The practice of personal mastery

*Tap into your full potential*

*By Christine Leonardi*

Many organisations are reaping the rewards for not focusing on employees’ areas of weakness. Instead, they have embraced a learning discipline called personal mastery to bring out and develop the best in people. These organisations have discovered that individuals who practice personal mastery are holistic thinkers, who approach difficult situations proactively and solve problems creatively.

“People with a high degree of personal mastery are acutely aware of their ignorance, incompetence and growth areas. But, they are also deeply self-confident,” says author of The Fifth Discipline: the Art and Practice of the Learning Organisation, Peter Senge.

Those who do not see the journey is the reward would consider this a paradox. However, personal mastery goes beyond developing specific skills and competencies. Practicing the “Kaizen” of personal mastery requires a commitment to the continuous improvement of everything you do in all areas of your life.

Personal mastery is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening your personal vision, focusing your energies, developing patience and seeing reality objectively in order to live life in the service of your highest aspirations.

The discipline of personal mastery is based on a number of key principles and practices:

- Personal vision
- Personal purpose
- Holding creative tension between vision and current reality
- Mitigating the impact of deeply rooted beliefs that are contrary to personal mastery
- Commitment to truth
- Understanding the subconscious
“It boils down to being the best version of yourself,” says senior lecturer at the University of Pretoria’s Gordon Institute of Business Science Terrence Taylor.

In the end, it is a lifelong journey of tapping into your full potential as a human being.

According to Taylor, the process involves a deep understanding of:

- Your values
- Your strengths
- Your initiative, or how you want to add value to your organisation

Moving away from a ‘quick fix’ mentality

There are no quick fixes in a society, which has moved away from the “character ethic” and unchangeable principles, to a personal quick fix mentality or “personality ethic”, where outward appearances matter more than inner substance and strength of character, says author of The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, Stephen Covey.

This superficial, manipulative and self-serving mentality focuses on “appearing to be” rather than “being”.

Covey believes the personality ethic of 20th century helped create a high-achieving society that did not know where it was going. He says an achievement that is not worthwhile is hollow. Covey’s idea of restoring the character ethic almost 20-years ago, was so old-fashioned, it seemed revolutionary.

Personal mastery is based on realigning your personal values with universal and timeless principles of a character ethic like honesty, integrity and industry. As a result, you build strength of character and move away from self-interest toward genuinely serving others.
“You also see reality more objectively,” says Covey. However, giving up your current perceptions of reality can be a painful and frightening process, because it means eliminating a false sense of security.

A commitment to truth helps people to challenge their subjective paradigms of reality and cut through the hype.

**According to Senge, personal mastery practitioners have the following characteristics:**

- They have a sense of purpose underscoring their goals
- Their vision is more like a calling than a good idea
- They see current reality as an ally, not an enemy
- They are committed to seeing reality increasingly accurately
- They are extremely inquisitive
- They do not resist change, but work with it
- They feel connected to others and to life itself
- They feel that they are part of a larger creative process, which they can influence, but cannot control

**You write and execute the programme of your life**

Covey believes that personal mastery or what he calls “private victory” comes before public victory. In other words, you have to master yourself first, before you can have victory with others. Individuals who practice personal mastery understand that every person is a “programmer of life”. In other words, you write and execute the programme of your life, putting what you value most ahead of all other things.

“Personal mastery is about creating what one wants in life and in work,” says Senge. “It means approaching one’s life as a creative work, living life from a creative as opposed to a reactive viewpoint.”

Covey says individuals who practice personal mastery are enlightened to the fact that they are capable of self-command and self-government. They therefore do not live in a world that dictates what they can and cannot do.
According to Covey, personal mastery requires the mastery of three habits:

• **Be proactive**

This is based on the notion that humans can decide how they respond to a given stimulus. Behaviour can either be proactive or reactive. When you are reactive, you blame other people and circumstances for obstacles or problems. You are proactive when you take responsibility for everything in your life. Initiative and taking action will then follow.

• **Start with the end in mind**

To solve the problems of tomorrow, we must have a plan and a vision for the future. Identify goals in all areas of your life, including physical, mental, social/emotional and spiritual – and then make the integration of these goals a goal in itself. People often express the "end in mind" by formulating a mission statement, which allows them to document their personal sense of purpose.

• **Put first things first**

After identifying your most important goals, you must make choices as to how you will use your time to achieve them. Things that matter most must never take a backseat to things that matter less.

**Tapping into people’s commitment and ability to learn**

“Although all people have the capacity to learn, the structures in which they have to function are often not conducive to reflection and engagement,” says Senge.

Traditional hierarchical organisations do not foster learning or personal accountability. To be flexible, adaptive and productive in situations of rapid change, “organisations need to discover how to inspire people’s commitment and capacity to learn at all levels,” he explains.

“Organisations that continually expand their capacity to create their future, require a fundamental shift of mind among their members.”

Research shows that people learn best in learning organisations with enabling cultures where everyone is accountable to everyone else.
According to Senge, learning organisations are “organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning to see the whole together.”

Continuous improvement and creativity is at the heart of learning organisations. Personal mastery forms the cornerstone for a genuine desire to do well and to serve a purpose. This means learning organisations create conditions where people can meet higher order needs.

Embracing the concept of positive organisational learning

In researching how leaders consistently perform at their best, “the University of Michigan Business School came up with an exciting development in the area of organisational learning called positive organisational scholarship,” says Taylor.

Organisations use a “reflected best self” tool to determine if leaders are working to their full potential. “CEOs literally ask 30 to 40 subordinates and close contacts from outside the organisation to provide honest and open feedback as to when they observed or experienced the CEO at their best,” Taylor explains.

“Receiving feedback in this way is a very humbling, but powerful tool, because it allows you to connect with the emotions of others in moments when they experienced you at your best.”

Taylor says leaders can also get reflected best self type feedback from participating in mentorship programmes or belonging to some form of mastermind group, like consistently working with board members. In linking personal mastery to effective leadership, Senge says, “The core leadership strategy is simple: be a model. Commit yourself to your own personal mastery.”
We live in a world where anything is possible

“People who have cultivated a high degree of personal mastery sail through challenging times with confident balance,” say Joel and Michelle Levey, the co-founders of InnerWork Technologies, a Seattle-based company dedicated to organisational culture development and renewal.

Personal mastery gives people deep listening skills, which allow them to cleverly respond to the subtle whispers that warn them when they are drifting out of balance. These individuals are more likely to eat when they are hungry, and to rest when they are tired.

“Because these individuals recognise and reduce the harmful accumulation of stressful events, they live in a more balanced and disease-resistant way,” Levey and Levey explain.

“They also deepen the entire mind-body-spirit connection. This gives them the inner strength and understanding necessary to approach every situation in a balanced and centred way.”

Through evolving personal mastery, you become exponentially self aware. As a result, you experience greater and greater levels of personal synergy, which gives you a greater sense of personal power,” Levey and Levey note. You naturally take the driver’s seat to your destiny and assume complete responsibility for the direction your life is headed in. You realise that your skills, talents and competence give you the ability to create anything you want within your circle of influence.

“We live in a world where anything is possible. You can make or break nations in a very short period of time,” GIBS director Nick Binedell said at a recent leadership conference, attended by 30 CEOs from South Africa’s largest corporations.

“We are only at the beginning of building South Africa. We need each other. We have much work to do,” he said.

This is an article that first appeared in the University of Pretoria’s Gordon Institute of Business Science’s online journal, The GIBS Review and authored by Christine Leonardi.