Learning as Leadership
A Methodology for Organizational Change Through Personal Mastery

by Lara H. Nuer

Editor's Note: This is the second of two articles on the subject of personal mastery. The May/June 1999 issue of *Performance Improvement* featured a case study on Fairchild Semiconductor and its dramatic performance improvement story of reducing product development cycle time from 270 to 90 days. Fairchild achieved these results by implementing the tools of Learning as Leadership (LaL), an organization that has developed a methodology for applying practical personal mastery tools in the workplace. This issue of *Performance Improvement* features a more extensive look at the methodology that was applied at Fairchild.

Organizations are facing increasingly complex issues, demanding a higher level of performance with severe consequences for not finding a resolution. Meeting this challenge requires dramatic organizational change that cannot occur without individual change. People need to be more conscious of and accountable for their performance in the workplace. Many performance improvement methods have much to offer, but forging a truly higher level of performance means challenging ourselves and our habits— in the ways we think, feel, and act. It means bridging the gap between our good intentions and our daily actions and overcoming our individual and collective obstacles to put our deepest aspirations into action. Until we embrace this reality and begin the work at a deeper, more personal level, we will not reach the kind of performance our changing world demands.

Fairchild Semiconductor has used personal mastery tools to collaborate at this deeper level and sustain profound organizational change. This organization's work with personal mastery allowed staff to finally leverage the various performance improvement interventions they had been learning and implementing for the past 10 years. They learned these tools through Learning as Leadership (LaL) by participating in a series of public and in-house training programs and receiving ongoing team and individual coaching.

Personal mastery became well known with the publication of Peter Senge's landmark book, *The Fifth Discipline* (1990). Senge defined personal mastery as one of the critical learning disciplines that will allow organizations to address the needs of the 21st century. At the same time, Claire Nuer, the founder of LaL, was pioneering a framework of

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personal mastery tools to build sustainable personal and organizational change. Claire believed that if we each become aware of our individual dysfunctions and their impact on our lives and decide to change, we can be the starting point for a collective shift in our businesses, our families, our communities, and the world (Neur, February 1999).

Many organizations are intrigued by the concept of personal mastery but consider it too "personal" and therefore not appropriate or applicable to business settings. Yet because of the rapid change occurring all around us, more people are finding business to be a fertile ground for this transformative work. Many people also have the misconception that personal mastery is a vague or unattainable discipline, when in fact it can be very concrete and straightforward. It leads us to take stock of the past to create our goals for the future, which in turn enables us to take action in the present.

Part One: Taking Stock of the Past

An integral part of the LaL methodology that is unique in the field of personal mastery is taking the time to examine the past. The first step in this diagnostic process is to go back in time as far as we can remember and make an accounting of significant events in our lives, to see what worked and what did not. This process is done without judgment. It is not to say, "This was good and that was bad," but rather, "This took me in the direction I wanted to go, and this pulled me away."

Patterns

We all have belief systems that we learned consciously and unconsciously from our parents, siblings, and life experiences. Left undetected, these belief systems limit our perceptions and drive our reactions, diminishing our ability to effectively address situations and interact with other people.

This process of examining our past uncovers what LaL calls our communication and behavioral patterns. These patterns originated in our childhood, when we unconsciously developed ways of thinking and behaving to survive the twists and turns life presented. In essence, they are defense mechanisms, and usually before the age of 10 we have laid the foundation for the behavioral patterns that we will exhibit

for the rest of our lives. While these behaviors might have been useful to us as children, they have unwanted consequences that are often very detrimental to us as adults. Few of us ever really become conscious of the degree to which these patterns inhibit us. The first step in LaL is to learn about their dynamics and consequences. If we do not take time to delve into the past and uncover its hidden obstacles, we will not be able to make informed choices about how we want to think and act differently going forward.

