



# Masterly Management

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*You don't have to complete a master's program to become a masterly manager, says Jonathan Byrnes. But understanding the process of obtaining a master's degree will help you think about how to improve your skills.*

by Jonathan Byrnes

How can a person become a great manager?

This question is particularly apt in this season. This column appears in June, when many young people at Harvard Business School, MIT, and other schools are completing their master's studies, and facing graduation and the prospect of entering the ranks of new managers.

It is natural for a new graduate to focus on the process of completing a grueling program, to be relieved that it is over, and to be excited by the prospect of entering a new phase of life. But it is very important not simply to rush into the next phase of life without reflecting on the meaning of achieving a master's degree.

A master's degree is very special. It marks a very important watershed in one's life. There is a great difference between what came before, and what will come after. Understanding this is the key to starting to develop into a great manager.

## Levels of achievement

In order to appreciate the meaning of a master's degree, it is very helpful to understand its historical context. The early universities were established in the context of the guild system in the late middle ages. In the guild system, there were three levels of achievement.

The first level was apprentice. If a person wanted to learn a craft, he found an expert practitioner, and worked in his house as an assistant for a number of years. In return for helping the head of the house, he was taught the fundamentals of the craft, and over time, he was increasingly allowed to practice the skills of the craft.

The second level was journeyman. After a number of years of apprenticeship, the young person became skilled in the practice of the craft, and was allowed to journey around practicing the craft on his own. Over time, he gained experience and perfected his skills, becoming more and more accomplished.

When the journeyman became extremely skilled, he could seek to attain the third, and highest, level of the craft. He could become a master. In order to become a master, the journeyman had to produce a work of superb refinement, his "masterpiece," that met the highest standards of excellence of the guild. When he accomplished this, he was allowed to establish a house of his own and to teach apprentices.

## Becoming a master

For students achieving a master's degree, there are important parallels. Most masters' students have progressed through career stages roughly analogous to the old guild system. Initially, they were undergraduates, and their prime tasks were to gain exposure to different disciplines, to choose to concentrate in one of them, and to acquire a solid working knowledge of the foundations of the field of his or her choice.

After graduation, most moved into entry-level positions in which they could apply their expertise and continue to learn, somewhat like the journeyman stage.

When these individuals achieved a high level of experience and accomplishment in the practice of their field, they applied to a graduate program to learn to become a master. These masters programs offer a rigorous course of study that prepares the student to be certified as a master, much like the masters of old.

The master's thesis, which many students write, is the analog to the masterpiece of the old guild system. It is

a student's "masterpiece," a demonstration that the student has "mastered" the discipline, and can produce an original work of rigor and insight that moves human knowledge forward.

Reflecting on the role of the masters of the old guild system offers important insights into "masterly" management. In the old guild system, a master craftsman had two essential tasks.

First, he had an opportunity, and an obligation, to produce a series of ever better, continually refined masterpieces. These moved forward the state of the art of the craft. Many of these masterpieces are on display in great museums throughout the world today, and their makers' names are forever etched in history.

Second, the master had an opportunity, and an obligation, to take on apprentices, to teach them the craft, and to start them on their journey toward mastery. Both of these essential tasks were necessary for the perpetuation of the craft.

Yet, wandering through a museum today, it is easy to focus exclusively on the masterpieces, and to forget the guild-based career development process that was necessary to produce them. Without the systematic process of training new masters, today's museums would look very different.

### **The masterly manager**

Like the masters of old, today's masterly managers have two essential tasks, both equally important. First, they must develop rigorous, well-grounded strategies, initiatives, and programs to move their companies forward. And second, they must actively train and develop the next generation of managers who can accomplish their vision, and who someday can take their place as they move up the ranks.

Masterly management requires excellence in both parts of the duality. Unless both are done well, the company will not prosper over time.

There are many roads to becoming a masterly manager today, but they all require that at some point the manager must shift focus from learning and practicing, to teaching and working through others. The higher up a manager rises in an organization, the more important the teaching becomes.

