

Leadership Mastery

How 5 Minutes Per Day Can Put You on the Road to Mastery

Have you ever had a wake-up call that changed everything? We all have. In fact, Paul Werder's story is a good place to start,

"I burned myself out again in 2012 when my stressful schedule and my inability to handle troublesome team dynamics turned into something called nervous system exhaustion. My left ear began clicking internally like an alarm clock at 10 pm every night and my sleep was quite compromised for several months. It was scary.

Since my healthcare providers had no immediate answers, I decided to take it on as a project to "achieve" total wellness. I began keeping a sleep log to assess progress or lack thereof, and capture the learning each night regarding what was impacting my ability to relax and sleep well. Two years later I am long past the worst of it; and thankfully, I have learned a ton about the thought patterns and emotions that were at the core of my affliction. It was subtle yet very nasty stuff like arrogance, anger, and impatience. "

For a highly regarded leadership consultant this was quite humbling. The rewards, however, have made it more than worthwhile because this journey has led to a remarkable new practice we want to share with heart-centered leaders everywhere. Our intention is to help you prevent or recover from your own afflictions, and better yet, achieve leadership mastery regarding whatever is most meaningful to you.

Leadership is a word that means many different things to many different people. As our society evolves, leadership seems to be more and more synonymous with the characteristics that healthy organizations want from every one of their people! We all want an organization full of purpose-driven, self-responsible, initiative-taking problem solvers; people who bring the best out of themselves to bring the best out of others. Most executives understand leadership is not exclusively a position on the org chart; but rather "a way of being from anyone fully using their unique talents to make their corner of the world a better place." This is LionHeart's perspective. It is shared by author Frederic Laloux in his description of today's most visionary organizations that have moved beyond traditional hierarchy in favor of self-management.¹

¹ Reinventing Organizations: A Guide to Creating Organizations Inspired by the Next Stage of Human Consciousness; Frederic Laloux, 2014

So, if leadership is for everyone, what about leadership mastery? The word mastery can also stimulate a fair amount of confusion. Many people inaccurately consider it “perfection” or a topic better left for the most gifted and talented among us. However, when we refer to the dictionary definition, we discover that “command of a subject and expert skill or knowledge”² is what we all currently possess in many aspects of our lives. By that definition, there is mastery in every one of us, if only through repetition of our daily activities, such as driving, cooking, and performing the routine tasks of our job. Author Geoff Colvin researched what distinguishes the highest performers from the rest of us in music, sports, science and business. He argues that “deliberate practice” is consistently more important than our natural talent when it comes to excelling at the highest levels.³

Where do we most need mastery? We do not mean to dismiss natural talent as a factor in what we can and cannot do. As the old basketball cliché says, “You just cannot teach height.” Business leaders certainly recruit for people with special talent just as professional sports teams do. However, the more important questions, in our opinion, are “What skills will be most useful to our purpose and success going forward?” and “How well do we develop our talent?”

The first question is easy to answer if you consider Geoff Colvin’s perspective in a subsequent book⁴ that articulates the need for stronger “soft skills.” His evidence is that computers are proving surprisingly capable of taking on more and more of our highly skilled knowledge-based work. Going forward the old fashioned human touch will distinguish the most valuable people in your organization; and computers will outperform even your top human talent when it comes to making growing amounts of sophisticated information useful. This revolutionary and disruptive transition will make technology even more dominant in the workplace than it already is. Colvin puts it this way,

“We are social beings, hardwired by our evolutionary past to equate personal relationships with survival. We want to work with other people in solving problems, tell them stories and hear stories from them, create new ideas with them, because if we didn’t do those things on the savanna 100,000 years ago, we died. The evidence is clear that the most effective groups are those whose members most strongly possess the most essentially, deeply human abilities – empathy above all, social sensitivity, storytelling, collaborating, solving problems together, building relationships. We developed these abilities of interaction with other people, not machines, not even emotion-sensing, emotion-expressing machines. We may enjoy the Pepper robot, but we didn’t evolve to interact with it.”