The Ego System

Claire Nuer coined the totality of the mechanisms that drive us as our "ego system" (Nuer, February 1999). Patterns are one element of this system, which is most evident in situations where communications and human relationships deteriorate and lead to interpersonal conflicts, large and small. In business this system is typically characterized by competition, the need to be right, perfectionism, territorial struggles, blaming others, and quick fix solutions. Although these characteristics lead us to success, they quite frequently get us more of what we don't want: dysfunctional societies, communities, organizations, families, and individuals. In the ego system, we think mainly of ourselves; in a team, like in a family, that does not work. Ego-system thinking and behavior are the sources of systemic failure in our organizations. In looking honestly around us, we can see that this system has frequently taken an unacceptably high toll on us and the people for whom we care the most.

An example of the ego system at work in our organizations is told by Rik Glover, engineering manager at Fairchild:

> In reviewing specific events at Fairchild, we were able to uncover recurring individual and collective issues that consistently prevented us from implementing the change we wanted. Cultural norms like keeping constantly busy to appear productive led us to undertake projects before we were ready. "Terminal politeness" maintained harmonious relationships, but only superficially: The unresolved problems that festered were detrimental to collaboration. In addition to the cultural dysfunctions, we each had our own obstacles. Some of us were defensive when receiving feedback, others overly aggressive in arguing their points of view. Too often, our well-worn patterns of behavior and communication rendered our team unproductive and unable to address the real issues. We realized that our biggest obstacle was not the technical diffi-

culties, but the individual issues that each one of us brought to the table (Glover, 1998).

Costs

A company functioning in the ego system experiences phenomenal costs in terms of lost time, productivity, energy, creativity, trust, and relationships. It also suffers from a tremendous amount of tension and organizational conflict, yet too often we remain blind to these consequences. We choose to experience only what benefits us and fail to look at the costs associated with these patterns. We ignore the fact that the very same patterns that may have driven us to the presidency of a company have also cost us our marriage, our relationship with our children, and many other relationships with the people we have stepped on along the way. It is easier to be an optimist and keep chasing the illusion of obtaining that one more thing we think will make us happy. The problem is that the costs catch up with us; they are there, even if we refuse to acknowledge them.

The Wall

The sum of these costs lead us to what Claire called "the wall" (Nuer, 1999). For many of us, there is no motivation to change unless an earthquake shakes up our life—whether a bankruptcy, downsizing, a disease, a separation—and then we are faced with a wall. Claire's question—and her vision—revolved around why and whether we as human beings need such a dramatic event to bring about real change.

In her last speech to the World Business Academy, Claire Nuer described her wall:

> I was a hidden child during the war, and all my family was deported except my mother. I could not put that aside, although I tried most of my life, until I was 49 and went through a sort of second personal tragedy, which was disease. That is when the first tragedy resurfaced. My illness pushed me to confront the wall, and day after day, I remained alive, which was not part of the prognosis, and so I began this journey. I wanted to tell people, "Don't wait until that point to change your life!" Do you think I have been successful? Not at all. Business people come to our workshops and they say "My life is great. I was born very fortunate, I'm wealthy, intelligent, acknowledged, I have everything... Well, I am getting divorced, but that doesn't mean anything...."
> Is it possible for us to make profound, sustainable change without a wall (Nuer, 1999)?

The Shift

Our safety is to stay within our habits. If our habitual ways of reacting lead us by default to function from the ego system, how can we shift to functioning from a different place? If there is a wall, there is the other side of the wall, and going beyond it requires clarity, commitment, and daily vigilance in our words and our actions. How do we put those into place?

Awareness of the costs and consequences of our past behavior gives us the foundation to ask tough questions and make informed choices. What is really happening in our organization? Where are we not able to communicate honestly? Where is it unsafe to bring up difficult issues? How are we punished for taking risks and trying new ideas? Where are we shut off from learning?

