

The Art of Mastery

by Jon Craighead

Mastery is defined as comprehensive knowledge, accomplishment, a skillful expertise or proficiency. Almost everyone wants to be recognized as masterful at something, such as work, sports, or intellect. Most would gladly choose such definitions for themselves; however, fewer would commit to do the work necessary to merit such a designation.

Mastery is a status that is not easily obtained. In most instances it takes sacrificial action and dedication that goes beyond the tolerance or comfort levels of most people. Mastery requires developing a maniacal persistence and an inexorable ability to endure disappointment before a successful outcome is reached. This is realized only by staying the course until success is a reality regardless of circumstances or difficulty. The question then is: Why would anyone want to put themselves through such rigor?

In reality, today's marketplace necessitates that leaders continuously update and invent newer versions of the same in order to remain viable. Innovative creations are sought out and demanded in fields such as electronics, medical care, pharmaceutical, and engineering in order to remain competitive and sustainable. Great surgeons are developed through multiple surgeries which hone surgical prowess and eventually develop into technical breakthroughs. Technologists create new systems through repetitively challenging current trendy applications. Leaders increase their leadership proficiencies by skillfully honing their personal and leadership approaches through the study of proven personnel practices. Mastery is an on-the-court phenomenon that requires repeated practicing and learning to master the highest level of applicable proficiency. There is an ongoing search for skilled practitioners to meet these demands. Mastery is a highly rewarding and profitable pursuit.

How does one become masterful? It starts with a commitment to be masterful in a chosen field of endeavor. It requires learning what is needed for success, i.e. knowledge of the field and utilizing available resources such as training and apprenticing opportunities. Becoming masterful can also entail partnering with skilled practitioners who provide mentoring support and who may become a sponsor and/or provide referrals to others who might be willing to help as well; becoming an observer of mastery in action, asking questions and seeking any available tutoring; and developing your knowledge bank by studying independently and collectively with others whenever possible.

Mastery is not simply doing a task well. It involves digging deeply into the hows and whys of the subject at hand. It's also about developing a facility for continuously learning and developing oneself. Mastery is studying, practicing, learning – and then studying again. The creation of a mastery mindset cultivates the quest for learning, developing a roadmap toward being count-on-able. These preliminary actions develop the fundamental mindset of an expert, even though you're not there yet.

The intricacies of mastery are significant in many ways. One very personal result is knowing that you can make a difference. Another is being in the presence of and inspired by other mastery practitioners and their modeling. Moreover, your contribution to the mission as a role model for others is rewarding and fulfilling, and being recognized for your expertise is edifying.

It has been said that the most dangerous place to be standing is the main exit of an office building at 5 pm. For many the workplace is more a necessary requirement and duty than a harbor for accomplishment, and escaping becomes the highlight of their day. Employees often finish their workday with little sense of satisfaction, a lack of accomplishment, and low energy. Their days often run together without clarity and with a feeling that their presence made little difference. They return the following day not because they have a choice, but because they need the paycheck.

Why is mastery so important, when good-enough will get you by? People who practice mastery, regardless of their title or level of responsibility, have a greater sense of purpose and wellbeing. When you think of it, most of us spend more time at work than anywhere else – more than with our families, friends and neighbors. This is why the workplace is so influential and impactful on our personal happiness. Leaving work with a sense of accomplishment is extremely gratifying. Such awareness that your personal efforts have made a difference has a direct impact on how you arrive home that day. Therefore mastery trumps business-as-usual any day of the week.