

## Quality of working life research: III. Mastery in the process of work

Søren Ventegodt,<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup> Niels Jørgen Andersen,<sup>4</sup> Isack Kandel<sup>6</sup> and Joav Merrick<sup>7,8,9</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Quality of Life Research Center, Classensgade 11C, 1 sal, DK-2100 Copenhagen O, and <sup>2</sup>Research Clinic for Holistic Medicine and <sup>3</sup>Nordic School of Holistic Medicine, Copenhagen, Denmark; <sup>4</sup>Scandinavian Foundation for Holistic Medicine, Sandvika, Norway; <sup>5</sup>Interuniversity College, Graz, Austria; <sup>6</sup>Faculty of Social Sciences, Department of Behavioral Sciences, Ariel University Center, Samaria, Ariel, and <sup>7</sup>National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, <sup>8</sup>Office of the Medical Director, Division for Mental Retardation, Ministry of Social Affairs, Jerusalem, Israel; and <sup>9</sup>Kentucky Children's Hospital, University of Kentucky, Lexington, United States

**Abstract:** Mastery in the process of work is one of the four dimensions developing the quality of work life. Mastery is about developing our potential, and our potential is all we might be and do in life. Mastery consists of all potentially achievable skills, including personal qualities. To master something means doing it brilliantly and to be among the best in what you do. But a master is not preoccupied with comparing himself with others. A master prefers comparisons with his/her personal visions and life dreams about the best way of improving. People who seek mastery live with a dream of ultimate professionalism and then go for it. Slowly and systematically it is done. They will gradually master a profession to perfection. A master loves his/her work intensely. He/she finds the greatest challenges at work and confronts them. The master develops professionally and mentally at the same time. In mastery, life is unfolded more freely, more perfectly. Every human being can develop toward mastery. It is true that most people are prepared to make an effort in their working life. This is not just about the salary but also about providing the world with a valuable and personal contribution that gives a strong sense of personal meaningfulness. Developing mastery is one of the four conditions besides quality of life, joint efforts, and creating true incremental value that are decisive for the quality of our working life. Today almost all human beings have both the potential and the opportunities to develop their mastery. In this paper, we shall take a closer look at what mastery really is about and how it is developed.

**Keywords:** Quality of Life, QOL, quality of working life, QWL, philosophy, human development, public health

**Correspondence:** Søren Ventegodt, MD, MMedSci, MSc, Director, Quality of Life Research Center, Classensgade 11C, 1 sal, DK-2100 Copenhagen O, Denmark. Tel: +45-33-141113; Fax: +45-33-141123; E-mail: [ventegodt@livskvalitet.org](mailto:ventegodt@livskvalitet.org)

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### INTRODUCTION

Every human being can develop toward mastery (1-7), and most people are prepared to make an effort in their working life. Almost all human beings have an unlimited potential of what we might be and do in life. Our potential is all we might be and do in life. It consists of all potentially achievable skills, including personal qualities (6,7). At first glance it might not seem as if humankind is well equipped with possibilities and potentialities. But we are indeed. It is quite easy to live one's life without ever realizing it. That is, in fact, what happens to most of us.

The brain is to be used according to your preferences and you may increase or decrease your demands on its functioning. If you really find the challenge of your life and make the most of your cerebral capacity, it may be possible to make the brain answer even the most complicated questions. We all have this possibility. But only a few of us seize this opportunity. We hold back,

thinking 'I am no genius, not even in my field of activity'. However, people who have not developed mastery are still needed, those who are on the way toward mastery. But those who achieve a great mastery will prove valuable according to a different scale. In this article we will examine the four aspects of developing mastery:

- Finding the potential for your mastery: Your gifts and talents
- realizing that potential in the form of skills, which requires:
- A deeply felt commitment that will not show until the day:
- When you find and grasp the challenge of your life.

We all have an invitation and a possibility to develop our mastery in the process of work when we grasp the sense and content in ourselves, our life dreams, and what we really want to do with our life.

