

Consciously Mastering Skills

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*The key to knowing and overcoming your
limitations.*

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Preface

We can all do more than we think. And we can all do lots of things less well than we think. Often we have no idea whether we can do something well or not. And even more often, we are completely wrong when we assess whether we can do something well enough.

It is not so easy to determine whether you can do something well enough. In this respect, knowing is much easier than being able to. Knowledge is easy to test. You give someone a series of questions, have them complete the answers and see how many of them were correct. The required minimum score immediately tells you whether the knowledge level can be deemed "good enough". Determining a skill level is much more complex. Measuring "skill" is much trickier than measuring "knowledge".

So the time has come to be more conscious of our skill levels. To consciously be aware of what we can already do, how well we can do it - and whether or not that is good enough.

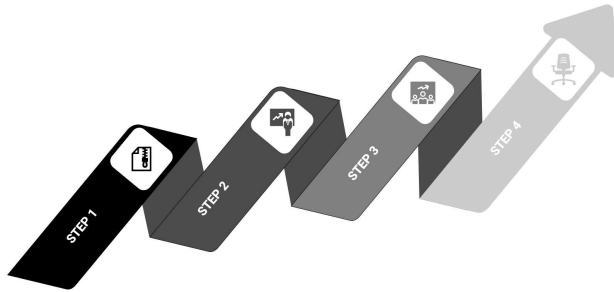
This book consists of a collection of stories. The common thread is consciously mastering skills. The extent to which we are aware of our skill levels and how becoming aware opens the gate to becoming better at doing something.

On your path from ability to conscious ability, you will encounter a lot of challenges. You will sometimes be able to take big steps forward. Most of the time, the steps will be small - but numerous. And sometimes you will even go

backwards for a while. Read this book as a first step. At the end of each chapter, you will find practical exercises to get started. Then the real work begins. The doing. The applying. Integrating conscious skilling into your behaviour so that you finally achieve mastery.

That is the paradox of this endeavour. We often think we have mastered a skill, that we can do something - while we still need to get a (whole) lot better to reach the level of "being able to do it well enough". That extra step forward is rarely successful for many of us. We are driven too much by our deeply ingrained habits, by behaviours that are so strongly integrated that we cannot break free of them and do not even realise we are doing something that is not good enough - and sometimes downright bad. The higher our hierarchical position in the companies we work for, the less likely we are to be made aware of our working points. Hence, many of us have not progressed for years. We are bumping up against our learning ceiling.

That is where the move to consciously mastering skills helps us. Awareness enables us to break through our learning ceiling, to take the next step forward towards being competent enough. If we take that step successfully then we can re-automate the right behaviour, the right execution of the skill, integrate it again, make it unconscious again. From unconscious to conscious to unconscious. It looks like this completes the circle, but it does not. In fact, we are not on a circle but on an upward spiral. Loops with increasing skill levels at every turn. Each loop gives access to the next. The path is endless, because just when you think you have achieved "good enough proficiency", something changes in the world



around you, making what was good enough yesterday only just good enough today and not good enough tomorrow. In the last chapter of the book, we look at that unconscious-conscious-unconscious cycle in more detail.

I wish you joy and perseverance on your journey to the next loop, to the next skill level, to a future where you are not just "on board" but ahead of the pack and staying ahead. Take each small step with conviction, and for those who think that small steps reflect a lack of ambition: nothing could be further from the truth. Small steps are smart. They allow you to move from one success experience to the next, keeping yourself motivated. Try to stay motivated when you fail at taking a big step. "Big hairy goals" sound tough. That's also all they do.

Marc Lambotte



PHOTO BY ALBERT DEHON ON UNSPLASH

Grinding the axe

The summer was hot and dry. It was still quite pleasant under the parasol on the terrace thanks to the gentle breeze. In the sun, it was too hot. Also for the cats. They were not to be seen. They rested in the coolness of the bushes until the heat of the sun became less intense. Then they would wake up and make it clear that their meal could be served. Each in their own way. One pushy, the other quietly waiting - and everything in between. Staring, pacing, meowing, discreetly present. Until then, Max had time. Time to muse, to listen to the rustling of the trees, to watch clouds with peculiar shapes, to do what he had been able to do so rarely during his professional life - take time to do "nothing".

Max had retired just over a year ago and had made an important decision at that time. He would only do what he really liked to do and even then only with the people he felt comfortable with. That had worked out reasonably well - though he had to admit that he occasionally folded under social pressure and made exceptions. The radical fidelity to his principles was less strict than it had been a half-century ago. Back then, the point was the point and that was it. Black or white. Grey was for the weak.

