The Path to Mastery is Never Straight

In my line of work, I experience an interesting paradox. People find themselves in leadership roles because they were good at something else. As recognition for their functional abilities, they were promoted. However, few received instruction in the skills associated with managing or leading.

They cope. They do the best they can. To address the limitations, they hire a coach. (Maybe the company hires a coach for them.) Surprisingly, they expect the skills will be easy to master.

Not so! The path to mastery is never straight!

I'm enjoying watching my grandson learn to walk. A few weeks ago, we could barely convince him to stand with one of us holding his hands. Now he's taking several tentative steps at a time, and you can see the increasing confidence on his face with each passing day. The transition from crawling to walking has not been instantaneous. Despite the falls and setbacks, he has been persistent.

In his book *Drive*, Daniel Pink shares the research that shows that there are three intrinsic human motivations. The first, the one most likely fueling my grandson's tenacity, is "autonomy," the drive to direct our own lives.

My grandson doesn't yet know about "mastery," the drive to work continuously to get better at something that matters to the individual. Walking certainly does seem to matter, however, and he does keep working at it, so maybe he is seeking an elemental form of mastery.

The third intrinsic motivator (just for completeness) is "purpose," the yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves.

The focus of this article is on "mastery," with the presumption that you want to become better at the variety of skills that help you to lead others.

Because you are already in a position of leadership, you may feel pressure to bluff your way. You'll learn faster and more deeply, however, if you'll acknowledge to yourself (and others) that you are in the process of developing your leadership skills. Further, your team will likely be more gracious than if you deny or ignore your limitations or pretend that you know what you are doing.

Confidence is an interesting thing. Many people think either you have it or you don't. The truth is that confidence is situational. How confident are you about being able to drive safely from your home to work? Ah, but do you remember your anxiety the first time you ever drove in heavy traffic?

Confidence is a matter of experience, and though you can learn much from a book or a training course, genuine confidence comes from experimenting and making adjustments. In mastering a skill, you often learn more from a negative experience than from outright success.

When I have the privilege of speaking to groups, sometimes I ask, "Why are people hesitant to try something new?" What do you think is the typical response?

Yep, it's "fear of failure." Ah, but failure exists only if you quit! What if you gave up the first time you drove in traffic? What if my grandson was afraid of failure the first time he took an unaided step?

Mastering any skill follows a predictable process. You go into the first effort with some nervousness, doubt, and perhaps you feel overwhelmed. You try anyway, making a bit of progress. You evaluate, make adjustments, and try again. You occasionally experience a setback. You stick with it, adjust, and try once more. With each effort, the situation and people involved provide you with feedback.

Feedback is not the same as failure. I suggest you throw away the "failure" concept and replace that terrible word with "feedback." Further, throw away any "fear" of feedback you might feel and replace it with "love" of feedback!

Nothing will help you become a better leader than a love of feedback. When you do well, you'll enjoy validation from the people who know the effects of your behaviors. And when you do poorly, honest feedback will do more to put you on the right track than any amount of coaching!

Mastering the skills of leadership involves experimenting, short bursts of progress, a little falling back, sticking with it, then another short burst of progress. Over time, you gradually learn what works in your relationships with others.

Ask any leader you admire about his or her path to mastering those skills. You'll be assured that the journey is never ending, and his or her path to mastery was certainly not straight!