I usually took care of too many things in the household. Now I have learned to let my husband know about that and he turns out to be willing to share the load. I appreciate him doing that. Being honest and polite with each other probably are the two main virtues I want to practice more in our relationship. These two are linked together and I don't think I can do one without the other. In addition, it relates to justice or making the right decision. In our relationship, I value having open communication and communicating honestly and at the same time being sensitive to each other. This to me is the right decision to strengthen our relationship. All these also have to be built upon our loyalty to each other and to God. What we are doing right now every day is to communicate with each other both our negative and positive feelings. It is also a way to cope with our stress. We start with writing journals and share our experience with each other before we go to bed each day. This practice seems to have a very positive effect on our relationship and we will continue to work on it.

David: I choose benevolence and I want to be more loving, caring, and kind to my partner. Politeness is also important too because I want to be sensitive to her needs. The other one is honesty. I think a lot of problems I encounter with my wife are caused by miscommunication. I'm not sure whether it is dishonest or just misunderstanding. We need to be more honest and upfront with one another instead of beating around the bushes. At the same time, I want to be more sensitive to my partner not to hurt her feelings when we talk. Those are the few virtues that I want to practice with. Of course, all these fall into the virtue of being justice and making the right decision. I don't have a schedule in mind but I will practice this every time we communicate with each other.

Comments From the Interviewer

In discussing the Bushido virtues with the couple, it seemed to the interviewer that these seven virtues are universally recognized across cultures. Although the virtues are grounded in the Asian family culture, they are not uncommon in the Western society. Also, the individual's early experience with his or her family of origin has a strong impact on how each virtue is perceived. Each of them talked about their early experience as a child and how the virtues were taught. The seven virtues are interconnected with one another; the couple seldom commented on one without talking about another. Finding a balance or a "happy medium" seemed to be the key to this couple as they practice these virtues in their daily lives. For example, on one hand, they stressed the importance of being honest with each other, and on the other hand, they wanted to be sensitive to

each other's needs without hurting one another's feelings. The topic of spirituality was brought up during the interview quite frequently. The virtues were connected with the couple's own spiritual values, and they asserted that they needed to depend on God or a higher power to make their practice work. Overall, the BMW seemed to be a good tool to channel couple communication for this couple. Both of them acknowledged that they have gained more awareness of themselves and their relationship by going through the exercise as well as the interview.

Summary

Communication seems to be a vital part of couple relationships based on the feedback of the couple in this study and others with whom we interviewed. It is somewhat like the nervous system in a human body in which the brain sends a message to a corresponding body part for it to func-

tion accordingly. Without clear communication, the message would be misinterpreted, thus leaving the body malfunctioned; good communication provides vital energy for couple relationships. The authors created BMW as a tool for couples to explore their value system and to enhance their communication at a deeper level. There are also other similar matrixes created by the authors for edifying couple relationships. The matrixes can be found in the articles of Li, Lin, and Eckstein (2007) and Ginsburg, Eckstein, Lin, Li, and Mullener (2010). Each matrix provides a completely different model for developing awareness and understanding for couples. It is the hope of the authors that relationship challenges can be overcome through open, nonjudgmental and trusting communication.

Appendix A

The Bushido Matrix Worksheet (BMW)

7 Virtues/5 questions	1. How was this virtue modeled for you as a child or adolescence and who modeled for you?	2. On a scale of 1–10, 1 being <i>low</i> and 10 being <i>high</i> , rate yourself on any three of the virtues you consider as most significant in your life. When/how in your life, apart from your current relationship, have you demonstrated some of these virtues?	3. In previous significant relationships, cite two or three examples of when any of these virtues were violated and/or compromised?	4. Give examples of when/how you and your partner demonstrate these virtues in your relationship?	5. Choose two or three of these virtues you consider important for improving your current relationship. How are you going to do it?
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Justice (義, *gi*)
 Courage (勇, *yū*)
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 Honesty (誠, *makoto*)
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