

The Path to Mastery is Never Straight

by Dennis Hooper, copyright © 2018, published in the Apr, May, Jun, 2018 issue of the "In CASE" Newsletter

As an executive coach, I experience an interesting paradox. People often find themselves in leadership positions because they were good at something else. As recognition for their technical or functional abilities, they were rewarded with a promotion. However, few received instruction in the skills associated with managing or leading.

They cope. They search the internet for ideas. They do the best they can. To address their limitations, they sometimes hire a coach. (Maybe the company hires a coach for them.) They often expect the supposedly "soft skills" required of a leader will be easy to master.

Not so! The path to mastery as a manager or leader is never straight!

I remember watching my grandson learn to walk. Initially, we could barely convince him to stand with one of us holding his hands. Finally, he was pulling up on everything. After taking several tentative steps, and falling, he'd try again. We could see the increasing confidence on his face. The transition from crawling to walking was not instantaneous. Despite the many setbacks, he was persistent.

In his 2009 book *Drive*, Daniel Pink shares the research that shows that there are three intrinsic human motivations. The first, the unconscious one that most likely fueled my grandson's tenacity, is "autonomy," the drive to direct our own lives. Like most kids, he learned how to walk, but it was not a conscious choice. (Many of us go through life not aware that we make unconscious choices often!)

The second intrinsic motivation is "mastery," the drive to work continuously to get better at something that matters to us. My grandson knows nothing about motivation but walking certainly seemed to matter to him, and he was certainly persistent at it. So, maybe he was seeking an elemental form of mastery. (Again, many of us go through life mastering new abilities, often not consciously.)

The third intrinsic motivator (just for completeness) is "purpose," the yearning to do what we do in the service of something larger than ourselves. This motivator was probably beyond the maturity level of my grandson! (And at age 7, probably still is.)

[Special note: For many leaders who achieve mastery, "servant leadership" becomes a purpose worth pursuing. Once you have some influence, position, acquisitions, and stature in the community, what value does "more" really bring? Some leaders find moving from gaining more authority to creatively figuring out how to serve those they influence becomes the greater purpose they pursue!]

The focus of this article is on "mastery," with the presumption that you want to become better at the variety of skills that contribute to your effectively leading 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 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 already know what you are doing.

Confidence is an interesting thing. Many people think either you have confidence or you don't. The truth is that your confidence level is heavily a function of the situation that you face. For example, 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 as a leader comes from experimenting and adjusting. 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 might be the most 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 that he took an unaided step?

Mastering any skill follows a predictable process. You go into the first effort with some nervousness, doubt, and perhaps a feeling of overwhelm. You try anyway, making a bit of progress. You evaluate, adjust, and try again. You occasionally experience a setback. You stick with the process, adjust, and try once more. With each effort, the situation and people involved provide you with feedback. The feedback may hurt for the moment, but it helps in the long run!

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! It’s in responding to the feedback that you move toward mastery.

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 experience the effects of your behaviors. And when you do poorly, honest feedback will do more to put you on the right track than any number of false affirmations!

Mastering the skills of leadership involves experimenting, short bursts of progress, a little falling back, sticking with it, and then another short burst of progress. Over time, you gradually learn what works in your influencing 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 and is not now very straight!

Dennis Hooper is an executive coach in Atlanta, helping leaders build organizations of excellence. His articles are at buildingfutureleaders.com/article-archives. He welcomes comments at 770-286-2250.