Mastery

Going beyond unconscious competence

What is Mastery?

A useful definition of mastery is: ***"being able, in real time, to be aware of and understand what is going on and be able to make informed choices as a result of this awareness".***

Described in this way developing Mastery is aspirational. George Leonard, in his book "Mastery" describes it, ***"It is a journey towards – a never ending journey. Every mile you progress you become two miles further away. The more I know the more I realise I still have to learn".***

The Alchemy team have added it as a level above Unconscious competence, in the popular model. The new level is shown in the diagram below together with ideas for moving from one level to another. Attaining **Mastery** is only transitory as you then seek the next step up. George Leonard describes this transitory nature with the words *"At its heart mastery is about developing awareness, developing a greater and greater set of possibilities for how I can respond at any given moment and continually learn from experience."*



This idea of deep competence has parallels with Malcolm Gladwell's assertion that it takes 10,000hrs of practice to become truly competent at a role. Whilst Gladwell's idea is an oversimplification the notion that to become truly masterful takes time, effort, practice and reflection is undoubtedly true. This idea of practice will be expanded later in this paper when we include the idea of practice and rehearsal.

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Why does it matter?

Developing Mastery matters because continually improving is a key factor in increasing performance, productivity or effectiveness. If we do not continually improve we will slowly lose ground to those people who are making the effort to learn and develop.

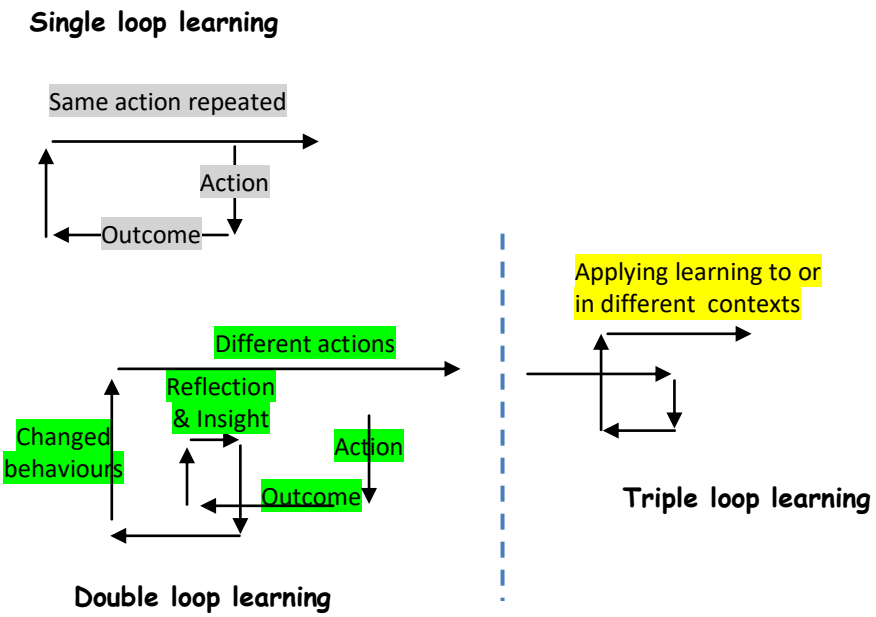
"To maintain the status quo, to stand still, is to fall behind" Alan South, SBS, Oxford

The benefits of developing Mastery

- It offers a real step up in performance
- It demonstrates a commitment to continuous learning
- It avoids me falling behind or losing my effectiveness because of a failure to learn and develop
- It provides me with a wider range of choices at any moment

The route to developing mastery

A commitment to continuous learning is key to developing mastery. Learning both to overcome immediate challenges - single loop learning, and to overcome challenges so that they can be avoided in the future - double loop learning, AND also learning to learn so that learning from one type of situation can be applied in different situations and circumstances. This triple loop learning is key to a learning journey and the development of mastery. The diagram below illustrates how Single, Double and Triple loop learning differ and why triple loop learning is so valuable.



In Leonard's book called "Mastery" he highlights a number of key features about Mastery which the Alchemy team regard as a focus in our approach to personal development:

- Mastery is available to everyone – it takes effort, application, persistence and time, which is a challenge in a world that likes quick fixes. This point is echoed by Malcom Gladwell's idea of 10,000 hours to achieve deep capability.
- Begin immediately and it takes a long time to start!! We often resist the challenge of beginning. It is or can be scary to begin the challenge for big improvements so

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the route is challenging and occasionally dispiriting when performance dips before improving.

- Learning typically takes place in spurts followed by time on a plateau – there is a rhythm to the journey.

