

# Fact-File 7: Personal Mastery – putting the ‘me’ in leadership...



Extracts from our guide on Personal Mastery: Leading with Emotional Intelligence

## Putting the ‘me’ in leadership

More and more leaders now connect successful business outcomes with their own level of *Personal Mastery* – their ability to tune into themselves and be more mindful of the impact their patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving have on the people and situations that surround them as well as the results they get.

Personal Mastery revolves around the idea that leadership starts with you – that no matter what your leadership level, roles or goals, the critical factor to begin with is inside us. The realm of Personal Mastery is largely internal. As we repeatedly point out in our leadership coaching clinics: *‘Before you can lead outwards, you need to look inwards.’*

## What’s Personal Mastery?

Personal Mastery is one of the 5 Learning Disciplines first promulgated by Peter Senge, populariser of the learning organisation, in his 1990 ground-breaking book, *The Fifth Discipline*.



It is perhaps the most elusive of the Disciplines. It’s centrally to do with ‘self-awareness’ – doing inner-work on ourselves and seeing the impact our patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving have on the people and

situations around us and the results we get from these encounters.

It’s *“the discipline of personal growth and learning”* says Senge, but it entails more than just learning new skills. With personal mastery, personal purpose and vision come first – it starts by clarifying what really matters most to us. It’s about creating a desired future and moving toward it.

It also links to ideas associated with personal empowerment, emotional intelligence and self-awareness. It means turning the mirror inwards, where all meaningful leadership work begins. Personal Mastery involves, as Senge says, a *“commitment to truth – a relentless willingness to uncover the ways we limit and deceive ourselves”*

“Personal mastery is the discipline of continually clarifying and deepening our personal vision, of focusing our energies, of developing patience, and of seeing reality objectively. People with a high level of personal mastery are able to consistently realize the results that matter most deeply to them.” Peter Senge  
*The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*

## 7 Pathways to Personal Mastery

In our leadership clinics, we map out 7 pathways that empower people to pursue the practice of Personal Mastery. The first 3 – *purpose, vision* and *values* – constitute essential cornerstones:

**1. Personal Vision.** Many leaders have goals but far fewer have a real sense of personal vision: an ability to picture clearly the best leader we can be and work towards that with focus, determination and diligence. Personal vision provides energy and impetus to change. It’s like a point on the horizon you set to guide the path you take. Without it, you wander around aimlessly.

“Personal vision is a key to unlocking the power of purpose. A personal vision is powerful to the extent that it expresses one’s underlying purpose. It is the vehicle for bringing purpose into the domain of acts and commitments.” Peter Senge

**2. Personal Purpose** in many ways precedes Personal Vision. We all crave meaning in our lives. We want to feel our lives matter and know how we make a difference, what our special gifts, talents and contributions are and why we do what you do. Purpose fuels passion. It’s energising.

“The simplest definition of personal purpose: the extent to which one can create one’s life the way he or she would like it to be... Vision differs from purpose. Vision is a definite picture of a desired future. Purpose is more abstract. But vision without a sense of purpose is futile.” Peter Senge

**3. Personal Values,** the things that matter most to us, form the foundation for personal vision. Leaders who practise Personal Mastery are guided by, and driven to act out of, a clear set of values in all arenas of their lives. Being clear on values you consciously choose to hold – and changing them if they ill-match – is at the heart of attributes like integrity and authenticity.

The other 4 pathways can be viewed as skill development sets that enable you to realise your personal purpose and vision and live your values.

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**4. Personal Alignment** is the degree to which our personal vision, purpose, values and behaviours are congruent with each other. When these things match-up closely, huge amounts of positive power and energy can be unleashed. and we find the creative capacity to re-shape and re-new ourselves. Leaders who are out-of-touch or out-of-synch with these things, often pursue courses of action that create inner-conflict; delimit their power or potential and lead them to adopt adverse behaviours.

**5. Personal Perception** is being aware of the particular ways you tend to perceive things – the frames of reference you use to see other people, events and situations. It’s also about your ‘self-identity’ and ‘self-concept’, which is the source of your ‘self-esteem’ and the degree to which you learn to perceive yourself accurately.