How does leadership mastery occur? It is a simple and well-known answer. Top performers practice in a deliberate, conscious manner that allows them to continually work themselves up to the next level. Musicians always warm up before performing and baseball players take batting practice before every game. The problem in business is that we seemingly have no time for practice. We hit the ground running with the stakes very high and eventually learn from experience. But in the rush of getting things done as the priority over learning from our experience, we miss a tremendous opportunity for learning every day.

² Dictionary.com

³ Talent Is Overrated: Geoff Colvin; 2008

⁴ Humans Are Underrated, Fortune Magazine July 23, 2015 adapted from book by same name; Geoff Colvin; 2015

Yes, we miss a tremendous opportunity for learning every day...*unless* we consider Tuesday practice for Wednesday, and Wednesday practice for Thursday, and so on. If we can learn to perform *and* practice simultaneously, we can greatly accelerate our ability to learn. This shift in consciousness allows mastery to occur with much less effort and wasted time.

The truth is we are all practicing something all of the time. We have our usual routines and habits that serve as our de-facto practices that keep us comfortable and secure. Unfortunately, this comfort has a cost in that we become vulnerable to operating on auto-pilot. Without reflection we inhibit learning. Worst case scenario, as in our nervous system exhaustion scenario, our ineffective practices actually change us in ways that are not beneficial.

Transformation and mastery occur most powerfully when we have conscious, intentional practices designed to have us become the person we want to be, working towards the future we are committed to. While this level of conscious engagement with our daily work may seem daunting, it is easier than you may think. If we establish a meaningful learning agenda and keep it “alive” on a daily basis we can begin to capture the insights, whether small or huge, from a few moments of thoughtful reflection. From personal experience, and working with thousands of leaders like ourselves, we know that life will offer up many lessons if we are awake enough to receive them.

Your leadership learning agenda can seem immense because the competencies of a leader are innumerable, often subtle and always situation specific. Our approach is to have you choose the one competency that is the most important for you to improve or master now, and then narrow that competency into a specifically defined focus. In our example, total wellness is a competency that can take years to master, so we break it into one “next learning step” after another. Our examples included noticing and relaxing physical tensions, deep breathing to replace impatience, forgiving judgmental thinking immediately, and many more.

Once you have your current focus in place you develop a short practice of reflection that allows you to review and capture your learning at the end of every day. You assess both your performance for the day, as well as whether you stretched yourself appropriately or not that day. You write down a few lines that clarify why you gave yourself the assessment that you did. Most importantly, you write down your insights from the day. This practice evolved from the sleep log that was instrumental to recovering from our nervous system scenario. At LionHeart we now call this practice *5 Minutes per Day on the Road to Mastery* and it can be applied to anything!

These insights are the key to mastering what is most important to you. Over time, your daily practice of reflection and assessment will increase your awareness, strengthen your intentionality, and accelerate your learning. You will soon uncover themes that begin to shape your actions in a positive direction. Additionally, when you put your heart into your daily work in a more enlivened manner, you will notice that your insights will be deeper and more transformational.

How do top performers achieve mastery? To accelerate your journey towards mastery even more, you can add a reflective practice that focuses on your breathing, and become more aware of your own physical cues, as they never lie to you. Sometimes you may notice tension or constriction in your body; other times you will feel at ease and alert at the end of your day. Either way, you can learn a lot by reflecting upon your day and discovering the potential connections between your activities, thought patterns, emotions and physical sensations. Eventually, you will notice when you are out of alignment with your values and highest intentions, and course correct more easily and quickly as you pursue mastery.

The role of a coach is to assist you see what you cannot see and listen to what you are saying that is contrary to your leadership learning agenda. Receiving this type of feedback in a safe environment is crucial. It will allow you to become vulnerable and authentic enough to progress with your most important leadership topics on your own. The coach can also assist you shift from one specifically defined focus to the next when you are ready to do so; and ensure you continue to stretch yourself appropriately until you have mastered your competency.

The role of those charged with your organizational culture is to ensure that the environment supports your desire to pursue mastery, as opposed to inadvertently take your enthusiasm for excellence out of you. With this transformational culture in place, you will have a strong foundation for financial success and expanding contribution. Imagine engaging everyone in this simple, but powerful practice regarding whatever is most important to your organization's success at any given moment. It's more than possible!

For more resources go to: <http://lionhrt.com/resources>

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