

Spotlight: We can all recall situations where another person, through their actions, enhanced the quality of our experience. The names of those individuals may slip away, but their faces and their actions stay with us always. What they did is, more often than not, something small, a simple gesture. The actions are significant not because of their magnitude, but because of their appropriateness. A kind word or a helping hand—offered at the right time in the right way—is all that is required to make the difference.

Every day, through the course of normal business interactions, we are constantly presented with the opportunity to respond in such a significant manner. Pursuing these opportunities builds stakeholder satisfaction in a very cost effective manner, but taking advantage of any opportunity requires both a personal awareness of the situation and a culture of mastery from which to act. Mastery is what allows us to transform ordinary events into the extraordinary.

Mastery is often too narrowly defined as what we do in our area of expertise. This is understandable given that achieving mastery is dependent on developing the skills of our craft. The daily commitment to honing our skills is a necessary step towards mastery and it is only the first step. Being highly skilled is not a guarantee of mastery and too often, competency passes for mastery. Beyond the skill itself, it is through the application of that skill that we approach mastery. Mastery takes us beyond what we do into how we apply ourselves and why we choose to do so. Skills are appropriate for a given time and place while mastery is eternal and boundless.

A culture of mastery is an environment energised by a cause rather than an outcome. Mastery is objective driven while being fully open to the possibility of the unexpected. The magic of serendipity turns accidents and mistakes into occurrences that are not only acceptable, but also welcomed. Unintentional deviations from the plan provide access to an entirely new energy. This energy is not a laser that narrows and concentrates its force, but a wave that swells to encompass ever more as it radiates from its source.

In our high-tech, speed driven, quantity entranced world, the qualities of mastery can be undervalued. Mastering one's work requires the space to experiment and the freedom to be unproductive: it requires practise. Building these requirements into the business day takes creativity and commitment. This is more a shift in perspective than a request for additional resources. It is already accepted that only a portion of the hours a person spends on the job are productive. If we take that non-productive time and dedicate it to mastery, the business becomes more cost effective through the benefits of mastery.

The constant pursuit of mastery increases a person's value to the business. Flexibility, adaptability, and responsiveness are a few of the key qualities gained through mastery. In the dynamic 21st century workplace, these are much more valuable qualities than speed and efficiency. Unfortunately, these qualities are difficult to measure making mastery an attribute we recognise more through its presence than through analysis.

Every person is capable of achieving mastery. The challenge for an enterprise is letting go enough—getting out of the way—to encourage a culture of mastery. There need not even be any grand plan with definitive objectives. Mastery of the simple and obvious aspects of a person's day can, in many ways, prove to be most valuable to both the individual and the business.

Quote: French writer Françoise René Auguste Chateaubriand gives us this definition of mastery:

"A master in the art of living draws no sharp distinction between his work and his play; his labour and his leisure; his mind and his body; his education and his recreation. He hardly knows which is which. He simply pursues his vision of excellence through whatever he is doing, and leaves others to determine whether he is working or playing. To himself, he always appears to be doing both."

Musings: During my life, I have had the privilege to work with several masters. Each taught me invaluable lessons about their craft through their instruction and by allowing me to observe them at work. The effectiveness in the transfer of information and the building of experience that comes from labouring along side a masterful person far exceeds what even the most prestigious educational institution can offer.

Sharing a task, even one where I was a junior partner contributing little to the final outcome, with a person I respect, allowed me to find my way of working towards my vocation. Each of these opportunities spurred me to venture into new fields and helped me discover and refine my skills. Surprisingly, the lasting skills have not been the obvious, direct objective of my training and rather those ancillary capabilities necessary to knit a working life together.

The opportunity to work in the presence of masters makes me a better person. I trust that my work honours their shared wisdom and that as I strive to master my work, I can pass along to others some of what I was given.