

Walking the Mastery Path

From Conner Academy Essays by Daryl Conner

Throughout the last several years, I have devoted myself to investigating the contributing factors that have led some change professionals to have incredibly influential relationships with their clients (High Impact practitioners), while others, despite making useful contributions, have relatively modest impact by comparison (Adequate practitioners). As I continue to examine what differentiates these individuals, I am often struck by how frequently people describe High Impact practitioners as having “mastered” change execution. This prompted me to think long and hard about the term “mastery.” Have these exceptionally influential change facilitators truly “mastered” their craft? Is that even possible? If so, what would it look like?

In the essay that follows, I attempt to probe what mastery itself represents for our profession. Specifically, I’ll offer what I’ve learned about the nature of mastery in the field of change execution, and some of the implications I believe are relevant to us as practitioners.

Master vs. Mastery Path

After much observation and deliberation, I’ve come to this conclusion: High Impact trusted advisors haven’t “mastered” anything. They aren’t masters of change; they are change practitioners on a mastery path. There is a significant difference.

Many people have the misconception that to master something means you have answers for all, or at least most, of the important questions in a particular discipline. The connotation is that being a master is the end state of what there is to learn about a subject: you have completed your training, reached an exalted plateau, and can now rest on your laurels. This couldn’t be further from the truth.

Advanced learning in any field is characterized by an unending trail of more questions, not a cul-de-sac of terminal answers. Therefore, we refer to pursuing these questions as being “on a mastery path,” which conveys a very different message.

A master has arrived, whereas a practitioner on the mastery path is still on the journey...and always will be.

Being perceived as a master of change may sound appealing to novices, but it is actually a short-lived, hollow achievement with little staying power. If you present yourself in this manner, whether overtly or subtly, you’re likely to have plenty of solutions for sale, but these are probably fixed or limited. By seeing yourself as a master, you run the risk of having quenched your thirst for learning. This leads to your perspective eventually becoming stale while new, more sophisticated questions arise that you are no longer able to properly address.

Practitioners on a mastery path, on the other hand, tend to enjoy longer tenures than those who conclude (consciously or otherwise) that they no longer need to pursue the next horizon of unknowns. The paradox is that precisely because High Impact practitioners never perceive themselves as having mastered their craft, they sustain the hunger for learning that keeps them relevant to whatever cutting-edge change management issues or challenges emerge.

High Impact practitioners pursuing the mastery path become exceptionally skilled at *what they do* (using frameworks, concepts, techniques, etc. when serving as a trusted advisor) and exceptionally effective at authentically expressing *who they are* (bringing forward their uniqueness of character and presence as part of the value they create). Despite this level of accomplishment, however, these practitioners remain students of their craft. Although they have encountered countless situations, learned numerous central lessons, and formed many insightful conclusions (far more than most practitioners), the perspectives they gain remain permeable to new input. In spite of their vast experience, they remain convinced that there are many more unresolved, critically important questions to be addressed. This innate curiosity and thirst for answers is what keeps them on the mastery path and, ultimately, what enables them to operate within the top 10% of the profession.

Ultimately, High Impact change facilitators devoted to a mastery path aren't students of mastery, they are students of the path. They aren't completing requirements to attain a status; they are enrolled in an unending developmental journey. They are motivated as much by the search as by what they find. This is why there are no masters in the field of change execution, only practitioners dedicated to following where the mastery path takes them. High Impact practitioners know that mastery isn't the prize—seeking it is.

Requirements to Enter the Mastery Path

Many change practitioners may be intrigued with the mastery path, but not everyone is predisposed to tackle the obstacles it presents. Because seeking mastery is so challenging, attempting to begin the journey without the proper prerequisites already in place is foolhardy. Two qualities in particular are important to embody before engaging with the mastery path: certain predispositions and a steadfast commitment.