**MASTERY IN THE PROCESS OF WORK****The bad secretary**

Tove has been on the way out for a long time. Each month she costs her company a fortune due to mismanaged sales appointments, letters not mailed, deadlines not met—not to mention her depressed voice on the phone, business letters filled with little faults such as double spacing and punctuation errors. She can barely make the word processor run a spell check. She thinks that she is too old to learn such skills.

Curiously enough she and everyone else seems to live with 'that is how Tove is'. Even when she makes serious mistakes, no one really bothers about correcting her. 'It is unfortunate that we were so busy that we had to let her take care of it' and 'She is growing old; you have to bear with her'. Old? Tove is only 51 years old!

**The good secretary**

Ellen, however, is more energetic. She is a lively and cheerful presence in the office. Her voice on the phone is brisk and she keeps her promises and deadlines. She is good at dictation and drafts. She is efficient and competent and makes only the occasional error. She is a good and thoroughly reliable secretary who keeps up with new word-processing packages. Often she makes jokes and becomes difficult only when under too much pressure because handling stress is not her strong point.

**The brilliant secretary**

Then there is Jill, mysterious Jill. She is a genius. She knows all that is going on in the company. She can lay her hands on all letters, order books, files, customers' lists etc. Even though the files contain thousands of documents, it will take her less than one minute to find any of them. She writes letters based on minimal drafts because she knows the ins and outs of procedures. She is on good terms with secretaries in dozens of client companies and they do each other favours. She comes up with suggestions to promote efficiency and quality assurance in sections that she only knows from the correspondence.

Jill ought to be covered in three layers of gold. She is 54 years old and has hardly had a day off sick in her nine years with the company. Nobody remembers having seen her stressed or confused. She is the only one who can manage three phones simultaneously. She has rescued the firm many times, because she is alert and attentive to errors committed in the company. How does she manage?

**MASTERING YOUR WORK**

To master something means to do it brilliantly and to be among the best. But a master is not preoccupied with comparing himself with others. He prefers comparisons with personal visions and life dreams about the best way of improving. People who seek mastery live with a dream of ultimate professionalism and then go for it. Slowly and systematically it is done. They will gradually master a profession to perfection.

A master loves his work intensely. He finds the greatest challenges at work and confronts them. The master develops professionally and mentally at the same time because work has become fully integrated with his personality.

As mastery develops so the distance between the person and the mastery diminishes until the two have fully merged. The distance disappears. The master is completely absorbed: 'Oh, what time is it? It is dark already.'

In mastery, life is unfolded more freely, more perfectly. Try considering how things stand with regard to your own mastery. Please try to answer the following questions:

- How competent are you at your job?
- How good are you compared to the best in your field?
- How good are you compared to the full Realization of your potential?
- How well developed is your sense of quality, and how ambitious are you in respect of your work and its quality?
- How fast and efficient are you compared to how efficient you could be?
- Do you develop the skills necessary for your profession?
- Do you experience work as a challenge?
- Are you doing your best to succeed?
- Are you preoccupied with matters that really interest you?
- Do you fully understand the purpose of your work and do you agree with this?
- Do you feel that work builds you up, or is it breaking you down?
- Do you realize your full potential at work?

Developing mastery has to do with four aspects:

1. Finding the potential for your mastery: Your gifts and talents
2. Realizing that potential in the form of skills, which requires:
3. A deeply felt commitment that will not show until the day:

4. When you find and grasp the challenge of your life.

Let us take a look at each of the four consecutive points.

#### **YOUR UNLIMITED POTENTIAL**

Our potential is all we might be and do in life (8-14). It consists of all potentially achievable skills, including personal qualities. At first glance it might not seem as if humankind is well equipped with possibilities and potentialities. But we are indeed. It is quite easy to live one's life without ever realizing it. That is, in fact, what happens to most of us.