Since then, he had learned to appreciate the value of grey. It had been a difficult learning process and even today he intensely disliked people who misused grey to avoid having to take a stand, to avoid having to make a decision or to hide their impotence or incompetence under the cloak of greyness. What is white should be called white and what is black should be called black. Black and white as proxies for good and bad. Or white and black as proxies

for good and bad. These days, you had to be careful. Even - and perhaps especially - if you have only good intentions.

Long ago, he had learned that there are a lot of things in our world that we label "good" or "bad" - when there is nothing wrong with those things in themselves. Nuclear power, pharmaceuticals, communication technologies, weapons and yes... even grey, are in themselves neither good nor bad. We humans find it convenient to put such a label on them anyway. That seems to absolve us of our responsibility. After all, it is what we do with those things that determines whether they are good or bad. Nuclear energy to make bombs or to cure people. Medicines to help people or make indecent profits. Communication technologies to transfer knowledge efficiently or to make the people swallow yet another political narrative.

He looked at the sky and one of the clouds reminded him of slightly opened lips. His brain made the unexpected connection with a cup of delicious cappuccino. Time for a coffee.



Vince could not believe his ears. He looked at his sales manager sitting on the chair next to him and did not see any emotion on her face. She listened attentively as Line of Business Director Arthur continued his talk.

"We are the only ones making the right technological choices. I expect all of you to explain to every company in our country why our product is so much better than that of our competitors. Our computers are better, more powerful and more reliable than those of any other brand. We have gold in our hands and your job is to sell that gold."

Two hours earlier, a heated discussion had taken place amongst the sales team. Dave, the product manager in charge, had explained for the umpteenth time why "our" technology was superior. And for the equally umpteenth time, he had ignored the concerns of the sales team. Vince had nevertheless summarised the situation clearly:

"Companies are no longer interested in computers as such. They want to buy software solutions that support their business processes, optimise them and make them more flexible. They don't care about the hardware. Our problem is that our computers are so different from what is common in the market, that the software solutions that everyone wants to buy today don't even work on our stuff."

Dave had heard the moan many times and he knew the salesman was right. He also knew that Line of Business Director Arthur did not want to hear the arguments. Dave had tried it once and immediately got the full brunt: "Your negative attitude about our great product makes it clear to me why sales are so poor in your country. You don't

believe in the product. Should I look for a new product manager?"

That night, Dave had slept badly. He had a family to take care of and a heavy mortgage to pay off. Financially, they were just making ends meet. At least as long as his wife and he both had highly paid jobs. If one of them became unemployed, the life they were used to would collapse like a house of cards. House gone, company car gone, holidays gone, children having to give up expensive hobbies and so on. He decided to apologise to the director the next day and hoped this would be enough to be allowed to keep his job. Then he would make sure the sales team was blamed for the poor sales figures. Not him.



The grasshopper seemed to have appeared out of nowhere. It sat right next to Max's steaming cappuccino, staring into nothingness. Every time Max saw a grasshopper, it reminded him of "La Sauterelle". That is French for grasshopper. La Sauterelle was the nickname of a director he had worked for decades ago. The French-speaking man had quite earned his nickname. Like a frenetic grasshopper, he jumped from one place to the next. There was never time to ask him a question. He landed near you, asked how you were doing, didn't wait for the answer, gave his orders and was gone already. He was completely focused on generating activity. Delivering business results, however, was harder for him. He tried to hide that behind a flood of actions. The salespeople who were paid based on what they sold and not on how much activity they generated were driven crazy. They constantly had to get their customers to show up for La Sauterelle's activities. They were even given personal objectives to measure how many of their customers were in the audience.

Anyway, the salespeople neatly managed to fill the seats in the hall. They begged their customers to come by and promised them nice dinners in compensation. Consequently, the main result of all the activity was a pile of expense reports. Sold computers not so much.

Without making a sound, the grasshopper jumped off the table into the grass. He was quickly gone. Just like La Sauterelle.



Dave walked out of the director's office with his head down. He felt exhausted and scared. Arthur might not have fired him and had accepted his apology, but at the same time the full responsibility for achieving sales figures now lay with Dave. He felt the immense pressure and did not know how he was going to make sure he still had a job in six months.

As the door closed, the stern expression on Arthur's face gave way to a deep sigh. Next week, he had to go to the company's divisional headquarters to report on his progress. The truth was that sales figures were poor. Previously he had managed to get through the business reviews unscathed. Two quarters ago, the head office's focus was on other countries - where sales figures were even worse. And last quarter, he had managed to dazzle most by giving an impressive overview of a whole range of activities that would undoubtedly position the products strongly in a booming market. Sic.

This time, the meeting promised to be more difficult. It was becoming increasingly clear that heads would have to roll. Consequently, product manager Dave's naivety had almost made him laugh. Did the guy really think he was going to get fired today? Now that would have been a waste of a valuable pawn. No, my friend, you won't be dumped until the moment I need a head. So stay a while longer.

