



Concepts and Practices to Get Out of Your Own Way

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Table of Contents

INTRODUCTION	3
WHAT IS SELF-MASTERY	4
Systems that Drive Our Mental State	4
<i>Body/Physical State</i>	4
<i>Emotions/Psychology</i>	5
<i>Linguistic Reality</i>	6
DOMAINS OF ACTION FOR SELF-MASTERY	7
Self-Assessment.....	7
Steer Towards Your Strengths	8
Mitigate Your Vulnerabilities	8
Actually Do It!!!	10
BECOME A MASTER OF YOUR PERSONAL POWER.....	10
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	12

INTRODUCTION

Running a successful business is extremely difficult. Often, the biggest obstacle to success is ourselves. We tend to think that success comes from mastering technical skills or beating your competition. In my work with business leaders, I find it is much more likely that you are limited by self-doubt, fear, lack of clarity, fatigue or a million other self-imposed-limitations.

There is a dizzying array of skills required to start and run a business. At the top of this list is the ability to manage one's Self. It often looks like the "world" is making our progress extremely difficult or impossible while we watch others move forward seemingly without effort. It looks like the world bends to their wishes. While that may be the case, it is more likely that they are skillful at "Self-Mastery".

As I began to see this for myself 15 years ago, I found that most people don't talk about it. While many of us work to address Self-Mastery in our personal lives, it is rarely a subject of business conversations. We all act as though our mental struggles are our own personal burden that no one else faces. We feel that if we admit those struggles, we will be marked as a "loser".

15 years ago, my business radically changed. As a side effect of the change I began to see that my biggest strategic challenge was that my mood was often not productive. I felt fearful and unsure of myself and lacked consistent passion for my work. While I was very confident in my skill in my work, I struggled with sales and marketing. I could see that my most important job was to manage my mood so that I could do the work to get clients and have an opportunity to demonstrate how much value I bring. I began to see the practices I employed to manage my mood as Self-Mastery. Now I see that Self-Mastery is the set of skills required to shepherd, govern and grow our Selves to ensure that we can perform at our best in the operation of our business and life in general. It's about maximizing our personal power.

I was very fortunate as this unfolded for me that I had been working diligently to understand human behavior to enable me to lead my 30-person company well and to assist my clients. I studied biology, especially neurology, philosophy and linguistics. This inquiry gave me powerful tools to observe and influence the behavior of others. With this new insight into Self-Mastery I found these tools extremely helpful in understanding myself. While it is a constant effort to apply these concepts, I have found a model that gives me some clarity on what is going on "in" me and allows me to design coherent action that has consistently improved my performance over the years. The distinctions in this paper have been essential to my progress.

As you will find, there is some jargon in this paper. It is not there on accident and it is not casual use of "fancy" words. It is a very specific set of distinctions that if you understand them will allow you to look at the domain of Self-Mastery more powerfully. Please encounter these strange sentences and words with curiosity and wonder in order for the concepts to pierce your already-listening (yep – weird, I know).

WHAT IS SELF-MASTERY

We all have an automatic way of being. Our “ground” is how we automatically react to situations in life without reflection. Depending upon the situation those embodied reactions may serve our objectives or they may hinder our progress.

Our ground reflects our specific neurological structure which is determined by our personal genetics and how we “rewired” due to past experiences. If we are not reflecting upon ourselves, our ground determines how we respond to our environment. Depending upon our situation (are we scared, feeling loved, driven, angry, distracted...) and what is happening in the environment, our particular ground produces reactions that may or may not serve our self-interests. How we “are” is a virtue or a vice, a strength or a vulnerability depending upon the situation. If your automatic way of behaving produces situations that are unsatisfactory to you, then you have the option of taking action to lead and manage yourself to behave more effectively. Someone that is perfectly wired to perform seamlessly at a super-model photo-shoot would not fare well in the apocalypse and vice-versa.

Ultimately, Self-Mastery is a specific set of practices/habits we employ to maximize the benefits of our strengths and to mitigate the negative consequences of our vulnerabilities. In short, we have to be able to

- 1) Assess and prioritize our strengths and vulnerabilities,
- 2) Steer our lives toward our strengths,
- 3) Develop practices to mitigate the negative impact of our vulnerabilities,
- 4) Actually execute those practices.

Before we discuss that process for designing and enacting specific practices in more depth, it is helpful to understand the categories of systems that we need to influence.