Life is not easy for all of us. We are just human beings and it is hard to believe that we possess special features and talents, until we have used these talents and become really good. We are not in the habit of believing that we are likely to become brilliant. But when, for some reason or another, we are forced to do our best, our vast potential suddenly comes to the fore. It is almost unlimited. We can do what we want to do, provided that we train persistently in spite of the difficulties encountered in the protracted learning process involved in mastering a new field of activity.

It would not be true to say that we are sufficiently gifted to learn anything. We are predisposed to a certain degree but we can all grow better in relation to how nature has shaped us. If we do not possess the necessary physical strength, agility and speed, hard physical work will not be tempting. Playing a game of tennis requires a well-trained body. Try to think of your potential as flower seeds to be sowed in good soil to germinate and grow. The good soil is a prerequisite of mastery. It is not that easy to become brilliant. In order to develop, the plant must set its root properly into the ground - and touch the soul where the happiness and joy are to be found. The leaves must reach the light. Somewhere out there is a need for our development.

#### **SKILLS**

Why are we not normally geniuses within our field of activity, but just reasonably competent at what we do? Why do we so rarely reach the zenith in our working life? It hardly comes as a surprise to anyone that mastering one's working life is difficult if one cannot master life in general. That was why quality of life is an important issue. Those who cannot yet understand the necessity of involving life as part of the discussion, we would like to convince in the following way.

How can we use proper professional language in our working life if we have a poor command of our language in ordinary situations? If we cannot express our ideas precisely and concisely? Reading and writing is more than reading a tabloid and leaving notes for one's spouse. Expressing yourself is an art. And life is an art in itself. There is so much to learn and to master.

To achieve something great is tied up with our physical and mental well being. Fortunately, it is a fact that when you decide to become very good at what you are doing, your well-being increases. One might say that the reason for your troubles during this process is that you are carrying your basic existence with you, and this is hard work. But there is no alternative really.

Each profession requires an extensive knowledge. If you work with materials, you may derive your knowledge from the science of engineering and building materials. There is so much to learn about iron and glass, for instance, that you could go on forever. No matter what your occupation, you will have to acquire professional know-how. A person who is deeply committed to his or her profession may acquire an incredible amount of professional knowledge. Nothing is boring when it fits into an overall objective.

We have to do our best and train systematically to improve. Not until we master a lot of tiny technical details can it all merge into a functional entity. That is to say that mastery makes you very happy - happiness derived from your ability to express yourself fully.

Everything in life fits into a whole. Can you achieve a professional mastery if you are not in control of your private and social life? No, it is not possible to be a master behind your desk or in production if you have severe problems with the one you love. Likewise, mastery involves your ability to laugh and become absorbed in playing with your children. Mastery encompasses life.

The choice to focus on the development of working-life quality is based on the knowledge that most people are prepared to make an effort in their working life. It is not just about the salary but also about providing the world with a valuable and personal contribution.

#### **A DEEPLY FELT COMMITMENT**

A true commitment is something that makes you direct all your attention and energy to the matter in hand. It is as if what really interests you - and exerts pull and push on you - is the need to become deeply immersed in order to experience yourself as a fully alive person.

Thus matters that really interest you will wake you up and make you happy too—and in the end you will be renewed, happy and lively.

Maybe you remember how you were once caught up in a good book or a movie - or maybe what someone told you about his life fascinated you. When life is right, a situation of glowing intensity may arise with its eternal magic so difficult to put into words.

Think of your first experience of falling in love and the desperate need you felt to be with the other person. It is the same quality, a wild and profound commitment. Is it possible to experience this kind of interest at work?

Yes it is. Very few humans feel this way about work, but there are no obstacles if you want to change the circumstances as the possibilities are just beneath the surface. Can you fall in love with your wife once more? Is it possible to discover new, fantastic traits in your friends? Can you take up new hobbies at an advanced age? Can one keep finding hidden sides of one's personality to exploit and develop? Of course one can, but they do not appear just like that. In contrast to our first falling in love - which we get for free - our adult life requires quite a lot from us if we want specific experiences to be part of our everyday life. Commitment cannot be expected to be a common feature of your day - your employer does not offer you a job with commitment on a plate. As adults we are responsible for adding energy, significance and meaning to life. This means that our contribution is like sawing knotty wood: we have an invitation to find the challenge of our life.