Part Two: Creating Goals for the Future

Commit

Once we have taken stock, we can decide whether we want to continue with business as usual or change certain ways of thinking, acting, or behaving. Making that change takes commitment—an inescapable commitment to being in the learning process and to putting into practice, on a daily basis, actions that will take us in the direction of our goals, not our egos. It is essential to set clear goals and commitments around specific behaviors and communication patterns that we no longer want to perpetuate, no matter what. This type of framework allows us to support each other, to follow through on our commitments, and to stay on the path of learning. When we make a commitment, we need to be aware that there are consequences involved that cannot all be understood beforehand. Such a commitment does require an element of faith, because we cannot know the outcome or any unexpected consequences beforehand.

An example of commitment at work in an organization can be found at McCown De Leeuw & Co., where a "24-hour rule" is one of several agreements staff made to create a more cohesive team. Cofounder and managing director George McCown says, "With this rule, we agree to deal directly and promptly (within 24 hours) with any disagreement with another individual, and to not talk behind people's backs. This is a very powerful example of how making clear commitments has built trust and honest communication in our organization" (McCown, 1999).

Declare

The next step lies in declaring our intentions to others and asking for their support. There is energy and clarity created by declaring a commitment. It lets others know where we stand and gives us the strength to push through barriers that previously would have stopped us. It makes us accountable and is, not surprisingly, the most difficult part for our ego. Nondeclaration preserves the escape hatch of claiming, "That's not really what I decided!" Our ego wants us to be perfect, to be right, and declaring our commitments to others automatically puts us in a position of vulnerability,

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where we can be criticized if we do not succeed—but it also affords the possibility of asking for and accepting support. It pushes us to step out of our self-protective mechanisms and to trust those around us. The exposure can be uncomfortable for our ego, but just beyond the dissonance lies a quality of communication and collaboration that can produce exceptional innovation and performance.

Part Three: Taking Action in the Present

Practice

Once we have made the commitment, it is time to walk our talk through reliability and follow through. Each individual's personal mastery evolution is unique, based on his or her experiences, interests, and starting point. For this reason, any personal mastery methodology needs to be custom tailored. Individual, ongoing coaching is a key to supporting daily practice. Personal mastery is not a discipline of persuasive words and unconvincing actions. Challenging our habits is a dissonant work of moment-by-moment commitment and perseverance that should concretely affect the quality and productivity of our endeavors.

As we increase our level of personal accountability and responsibility, we learn to be more open both with ourselves and others about evaluating whether we are on track with our commitments. We do this without blame or judgment, and instead of saving the appearance of being "competent" or "knowing," we search for feedback and support from those around us. Pursuing personal mastery does not mean becoming superhuman; it means deepening relationships and leveraging the resources of our colleagues, friends, and family. Unlike the famous New Year's resolution that we shelve after the first month and either forget or feel guilty about for the rest of the year, goals are something that can be revisited and re-evaluated as we practice them. If a goal no longer suits us, we can correct our course as appropriate; if we are struggling to follow through on a goal or commitment we are clear about, we can seek support to bring us back in line.

Letting Go of the Outcome

In a world consumed with the bottom line, it is difficult to speak of letting go of the outcome. Yet focusing on the end result leads to fear, the endless need to have more. Fear impedes learning, innovation, and collaboration; it leads us inevitably to those outcomes we do not want. LaL's learning process is based on using results as a measuring stick for learning in the present; they allow us to see where we need to change or improve, but do not carry the weight of success or failure. Goals and commitments are like the North Star on the horizon, a benchmark in the future that guides us as we move forward in the present. When the focus is on the present, with results driving learning and goals driving our actions, then we can create what we want outside of fear.

Define the Task as an Experiment

An example of letting go of the outcome comes from Fairchild. "We needed to test new ways of performing our work, while providing the security to learn from our mistakes," says Rik Glover.