Systems that Drive Our Mental State

We are complex beings whose mental state can be difficult to understand and influence. To reduce the complexity and to develop a deeper understanding of Self-Mastery it is useful to think about human beings as having three different systems that drive our mental state and provides a map of which practices need to be employed. They are:

- 1) Body/Physical health,
- 2) Emotions,
- 3) Linguistic Reality

Body/Physical State

Though we tend to forget, we are in fact biological. We become aware of this when our health suffers directly. What is often overlooked is that our biology also affects our mood. For us to perform in business and in life we have to show up and be ready to act. If our body is not functioning well there are direct impacts to our business. We may not be able to show up or we may not be able to perform. It is hard to do that big presentation when you have the flu or travel with a broken leg.

While the direct health of your body is important, the impact on your mind is more important in this discussion. Not only does our physiology determine how sharp we are, it also throws us into moods and shapes how we see the world. If you are not able to think quickly and clearly, or are in an ungrounded, ineffective mood, you are not as able to perform most of the functions of your job.

Early on in my Self-Mastery work I could see that I lacked confidence. I really couldn't describe the feeling well because in a lot of ways I can be accused of being arrogant, the notion that I lacked self-confidence didn't really resonate but it seemed to describe the feeling. I began to wonder if my physical state was contributing to this feeling. My health was generally good, but I know that I had lots of bad habits that didn't help. At the time I was drinking too much, smoking, not eating enough vegetables and not getting enough exercise. Fifteen years later (baby steps along the way) I don't drink or smoke. I get enough cardio and eat much better. I can feel the difference that this makes in my mood every time I eat something that I know I shouldn't. Our physiology affects our mood and emotions. No question.

Emotions/Psychology

We are emotional beings. Emotions move us forward. They give us motivation, desire, drive, information and guidance along the way. They can urge us forward intelligently. They can also get in the way. They can give us unhealthy drives, mis-information, and can drive us into the ditch. Our emotions are evoked according to patterns that result from the genetics of being “human”, our personal genetics and also come from the experiences of our childhood.

If our emotional response allows us to respond to situations in our environment in ways that support our objectives, they are powerful and are strengths. Where our emotions throw us into a path of action that is not supportive of our objectives, we have an area where our emotions are a liability.

We are all different in terms of what patterns of emotional response we have and how to manage them. We have different genetics and different histories that shapes our pattern matching system and set the direction and intensity of our emotions. Understanding these patterns can allow us to see our ground and to develop practices to accommodate or change the patterns stored in our head.

There is a lot to consider about emotions other than our ground – we can also change the programming that doesn't serve us. To maximize our personal emotional power, we can improve how we:

- Identify and design effective emotions,
- Recognize, design, and use the mechanisms which influence our emotions,
- Read other people's emotions to most enable us to effectively deal with them.

We all have stuff from our childhood. I am no different. As I observed myself, I could see that if someone or some situation poked my sensibilities and made me upset in some way, my emotional reaction was way bigger than the affront should have accorded. Someone could not say hi back to me and it would create a large negative emotional reaction. I started to recognize these reactions as triggering some narrative from my childhood. That emotional reaction wasn't

serving me, so I sought help through therapy to work to uncover what those childhood narratives were that were limiting me. I started some practices – mechanisms to respond to those reactions. While the reaction hasn't gone away entirely, the magnitude of the reaction had diminished significantly so that it rarely affects me.

Linguistic Reality

We all live in language. The “world” to us is a set of distinctions of objects and ideas in the world, how the world “is” and what sequence of events happen naturally in the world. Our linguistic reality is a set of narratives and beliefs for how we understand and navigate the world.

We accumulate and refine our narratives as we grow older, smarter and more experienced. Those narratives answer some question about the world. Some of those questions have specific, verifiable answers – they are objective. How is a legal business entity formed? What are the rules of accounting? What are the laws regarding hiring and firing personnel? The answers to the objective questions are important in business but are not critical in the subject of Self-Mastery.

Some questions are subjective. Those are the “unanswerable” questions. No one among us can say for sure what the “real” answer is. What is the right employee? Why am I in business? How should I sell my product? There are a lot of questions of life that are subjective, or that we can not say as a fact how something is. The way we answer the unanswerable questions and how we go about answering them for ourselves is our world and has a critical impact of our mental state. It is our “reality”. It shapes how we see the world and helps disclose how we should act. Your inquiry and answers to the unanswerables can be called your “spirituality”. Some fundamental “unanswerable questions” are:

- Who am I?
- Why am I here?
- What is a “good” life?
- What is the right way to “be”?
- What is right and wrong?
- Who do I align with and why?
- How can I be a good partner?
- What am I committed to accomplishing?

