

Developing Leadership Skills: The Four As to Mastery

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Acquiring any skill takes time and plenty of practice. In an attempt to make the development of leadership skills a little easier, I want to share a few ideas on the skill learning process and relate them to the development of leadership expertise. Being aware of the five overlapping stages in Figure 1 can help in the acquisition of a variety of leadership skills.

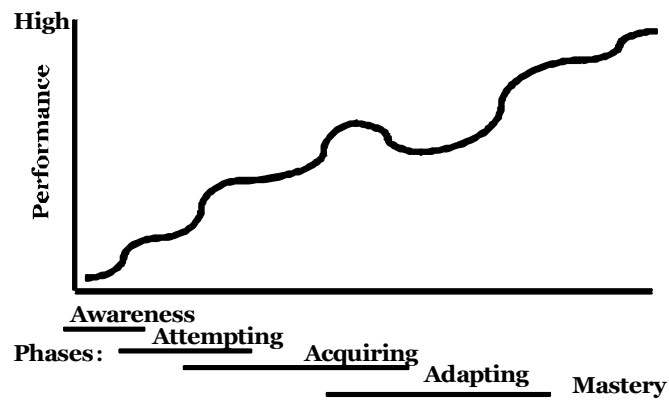


Figure 1. Stages in the Skill Learning Process: The Four A's to Mastery

As illustrated in Figure 1, the five stages in the skill learning process are:

AWARENESS: The initial stage of skill learning

ATTEMPTING: The planning stage

ACQUIRING: Practicing the skill

ADAPTING: Using skills in more challenging situations

MASTERING: The ultimate stage of skill learning

Let us take a look at each of the above stages.

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AWARENESS: The initial stage of learning

Awareness of the need to develop a new skill is an essential first step in acquiring it. Personal reflection, conversations with colleagues or enrolling in a workshop, can often lead to an awareness of the value of learning a new skill. For example, involvement in a workshop on teamwork may help one become aware of the need to improve one's teamwork skills. Then again, feedback or comments from colleagues in a group discussion setting might also lead one to recognize the need to improve one's listening skills.

Quite simply, unless one is aware of the need to learn a particular skill it is very unlikely that proficiency in the skill will be acquired.

ATTEMPTING: The planning stage

When attempting to learn a new skill an important early step is thinking about how one can best learn the skill. Taking the time to consider whether one has to consult other people, model the behavior of others, read instructional books or digital material, or just practice on one's own is time well spent. The key point is that one has to be willing to try to learn and plan the learning process.

For example, in the case of acquiring the skill of chairing a meeting, some of the possible approaches might include:

- ✓ Watching other people chair meetings and modeling their behavior.
- ✓ Reading articles or books on planning and chairing meetings.
- ✓ Using the Internet to retrieve ideas on how to improve one's chairing skills.
- ✓ Involvement in relevant courses or professional development sessions.

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ACQUIRING: Practicing the skill

Acquiring a skill through deliberate practice is the most important step in the skill acquisition process. When initially trying to learn a skill, deliberate practice can be enhanced by using a set of skill cues that remind one of how to initially perform the skill. Using existing sets of skill cues can be helpful; however, with practice, developing one's own set of skill cues or modifying existing ones can be especially helpful.

Moreover, practicing the skill in a supportive environment that helps build competence and confidence is an essential component of the acquiring stage of learning. Most importantly, receiving encouragement and supportive feedback from a colleague or friend can be invaluable at this point. The following acronym-based reminder on some of the key skill cues related to the chairing of positive and productive meetings has proven to be helpful to those who have used it.

CHAIRING: An acronym-based reminder

- C**onvene meeting and review agenda
- H**ighlight key objectives
- A**ssess progress and required processes
- I**nvolve people in the discussion
- R**evue discussion by summarizing key points
- I**ndicate pros and cons of decision making methods, as required
- N**ote decisions made and next steps
- G**enerate a feeling of collaboration and productivity.

ADAPTING: Using skills in more challenging situations

The adapting stage of skill learning involves performing our skills in increasingly more difficult environments. At this stage, proficiency increases when we use our new skills in "deliciously uncertain" environments, that is, situations that are just difficult enough to provide a challenge but not so hard as to ensure failure. By practicing our skills in

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progressively more difficult situations, we are more likely to maintain a sense of positive self-efficacy so that when difficulties arise we are more likely to persist in trying to learn the skill.

For example, developing the skill of chairing meetings effectively can begin in small group or team settings and then one might move on to chairing more formal meetings with a larger group of participants. Chairing tension-filled meetings is not the place to start! Remember the importance of “deliciously uncertain” situations when trying to master a difficult skill like chairing meetings.

Supportive conversations with a colleague and personally reflecting on one’s performance can be helpful after trying to improve your skills in more challenging situations.

MASTERING: The ultimate stage of skill learning

When we can perform a professional skill relatively automatically, that is, when we don’t have to think about how to actually perform it, then we have the sense that we have truly mastered the skill. The path to mastery varies in length but the above four stages of learning are usually involved. As is the case when we acquire any new skill, performance dips should be expected as they are part of the learning process. The ultimate goal should be the development of a personal leadership style based on a relevant set of automatized skills that can be used effectively and efficiently.