

Nuggets and Bright Lines

- *The war on mastery*
- *The three destroyers*
- *The five steps to mastery*



Mastery

In this article I am going to share some information from one of my all time favourite books, *Mastery* by George Leonard.

This little gem of a book is subtitled 'the keys to success and long term fulfilment.' The keywords in the subtitle are 'long term.' In this twenty first century world this book stood out as an absolute beacon of light for me and I want to share why this is so. The author has written a number of books. one of them entitled, *The Way of Aikido*. Aikido is a Japanese form of self-defence, in which practitioners utilise the energy and movements of their opponents to overcome them.

In the opening pages Leonard discusses what he calls 'the war on mastery.' What he means by that, is how the world has evolved into a system of seemingly ever increasing instant gratification: microwave meals, kettles that boil within 30 seconds, the ever-increasing speed of transport and instant search results whereby we are conditioned neurologically and hormonally to get frustrated when we don't achieve success or results or get things happening in a short period of time. He points out that the reason this is something we need to address is because real success and achievement in life don't come instantly. He highlights the fact that the evolving way of the world is and its portrayal is essentially a war on mastery.

Leonard then goes on to identify the three key personality types that we can all migrate towards that take us away from achievement and mastery.

The Dabblers.

This is somebody who gets involved, but doesn't stick at it. They are all enthusiastic at the beginning, but as soon as this wanes or a seemingly better offer comes along or something just gets in the way, which it inevitably does then the effort drops off. They're then on to the next thing.

The Obsessive.

This is the person who jumps in and is totally enthusiastic, stays behind, goes the extra mile, buys all the kit and wants to know every detail. They appear almost totally obsessed by their subject. Then once, the process of practice needs to be the focus the subject loses its appeal because they haven't got that same falling in love feeling, that wow, that brand new factor. Then they are on to the next thing and projecting their obsession on to something else.

The Hacker.

At least The Hacker stays on the path albeit without a focus. The hacker is somebody who's happy to turn up most of the time although certainly not every time. They aren't really that bothered about achieving results, but perhaps, enjoy the company, and the social aspects. They have learned to accept the comfort of what it is they're doing. They're not pushing themselves. They're actually just chipping away without the focus that Leonard talks about.

Leonard talks about the process of mastery as a mysterious process that is at first difficult. He describes the challenges we encounter when we first get into something and try something new. He discusses the embarrassed feelings of inability when we can't coordinate and do something that look so easy and yet seems so difficult. He talks about the slow progression as things seem to be getting a little easier and then the onset of it becoming a pleasurable process when through practice, we get better and better at it.

He goes on to talk about the five key processes of mastery.

1. Instruction

Leonard advises strongly to get the very best instruction possible, whether that be through the written word, audio, video or a mentor or coach. Best of all in Leonard's view is acquiring a great mentor.

2. Practice

Next he turns to the practice itself. This is essentially, turning up day after day, week after week and month after month and just doing the practice purposefully. He talks eloquently about *falling in love with the process*. He describes living on the plateau where you practice, practice, practice. What for? For practices sake. Eventually, that process of loving the plateau, of practicing for practices sake, embeds those skills, those neurones and pathways creating the neuromuscular changes that occur in our bodies as we develop the new skill.

3. Surrender

This is surrendering to the process. It is living as if the goal you are obsessed by is secondary to the surrendering to the process of practice. This is the state where the levels of anxiety are replaced by the tranquility of being in the moment knowing deep down in your heart that surrendering to the process is where it's at.

4. Intentionality

When Leonard talks about intentionality he talks about the balance between knowing what it is you want and where you want to be but at the same time, not allowing that thought process to destroy the process of the practice. He describes it as rather than seeing your vision as a goal or demand see it as an intentionality.

For example when we get up in the morning, we have an intentionality to actually have achieved something by the end of the day, at the same time, we have that balance, whereby we allow ourselves to go through the process of the day.

He talks about doing this in, for example, that 120 minutes practice session that you have every day. So, the intention in the practice session is:

'I'm going to take steps towards being able to land the ball every time in the second 6-yard box from the corner flag in an out swinging corner.'

The practice is to do, for example, one hundred repetitions with this intention in mind in a calm, relaxed and focussed way.

5. The Edge

Here Leonard talks about what he calls the edge, that point, as Jordan Peterson so aptly puts it, between order and chaos. Order is when you can do something. You've mastered it. You've got it sorted. Just a little bit further on, is the chaos, where you can't control things. You're under pressure. It seems beyond you. In sport this is where you are out of your comfort zone, fully engaged but not winning.

Some of the great coaches talk about aiming for that incremental improvement, whereby you stretch yourself to that four percent beyond your current level. Practicing on the edge, is just there: in that four percent zone beyond your ability. It stretches you enough, but just allows you to start to hit that little bit of success without creating excess anxiety. It's the purposeful practice sweet spot.

So, there we have the five steps, the great instruction, the practice itself, the surrender to the practice, the intentionality and the edge. Leonard talks about taking some tools on the journey with you, which I'll let you find out about those for yourself in the book. I can't recommend this book enough. You could read it in a day. It will change the way that you see life, if it hits you the same way that it hit me.

For me, one of the big things in developing players is how we can teach the game in the most effective way. When I was going through the fundamental coach education, we talked about practice, practice, practice. More recently there has been a change in emphasis to allowing the game itself to be the teacher.

I'm going to stick my neck on the line here. Undoubtedly the game will teach because being involved in and experiencing it will expose participants to such things. However, if

individuals are unable to execute certain things, because they have not mastered those processes in a controlled environment then the raw game left to its own devices will almost certainly fail to teach well.

As with many things in life I think it is a balance. In this case it is of facilitating the right challenge by appropriately adapting practices and games to elicit specifics from young players. It is vital too we remain humble enough to closely observe our practices and be prepared to evolve and adjust.

The Author

Rob is a UEFA qualified coach with a League Managers Association qualification and a science and medicine background. He has worked in the football industry in Europe, USA, Asia and Africa; at International, Premiership, League, Non-League and grass roots levels with both World Cup and European Championship experience.



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