Predispositions

For mastery to be successfully sought, practitioners must already possess a very specific foundation upon which they can build. In particular, they must demonstrate some degree of preexisting tendency toward the mindsets and behaviors needed for pursuing the mastery path. This means displaying a bias towards traits such as:

- Introspection
- Authenticity
- Risk taking
- Frustration (at not fully leveraging their potential)
- Tenacity
- Patience
- Self-confidence
- Unpretentiousness

Someone else can require that you strengthen your change-related competencies (a boss to keep your job, a school to get your degree, a proprietary company to get your certification, etc.), but seeking mastery is a different matter. You can be encouraged to explore a mastery-level pursuit, but never coerced. To cross the threshold and walk the mastery path, being pressured or enticed by

outside forces will never do; only an invitation from your own heart, invoked by your own innate predispositions, will suffice.

Commitment

Walking the mastery path requires deep commitment to the profession of change management and involves unending refinement of both *what you do* and *who you are*. Devotion to this journey must be sustained through intense developmental efforts for as long as a practitioner wishes to remain a High Impact change resource to senior leaders. Because practitioners on the mastery path know they will never achieve the perfection they strive toward, having all the answers isn't their objective. Instead, what they pledge themselves to is:

- Ensuring they are far more knowledgeable and experienced than their clients
- Staying aware of how little they really understand compared to the vast complexities involved in human transitions
- Acknowledging their shortcomings when they fail to live up to their own expectations and the expectations of those they serve
- Extracting the critical insights buried inside their missteps
- Applying these lessons to the next client situation

By practicing their craft in this way, High Impact change professionals advance their capabilities while moving further down the mastery path, yet they remain humbled by how much more still lies beyond their grasp.

Approaching the Path

Those who are fortunate enough to become exceptionally accomplished change practitioners typically follow a common professional trajectory:

- Early in their careers, they focus on rudimentary tools: learning fundamental concepts, frameworks, and techniques to use as they guide clients through relatively modest change challenges.
- Then, they go through a period of repetitious application of the basics in order to develop enough nuts and bolts competence to provide more substantive assistance to management-level clients.
- This is followed by years of refining their knowledge and skills to the point where they can frequently deliver meaningful support to higher-level managers involved in more significant change endeavors.
- Over time, some individuals continue to practice their craft to the point of becoming regarded by clients and colleagues alike as respected professionals who are capable of consistently delivering helpful assistance to executive-level leaders. These are practitioners who have advanced to the top of the Adequate (65%) category. Senior leaders enjoy working with them and find value in what they offer, but mostly rely on them for tactical change support or to play marginal change roles in important projects. They are not perceived to be in the top 10%, High Impact echelon of trusted advisors considered crucial to strategically vital change initiatives.

At this juncture, a few practitioners begin asking themselves “Where to from here?” How they answer that question will lead them to make one of two moves:

- **Level out**—This is a “horizontal” move, usually made unconsciously and without intentional volition. The practitioners who *level out* unknowingly conclude that the expertise they have attained is sufficient for their aspirations, and they no longer need to continue substantively building their capabilities. They are good at what they do, the leaders they serve are satisfied with what they deliver, and peers think highly of their work. As far as they are concerned, that's as good as it needs to get.
- **Level leap**—This is a “vertical” move, made consciously and intentionally. Practitioners who *level leap* determine that even the considerable expertise they have developed is insufficient for their aspirations. They are confident in their work and enjoy the recognition they receive; however, they believe they are still far from fulfilling their professional potential. As a result, they feel compelled to further advance the practice of their craft.

Change professionals who *level out* at this point of their careers constitute the top end of the 65%ers. They usually continue to keep up with what is new in the field and attend or present at professional conferences. They don't disregard professional development altogether, but the intensity and focus of their learning pursuits are commensurate with a general satisfaction with their Adequate status.

