

Mastery Now – More Than Ever

by Caela Farren, Ph.D., MasteryWorks, Inc.

Introduction

The path to mastery is something you can choose today. Ernest Hemingway was hardly a modest man, but when he was asked about his mastery of the novel, he replied, “We are all apprentices in a craft where no one ever becomes a master.” In that brief response, Hemmingway summed up the worn path he traveled daily. “Mastery resists definition yet can be instantly recognized,” wrote George Leonard. “It comes in many varieties, yet follows certain unchanging laws. It brings rich rewards, yet it is not really a goal but rather a journey.”¹

Indeed, mastery is an unending journey without final destination. It is a process more than place. It is a path that few admit to having achieved, because for them, mastery is always a day away.

Some Questions

Why do some baseball pitchers consistently throw more strikes than others? Win Cy Young Awards one year after another? How does one archeologist break the code to the Mayan civilization? How does a writer like Pat Conroy, or the painter, Jamie Wyeth, or film makers like Steven Spielberg and Francis Ford Coppola produce masterpieces? How did Jonas Salk discover a life-saving vaccine? Is it a combination of discipline, talent, knowledge, repetition, commitment, genius, and luck? Or is there more to it? And do masters share similar experiences? Feel the same emotion, passion and energy? What characteristics bring them to their journey?

The Barriers

In our highly volatile, more competitive, fast-paced and rapidly changing world, will the notion of mastery flourish? In the revolution to a knowledge culture where the short-term is considered more valuable than the long run, people change jobs and professions like they change their socks and that's what's touted as success. Money has too often become more important than mastery. Indeed, is mastery still relevant in a microwave-mentality generation driven by instant gratification and quick fixes? And if there is a place in this world for masters, what path can you travel to become one?

The Keys to Mastery

Whether in a baseball park, on a basketball court, or inside a board room, men and women, who have achieved the complete command of their game have always fascinated us. History has demonstrated that masters advance the state of knowledge through discovery and invention. They are the people who set world-records in competition and elevate art, literature and music.

Each generation has had its icons. For example, Leonardo Da Vinci was an acknowledged master of the Renaissance; Frederic Chopin was a 19th century equivalent of a contemporary rock star; and Albert Einstein will be a household name for the ages. Indeed, masters and their contributions to civilization and society are the ones who stand the test of time. They are at “the top of their game” whether in a profession, trade, arts or in the sciences. They are the natural leaders and mentors of human history. They raise the bar of human achievement and pave the way for breakthrough and innovation for those who follow.² www.masteryworks.com/newsite/whymastery/mastery_enduring.htm

Albert Einstein once said “that only one who devotes himself to a cause with his whole strength and soul can be a true master. For this reason mastery demands all of person.” A widely acknowledged expert in the field of mastery and martial art’s black belt, George Leonard has written that, “Almost without exception, masters, are dedicated to the fundamentals of their calling. They are zealots of practice, connoisseurs of the small, incremental step. At the same time – and here’s the paradox – these people are precisely the ones who are likely to challenge previous limits, to take risks for the sake of higher performance and seem to become obsessive at times in that pursuit.”

Leonard believes that there are five keys toward achieving mastery:

- 1) Instruction** (Find the right guide to take you on your journey). The world’s greatest symphony orchestra conductor, Serge Koussevitzky took Leonard Bernstein under his wing and became his teacher
- 2) Practice** (The joy of learning and improving through repetition). Boston Celtics’ Basketball star, Larry Bird spent most waking days and nights practicing shots- but only a few hours a week actually playing the game.
- 3) Surrender to Your Passion** (Love it or leave it). Dr. Jonas Salk, who invented the cure for polio, once said, “The greatest reward for a job well done is the opportunity to do more work.”
- 4) Intentionality** (Visualize the outcome). In shotgun trap and skeet competition, National Champions uniformly see the “clay bird” explode before they even pull the trigger.
- 5) Go to the Edge** (There is a human striving for self-transcendence. Even with all of our human follies, there is a *need* to go a little bit further than we’ve gone before and maybe even further than anyone else has gone.) After injuring his shoulder the evening before his first attempt at breaking the sound barrier, aviation pioneer, Chuck Yeager used a broomstick handle to help him close the hatch on his tiny rocket jet and then penetrated the sound barrier to set a world speed record.³ www.the5keystomastery.com

Field Notes

In a collection of interviews more than eleven years ago, Joan Ames gave us an anecdotal glimpse into the minds and hearts of a handful of people who had attained mastery in their respective fields.

