Cycle Time

Mastery model clarifies the paths to professional excellence

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Journal of Digital Asset Management (2007) 3, 56–59. doi:10.1057/palgrave.dam.3650067

In the last issue, we introduced the principle of knowledge maturity, extending our examination of knowledge-worker productivity and how DAM enhances the productivity of many different types of professional users. In the current issue of the *Journal of DAM*, we take a deeper examination.

Our work across many fields and disciplines reveals that the *personal-mastery development cycle* helps explain the rapid emergence of social networking, activism of trust networks and new forms of knowledge — what we called in our last Cycle Time column *open-source insights and best-practice sharing among peer practitioners*. Figure 1 depicts the seven phases of the personal-mastery development cycle.

The journey toward mastery begins with the discovery or self-disclosure of *desires and impulses*, culminating in the formulation of an *ideal* — an inspiring insight and condition of satisfaction, often expressed as “wouldn’t it be cool if...”

As social beings, we move between inner, private world experiences and the external, public sphere of communication and interaction. When we *declare an intent*, especially when we take a public stand for some future possibility, interesting things happen. We begin to see the world in new and unforeseen ways. We observe interesting patterns and nuances when before we saw nothing but chaos and heard nothing but unintelligible noise.

With unbending intent, enthusiastic expectation and passionate indifference to the

lack of hard evidence in the moment — the three essential psychological resources of masters — the road to mastery calls forth a *tragic demand*. At this point, we recognize a new context while still holding on to the pre-existing and innocent worldview.

For this reason, paradox often defines the phase of tragic demand and requires that masters-in-process tolerate two absolute truths that nonetheless contradict each other and rise above this conflict with nobility and equanimity.

The *journey ahead* constitutes a high-level roadmap outlining the basic thrust, contours, actions and endpoint condition. For many masters-in-process, the journey ahead entails the acceptance that much work lies ahead and the impulse to get on with it.

Crunch time constitutes the third phase on the road to mastery, emphasizing the foundational work of a chosen trade, craft or discipline. When learning how to windsurf, it may take several frustrating hours before the beginner gets it — the essential posture and rapid micro-realignment of maintaining balance and an upright position on a slippery board and the even more slippery surface of water. With some perseverance, the beginner has the essential “ah-ha of how.”

At that point, crunch time begins; no longer a mystery of what or how, the road to mastery lies before us. In the case of windsurfing, the master-in-process must simply put time on the board, engaging in hour upon hour of intentional practice.

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Figure 1: Personal-mastery development cycle

Masters-in-process undertake the work of *resource alignment*, pulling in just what they need, just in time and in forms well suited for the tasks at hand.

Resource alignment consists of intentional practice, fast-cycle results-based feedback and coaching. The master-in-process holds an unbending intent to improve — *intentional practice*. The master-in-process submits to performance reviews by results and data, using fact-based insights to prompt an even stronger, clearer, crisper and more cogent desire for improvement. The faster the master-in-process cycles results and data, the faster the unbending intent to improve attracts powerful new sources of insight: *coaches*.

Masters of their field often report that everything just lined up: opportunities, resources, advice and acknowledgment. Many accomplished masters believe that no *one* individual became their coach, although many masters do have brilliant coaches. Rather, many of our greatest masters got most of what they needed by osmosis: sharing insights, techniques and philosophies with other peer practitioners.

The resources of masters-in-process coalesce, attaining a critical mass and the birth of commitment. *Commitment* constitutes the fourth phase on the road to mastery, demonstrating a public and irrevocable stand to see the mastery process to its completion. One concrete demonstration of the commitment to mastery entails the development and use of *action plans, checklists and other process-oriented management systems*. Personally, I have found the action

management system of David Allen, author of *Getting Things Done*, a definitive and brilliant action management system. I, however, found mastering this system difficult and thus hired an equally brilliant “action-management coach,” Martha Ringer (<http://www.martharinger.com>), without whom I would spent another frustrating year before I truly got the core principles expressed in these essential questions:

- What do I want? (Attained state or desired outcome)
- What do I want to achieve? (Result that I will produce)
- What next-action step takes me closer to what I want?)
- What specific, demonstrable behavior defines my next-action step? (Transitive verb with direct “object” or tangible result of the transitive verb)

My action management routine became simple: Each morning I scan my hard commitments for the day (appointments and deadlines), review the list of 40 or so Next Actions from my 40 or so Active Projects and start completing one Next Action at a time. This provides a snippet of a larger framework for mastering the Commitment phase of the mastery cycle.