Practitioners who *level leap* at this point are the ones who ultimately become 10%ers. Prior to making this leap, they will often feel “stalled” or “burned out” with regard to the organization(s) where they work, or maybe even more broadly about the entire change profession. These are times when they might feel that there is little new mental, emotional, physical, or spiritual learning taking place; they feel stagnant, and boredom sets in. Their enthusiasm for their work diminishes, and engaging in even critical events or task can seem hollow and generates only rote attention.

Most change professionals experience these “empty” periods at one point or another, but for Adequate practitioners, they are the norm, whereas for High Impact practitioners, they are the exception. Those who level out come to accept and even expect a lack of passion for their work. Those who level leap interpret the same doldrums as a launching pad for raising their game and entering or reenergizing their mastery path journey. In doing so, they throw themselves into advanced learning activities, spending less time pursuing the technical aspects of change execution and more time looking for ways to accelerate the impact of the methodologies in which they are already proficient. Being sufficiently or adequately influential with the leaders they advise isn't acceptable to them—they want to be exceptionally influential with the executive they serve. They want to operate at nothing less than the High Impact level.

Level-Leapers Seeking the Mastery Path

Practitioners eager to level leap and pursue the mastery path tend to have a difficult time finding forums where they can engage in the kind of professional development activities they desire. From their perspective, the information available in most change-related books, blogs and online communities revisits familiar ground, and new ideas that do emerge seem more like refinements than breakthroughs. When attending conferences, they enjoy offering advice to less-experienced practitioners, but they often become frustrated at the lack of offerings for their own developmental

needs. They come to realize that most academic degree programs are calibrated for entry-level or mid-career practitioners. What “advanced practitioner” training they do find is usually associated with proprietary concepts, tools, and techniques; thus, the learning is geared toward a particular approach rather than providing a methodology-agnostic environment that deepens their overall capabilities as seasoned change professionals.

In the end, there are few resources available for veteran change facilitators who are ready to leap to truly cutting-edge capability-building; they exist but are not easy to find. As a result, walking the mastery path requires a constant vigilance for learning experiences that will foster the accelerated professional growth being sought. After all, learning of this nature doesn’t lend itself to a formulaic curriculum that can be mapped out well in advance.

Preparation for being a High Impact trusted advisor to senior officers has no fixed agenda or definitive completion point. In fact, as soon as practitioners start down the mastery path, it begins to reveal events, circumstances, and relationships where the critical lessons are to be found, and they are different for each person. The key is to be attentive to when these learning opportunities arise.

Though mastery path learning experiences come in different forms, they all have a certain profile. Pursuing mastery involves growing:

- From technician to artist
- From believing you know a lot to realizing you know relatively little
- From controlling to allowing
- From doing to being
- From conveying knowledge and demonstrating skills to offering insight and wisdom
- From practicing the craft as something you are good at doing to letting it unfold as an expression of who you are

Learning experiences that enable a practitioner to transform from any of the former to the latter states are worthy pursuits. They are all essential steps down the mastery path.

Proceeding Down the Mastery Path

The mastery path is a personalized quest in which each practitioner must find his or her own way. You can decide whether to start down the path, but you cannot mandate what you will encounter once you begin the journey. You get to determine the pace of your pursuit, at what depth you engage, whether to stop and rest for a while, or even to leave the path, if you wish. You have very little say, however, regarding what issues will surface for you to address. You can decide whether to face them, but not what needs to be faced.

Opening yourself to these experiences and fully embracing them can be a frightening act of surrender, because not all the lessons are easy, nor are all of the people who will serve as teachers ones you might choose for yourself. Yet listening to and honoring the challenges and lessons the path presents is essential to the progress you seek. Adequate practitioners tend to engage in professional development in order to meet requirements for a degree or certification, or because they have found something that interests them. High Impact trusted advisors, on the other hand, maintain

a vigilance for signals to guide them toward what is necessary for their advancement on the path, no matter the turmoil or discomfort that may result.