Similarly, the most effective consulting assistance involves working through a company's own managers, coaching and teaching them while ensuring creativity and discipline in the process. The ultimate measure of consulting success is building the capability of the company's organization so the company's managers can succeed even in new areas on their own.

In an earlier column, "[Managing at the Right Level](#)," I described a syndrome that affects many companies with deficient performance. In this syndrome, managers fail to focus enough time and attention on developing those below them. As a consequence, they are stuck doing the job their subordinates should be doing. The subordinates fail to develop, and the managers lose the opportunity to create productive new initiatives that the whole organization can carry out.

I recently had dinner with a group of middle managers of a major company. We talked about the company and its management process. One of the managers commented, "It's OK to experiment, but you better not be wrong." In reality, learning by doing is necessary to develop thoughtful, creative managers and a few mistakes along the way are a natural part of the process.

In the most effective companies, there is an extraordinary emphasis on developing managers. Higher-level executives create direction, and then focus most of their time and attention on coaching and teaching their subordinate managers, monitoring their results, and helping them understand how to improve their performance.

This process is analogous to what happens at a great teaching hospital, where the master surgeons always have residents and interns at their sides. The master surgeons, like master managers, stay focused on the duality of providing vision on how to do things better, and training and working through others.

The strategies, initiatives, and programs developed by masterly managers working through their subordinates are almost always superior to those developed by managers in other companies working alone. This occurs for two reasons.

First, the best managers are attracted by companies that offer the opportunity for effective management development and learning by doing. Second, teaching is the most effective form of learning, and a masterly manager has to have his or her thoughts rigorous and well developed in order to coach effectively the subordinate managers.

When one reads through the business press and annual reports, it is like walking through a great museum. The successful strategies, initiatives, and programs are all on display, but there is much less mention of the underlying systematic process of developing the managers that produced them. Masterly managers understand the yin and yang of management excellence.

### **Successful implementation**

Every week, I receive e-mails from former students and readers seeking advice about business problems. These almost always concern difficulties in implementation. The correspondent has figured out a better way to do things, but can't get his or her counterparts and colleagues to accept it.

Masterly managers, and those trained by them, are experts in implementation because they are oriented toward working through others and are receptive to others' ideas. An organization characterized by master managers is very receptive to change because the managers are conditioned to be open-minded and inquisitive. They are used to trying out ideas on others, and have been taught to view management as a process of give and take, a marketplace of ideas in which real value wins.

In this process of idea development, younger managers develop relationships with each other well before they are needed. A cohort of effective young managers becomes used to working with each other, and they rise up in the organization together. In this way, a company with a critical mass of masterly managers becomes itself a self-perpetuating masterly organization, changing and adapting as new opportunities evolve and develop.

Like the masters of old, master managers understand that the most powerful way to be effective is to become expert at teaching and working through others. This frees up the master manager to set the company's direction with great vision and discipline, and enables him or her to leverage greatly through a vibrant, capable organization. And in this way, the organization continually renews itself, constantly pulling further and further ahead of the competition. 

**Note to my readers:** After nearly fifty columns over four years, this is my final column published by HBS Working Knowledge. I will, however, continue to publish columns regularly on my Web site <http://mit.edu/jlbyrnes>. I invite you to register on my Web site, and I'll let you know when I publish new material. Or, just stop by from time to time for a look.

*For the editors who have reprinted my material throughout the world, I will continue to make my columns available for your publications.*

*I'm very grateful to Harvard Business School for the opportunity to write for HBS Working Knowledge, and I'm especially grateful to HBSWK's editor, Sean Silverthorne, for his wise help and guidance.*

*Over the next year, I'll be writing a book based in large part on these columns and my MIT courses. I look forward to continuing to hear from my readers with anecdotes and insights.*

*My readers have always been the central reason why I write, and I really appreciate your willingness to take the time to correspond with me and to read my writings. I look forward to staying in touch.*

See you next month . . . at my Web site!

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