



## Mastery

*Part 4 – A Place to Practice & Practice*  
*The fourth of a 4-part series on achieving mastery at work*

*By Jean Van Rensselar*

The best place to master your gifts may be your workplace – but not necessarily. Many dedicated people – unable to use their gifts at work and unable to change jobs – achieve mastery nevertheless.

For example, during his early post-graduate years, Albert Einstein worked as a patent clerk by day and an amateur physicist on nights and weekends. He's a great example of someone who practiced during off-work hours until he was able to turn his hobby into a full-time job. The only downside to doing this is that, for some people, it takes off the pressure that they need to stay motivated.

The right amount of pressure is a good thing, but I'll get to that in a second.

The drive toward mastery is as basic as the need for food, safety, and love. It's an instinct that most people ignore and some people actively bury with addictions. Other people try for a time and give up. The interesting thing is that the *giving up point* usually comes just before a period of rapid progress.

There are four aspects to achieving mastery at work. These are:

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

This article explains how to find the best place to practice and smart practicing techniques.

## A Place to Practice & Practice

Research shows that it takes about 10,000 hours of practice to become an expert in any field and there are almost no exceptions – this applies to analysts as well as musicians. Given this, it's much easier if your workplace provides an opportunity for regular practice. Ideally, you should be in a workplace where you can do what you're good at. If not, you have four choices:

1. Give up – resign yourself to the way things are. Try to use develop mastery or at least proficiency in off hours.
2. Leave your workplace and find something with more potential.
3. Challenge the system creatively and politically – in the process, you'll make it easier for others to use their gifts as well.
4. Change your job without changing your workplace or challenging the system.

### Job Crafting

You can change the parameters of your job description yourself by taking on more of the tasks you enjoy doing. It's called *job crafting*. This will leave you overworked for a time, but hopefully once everyone sees how well you perform the new tasks, they'll assign the things you don't really like to someone else.

For example, if you're in marketing, but are getting really tired of sitting behind your computer drafting communications all day, ask if you can help plan an event. Once the event is over and everyone sees what a valuable contribution you made, you can ask to be released from your blog-writing duties.

It's logical to conclude that if managers let employees do the work they wanted to do, there would be a handful of jobs that everyone wanted and dozens of jobs that no one wanted. Research shows it doesn't work out that way. Companies that let employees pick the job they want say it works out miraculously well.

At W.L. Gore & Associates, a *Fortune 100 Best Place to Work* company, new employees aren't assigned jobs, nor are they hired for a specific job. Rather, they're hired for their potential. During the first few days on the job, new hires are guided around the facility until they find something that needs to be done and something that they want to do. No one at W.L. Gore has a job that they don't want to be doing – sure there are aspects of their jobs that they don't like, but they spend the majority of their days honing their skills by doing activities they enjoy.

### Be Continuously Open to Change

You need to be careful not to be victimized by your own self-discipline and hard work. It's good to keep moving while you're exploring your potential as long as you remain open to change – the idea that you build the road as you travel. Sometimes people avoid exploring potential gifts by diving deeper into what they're already doing. Even if they want to change, they continue gerbil-like with the behaviors that perpetuate the status quo.

If you don't like where you are and want to change, change your goals and start making incremental changes in your behavior. Instead of making a "to do" lists, make a "stop doing" list of habits that are holding you back.

### Seeking Flow in Practice

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi has spent a lifetime researching the flow experience and how we can deliberately bring it about. Since flow occurs when a task optimizes our skills, Csikszentmihalyi believes there are two tried and true ways to encourage it. We can either bump up our skills or increase challenges. In this way, the flow experience is the prime vehicle for mastery.

Some hallmarks of the flow experience are:

- Clear goals
- The challenge is well matched to your skill level
- Intense concentration – your consciousness feels like a smooth current of energy.
- Merging of action and awareness – you feel centered
- Loss of self-consciousness
- A sense of control
- Loss of time consciousness – time seems transcended
- Clear, immediate, and continuous internal feedback - you have a sense of what to do. Even when you make a mistake, you realize it right away and know exactly how to fix it.
- Detachment from the outcome: even though you started with a clear goal, you're no longer looking for a specific outcome. The work ends when you feel a sense of completion, not when you reach the original goal.

So why don't we naturally gravitate toward flow? Because it takes about a half hour of mental strain in order to get to flow and often, when we think of engaging in an activity that will eventually produce flow, all we can anticipate is the initial strain and anxiety. This is what's called writer's block, but that type of block occurs in every field when you're challenging yourself. There's no way to get around it – you can only go through it.

For some people, analyzing statistics is a flow activity, for others it's painting, for others it's cleaning. Try not to get caught up in what you think you should be doing or what will make the most money. If you're creative and motivated enough, you can always make a living doing what you love, but you'll never truly master something that you don't love.

### Finding the Right Level of Difficulty

There are concrete ways to determine the right level of challenge for a flow activity. Motivation researchers use the term *just manageable difficulty*. Goals need to be difficult enough to test your limits, yet not so difficult that the activity is frustrating.

Gilbert Brim devoted a good portion of his book *Ambition* to the concept of just manageably difficult and laid out guidelines for determining it. According to Brim there are 3 ways to find this level:

- Dedicate 80 percent of personal capacity: This, Brim believes, is the best way to determine the correct level of difficulty. He allows for individual differences, though and adds that a riskier goal doesn't always call for using more personal capacity. For example even a goal with certain success might require an enormous amount of effort to complete.
- The raw probability of success and failure is about even: Research on task motivation shows that people are most strongly motivated to work on a goal when the probability of success is about 50 percent. The threat of failure sweetens the joy of winning. Brim thinks most of us prefer stronger odds of success, but, he says, it depends on the task. If we want something very much, we are willing to undertake the challenge, even if the odds of success are small.

- Aim for 25 percent more than you've already achieved. Brim thinks that this rule applies to other areas of life such as fame, love, and volunteerism.

If you've ever worked out with weights or watched other people work out with weights, you certainly get this.

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The question you should be asking isn't "What would make me happy?" – that implies whenever you apply your gifts you're going to be happy. This isn't the case. There will be times, especially during periods of accelerated growth, that you won't be happy at all. You'll be focused and challenged, but not necessarily happy. The question you want to ask instead is "What feels right?"

#### About the Author

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