Practice constitutes the fifth phase on the road to mastery, using the action plans, checklists and other systems to achieve competence and *natural rhythms*. Practice entails coming up to speed, achieving an elation and momentary sense of true mastery — tantalizing, fleeting and inspiring. Practice progresses with the uncompromising stand: “I no longer see

mistakes. Everything clarifies my desire for excellence. I only see an ever-deepening desire and ever-faster fulfillment of my desire. Competition no longer defines or constrains me; rather, it urges me to reach beyond my conceived limits.” Masters place attention of desired outcomes, next-action steps and progress toward these outcomes — “first attentions”. Masters do not invest any time in problems, complaints, excuses, worries or disruptions to their first attentions.

Habit constitutes the sixth phase on the road to mastery, driving action plans, checklists and other systems into deep muscle memory. Habit entails the systemic re-patterning of social networks and ways of relating with peers. Habit begins the integration of individual practices, group work and an academy of peers.

Habituation still takes *individual work* — practice beyond the common, such as Michael Jordan shooting basketball alone for five hours a day or Bill Gates pounding out one million lines of programming code.

Habituation also consists of *group work* such as the full-out, nothing-held-back practice games with peers and team members for sports. For business and non-sports or role-based professions, group work entails *simulations* and group-based *clay modeling* of an operating principle.

Finally, habituation also consists of *academy work* — a symposium of peer practitioners that launches into an open-ended inquiry of a subject, conducts performance reviews of real-world events (results and data) or investigates the root causes of a problem condition and evaluates alternative solutions.

Moving beyond habituation entails full participation with peer practitioners with a formally defined discipline. *Peer-practitioner disciplines* declare a grand thesis, develop a data-processing framework (criteria for what they consider good data and bad data, procedures for performing logical operations on good data, etc) and evaluate the work of peers within the field. The *Journal of DAM* stands testament to these aims.

Mastery constitutes the seventh phase on the road to mastery, demonstrating the full integration of a practice or craft as a fluid, almost whimsical expression of themselves. Mastery also replicates itself, supporting others in attaining mastery. Often this entails

learning how others learn, opening a new mastery cycle.

OPERATING STATES

Mastery progresses through five operating states, starting with formulation and ending with mastery. Figure 2 depicts the five operating states, beginning with formulation and ending with mastery.

Formulation, the first operating state, describes the condition of a blank slate — no content, no established routines, etc. Think of a bare-wall empty office with no desks, telephones, lights, etc — *survival!* We all start in the operating state of Formulation. Serial entrepreneurs have mastered the transit through formulation, spending only days or a few weeks building a framework for the business and how to operate.

Concentration, the second operating state, describes putting in the foundation and basics: roles and responsibilities, weekly meetings, accounting systems, cold calling, etc — *systems!* Serial entrepreneurs already possess deep muscle memory about how to run a business; they literally do that while asleep. Concentration then entails getting customers and refining their ability to attract ideal customers.

Momentum, the third operating state, describes the first real evidence of longer-term success and survival: phones ring, customers want more, talented people want jobs — *expansion!* Successful executives and serial entrepreneurs know that continued expansion directly correlates to accountability — systems, processes and self-managing staff that make and keep promises. In practical terms, quality management and performance support systems, such as the one described in *Getting Things Done* constitute a critical success factor for momentum.

Stability, the fourth operating state, describes the self-generating sustainability and refinement of core processes and culture — *taste!* Look at any large successful organization, and you will find a firm in stability. By the way, the lessons and insights for maintaining stability rarely prove useful for those firm or individuals in Formulation or Concentration. Yet, most schools and books represent lessons and insights from the operating state of Stability. Oh well.

Figure 2: The five operating states

Mastery, the fifth operating state, describes a rarely achieved and seldom maintained condition of cultural innovation and leadership — *inspiration!* Individuals often reach this operating state later in life; a few achieve this early in life: Tiger Woods, Michael Jordan, etc.

The journey toward mastery frames another key to successful DAM: continuous, ongoing improvement of the user experience and workflows involved in the care and feeding of a DAM system. Take one step, then another and then another. Clarity of the next step makes it all possible and pragmatic.