



Mastery

Part 3 - Instruction & Feedback

The third of a 4-part series on achieving mastery at work

By Jean Van Rensselar

Non-achievers believe that whatever gift they're born with will magically develop on its own. The truth is that those who master their gifts are born not only with the gift but also the intense desire for mastery. This means that they are willing to do whatever they need to do - seeking out the best instructors and mentors and fearlessly soliciting feedback.

The drive toward mastery is as basic as the need for food, safety, and love. But most people don't master their gifts. Lack of instruction and avoiding feedback are two of the reasons, but there are many other roadblocks to one or more of the following four aspects of mastery:

1. *Basic Psychological Health and Physical Fitness*
2. *Identifying Gifts*
3. *Instruction and Feedback*
4. *A Place to Practice & Practice.*

This article will explore into the basics of instruction and feedback.

Instruction

Chances are, you already know what you're good at and you'd like to continually improve. So ask yourself how good you are compared to the best in your field and how you can most efficiently narrow that gap.

Know How You Learn Best

Most people learn best through instruction – written or oral - reinforced by immediate doing. The theory behind the ancient idea of apprenticeship is exactly that. Even when a place to practice isn't available, some people can substitute the *doing* with visualization. For example, a prisoner of war perfected his golf swing while he was detained.

There are dozens of excellent tests to determine learning style. While I'm not a big fan of personality tests, I do see the value in learning-style evaluations. They can shave years off the mastery trajectory. Why languish in a classroom when you learn better on your own? Or struggle to learn something on your own when you need the structure of a classroom?

Some people think they hate to learn new things, but really what they hate is the way they're forced to learn them. Those of us who've spent countless hours staring at ceiling tiles in seminars know this all too well.

One of my relatives was failing high school calculus – and failing in a spectacular way. He'd "earned" an F the night before the final. His father (an engineer) stayed up with him until 3 a.m. – spending a total of 7 hours teaching him the basics of calculus. The next day, his son aced the final and passed the class. For me, this was a real lesson in the value of learning styles.

So take a learning style test – if you have a college close by, call the counseling office and make an appointment. You can also find learning style tests online – some of them are very good. Following is a link to an educational site that offers a 44-question test you can take online. As soon as you click on *submit* your results will be displayed. Then you click on another link to see exactly what the results mean. The entire process is free and won't take you more than 15 minutes. You'll find the test at <http://www.engr.ncsu.edu/learningstyles/ilsweb.html>.

Mentors

While - when it comes to learning raw skills and subtle techniques - there's nothing better than a dedicated mentor, the fact is, mentors are in short supply and they aren't the only route to mastery. There are also classes, books, learning software, videos, etc. If you really want to become a master in your field, the lack of a mentor won't stop you.

If you're going the book route, seek out older books by pioneers in your field first. You probably won't find these at your public library, but you will find them at the library of a university that offers a major in your field of mastery. If you're local, you can probably check those books out. Once you've built a good knowledge base of classic achievers in your field, determine who the current leaders are and read books authored by them.

If you go the mentor route, it's wise to choose a mentor who is at the peak of his career--when he is most energetic and open to new ideas. A study of Nobel Prize winners shows that over half were taught by other Nobel winners. Among scientists for example, Rutherford taught Bohr who taught Heisenberg. The practice created a family relationship among past and future winners that has continued for generations.

Among the most famous mentor relationships was that between William Larimar Mellon and Albert Schweitzer. Larry (as he preferred to be called) was born with all the pedigree and money anyone could hope for. Without a doubt, he could have coasted through life doing very little.

When he was in his 20s, not knowing what else to do, Larry bought a ranch in Arizona and busied himself with daily chores. The lifestyle was OK – but not really fulfilling. One day in 1947, he happened across a magazine article about Albert Schweitzer. Larry was intrigued with the medical missionary and the hospital he'd set up in Africa. So he sent Schweitzer a letter, asking how one would go about setting up such a hospital. Schweitzer – not taking him seriously - wrote back warning that there were many problems involved with running a Third World hospital and anyone hoping to run a hospital would need medical training.

Larry took the handwritten note and ran with it. Two months later - 38 years old, with no college degree, and against all odds - he decided to become a doctor and open a hospital in a place with the greatest need. He and his wife, Gwen, both enrolled at Tulane University, where he received his medical degree and his wife became a lab technician. During school vacations, they took their children around the world looking for a place to open their hospital. While in Haiti, the Mellons came across an abandoned manufacturing plant in Deschapelles. The hospital opened June 26, 1956, on Larry's 46th birthday. He named it the Albert Schweitzer Hospital.

Schweitzer's counsel was invaluable, especially during the first few years after the hospital opened. The two corresponded regularly and remained close friends until Schweitzer's death in 1965.

Larry and Gwen spent the rest of their 33 years together working in the hospital. Larry died in 1989 and Gwen in 2000. At their request, the couple is buried in the hospital cemetery in cardboard boxes the way the poorest Haitians are interred. Larry's New York Times obituary featured a picture of the disheveled, but smiling physician at 60, squinting through thick glasses.

Feedback

Once you've opened a channel for instruction – whether it's a mentor, classes, or learning on your own - you'll need to get clear feedback. Find an expert in your field that you can trust to be honest, unbiased, and constructive. Don't ask relatives. You are looking for specific information about how you performed - what you did well and what you need to work on - and what your next performance goal should be.

1. Ask About Your Current Performance

Ask what you are doing well and then ask what you need to work on. The feedback should be geared toward helping you develop beyond your current level.

2. Ask about the Next Step

Ask for specifics about how you can keep improving. Ask about anything that might be standing in your way and how you can overcome those obstacles.

3. Review your Overall Plan

Does the person giving you feedback think you're on track toward mastery? If you've established a timetable, are you on schedule? Is your schedule still realistic or do you need to adjust it to what you're experiencing?

It's important to ask for feedback often.

Getting Past Fear of Feedback

One of the biggest obstacles to mastery is fear of feedback. We're afraid to know the truth for many reasons – often because we don't believe we have the ability to overcome negative feedback. This fear of feedback manifests as jealousy, denial, brooding, and procrastination.

Jealousy

Jealousy is unhealthy comparison centered on negative emotions like rivalry, envy, possessiveness, and suspicion. The way out of it is to see comparison as a way to build on the strengths of others.

Denial

This is usually an unconscious response resulting from the inability or unwillingness to face reality. Seeking out and accepting feedback from someone we respect will force us out of denial.

Brooding

Those who tend to brood feel they have no power or control over their situation. They retreat into passivity, isolation, and inaction – failing to see how much power they actually do have. The way out is to stay engaged. If you find yourself brooding over negative feedback, get a second opinion or simply give it 24 hours – but no more - before you ask for clarification. Keep your reactions private until you can form them into a productive response.

Procrastination

Some of us never get around to asking anyone for feedback, or miss feedback sessions, or always have something that we need to finish before we schedule a feedback session. Procrastination often contains an element of hostility or anger. Have you ever noticed that the people who are repeatedly late for meetings are the ones making sniping remarks before and after meetings? If you find yourself procrastinating, ask yourself if there's something you feel angry about and bring it out in the open.

No one likes being criticized, but there's a big difference between criticism and constructive feedback. That's why it's important is that you only accept and solicit feedback from people you've chosen and respect.

As important as instruction is, feedback is more important – without it, your efforts are rudderless. So get the best instruction you can and find a source of feedback that you can count on, admire, and trust to be constructive and fearlessly upfront. Once you've done that it's all about creating the best practice environment and practicing in the most effective and efficient way possible until your gift fully manifests into the world.

About the Author

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