As we focus outwards, another question comes into focus: “*Is how I see myself and what I stand for the same as others see me?*” This relates to how accurately leaders see themselves, which also extends to how you see other people, events and situations too. Our way of seeing impacts our way of being which links to personal awareness.

**6. Personal Awareness** is how much you know (or are willing to know) about yourself – what makes you the way you are, your wants, drives, needs, desires and preferences. It’s being able to step back and become an observer of what you’re really like: your patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving; seeing how those patterns impact on others and affect the quality of your interactions; strengthening those that get you good results and changing those that don’t.

What we’re not aware of often controls us. Without knowing themselves, leaders can’t help teams to develop skills to think and work better together, engender a sense of purpose or build positive emotional climates. They also remain unaware of the personal patterns shaping their thoughts, emotions, actions and approach to challenging situations. They blame others and rarely look at their contribution.

**7. Personal Transformation** is the creative capacity we all have to re-shape, re-new or re-invent ourselves to be more in harmony with our

personal vision, values and purpose. The ability to bridge those unavoidable gaps between personal vision and present reality is a key action-element of Personal Mastery.

## A Matter of Mindfulness

As well as compelling us to be more self-aware of how we think, feel and behave as we approach the world, Personal Mastery is connected to a quality we call ‘mindfulness’ – the ability to see how our thoughts and feelings create much of the reality we experience and how we contribute to the situations that arise around us.

□ We define mindfulness as opening up fully to what happens inside you (mental, emotional and physical) and relating that to what’s going on outside you, including the impact of your inner-states on any external happenings.

□ It’s being expansively present and attentive to what is happening in the moment and being able to distinguish between reality and the thoughts and feelings we project on to it.

The first step in managing a crisis, improving your situation-analysis approach or handling a difficult discussion is mostly likely a mental one. With mindfulness, we can exercise self-control and make better choices.

## The Practice of Personal Mastery

Leaders who practise the discipline of *Personal Mastery* use it as a personal framework to make meaning for themselves and others out of what happens. Personal Mastery is:

- A way to put work situations in a broader context and keep things in perspective
- The basis on which to build shared team visions, common values and agreed priorities about what’s really important
- An energy source of motivation, commitment, consistency, conviction, coherence, integrity
- A foundation for making daily decisions as well as major life-directing ones
- Like an anchor, providing a sense of direction that attaches leaders to their purpose and



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prevents them drifting away from what really matters by prevailing organisational tides

- ❑ A mechanism to help decide priorities, relieve the pressure many of us of feel of being caught in the continuous spiral of ‘the activity trap’ and being able to tell how personally effective we are in moving towards goals

So what does a leader with a sound level of personal mastery look like? Here are some of the attributes and practices you might see:

- ☑ Dedicated to creating and leading out of a personal vision. They can accurately assess the gap between current reality and this vision too, that propels them forward.
- ☑ They are mindful, present and they practise regular self-reflection and inquiry. They understand their feelings, behaviours, mental models and embrace self-management.
- ☑ They develop ‘thinking literacy’ skills and change mindsets and behaviour patterns to achieve greater levels of self-awareness.
- ☑ They ensure clear values and principles inform all aspects of their life and use these to determine decisions and take directions.
- ☑ They have a special sense of purpose and vision that is more of a calling – not just goals.
- ☑ They can step back from a situation, see it from many different angles and make many different connections.
- ☑ They are curious, inquisitive and place a high value on learning as both a way to create change and as an important cultural element.
- ☑ They seek constant feedback on how they come across, accurately assess themselves and are open to changing their patterns.
- ☑ They foster challenging prevailing modes of thinking and display mental agility in terms of seeing mental models and assumptions.
- ☑ They are systems-thinkers – can see bigger pictures, subtle interconnections and also their contribution as a part in a larger system.

## Coaching for Personal Mastery

Integrating Personal Mastery into your leadership means developing new personal skills, tools and capabilities that can empower, transform and re-shape ourselves in ways that more closely line up with the personal vision we have of being the best leader we can be.

Coaching for Personal Mastery is mainly to do with solo-reflection. This diagram maps out some of the important stages in the process.



**Personal vision** is the beginning. Picturing the kind of leader we want to be, the results we most want and how to bridge the gaps between our leadership aspirations and current reality.