#### **FINDING THE CHALLENGE OF YOUR LIFE**

Can work become a challenge? The same piece of work may as you know, be considered either as a challenge or as a nuisance, depending on who you are. My definition is as follows: A challenge is something that you feel you have to seize but offhand do not know how to handle. In fact, you cannot handle it until you have done it, because a challenge is a challenge precisely because it requires you to make moves and learn more in order to accomplish your task.

A challenge is a necessary task to be accomplished because a challenge is something very personal; something that is very important to you and which for personal reasons you must take on.

Challenge is strictly personal because it is about one's personal development toward mastery. It is one's development toward accomplishing one's essential task. This destination is defined by one's nature, by one's

personality and by one's situation in a community. It is experienced as a vocation. Something calls us.

One might say that any small challenge derives energy from the great challenge that we basically see in our lives. A human being who is incapable of experiencing his or her life as fundamentally a challenge will not consider his/her work and private sphere as a challenge either. Such a person will find it very hard to develop toward true mastery. If you fail to perceive work as an exciting and fascinating challenge that demands great efforts, you will lose your way. Challenge is the basic prerequisite for becoming good at something since it is challenge that propels us beyond our own limits.

Many people wrongly think that challenges appear from the outside and that the employer will provide them with challenges. So too it is believed that some work provides challenges while other does not. Nothing could be further from the truth. Challenges are something we find for ourselves - amidst a tangled world of opportunities. If it is in our nature to interpret the world as a place full of challenges, we will find challenges everywhere. There is always a tiny chance of heading in the right direction.

People who see challenges everywhere are pursued by good luck; those who fail to see challenges are pursued by back luck. Of course, all people experience both good and bad luck. But, those who do not see a challenge when it is there may miss their chance.

Challenges are found in one's private as well as one's professional life. In general, one's love life is quite a challenge. What you can learn here is generally related to your experiences with regard to professional challenges. You are forced to develop your personality, self-discipline and patience—not to mention decisiveness, shrewdness and clarity.

But many fail to see their complete relationship as a challenge and try to make peace with their partner. If peace at home is attempted and finally achieved, the final and completely senseless phase of a private relationship has begun. Normally, this stage lasts for the rest of your life. A partner or spouse is a worthy opponent and an immense challenge, which you will have to cope with until the situation changes due to death, a new partner etc. You cannot take drama and wildness away from love without killing it.

In the same way, you may enter into a passionate relationship with your work. The day you start making peace with it, you stop fighting and start being contented. To be content with something is to accept things as they

appear to be, renouncing your expectations of changes, as well as letting go of your will and your responsibility for creating change. This is the way to lead your personal development into a deadlock.

Apparently, few people consider work a challenge. Short working hours and high pay is the norm. So one finds oneself a well-paid job from 8 a.m. to 4 p.m., but what kind of life is that? Where is the spark? Where is the commitment? Where is the excitement?

Many people would be able to improve their lives considerably if they accepted a lowering of their salary in favor of devoting their time to work that makes their commitment prosper. But this requires you to consider work as a situation in which to be challenged. Also, you must dream your personal life dream of becoming a master. When you find your challenge and accept it, it will probably bring about supreme skills.

#### **EVERY HUMAN BEING CAN DEVELOP TOWARD MASTERY**

The word genius is applied to very few human beings. We often think of geniuses as fellow-beings with innate special talents. However, these geniuses were not born brilliant. Albert Einstein did not do well in primary school, for instance. His first job as an adult was an ordinary one at a Patent Bureau. But he kept developing and today he is considered a genius of our time. The brain of Einstein was thoroughly examined after his death. It was widely believed that his brain would be different, but it was not. No particular features were found.