Leonard outlines five key elements for the development of mastery: Instruction, Practice, Surrender, Intentionality and The Edge. These can be simply explained as:

Instruction - work with the best instructors/teachers/mentors that I can

Practice, practice and more practice (and the Alchemy team add rehearse as well)

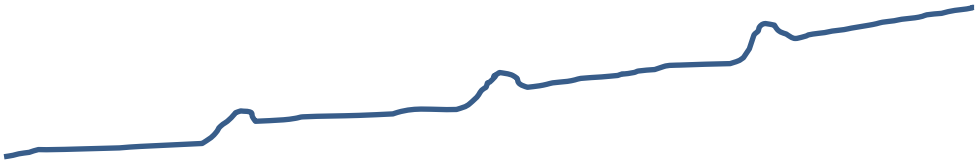
Surrender to learning and the challenge of finding new skills and capabilities - be humble

Intentionality - having an image of what I am trying to achieve

The Edge - continually striving to find the 'edge' of capability: look for the next 'step up'

If we follow these ideas we can make a significant improvement in our skills, capabilities and choices that we have available at any time. The more choices that we have the more effective we will be.

Leonard illustrates the journey towards mastery with the diagram below. It shows steady progress, followed by occasional jumps in understanding and skill often followed by a drop in performance before more steady progress as we become able to implement our new skills successfully. Whilst our learning journey is unlikely to be such a straightforward shape it is likely to follow the path of steady progress followed by sharp jumps when new skills are learned, with a dip as these new skills are integrated followed by further steady progress as the new skills become more familiar before the next sharp jump.



As Miller states in his Six seconds article" practice – with the aim of getting better – needs to be deliberate". Not all practice is the same. *And the Alchemy team believe this new learning has to be taken through 'rehearsal' into actual play.* (see next paragraph) "This distinction between deliberate practice aimed at a particular goal and generic practice is crucial," Ericsson says, "because not every type of practice leads to improved ability. You don't get benefits from mechanical repetition, but by adjusting your execution over and over to get closer to your goal." Deliberate practice is often guided by an expert, skilled coach, or mentor, "someone with an expert eye," according to bestselling author Daniel Goleman. These coaches and mentors are offering feedback on specific ways to improve, and "without such feedback, you don't get to the top ranks. The feedback matters and the concentration does, too – not just the hours."

After practice there is the challenge of taking this new or these new skills into the work arena. This is where the idea of rehearsal is valuable. The Alchemy team (one of whom is a musician) talks about the difference between Practice and Rehearsal. This is a more straightforward distinction than that proposed by Miller, Ericsson and Goleman.

Practice is the development of a new skill. This is outlined in the paragraphs above where using a coach, getting quality feedback, developing new mindsets or muscle memory.

Rehearsal takes these new skills and tries them out in a 'safe' working environment. An orchestra 'rehearses' before a performance. It works together to take their individual

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practice and put it together in a way ready for performance. We need to do this with newly acquired or developed skills and capabilities. A coach needs to practice skills e.g. listening, questioning, presence and then try out these skills in a rehearsal where if they do not work as expected there is no damage. Finally the new skills are taken into real coaching situations when the coach is confident enough to use them.

Some of the challenges on the route to Mastery

The primary challenges are;

1. Staying on route requires effort and commitment
2. The occasional drops in performance as new skills are learned can be dispiriting
3. Leonard describes three caricatures of people who are seeking a 'quick' route to mastery. He calls these, The Dabbler, The Obsessive or the Hacker.

   The Dabbler. Starts something new with great enthusiasm. Finds it is more difficult or time consuming than imagined and then gives up.

   The Obsessive. Never gives up on improving their performance. Keeps expending energy and effort to learn new things. AND does not accept the need for new skills to be integrated and so does not tolerate the plateau in performance that typically follows the development of new skills.

   The Hacker. This person develops a new skill or capability and is then happy to stay on the plateau. They avoid seeking out new skills and the development of greater competence. They remain content with moderate performance.

It is worth the effort for the increased levels of performance

Developing Mastery is a demanding and challenging journey. You are likely to encounter others who decry your efforts at continual improvement. And by creating opportunities for continuing development your overall performance will improve. You will be able to better serve your clients. You will get more satisfaction as you find your wider range of choices enables you to address difficult situations with greater assurance.

It is worth the time, effort and commitment.

References and bibliography

Leonard, G. (1992). *Mastery.* Plume books

Greene, R. (2012). *Mastery.* Profile.

Miller, M. *The Great Practice Myth: Debunking the 10,000 Hour Rule.* Six seconds, The Emotional Intelligence network

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Contact us for more information

For more information about these ideas and ways you can apply it within your organisation please contact.

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