Confirming George Leonard’s five keys to mastery, she discovered that, aside from the patently obvious key factors such as “hard work, practice, commitment and passion for the endeavor,” there are far more subtle characteristics that accompany masters on their journey.⁴

For example, Ames learned that an epiphany often motivated masters to follow their path. Just a few words or deeds seemed to have triggered powerful changes. In most cases, the event occurred at an early age, but in every case, the change produced an inner need for knowledge and growth to feed their vision. In all cases, teachers and mentors then provided the discipline and tenacity needed to get it right

by setting the standards for hard work, practice and determination. by setting the standards for hard work, practice and determination.

Anecdotal evidence suggested that mastery appears to be less about talent and more about passion. Loving what you do creates determination and commitment. Ames learned that all masters experience a feeling of being driven and a desire to accomplish great things through their passion. So what is passion and how do we find it? Actually, in most cases it is passion that finds you.

In his books on building world class companies, Michael Gerber makes passion the number one element to success. "Passion is what passion is. You can feel its current coursing through your body. You can feel the water breaking against your inner emotional rocks. You can feel the waves of wanting rise inside of you without the slightest warning. There's not a soul on the face of the earth who hasn't been taken by the energy that is so innately, so organically, so uniquely [your very own]. Passion is what we are and why we're here. Passion is so understandable and so unmistakable that it's a wonder any of us get anything done with such a racket going on inside."⁵

In most cases, society reacts to the combination of talent and interest by offering support, which leads to further knowledge. Teachers find joy in training committed students; governments and institutions underwrite sports training for promising athletes; and scholarships are available in the arts and sciences for talented students. Ames also found that the masters interviewed were drawn into the company of other experts for support and for new ideas. Most masters expressed an extraordinary, mystical spiritual quality connected to performing their art or work. When working or performing at the highest levels, athletes, scientists and performing artists felt themselves in a "zone," likened to a spiritual state of inner peace and well being. This momentary sensation was the same for basketball players as it was for opera singers. In the end, the spiritual quality of mastery produced a common experience of deep humility and an inner confidence to perform the extraordinary at the highest levels.

Recognizing a Master

A master is one of an elite group of experts whose judgment sets the regulations, standards or ideals in a domain or one who other experts acknowledge to be a master. While experts excel in generating the best solutions in solving problems, masters take problem solving to higher levels. They are consistently faster and more accurate, can detect features that others cannot, see patterns and configurations hidden to others, and perceive the deep structures of a problem or situation. They spend a great deal of time analyzing a problem or a situation quantitatively. They have more accurate self-monitoring skills in terms of their ability to detect errors and the status of their own understanding. They can recall prior knowledge in their respective fields in exquisite detail with minimal cognitive effort. They can find the appropriate strategies, and are more opportunistic, making use of whatever information is available while solving problems. On the other hand, masters can fall short. They cannot often articulate the way they solve problems because they do not see the surface but rather the deeper part of complex structures. They resolve problems intuitively and through repetition in practice. Understanding the deeper structures of problems, they sometimes overlook details. Many are so obsessively focused on their work that their knowledge is confined to a single field. Exuding over-confidence, they can miscalculate their capabilities. Where others see irresolvable problems, they thrive on overcoming adversity.⁶

The Forces Against Mastery

Today, it seems as if we are confronted by a quick-fix anti-mastery mentality every turn. Television commercials bombard us daily with drugs claiming relief from just about every pain or illness. Symptoms disappear without treating the underlying disease. The news is regularly distorted in 30-second sound bites. Doctors spend a rushed few minutes with patients because of rates set by insurance companies.

Long term corporate growth is sacrificed at the altar of quick profits. "Success in industry often breeds complacency."⁷ www.masteryworks.com/newsite/whymastery/mastery_important.htm

Government is floundering in gridlock without hope of change. Drugs, quick fix solutions, lotteries, sweepstakes and all the sizzle without substance have created a new religion where we worship the quick, the expedient, and the effortless. Values have been neatly packaged, commercialized, and then radically disposed of. We are living in a climate that promises rapid success without value. George Leonard believes that "The desire of most people today for quick, sure and highly visible results is the deadliest enemy of mastery."

Paradoxically, the success and all the temptations that come with fame and recognition, such as, medals, and prizes can spell the end to mastery. All 30 masters interviewed by Joan Ames agreed that success is mastery's most mortal enemy. The formula for success at mastery is a balance between life and practice, achievement and humility, goal orientation and enjoyment.

Are YOU Ready to Follow the Path?

So, you say that there's something that's burning a hole in your belly and you want to change your ways. You have found something exciting that you feel a growing desire to excel in. Perhaps it's as simple as knocking ten or more strokes off your golf score, or giving a thoughtful and well-organized presentation at a department meeting, or losing twenty extra pounds or running a marathon under three hours. But then again, you might find yourself possessed by a drive and passion to write a symphony, create a novel, or become a sculptor. If that's what you've been yearning to do, you're more than half way there. Passion is the essential ingredient of mastery.