> In order to step beyond our fear of failure, we declared our effort an "experiment." It was clear that the team was expected to create a process which would get us to a 90-day cycle time, and we understood that this might not happen the first time through. It was incredibly liberating to know that what we were doing was proposing an experiment and that no matter how crazy the idea, we should test it and try to learn from the experience. We ended up trying things that we would never have tried in the past. Giving ourselves the right to fail allowed us to truly break through our 270-day barrier. Our experience with Learning as Leadership taught us how to set goals while letting go of the result, to be on a path of learning. Instead of judging the outcomes on that path as good or bad, we used them as landmarks to show us when we were veering off course and needed to reaffirm our alignment with our goals (Glover, 1999).

Noble Goals

One of the major tools in Claire Nuer's personal mastery methodology is the noble goal. A noble goal is an overarching sense of purpose that is more expansive than our individual goals of material gain or success. It encompasses the contribution we want to make, through our work and our professional and personal relationships, to our loved ones, our colleagues, our community, and the planet. It contains our values and our aspirations and provides a reference

point in difficult situations; it brings us back to our true essentials, even when we feel everything else is lost—it is our raison d'être. Defining our personal noble goal is a process of continual refinement, and one stepping stone to discovering this lies in knowing what we do not want.

Claire explained it at a conference:

> If we have not yet learned how to find our passion, we can begin to apprehend our noble goal by asking ourselves, "What do I no longer want?" For example, based on what I experienced in my childhood, I no longer want to create a context for destruction, and my noble goal is the opposite of that, to co-create a context for humanity. Instead of being dependent on my ego, I choose to be dependent upon my noble goal, and it helps me stay on track with my choices and my actions. It does not mean that I will ever reach it or achieve it, it just means it is there, pulling me forward. How I approach my goals, my challenges, my relationships, my work, everything, will depend upon my noble goal. Sadly, most of the time we do without this feeling of purpose, so we do not have fun at work; we fragment our life: Work is work, and fun is fun, and we play outside, and so life becomes shrunken. If we could each bring that passion into our workplace, rather than leaving it at home as we seem to believe inevitable... imagine the companies we could build (Nuer, 1999)!

The "Ecosystem"

When we begin to shift our patterns and start living from a place of passion, from our noble goal, we begin to experience what Claire called the "ecosystem" (Nuer, February 1999). In this environment there is compassion, trust, and dialogue, and creating that often demands going through our greatest fears. Instead of protecting ourselves, as we do in the ego system, and perpetuating problems, we take the risk of facing tough issues and communicating directly about them. We support others in overcoming their difficulties and achieving their goals and take the uncomfortable step of being vulnerable and "imperfect" in accepting the same from others. In the ecosystem, we operate beyond competition, where there are no "stars;" each of us is a link in the chain, recognizing that we are not alone, that we need each other, and in building on each others' strengths and weaknesses, we can create something far more fulfilling than we could on our own. We begin to tap into our true potential.

Conclusion

As long as we do not bring the resources of our true selves forward on a daily basis, we cannot build companies that are truly different. An iceberg can be used as a simplified metaphor for human behavior: from the air, only a small fraction (roughly 15%) is visible, while the vast majority (85%) lies unseen beneath the surface of the ocean. We usu-

ally only allow others to see the tip of the iceberg of who we are—that 15% above water, generally our "rational self" or "corporate image." The reality, however, is that the vast majority of what really drives the decisionmaking process in all of us lies unseen beneath the surface. Until we take the time to recognize and understand the importance of the totality of human behavior, we will severely limit our ability to change and grow in ways that will sustain long-lasting performance improvement for our organizations. Personal mastery is about becoming aware of that 85% and tapping into the total human, not just the tip of the iceberg.

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Lara, originally from Paris, France, is passionate about her work. Her dedication comes from the legacy passed on by her mother, who was a hidden child in France during World War II and who lost most of her family in the Holocaust. Claire Nuer's commitment has always been that we make important decisions today so that in 50 years there is a context of humanity for our children.

Lara believes that the work of LaL can be a starting point for change, and that if each one of us changes how we function individually, we can create a collective shift, not only in business, but in our families, our communities, and the world. She may be reached at LaL at (415) 453-5050; fax: (415) 453-5160; or email: info@learnaslead.com.