**Self-Awareness** comes next. Seeing yourself accurately is an essential foundation. It means:

- ❑ Challenging ourselves to be truthful about how we really are. This confronts us with how much we’re willing to really know about ourselves and how we come to terms with those aspects we’re uncomfortable about.
- ❑ Self-disclosure – being open to myself about myself first and then being open with others about myself and telling them what I feel about myself.

**Evaluation** includes feedback because how we see ourselves is only part of the reality. The other part is how we come across to others. One of the hardest things about self-awareness is seeing ourselves as others see us. This means:

- ❑ Opening up to personal change by seeking feedback from others, sharing self-doubts and facing barriers that block self-awareness.
- ❑ Being more mindful of our own behaviour, how it comes across to our team and coping with getting feedback about our behaviour without doing defensive routines.

**Behaviour choices and changes I make.** Being more self-aware of our own behaviour and how it affects others and staying open to hard feedback enables leaders to then make a conscious choice about whether and how to behave differently. This means embracing the choice principle and seeing how I choose, without making excuses.

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**Positive Action:** We now translate personal vision and our behaviour-change choices into positive action. This means being prepared to try out new ways and replace dysfunctional patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving that block us being better leaders. It's a continual process.

## The link to Emotional Intelligence

As a concept, Daniel Goleman's 4 dimensions of *Emotional Intelligence* (EI) are closely related to Personal Mastery. Here are some of the links:

**1. Personal Vision:** As we've seen, Personal Mastery is centrally to do with personal vision – how clearly we can picture what we most want to create. Both Senge and Goleman say a personal vision is the start point for this kind of self-work.

**2. Self-Awareness:** How much we know about ourselves, our thoughts and behaviour patterns, fuels Personal Mastery, while emotional self-awareness is the first of Dan Goleman's 4 EI Dimensions.

**3. Choice:** Choice, says Senge, is a key guiding principle for Personal Mastery. Goleman points out that as we become more aware of how we generate our own emotional states, we gain more control and begin to see how we can choose our feelings and the behaviour that follows. He sees this as the basis for emotional self-regulation.

**4. Team Conversations:** Senge's Discipline of Team Learning revolves around more mindful conversations. Goleman's 3<sup>rd</sup> dimension, Social Intelligence, extends EI to teams and he sees conversations as the main arena through where leaders demonstrate their emotional mastery.

**5. Solo-Reflection:** Both Senge and Goleman point out that the practices of Personal Mastery and EI are mainly conducted through self-reflection and call for deep thinking about how much we know about our patterns, how these impact on behaviour, teams and the way we handle challenges, dilemmas and difficulties.

In many ways, EI fills in some of the bits that seem to be missing from Peter Senge's coverage of Personal Mastery. Given the close connection between the two ideas, the terms can virtually be used synonymously, so large is the overlap.

## Growing Personal Mastery

It stands to reason, that to become a learning organisation, there must be people at all levels

committed to pursuing the discipline of Personal Mastery. *What can organisations do to grow it?*

The most important thing is to create a culture that fosters self-management, self-responsibility, self-awareness and choice as key operating principles and allows time for self-reflection and open dialogue. Here are some other ideas:

- ◆ *Encourage challenge and inquiry.* In most workplaces, people are rewarded for coming up with solutions within accepted paradigms – not for challenge them.
- ◆ *Identify core beliefs and tacit assumptions* in the culture that militate against Personal Mastery and change them. For example, that self-reflection is self-indulgent; that personal vision is pie-on-the-sky and that emotional awareness is irrelevant to business'
- ◆ Leaders need to become models, mentors and coaches for personal mastery.

A commitment to cultivating Personal Mastery as a way of workplace life is long-term. It's not a program or a one-day workshop.

No-one ever fully masters the Disciplines, but learning-centred leaders practise them persistently, knowing that personal and cultural transformation follow that significantly enhances capacity to make better choices and achieve more of the results they really choose.



This FactFile is derived from the Guide to Modules 10 & 12 in *The Learning-Centred Leadership Series*® – **Personal Mastery:**

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**The Change Forum** conducts a 2-day hands-on coaching clinic for leaders who want to learn how to cultivate the practices of Personal Mastery and Emotional Intelligence. For a full brochure on **Personal Mastery: Leading with Emotional Intelligence...**

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