The brain, yours for example, is to be used according to your preferences and you may increase or decrease your demands on its functioning. It is a way of 'beating' your brain. If you really find the challenge of your life and make the most of your cerebral capacity, it may be possible to make the brain answer even the most complicated questions. We all have this possibility. Only few of us seize this opportunity. We hold back, thinking 'I am no genius, not even in my field of activity'.

Why must we always be so small and modest? Ask for more! Trust yourself. Make heavy demands on yourself and at work. Take the best from your working life. Ask for the necessary freedom to make your own working schedule as well as solving problems your way. Ask for influence on the stated goals and targets, standards of quality, working procedures - all of it.

It is naive to believe that your company will immediately grant you the privileges you want in order to develop your mastery. Speak out for yourself! Make you superior understand where you are heading and

make him or her understand the potential of your future value and commitment to your company.

Go for it—and accept the risk. Show your will power. Seize the opportunity and become brilliant. It may be that you will be considered peculiar, but that is not your problem. It is possible that your ambitions are considered as slave work. You will also have to accept that your communication with your superiors may cause some gossip about your 'buttering up'. But you are the only one who knows your reasons, which is why it will be wise to ignore what others think about you and your development project.

The person in the company who succeeds in achieving mastery will change his or her status notably. He or she will become one of a kind and make a significant difference. This brilliant person will make a considerable contribution to making a company locally, nationally and internationally. The masters are the truly valuable employees. There is no denying it. A secretary, an engineer or a welder can do things nobody else can. He or she will leave a unique stamp on the environment.

A master is practically irreplaceable. He or she calls down to earth the spirit and makes significant moves forward. It is the master who makes our world develop through the Realization of his or her life dreams and through fighting the biggest challenges. However, people who have not developed mastery are still needed, those who are on the way toward mastery. But those who achieve a great mastery will prove valuable according to a different scale.

#### **DISCUSSION**

People who seek mastery live with a dream of ultimate professionalism and then go for it. Slowly and systematically it is done. They will gradually master a profession to perfection. The master finds the greatest challenges at work and confronts them. He develops professionally and mentally at the same time, because work has become fully integrated with his personality.

Is a life without challenges and commitment less worthy? In fact, the answer is affirmative, because if you do not have any challenges or feel deep commitment, you are about to loose yourself. To feel that you are developing your self toward mastery you have to meet your challenges and that requires your commitment. A challenge is a necessary task to be accomplished, because a challenge is something very personal; something that is very important to you and which for personal reasons you must take on. Those people who achieve a great mastery will prove valuable according to a different scale. And

that is a personal thing, call it a personal gift which follows each one of us.

When you stop fighting and start being content, watch out! To be content is to accept things as they appear to be, renouncing your expectations of changes, as well as letting go of your will and your responsibility for creating change. This is the way to lead your personal development into a deadlock.

Many people wrongly think that challenges appear from the outside and that the employer will provide them with challenges. So too it is believed that some work provides challenges, while other does not. Nothing could be further from the truth. Challenges are something we find for ourselves—amidst a tangled world of opportunities. If it is in our nature to interpret the world as a place full of challenges, we will find challenges everywhere. Challenges are found in one's private as well as one's professional life, where you are forced to develop your personality, self-discipline and patience - not to mention decisiveness, shrewdness and clarity.

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We all have an invitation to find the challenge of our life and to develop mastery in the process of work. When you find your challenge and accept it, it will probably bring about supreme skills when you do your best and train systematically to improve. Not until we master a lot of tiny technical details can it all merge into a functional entity. That is to say that mastery makes you very happy - happiness derived from your ability to express yourself fully.

Life is not easy for all of us. We are just human beings and it is hard to believe that we possess special features and talents, until we have used these talents and become really good. We are not in the habit of believing that we are likely to become brilliant. But when, for some reason or another, we are forced to do our best, our vast potential suddenly comes to the fore. It is almost unlimited. We can do what we want to do, provided that we train persistently in spite of the difficulties encountered in the protracted learning process involved in mastering a new field of activity.

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