At first blush, it might seem that there's a huge difference between losing 20 pounds and writing a symphony or playing tournament golf. However, in each case, the process –the path- to mastery is the same. Losing weight through diet and exercise or running a three-hour marathon takes commitment and discipline. It also takes commitment and discipline and, in addition, expert training and daily repetitions in practice to play competitive golf or to write a symphony or a novel. Mastery of complex tasks takes time – as many as 10 - 17 years according to George Leonard. While talent certainly plays a role, talent is directly related to an individual's interests. "In general, people are more interested in things they are good at doing than things they find difficult. The combination of talent and interest leads to specialized knowledge and knowledge produces expertise." See (6) The Cambridge Handbook of Expertise and Expert Performance and www.masteryworks.com/newsite/whymastery/mastery_twotypes.htm

Beware of Resistance

While subtle changes, like losing weight may be more easily accomplished, great changes usually face greater resistance. Institutions, organizations and individuals resist change. A level of resistance is proportional to the level of change. Major changes meet major resistance and the vast majority of individuals, institutions and organizations are chained to habit, victimized by comfort and success and oppose change. Just look at congress and try to imagine how much resistance would be encountered to get our elected officials to work together in the common interest.

Resistance comes cloaked in many disguises including external organizational forces that are beyond an individual's control. Travelling on a path to be the best at a particular job or in a specific profession flies in the face of how organizations are packaging work/professions/trades, reductions in force through mergers, globalization and changing technology. Organizations change work packages at a rapid pace making mastery nearly impossible. A university degree, which may be important today may become less relevant tomorrow. Specialties in science, medicine, law, accounting, engineering, computer software, or

any job, where knowledge is rapidly changing, risk obsolescence if one is not working at the frontiers of the field and mastering much of the field of knowledge.

While jobs disappear and reconfigure, there will always be a place for mastery. It's mastery that drives invention, promotes change and raises up institutions and societies to greater levels of achievement and innovation. Dr. Michael Hammer, business consultant and educator writes, "A successful career will no longer be about promotion. It will be about mastery."⁹ www.hammerandco.com/about-bio.asp "Jobs can be taken away, but mastery cannot."¹⁰

www.masteryworks.com/newsite/whymastery/mastery_overview.htm

The Need for Mastery

In the last few decades, "filling jobs" has taken precedence over mentoring and developing mastery in a field. Many workers have lost incentive or hope of becoming great at their work or making innovative contributions to their organizations. They do whatever is expedient to hold onto their jobs. In a volatile, changing workplace, people's natural desire to become good at something has taken a second seat to keeping their job. Individuals are frequently assessed on a set of disembodied competencies sometimes purchased from outside vendors. Frequently, they have little to do with the core competencies required for success in the core professions. People become "jobbers" and use only a few of the essential skills required. They will become obsolete and outsourced. Stress goes up and their health fails. Ultimately, the organization flounders.¹¹ www.masteryworks.com/newsite/whymastery/mastery_enduring.htm

Mastery is an unending journey without final destination. It is a process more than place. Mastery drives invention, promotes change and raises up institutions and societies to greater levels of achievement and innovation. Mastery appears to be less about talent and more about passion. The major keys toward achieving mastery are:

- **Instruction** by an appropriate teacher or mentor to take you on your journey.
- **Practice** becomes the key to learning and improving through repetition.
- Give in to your **Passion** to take you on your path.
- **Intentionality** will allow you to see your goal before you achieve it.
- **Break out** of the mold and thrive on uncertainty and exploration.

Summary

Institutions and organizations need to understand that long-term goals are as valuable as quarterly profits. We need to make enduring values a priority once again. We must see the big picture. Mastery is simply not confined to institutions, individuals, and organizations. In a world running out of fossil fuel, clean water, and faced with global warming, terrorism, disease and hunger, man's need for mastery is greater than ever.

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About the Author — Caela Farren, Ph.D., is President of MasteryWorks, Inc. in Falls Church, VA. She has been a consultant, entrepreneur, and educator for over 30 years, Caela has worked with hundreds of thousands of people worldwide to get them on their mastery path. Caela's practice and company builds strong links between changing trends in industries, changing strategies of organizations and the talents and aspirations of individuals. People who work with her company discover their passion, their mastery path, and bring renewed contribution and high performance to their organizations.

Caela is known internationally for her expertise in developing talent management products and services. Her solutions are user-friendly systems that serve the needs of both organizations and individuals. She is frequently quoted in the media regarding her thoughts and advice on changing careers and work patterns in the nation. Hundreds of organizations have implemented talent management solutions from MasteryWorks, Inc. — consulting, workshops, assessment instruments and web-based talent management portals.

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