The list goes on and different questions grip different people. We have different answers to these questions and with some of them we remain befuddled. While there aren't “right” answers to these questions (by definition) how we answer them will amplify or diminish our capacity to take care of concerns in different situations. In other words; the reality that we live in may or may not serve us well. The beliefs that we have about what is in the world and how the world works, may drive us to act in a way that goes against our self-interest. If we are aware we can evolve through life in a way that improves our answers to the unanswerables with life experience and gives us more power to take care of our concerns.

Our linguistic reality feeds our emotions. The way we see the world in language informs our selves of what our potential is and where threats are. If we have a big ambition that serves who we are and what is good in the world and fits how we see how the world works, we can be

deeply motivated. A lack of motivation may be resolved with different answers to the unanswerable questions.

I am deeply drawn to this inquiry. I am always looking for new interpretations to explain the world and myself. The ones that I have focused on primarily are; “What is a good life?” and “What is my purpose?” I think early on my purpose was to make a lot of money, which as it turns out, is really a pretty weak narrative. I can tell my motivation rises and falls depending upon how connected I feel to my story of the good life that I am committed to achieving (aka ambition) and what is connected to a visceral sense of my purpose. It has changed a dozen times in the last 15 years. I keep getting closer and my motivation continues to grow.

DOMAINS OF ACTION FOR SELF-MASTERY

Self-Mastery ultimately is our ability to act so that we benefit from our strengths and reduce the impact of our vulnerabilities. It is a lifetime practice. It is never “done”. As was mentioned before, there are four domains of action for Self-Mastery;

- 1) An accurate self-assessment of our strengths and vulnerabilities,
- 2) Steer our lives towards our strengths,
- 3) Develop practices to mitigate the negative impact of our vulnerabilities,
- 4) Actually execute those practices.

Self-Assessment

Real self-awareness is extremely difficult. We are so used to our Selves and we so deeply live in our interpretations of the world that cognitive blindness is one of the biggest barriers to thriving in business. We have all had the experience where we encounter a person that is their own worst enemy. They blunder about like a bull in a china shop causing breakdowns for others and themselves and are oblivious to how their poor behavior is destructive to those around them and ultimately limits their ability to achieve their ambitions. They are blind to how their interpretations and habits are damaging themselves and others and are closed down to more effective interpretations. We all have this blindness in some way. Being aware of how our inclinations, interpretations, and habits send us in a direction that serves us or damages us is the first step of Self-Mastery.

Our vulnerabilities may be dramatic and obvious to those around us or they may be invisible to them and only negatively affect us. If you are emotionally fatigued and just don't show up to the networking function, you limit your progress, but others may not know about it.

Most people have some sense of where their own ability to perform is affected and causes recurrent breakdowns. That doesn't mean we really have a self-assessment. It is a feeling that requires clarity. What is your ground? What is the specific tendency and what is the effect? This can be difficult to see both because it is technically challenging, but also because it requires a degree of emotional development to be able to tolerate the examination.

Steer Towards Your Strengths

Culturally we tend to focus on “problems” or deficits. How are we “wrong” and how must we be “fixed”? This interpretation limits our capacity to pursue big goals and to live with passion. The broad direction of life and career is best set by an understanding of strengths. What are you great at physically, emotionally, and spiritually? In what situations do you shine? What do you love to do? By designing your business first around your strengths, you increase the likelihood that you will be great at your work, you will be more seductive and get the customers you love that want to pay you more and will have you do work that you love.

Our culture does suggest that we pursue the technical tasks where we have skill, yet sadly, it does not attend to our more ethereal inclinations. “Do you love your work?” is often considered a superfluous question. We are expected to be “a good soldier” or to “suck it up”. This hard-hearted approach diminishes our passion, our effectiveness and ultimately our success in business.

Mitigate Your Vulnerabilities

When you are on the path suggested by your strengths then you will be energized and ambitious. This drive will make it easier to accept the fact that your ground has gaps where you are not perfect for your job. If you do a realistic self-assessment, you will find many areas where your ground does not serve you. So many that you won’t have enough energy to solve all of your “problems”. If you are normal, you will see dozens of ways that you fall “short”. You can’t solve them all, even over a lifetime. You must pick which issues to focus on.

It is best to identify one or two to work on at a time. Identify which vulnerability presents the biggest strategic challenge. Which is the biggest challenge to you seizing opportunities, fulfilling well or dealing with breakdowns? If you have a sense of the 5 most impactful gaps in your ground, put them in order of which ones are most easily addressed and focus on the top 1 or 2.

This is not a scientific process. There is an art to it and getting other people to check your interpretations is extremely valuable.