This is not to say that High Impact practitioners avoid what is intriguing or shun having fun while on the path; this just isn't their primary criteria for engaging learning opportunities. What is most important to them is what will further their mastery pursuit—and sometimes, these are uncomfortable, even painful decisions. For example, there may be times when the path calls for leaving behind some skills and viewpoints that have proven useful in the past in order to make room for an even stronger capability. Abandoning the familiar, particularly when it is still paying dividends, can produce excruciating anxiety, but it is sometimes the only way to make room for what is trying to emerge.

When progress on the mastery path occurs, it arises from the necessary predisposition and commitment being in place and the practitioner having learned how to remove obstacles that were blocking progress. These barriers can be tough to recognize and even more difficult to remove. Tackling them means identifying existing patterns of perceiving, thinking, or behaving that inhibit making headway—not an easy task. Yet to evolve to the upper 10% of our profession, this is what is required.

Learning another new external concept or technique simply will not do. High Impact practitioners must engage with what is inside of them in order to advance their craft and continue down the mastery path.

Measuring Progress on the Path

Fully mastering change execution is an unrealistic objective, yet that is precisely what High Impact practitioners are committed to pursuing. Moreover, the journey can be a difficult, at times painful one. How does this not become a demoralizing act of futility? The saving grace is in how you keep score.

The calculus to assess advancement on the mastery path has little to do with how long you have been a professional change facilitator or the number of academic degrees and proprietary certifications you have accumulated. Basic knowledge and skills in the mechanics of our field are table stakes; don't even think about entering the mastery path without these qualifications well in hand. Progress toward an ever-expanding horizon like change mastery can be most clearly determined by looking at two factors:

- How much you have learned about yourself and what you need to introspectively address in order to be grounded enough to establish penetrating, vulnerability-centric, highly influential working relationships with senior leaders.
- How exhilarating it is that, despite all your efforts to close the gaps, there is more left to learn about yourself and helping leaders navigate organizational change than the sum total of what you have thus far absorbed.

When you experience equal parts accomplishment and humility, only then can you consider yourself successfully advancing down the mastery path.

Call to Action

Very few change professionals attain *exceptional* levels of respect and influence from senior executives; the ones who do we refer to as High Impact trusted advisors. Despite their accomplishments, these practitioners don't attest to having mastered their craft—they feel instead that they are walking a mastery path. They are on an unending developmental journey where progress is realized, but each step reveals new unanswered questions so that the “mastery” horizon keeps advancing, forever staying beyond their reach. Rather than feeling frustrated at this ever-elusive destination, however, High Impact practitioners relish the process of advancing down the path. It is making the journey, not reaching its endpoint, that motivates them to succeed at this line of work.

There are many reasons that contribute to why so few change professionals are seen as operating in the High Impact zone. One is that the majority of practitioners in our field are not calibrated for the challenges and risks associated with walking the mastery path. This isn't a problem, however, because the majority of leaders seeking change execution assistance are perfectly content with the value they receive from practitioners in the Adequate zone. Senior executives facing strategic, dicey, perilous change, however, need—and seek—a different kind of resource: the practitioners I refer to as High Impact trusted advisors pursuing mastery.

The question for us as a profession is: Do we have enough practitioners who are stepping up to fulfill this need? I'm not asking if we have enough Adequate players who will take these assignments, I'm asking: Are there enough in our ranks who are on the mastery path and ready to properly support the more complex change endeavors being presented?

Closer to home, I'm asking: Have you made a decision about what zone you want your practice to be operating within? Functioning as an Adequate practitioner is honorable and will generate value for the leaders you serve, and the same is true for High Impact practitioners. One is not better than the other; they are both legitimate ways to define the kind of work we are engaged in. That said, these are two distinct modes of operating, so it is important that each of us comes to terms with the type of contribution we want to make while serving in this field.

Either option delivers value to clients and advances the credibility of our profession. The invitation here is to be intentional about the degree of influence you aspire to provide, and to recognize what is required to reach that level. For those who want to maximize their impact with C-suite executives, walking the mastery path is the only viable alternative