



Mastery

Part 1 – A Foundation of Health *The first of a 4-part series on achieving mastery at work*

By Jean Van Rensselar

No matter where you work or what your job title is, your workplace should be a prime environment to achieve mastery. Those who have the opportunity to master their gifts at work enjoy their jobs and look forward to going to work. They get along well with coworkers and are fiercely loyal to their employers. Work is something that they *must* do for reasons much deeper than a paycheck.

Ideally, work functions as a place to fully develop our gifts. This drive toward mastery is a primary motivator and a primal need – whether we can articulate that need or not. Progress toward mastery benefits everyone – the employee and the employer. Masters in their field, whether they're line workers, engineers, salespeople, or administrators are truly irreplaceable.

Given this, there are 4 aspects to achieving mastery at work:

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

The foundation, *Basic Psychological Health and Physical Fitness*, is often overlooked, but it's essential.

Basic Psychological Health and Physical Fitness

Before you can take full advantage of your gifts, you must be psychologically healthy enough to work. Notice that I said psychologically healthy *enough to work*– this means that one doesn't need to be at the pinnacle of psychological health to become a master. History is replete with accomplished philosophers, artists, scientists, and even psychiatrists who no one would consider to be fully functioning.

From a psychological perspective, there are those who are so unhealthy that they can't work at all – even when alone. Others can work alone, but not with others. Others can work alone and with others, but continually disrupt their work environments – most often flying under the HR radar. This requirement of basic psychological health is something that most employers fail to take into account. They underestimate the damage that one impaired employee can do.

While most of us have little control over our emotions, most of us have absolute control over our behavior. This means that despite how we feel, we act in a way that is consistent with our values.

At work, psychologically healthy people are able to:

1. Focus,
2. Organize
3. Plan
4. Discipline themselves
5. Interact well with others, and
6. Produce something of value

These 6 ingredients form the foundation of mastery.

People often confuse genius with mastery, but they are not the same. One of the core differences is that masters produce something that others value. In order to do that, people need a basic level of psychological health. Consider the following.

Gerald Darrow was a genius on anyone's scale. As a 7-year-old, he was featured on a TV show where audience members tried to stump intellectually gifted children with challenging questions. He was the youngest child on the show (the fact that he was on the show for 4 years without getting bumped off was a spectacular feat in itself).

At the tender age of 9, he was on the cover of *Life* magazine. But it was pretty much downhill from there. His adult years were an abyss. Except for a brief stint as a disc jockey on a classical music station, he lived as a recluse, tending roses for a living. He spent most of his life in poor health, on welfare, and listening to his impressive music collection...alone. At 47 he was dead. The point here is that in order to become a master, you need to have basic life skills – including interpersonal skills.

By the way, Gerald Darrow's peer and another child prodigy on the same TV show was James Watson. As an adult, along with Francis Crick, Watson discovered the structure of DNA and won the 1962 Nobel Prize for Medicine.

So what separates the gifted who achieve mastery from the gifted that don't?

- They know their abilities and seek out opportunities to use them.
- They get satisfaction not just from knowledge itself, but from masterfully applying it.
- They are action-oriented: they follow insight with activity.
- They are deliberate: they know the difference between impulse and considered inspiration.
- They don't quit: even when they're multi-tasking, they eventually get everything done (the unaccomplished gifted tend to *almost* finish everything).
- They accept blame for their mistakes and move on.
- They are willing to delay gratification
- They focus on the big picture
- They know which thinking skills to apply to a particular situation – analytical, intuitive, etc.
- They accurately determine risk: they welcome well-calculated risks and account for the possibility of failure.
- They connect well with their environment: they read everything and talk to everyone they can find. They welcome suggestions and feedback.
- They know where they work best: which environments foster their abilities and maximize their talents.
- They allow for their own humanness: They accept that they'll be depressed, frustrated, hurt, angry, and stressed sometimes, but they don't give in to self pity or self deprecation.

The classic debate is whether people are driven more strongly by an internal urge or by external incentives such as money and prestige. When it comes to true mastery, it must be the internal urge. It can't be any other way, because the urge toward mastery is the inborn urge toward growth. While it's true that most people are born with it, for many that drive becomes buried as they move toward middle age.

So the big question is: *If you don't have enough drive to grow, to master your gifts, what's blocking it?* Here are three possible answers:

1. Emotional baggage – you're depressed, severely discouraged, or otherwise stressed.
2. You can't imagine the future – for example, in order to commit to a class 3 nights a week, most people would need a clear picture of the payoff.
3. You can't delay gratification – or you can't delay it for very long.

This last trait is actually much more crippling than you'd imagine. In fact, psychiatrist and author M. Scott Peck, has often said that it's the most pressing cultural problem we have. One of the reasons it continues to be such a problem is that it feeds on the growth in consumerism. Consider this: we live in a society that encourages instant gratification when it comes to consumption, but severely punishes it in every other aspect of our lives.

The good news is that you can recapture that drive toward growth – people often do. Studies show that, like every other life skill, if you don't have it you can learn it.

Mastery also requires at least minimal physical fitness. But even those who are extremely impaired – fighting a life-threatening or chronic condition – can pursue mastery. Physical fitness is only relevant when the degree of impairment profoundly affects mental energy. This happens whenever they must use all of their emotional resources to deal with their condition and have none left over to expend on mastering anything else.

For some, unable to overcome a set of difficult circumstances, significant psychological or physical impairment *becomes* their life. Sadly, the world is and always has been filled with those whose extraordinary gifts never see the light of day.

But the vast majority possesses the minimum degree of psychological and physical health necessary to achieve mastery. A portion of those who don't will be able heal - many people go through periods of crippling turmoil in their lives and benefit enormously from the window of introspection that naturally occurs while they're healing.

Assuming that you're psychologically healthy and physically fit enough, the next step toward mastery is having a clear sense of your gifts and talents – not as easy as it sounds. We'll explore this in Part II - Identifying *Gifts*.

About the Author

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