The next step is to specifically invent a practice which if you do regularly for as long as it’s relevant (perhaps your whole lifetime), will resolve the gap.

There are different ways to address a gap. You can:

- Change your ground,
- Implement mitigation practices,
- Design around the vulnerability,
- Get someone else to do the function.

You can work on yourself and change how you are. In some ways this is the long-term goal and having some recurrent practice to work on yourself pays off. In the short term this may not be possible.

In the short term you may need to institute a practice that manages your vulnerability. To just mitigate the problems – reduce the symptoms or effects of the problem. As an example, if you get angry easily, you may have had problems with customers. That does not serve you. In the long-term, therapy, meditation and other practices may impact the brain structure and chemistry that was shaped in childhood. This is hard to change, but can happen over time. In the short term you may want to have a regular practice to leak your pent-up frustration through kick boxing. You may want to have a practice to never respond to a challenging email or interaction for some period of time that allows you to gain composure.

You could also design around your vulnerability. If you are introverted and find networking extremely painful, it might be a mistake to have a referral marketing program. While that may be the most effective strategy from a design perspective, given your vulnerabilities it might be wiser to spend more money and time on a digital marketing program.

Finally, you might need to limit your exposure to the situations that you are not effective in by getting someone else to perform the role where those situations occur. In the example above, perhaps it is best to hire a person to go to networking functions for you – if you have the resources.

The types of tactics employed are vast. They should be very specific and actionable. Some examples of specific tactics are:

Limiting simple carbs	Go to Church	Tai Chi
Becoming Vegan	Read self-help books	Eliminate Dairy
Join a Gym	Calligraphy	Regular Vacation
Regular Yoga	Therapy	Find a significant other
Therapy	Learn a language	Couples Therapy
Learn conflict resolution	Journaling	Kick-boxing
Acupuncture	Daily centering practice	Take a class
Regular walks	Smoothies	Financial Planning
Cook regularly	Hire a life coach	Make your bed regularly
Do a vision quest	Have difficult conversation	Smile
Use a planner	Meditation retreat	Limit caffeine
Jigsaw puzzles	Juice	Camping
Stop smoking	Stop drinking alcohol	Meet with grown children
Travel	Woodworking	Aromatherapy
Take supplements	Get rid of your TV	Level-10
Stop electronics	Quarterly Business Review	Stand straight
Clarity Break	Join a club	Mood buddy
Escape rooms	Medication	Call your mom
Gardening	Shopping	

There is almost no limit to the specific practice to implement. Make it specific and never ending though. Perhaps in the future you will have addressed the gap. You can stop at that time. In the interim though Self-Mastery is the implementation of standard practices. Often, we respond to a breakdown with a temporary practice. That only ensures a repeat. Mastery is about having a habit in place.

Actually Do It!!!

This is in some ways an extra step that needs to be here because it is hard to start a new habit. If the practice you designed does not fit who you are, design a new practice. This is really where movement happens. People make commitments all of the time and don't follow through. That is a part of being human. This step is about not stopping if the practice doesn't work for you. Keep trying. Keep inventing new practices. Ask others what they do. Don't give up.

Getting help from others is extremely useful if not essential. It is extremely hard to do this by yourself, if it is possible at all. Open up to others about what you are doing. Ask others about your strengths and vulnerabilities. Enlist their help. Work with groups of people that are serious and are dedicated to Self-Mastery.

This has been my biggest challenge. As I talk to other people, I find that many people struggle with this. Especially visionaries. I think that shame in our culture makes this progress so much slower. I have learned that the most powerful step to change is to accept yourself, forgive yourself and love yourself. After that, it's all about not stopping to try. Change it up. Try different tactics. Talk to a lot of people. Be humble and vulnerable. The more I do all of that, the quicker change comes to me.

BECOME A MASTER OF YOUR PERSONAL POWER

I have been working with business owners for over 15 years. The biggest difference between those that are struggling to succeed and those that are succeeding is the degree to which they effectively manage themselves. As the engine of your business, you need to be present, sharp and ambitious. That doesn't always happen automatically.

Your level of contribution to your work is determined by your physical state, your emotional state and the stories you believe about the world. Making sure these three facets of your "Self" are tuned and powerful takes some time and attention.

If you are channeling your strengths in your work and selectively identifying and mitigating your weaknesses you are moving closer to your goals. If you do this over a long period of time,

business gets easier. You get better results, you can work less, stress is reduced. Another amazing thing can happen. The rest of your life can become more potent as well.

These practices that help you succeed in business also move you forward in your family, relationships and personal life in general. So – pick something to work on – move forward and live your dreams.

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