

Leadership Expertise and Developing Leadership Skills: The Four A's to Mastery

[The I-C-E Path to leadership expertise](#) provides a heuristic framework from which to consider some of the key developmental changes that occur as leaders move through the inexperienced, competent and expert phases of leadership development. In this document, I will briefly describe some of the common characteristics associated with increased expertise at each of these levels in relation to the basic values, key ideas, and essential skills that leaders acquire. In addition, some of the important changes associated with self awareness and self regulation will be shared.

Given the extensive amount of learning that takes place during the leadership development process, I wish to conclude this series of documents on the I-C-E Path framework with a discussion of the role that [Developing Leadership Skills: The Four A's to Mastery](#), namely, the awareness, attempting, acquiring, and adapting phases of skill learning play within the inexperienced, competent, and expert stages of leadership development. My objective is to encourage leaders at different stages on the I-C-E Path to consider ways to enhance their professional learning.

Inexperienced Leaders and the Four A's to Mastery

Initially, inexperienced leaders are unaware of the above phases in the professional skill learning process; however, through their involvement in structured learning situations such as university courses or professional development sessions, they are often introduced to them.

During the awareness phase, inexperienced leaders begin to identify some of the key ideas and essential skills that they need to learn. Feedback from colleagues or mentors can help in this initial phase. Taking time to complete [self-evaluation quizzes](#) related to some of the basic leadership skills can also be helpful; as the

results provide an indication of the specific skills or sub-skills that need to be improved.

One of the most important self-regulatory skills that inexperienced leaders should acquire relates to the selection (awareness) and planning (attempting) phases of the professional skill learning process. Being aware of how to select relevant learning goals and plan the learning process can enhance the efficiency with which one acquires leadership expertise .

As the research on the acquisition of leadership expertise has shown, acquiring any skill requires deliberate practice, which usually involves the use of a set of skill cues, focused ongoing practice, and supportive feedback over an extended period of time (Ericsson, 1996; Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007). Hence, understanding and applying some of the strategies described in the Four A's to Mastery process can facilitate the rate at which leadership expertise is acquired.

In sum, inexperienced leaders need to focus on the first three phases of skill learning so as to select the most important skills to learn, plan to acquire them in an efficient manner, and monitor their progress towards the learning goals that they set.

Competent Leaders and the Four A's to Mastery

As leaders increase the scope of their knowledge base, they can enhance their expertise by selecting and practicing skills that will be of help to them within the specific situation in which they are leading. Taking time to carefully [reflect on one's leadership performance](#) can help identify the skills that need to be learned. Conversations with colleagues and mentors can enhance this selection process.

Given the increased demands that competent leaders often face, it is important for them to carefully select the new skills that they want to learn. Moreover, it is important for them to take time to plan when and how they will practice these skills.

In addition to consciously planning one's learning of new skills, competent leaders need to adapt the skills that they have acquired to the specific demands of the challenges that they are facing. In sum, taking time to reflect on one's performance, selecting a limited number of skills for improvement, and discussing with colleagues the best ways to adapt one's skills can significantly help the professional learning process.

Expert Leaders and the Four A's to Mastery

Given that expert leaders have developed a more extensive, organized and accessible knowledge base, including relatively well-automatized self-awareness and self-regulatory strategies, it is not surprising that they are able to monitor their leadership performance and improve it more readily than less competent leaders (Ericsson, 1996; Ericsson, Prietula, & Cokely, 2007; Glaser, 1996, Wall, 2008).

Many expert leaders routinely take time to reflect on their performance, discuss with colleagues the leadership challenges they face, and make use of well-established relationships with mentors to improve their leadership performance. They also employ a variety of [time management strategies](#) designed to help them lead relatively balanced and healthy lifestyles.

Expert leaders are also aware of the challenges associated with professional and organizational change. They understand the importance of clearly identifying the purpose and reasons for change, the factors supporting or opposing it, and are especially careful about when and how they introduce the change process.

Over time, all leaders will experience difficult challenges that even the most expert of leaders would wish to avoid. However, by developing their own leadership capacity and the capacity of their

colleagues, and by trying to maintain a sensible and realistic work pace, expert leaders are more likely to handle difficult times in a more effective and efficient manner than those who are less competent.

In closing, I believe that applying an understanding of the Four A's to Mastery process can help leaders at all three levels on the I-C-E Path to leadership development.

References

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