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Zen and the art of management

By Jessica Garrison and Ted Rohrlich, Times Staff Writers
May 11, 2007

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The Los Angeles Housing Department has paid thousands of dollars to a Zen Buddhist priest from Hawaii for management training that includes teaching breathing with sphincter control, learning "how to stand" and playing with wooden sticks.

Norma Wong, a former Hawaii state legislator and leadership consultant, has been paid \$18,819 since 2005 to conduct at least four training sessions for executives and other staff. The most recent one was last week.

Mercedes Marquez, the general manager of the department, said the training was designed to help "center" Housing Department managers and teach them to react nimbly to problems such as the city's housing shortage. Up to 30 people attended each session.

"She asks when you center yourself to hold yourself in," Marquez said of the instructor.

The breathing exercises and stick play, she said, were a small part of two-day sessions, which also included discussions of team building and improving department procedures.

Some staff members, however, have found aspects of the training objectionable.

Lynn Hansen, a former assistant general manager, said she was put off by the presumption that she and her colleagues "had to be taught how to breathe and how to stand."

"I'm not sure how that helps me face an irate constituent," she said.

Hansen, who left the department in late 2005, participated in the first session.

She said most of the training took place in a conference room but "at one point we went out in the parking lot to wield our swords."

Another attendee described how executives were asked to encircle Marquez with their backs to her while holding their sticks, saying they were instructed to imagine that they were shielding their boss from opposing forces such as City Council members or other departments.

"We had to make sure she was protected," said the participant, who spoke on condition of anonymity for fear of retaliation.

Marquez and her deputy, Yolanda Chavez, flatly denied that that ever happened.

Marquez describes herself as a Zen Buddhist priest as well as a Roman Catholic.

She and others stressed that there was no religious component to the training. Marquez also said Zen Buddhism is not a religious faith but a "way to live."

Marquez said she met Wong in the course of her own Buddhist training and came to admire her work as a leadership consultant.

Marquez urged Wong to consider submitting a proposal to do leadership training for the department shortly after Marquez was named to head it in 2004. Wong's Honolulu-based temple is called Daihonzan Chozin-ji and also does business as Anko-In.

Anko-In, founded in 2000, provides workshops and seminars "on the application of Zen principles for organizations and individuals," according to a description in a 2005 city memo. It has been hired by private firms and school districts.

Wong declined to comment, saying she did not have the city's permission.

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According to advertisements about an appearance at the University of Wisconsin, she is considered an expert on Sun-Tzu's "Art of War," an early treatise on military strategy that has gained popularity among business executives who seek to apply its principles to capitalism.

In some ways, the training is similar to what occurs in the private sector, in which managers sometimes are exposed to Eastern texts such as the Bhagavad Gita, asked to dodge paint balls or catch their colleagues in so-called trust falls. High-end sessions might include whitewater rafting.

Marquez said many people had told her that they found the training helpful.

Her department, with more than 500 employees and a budget of \$45 million, helps build affordable housing, enforce rent control laws and ensure apartments are up to code.

In 2005, the city attorney's office approved an initial \$4,750 two-day workshop titled "Recalibration," described in the 2005 memo as helping executives to "manage the stress of change" and develop "team dynamics, chemistry and rhythm."

Among the activities described by attendees was an exercise in which employees tried to match the movements of a leader's stick.

"The leader gives an initial command, so everybody waves sticks in rhythm," said Mark Winogrand, a former Culver City city manager and former interim director of the city's planning department, who helps Wong do the training.

"She's a very clever team builder."

Last year, the City Council unanimously approved another contract for up to \$15,000 to Wong's organization.

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